

# *Women's History* **MAGAZINE**

## *Themed Issue Life History*

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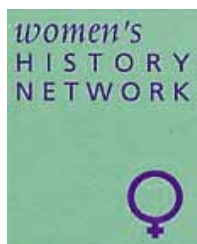
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17th Annual Conference of the Women's History Network

## Gender and Generations: Women and Life Cycles

University of Glasgow, 5-7 September 2008

**Keynote speakers: Professor Lynda Coon, University of Arkansas**  
**Professor Mary Beth Norton, Cornell University**  
**Dr. Michael Roper, University of Essex**

This conference explores women's life cycle experiences from the medieval period onwards through a variety of cultural, political, economic and social contexts. There is a rich range of panel themes including:

- Pregnancy and motherhood
- Health, fitness and education
- Marriage and family relationships
- Employment and society
- Feminism across generations
- Memory, oral history and biography
- Ageing, death and dying

**Call:** We are still soliciting abstracts from scholars researching the medieval period that focus on these themes. If you have a paper to offer please email Dr Rosemary Elliot: [R.Elliot@lbss.gla.ac.uk](mailto:R.Elliot@lbss.gla.ac.uk)

Details of the provisional programme and how to register can be found at

[www.womenshistorynetwork.org](http://www.womenshistorynetwork.org)

[www.gla.ac.uk/departments/historicalstudies](http://www.gla.ac.uk/departments/historicalstudies)



# Editorial

Welcome to the summer edition of *Women's History Magazine*. You should have received a letter from Katherine Holden, the Convenor of WHN, explaining that we are making some changes to the Magazine. See the committee page for more details. This decision means that we are currently publishing two magazines a year, but with the real bonus of more articles, reviews and features. We hope you like the changes. We have moved the notices, conference details and calls for papers to the new quarterly online newsletter.

In this edition we have four articles focused on the theme of Life History. Life History has developed in a range of disciplines—including history, sociology, anthropology, psychology and education—and one of the strengths of the approach is its multi- and interdisciplinary nature. It is informed by the practice of oral history and life writing, that is, autobiography, diaries, letters and other forms of life writing, and uses these as a primary source for historical, social and cultural research. Life history research is concerned with theories of memory, language and self-representation, and with debates about literacy and orality.

The papers here represent a small sample of the range of the concerns of the field. Grey Osterud's article focuses on the lives of farming women in the Nanticoke Valley near the Delaware River in the United States to explore the contradictions in the narratives of her interviewees. In doing so, she illustrates the complexities of the lives of these women and the issues that arise when one attempts to tell one's life story.

One of the concerns of oral historians has been to uncover the lives of people whose story is otherwise likely to go untold. This makes the practice of oral history a valuable tool for women historians in their quest to recover untold stories of the past. One group of women that have been largely neglected until recently are the women who worked at the British Government's decoding centre at Bletchley Park in Buckinghamshire. As well as uncovering their history, Ann Day ponders on the problems attendant to gathering histories of women's officially secret lives.

However, life history is not just about oral history. Written stories are also important to the life historian. In her piece on using the Mass Observation archive at the University of Sussex, Teresa Cairns, rather than using the well known diaries of the early phase of Mass Observation, focuses on the stories told in the Directives sent out to people in the later phase of the Archive to explore the ways in which gender and class affected the educational life histories of some of the writers.

The next article by Patricia Thomas focuses on the life of a woman 'first'. Janet Paul was one of the first women in New Zealand to have played a major role in the country's publishing industry. As a designer she ensured that high typographical standards took root in her country and was awarded the Dame Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit for her contribution to publishing.

The biographical theme continues with Olivier

Rota's 'reclamation' of the life of Margaret Fletcher, an English Catholic educator who saw no conflict between an intellectual education for girls and their role in life. She argued that the Church would benefit from educated women. Her view of education was deep and liberal, and not restricted to academic learning, and her contribution to the debate on girls' education throws up some surprises.

This is also the time of year when we remind you of the annual conference, this year returning to Glasgow University and hosted by the recently established Centre for Gender History. The Centre supports a vibrant research community with interests traversing the medieval period to the present day. The conference itself promises an engaging programme focusing on gender and generations through history. A key theme is pregnancy, maternity and motherhood, but papers also explore topics such as ageing, intergenerational conflict, family culture, employment and education, health, and death and inheritance. There will also be a round table on feminisms across the twentieth century. A registration form and updated programme details are on the website, so don't forget to register.

Gerry Holloway, Claire Jones, Jane Potter, Debbi Simonton

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Front cover:  
Picture courtesy of the  
Franklin D. Roosevelt  
Library Digital Archives

# Listening for the contradictions in rural women's life-history narratives

Grey Osterud

*Newton, Massachusetts*

By the commonly accepted standards of historical methodology, the silences, distortions and contradictions that appear in life-history narratives render these sources problematic for the reconstruction and analysis of the past. As first-person documents, oral autobiographies, like written ones, are generated through a process of retrospection that places recollections of the past in the context of the present. People's contemporary position and perspectives shape what they recall and how they interpret events. In telling their stories, autobiographers aim to make connections, create coherence, and give meaning to their lives, emphasizing those aspects of their experience that explain their contemporary situation and often setting aside those actions they feel uncomfortable about or do not comport easily with their present sense of self. In recording personal narratives, historians are engaging in social interaction as well as research. Indeed, the relationship between interviewer and informant exercises such a powerful influence on these documents that many oral historians concede they are co-created by the two persons in dialogue. In utilizing oral history methods, feminists have been especially concerned to recognize and compensate for the asymmetries that exist between our subjects and ourselves. The women we interview do not provide merely the raw material for scholars to interpret by placing it in social-historical context; rather, they participate actively in making sense of their own life and times. Feminist oral historians seek to share the power that inheres in the texts or exhibitions we produce, most often by deliberately involving our informants in the process of interpretation. Collaboration in the presentation of life-histories goes some ways towards creating a 'shared authority' over the past.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, however self-consciously we adapt anthropological and psychological approaches to feminist purposes, the documents that result are still filled with elements that historians would find problematic in written primary sources. The benefits of studying living rather than dead people, who are not immured in the silence of the past and audible only in the fragmentary records that have survived centuries of neglect, are considerable, in part because we can pose questions for our subjects to consider rather than having to search for clues to women's lives in scattered facts on the periphery of documents concerned with matters to which men were central. But the stories that we generate and record are not self-explanatory or unproblematic. For example, if we allow women to shape their narratives according to their subjective understandings of time and lived experience, eliciting their own sense of the trajectory of their lives rather than following a chronological or developmental schema and interrogating them about the precise order of events, we find puzzling gaps and overlaps, as well as

elements out of sequence. Discrepancies appear between the ways a story is told at one time and at another, either within or between interviews; sometimes a story told in chronological order seems strikingly at variance with what the subject says the experience meant to her in retrospect. Feminists have learned to listen for and interpret pregnant silences, but distortions and discrepancies often seem problematic. Rather than employing methods that historians conventionally use in these situations, such as cross-checking among documents and crediting those points on which different sources agree, I propose that we adopt approaches that take into account the processes of retrospection and dialogue through which life-history narratives are generated and explore the distortions and contradictions they contain not as shortcomings but as valuable clues to the dynamics of social life in specific conjunctures of time and place.<sup>2</sup>

I draw my examples from extended life-history interviews I conducted over a decade and a half with about two dozen older women (and a few men in their families) in a rural community located in upstate New York. The Nanticoke Valley, as local residents call it, is difficult for outsiders to comprehend, so different is it from the imagined American landscape: a hilly, upland region with such poor soil that it supports mostly hemlock forest and scrub; sparsely populated by Native Americans, who concentrated in the fertile Finger Lakes region to the north and west and the Delaware and Susquehanna river valleys to the east and south; taken up by people of English, Scottish, and German ancestry from New England and New York's Hudson Valley who scattered in open-country neighbourhoods rather than congregating in villages and eked out a living by cutting timber and pasturing dairy cattle; a casualty of the twentieth-century transition to large-scale, specialized, capitalist agriculture. With its abandoned farmland returning to brush and its remaining residents living in increasing isolation, it became the northernmost county in the Appalachian rural antipoverty program of the 1960s. Yet the Nanticoke Valley was close enough to the 'triple cities' of Binghamton, Johnson City, and Endicott, home of the Endicott-Johnson Corporation, the largest manufacturer of boots and shoes outside of New England from the 1910s through the 1940s, that from the First World War on, farm families could send members there to work for wages, as well as sell fruits and vegetables, poultry and dairy products to urban customers. Families, who worked in the factory, purchased tumble-down farms in the Nanticoke Valley and supplemented their wages with subsistence production; some of the newcomers made a transition to small-scale, market-oriented farming. Many of these were immigrants from rural communities in Eastern and Southern Europe and had done stints in the coal mines and silk mills of

eastern Pennsylvania before becoming shoe workers at E-J. By the mid-twentieth-century, the Nanticoke Valley was a diverse mix of working families who combined factory jobs with farming in a variety of ways. Located on the urban periphery, they allocated their labour in a flexible manner, depending on the relative conditions in the labour and produce markets and on the changing composition of their households.<sup>3</sup>

While the residents of the Nanticoke Valley prided themselves on their high standards of education and cosmopolitan cultural orientation, defying the stereotypes of backward backwoods people, they also had a propensity for collective action that regional elites in both agribusiness and industry found disconcerting. Strikingly, their activities were marked by cooperation between natives and newcomers across ethno-religious lines, in part because neighbours sent their children to district schools and socialized together and in part because they continued the custom of 'changing works', sharing labour and equipment at haying and harvest. The Nanticoke Valley was home to the county's first and longest-lived Grange, founded in 1874, which operated a cooperative purchasing scheme to buy lime and fertilizer and set up a cooperative creamery to process and market butter and cheese. Eventually the organization morphed into the Dairyman's League, which conducted a large-scale strike against fluid milk shippers and processors in the 1930s. Advocates of capitalist farming—including experts affiliated with the national Farm Bureau and Cornell University's agricultural experiment station, who ran extension programs to instruct farmers in more profitable methods—asserted, with some validity, that the labour-intensive, rather than capital-intensive, character of local farming made Nanticoke Valley residents into radicals. Equally or more important was their predilection for cooperative work within and between families. Nanticoke Valley folk saw mutual aid as essential to ensure the survival of family farms, and the habit of solidarity existed within families as well as between them. The agricultural economists were dumbfounded when their careful analysis of recorded inputs and outputs demonstrated that, contrary to their predictions, upland farms that relied on summer dairying, milking cows only when they were sent out to pasture, yielded more income relative to the value of labour than winter dairying, which relied on purchased feed. They were equally shocked that women's labour in the dairy barn and hayfields made the difference between profit and loss. Nanticoke Valley folk were radical not only in their notions of political economy but also in their ideas about gender. The local Grange was among the early advocates of women's suffrage; women were elected to major town offices as soon as they were granted the vote. From the 1910s on, Nanticoke Valley residents included women in all Farm Bureau programs designed for 'practical farmers' and insisted that the Home Bureau deal with income-producing and marketing ventures, such as poultry raising, rather than 'home economics', which they saw as merely decorative.<sup>4</sup>

With the initial sponsorship of the Nanticoke Valley Historical Society, which hired me to do an exhibition on

women's history after they realized that the community history exhibition they had mounted in their new museum dealt almost exclusively with men, I interviewed older women about their lives, conducting multiple sessions over several months and sharing my interview transcripts and summaries with them. In some cases, they gave me access to their mothers' and grandmothers' diaries and letters and to caches of family photographs. All showed me around the 'historic'—that is, old and unrenovated—houses and farmsteads they inhabited and reconstructed the local landscape as they remembered it from their youth. My central interest was in gender and generational relations during the capitalist transition in the countryside, so I asked many questions about the gender division of labour on and off the farm, patterns of decision-making, the rationale for shifts in farm operations and improvements to the barn and house, and the passing down or purchase of farmland.<sup>5</sup> While I attempted to avoid hearing gossip about others, I did inquire about people's relationships with their relatives, friends and neighbours. Our conversations often touched on sensitive subjects: courtship and marriage, sexuality and birth control, infidelity and desertion, alcoholism, domestic abuse, mental illness, dementia and death. Over time, with each informant, I figured out what not to probe too deeply and how to make a woman more comfortable in discussing taboo topics. As I shared my tentative interpretations with them, they were often bolder in their statements about their life experiences than I had initially been.

Still, the transcripts and interpretive life-histories we generated are riddled with silences, distortions and discrepancies. If I neither backed away entirely from exploring these charged areas nor pushed my informants to confront and reconcile their disparate accounts, but rather considered the contexts and points of view that gave rise to these contradictions, I learned a great deal. The process of retrospection reshapes the past into a pattern that is consistent with the informant's present identity and beliefs. In the process, conflicts are often suppressed, especially unresolved conflicts in family relationships, and changes that have occurred over time in informants' beliefs and values are often concealed. We now understand that traumatic experiences which cannot be assimilated into the self may be suppressed from memory without being forgotten and have learned to listen to the gaps in narratives that register trauma. So, too, unresolved conflicts and unacknowledged changes betray their presence in distortions and discrepancies, and probing the significance of these gaps and contradictions—rather than trying to decide what is 'true' or to reconcile discrepant accounts—is a fruitful undertaking.

The first example I offer illustrates the dialogical process of coming to terms with the past that oral history engages.<sup>6</sup> I sought out Carolyn Lane Charleroy, who drove a school bus and sold homemade preserves while raising five children because she was the only member of an entire kin-group who participated in community activities. The rest of her family of origin, the Lanes, lived in as much isolation from dominant social institutions as they could manage, subsisting primarily off their land but



selling no farm produce. The menfolk earned an irregular income by wildcat logging with a portable sawmill, they dwelt in a complex of houses, sheds, and shops built in the 1820s in a 'holler' well off the road, chasing away the tax collector and the truant officer and admitting only the visiting public health nurse. I hoped Carolyn would take me to meet her relatives or at least to see the place they lived, which was historically significant and, I surmised, had remained untouched by twentieth-century innovations such as electricity. Carolyn had left the family compound at the age of ten to live and work as a servant for the Jewish doctor's family and go to the village school, where she excelled academically. Eventually she married the son of a respectable working-class French-Canadian family. She was known as a hardworking, upstanding, sober, church-going woman, a conscientious mother and trustworthy bus driver, a reliable neighbour in times of trouble. She had some contact with her extended kin-group, especially with the Lane children who rode her bus, but she was not tainted by their reputation for what the more charitable rural residents called 'slovenliness'. When I inquired as to how it happened that Carolyn moved from the 'holler' into the village, she explained that her teacher and the doctor's wife thought she should keep going to school rather than stay home to take care of her younger brothers and sisters, including the motherless baby. At that point, she skipped over what happened to her mother, allowing me to think that she had died in or soon after childbirth. Later, as she sketched out her own life, she pointedly observed that she had all her children in the hospital.

When we circled back to her mother's life, Carolyn retold her mother's story from the time she married into this feckless family, describing how much her mother loved to work outdoors but how frustrated she was with the Lanes' scrubby meadows and scrawny livestock. During World War I, when the shoe factory was hiring anyone they could find to fill contracts for army boots, she went to work at E.-J. Without stopping to reflect, Carolyn explained that her mother was saving up her wages to get water piped into the house and the shed she used as a milk room, but then she got pregnant—again. Since she had had a bad time with the last birth, she decided to use her earnings to have this baby in the hospital in the factory town. But, her father took the money from wherever her mother had hidden it and bought a horse, which broke down as soon as he tried to use it for ploughing. 'Ooh, was my mother angry. She didn't holler, but she didn't speak to my father either. She just kept going to work in the factory as long as she could, and when she was home she worked like fury in the barn and the garden and did what housework she had to.' Up to that point, Carolyn had told this story as her mother's life; then suddenly she shifted to her own point of view as a child. 'She didn't get up after that birth,' Carolyn said. 'She was not sick, and she would feed the baby when I brought it to her, most of the time, but she did not get around to doing anything. I did what I could. But she only cried.' Then Carolyn started to cry herself. Still thinking that her mother had died, I made comforting noises. Suddenly her mood shifted, and she

said indignantly: 'She went off with a man from the factory. He came up with a truck—the same truck as had picked her up to go to work—and she went away. She left the baby, me, all of us. We never saw her again. I didn't know what to do. I wish my father didn't buy that horse.' It was at this juncture that the teacher and the doctor's wife brought her down to the village. 'They said I should hold my head up, work hard and do right, and pay no mind to what anybody said mean.'

In discussing these painful childhood events with Carolyn, now seventy-eight, I began by sympathizing with her plight at the time. She didn't feel a bit sorry for herself, Carolyn asserted; she was the lucky one, since she could stay in school when her oldest sister had to quit to take care of the baby. Nine years later, her youngest sister had taken her place as the 'help' in the doctor's household, so that turned out all right, too. During a long pause, I asked if she had heard of postpartum depression. She had not, so I explained. The relief Carolyn felt was palpable. 'You mean it wasn't her fault? You mean she was sick in her mind, because of her body being upside-down after this baby came? They always said she was sinful, a bad mother, no mother at all. Not the teacher or the doctor's wife, they never said a word, but everybody else.' Eventually, we also talked about the reasons why her mother was so angry when her husband took the money she had saved out of her wages and perhaps, before that, about becoming pregnant again. I began to understand why women who married into the Lanes found life so difficult. But the key revelation to my informant was that her mother's desertion of the family could be understood not as an immoral act but as an illness. She had long since come to terms with abandonment; it was as if this new viewpoint had given her mother a good death.

In the Nanticoke Valley, I learned much about how women negotiated their relationships with fathers, husbands and sons, attempted to control their own labour, enhanced their power in farm family decision-making, and countered forces that might have marginalized them. Few women in this community were as isolated as Carolyn's mother; most felt enmeshed in a supportive, though sometimes intrusive, network of family, friends and neighbours. In the twentieth century, they drew selectively on both the 'traditional' values of the rural community, especially family and neighbourly solidarity, and 'modern' values disseminated by urban culture, especially heterosexual intimacy and homosocial bonding, to support their centrality to farm families and their connections within the community, attempting more or less consciously to ensure that relationships within and beyond the family were mutually reinforcing and upheld their notion of what women deserved. The retrospective and dialogical nature of these life-history narratives is crucial to this mode of understanding how women encountered and negotiated societal contradictions.

Sometimes informants spontaneously distinguished between what they felt at the time an experience occurred and how they thought about it in retrospect. For example, many of the rural women I interviewed had long discussions with me about the fact that sex was 'something you just



*Picture courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library Digital Archives*

didn't talk about' when they were growing up in the 1920s and thirties.<sup>7</sup> Now they felt comfortable enough to talk openly about these matters—or at least to share with me what it meant not to discuss sexuality and reproduction when they were young. Most thought that their ignorance about sex had negative effects on their early married life and made childbearing more of a burden than it might have been, yet they worried that contemporary mass culture's objectification of women's bodies was damaging to women's sense of self and diminished the respect they enjoyed. After I shared with them a draft article that quoted from other anonymous informants, including descriptions of their initial repugnance toward sexual intercourse and their despair at frequent, involuntary pregnancies, I heard for the first time what they knew about a woman doctor in another town who performed abortions and why they treasured the Jewish physician who had settled in the Nanticoke Valley: he was the first doctor in the community who was willing to distribute birth control information and devices to married women.

The mixed feelings that women had about childbearing when they learned about birth control relatively late in their reproductive lives are evident in the story of Ruth Woods Brown, who had nine children. When, after the birth of her seventh child, she asked her doctor how she could avoid another pregnancy, he told her that she could send her husband to sleep in the woodshed. She interpreted his remark as a refusal to take her seriously, since no woman who loved her husband or valued her marriage would do such a thing. She was told about contraception only after giving birth at the age of forty-one to a child with Down's Syndrome. As Ruth discussed this event with me twenty-seven years later, she was still angry that she had not been told of the age-related risks of having a 'retarded child'. But, she was happy that her daughter was her 'last baby', since she could devote herself to her care. This child, who would never really grow up, was her companion after her older husband died and the other children had left home. As she aged, she worried both about losing her daughter prematurely and about what would happen if her daughter survived her. Ruth would not have chosen to have a child with Down's

Syndrome, but she was grateful for her sweet-natured, beloved and loving daughter. In her eyes, her responsibility began where her agency did, from the moment she learnt about birth control. What had happened before was not her fault; making this child her last was her own decision. This kind of double consciousness, which compares and contrasts past and present perspectives, is relatively rare in retrospective accounts about matters that have not been subject to such major, visible social changes as sexuality and reproduction.

More often, we find divergent, or even conflicting, perspectives in different interviews or parts of interviews. As a particular topic comes up in distinct contexts, informants approach it in different ways. These inconsistencies in interpretation should not be surprising; people have no trouble believing contradictory things as long as they do not have to articulate them in abstract and universal form. The open-ended interview format invited informants to express their views in situation-specific, context-dependent ways. Rather than discounting them as irrational or idiosyncratic, I suggest that we examine them carefully and elucidate their double messages, which can be understood in rational and systematic ways. Some of these contradictions can be explained in terms of situational variation and historical change, and the most pervasive discrepancies can illuminate more fundamental structural contradictions in social relations. I draw my examples from my informants' discussions of the gender division of labour and relations of power in their families.

Take contradictions between informants' general statements about the character of relationships among women and men and their particular accounts of their own and others' actions and interactions. Taking into account the well-known phenomenon whereby people affirm opinions that they believe are generally acceptable and stress prevailing norms rather than actual practices, what do we make of the fact that many women said that neither they nor their mothers worked on the family farm? When questioned directly, they said that they 'just did the housework and took care of the children.' By the norms of urban society, of course, they did not 'work' because they did not hold paying jobs outside the household, as shoe stitchers or school teachers, for example. However, when these women concretely described their own and their mothers' daily activities, they mentioned a wide range of outdoor tasks: planting and digging potatoes, raking and loading hay, even ploughing and cultivating the fields. They also described their mothers and themselves as performing tasks which, although done in the barn, yard, cellar, or house, were part of the central farm enterprise: milking cows, tending calves, making butter and cheese, washing dairy utensils. According to the prevailing conceptions of 'farm' and 'household' work in this rural community, the 'household' included the barn and yard, while the 'farm' encompassed only the fields and pastures. These families understood 'household work' as economically productive labour. In dairying, it was integral to the main farm operation; in the form of poultry-raising or gardening, it might constitute a separate operation that women controlled. Understanding the distinct conceptions

of 'farm' and 'household' that prevailed in the Nanticoke Valley goes some distance toward explaining this apparent contradiction.

It does not, however, iron it out entirely. While women and men shared the work in the barn and yard, farm work was gender marked; men were regarded as responsible for field labour. When women performed that work, together with their husbands or by themselves in the men's absence, they described themselves as 'helping' the men. In women's general discussions of their labour, this work became invisible because the fields were not regarded as their domain; it disappears under the cover of the marital relationship. Significantly, women 'helped' their husbands in the fields far more often than men 'helped' their wives with routine chores in the house. Most regarded that imperative as entirely fair and eminently rational, since after all, 'that was your livelihood'.

Rural residents, who were well aware of the divergence between notions of gender that had prevailed in American society and the more flexible patterns of work and interaction that were common in their community, often articulated an alternative conception of relations between women and men as well as economics. They affirmed the productive value of women's household labour and the partnership of women and men in family farming. But the distortions that resulted from their speaking in terms drawn from the prevailing gender ideology still mattered. Careful scrutiny of the ways in which rural women utilized the dominant discourses of masculinity and femininity has rather mixed implications. On the one hand, some informants clearly saw women's 'help' in the fields as a form of secondary labour—something that women did to supplement or substitute for male labour, under masculine guidance and direction, and thus not calling into question men's control over the domain of the 'farm'. The subordination of women to men, at least in this arena of masculine responsibility, involves the subsumption of their labour as well. On the other hand, some informants saw women's 'help' in the fields as an expression of their commitment to the family enterprise. In their view, women voluntarily chose to work with their husbands; their sharing in field labour exemplified the cooperation and flexibility that ideally characterized rural gender relations. On the third hand (contradictions don't always come in pairs), other informants worried that women's labour in the field was not always voluntary. Their emphasis on the occasional and supplementary nature of the 'help' that women provided to men reflected their determination to define field work as a male responsibility, to ensure that men did not come to rely on women's labour or assume that they could control their wives' activities. These women, then, draw upon the dominant cultural ideology that women should not work outside the household for their own purposes: to defend women's control over their labour time and protect themselves from having to work a 'double day'.

What all these women saw as crucial was whether a woman was able to decide how she would allocate her efforts and whether she had a fair share of power in farm family decision-making. They were well aware that

a woman's endless, expert labours in the house, barn, and fields did not guarantee that her contribution to the family income and subsistence would be recognized and recompensed with a say over expenditures, investments, and matters of inheritance. Correcting my rather naive notions about the visible, concrete connections in this agricultural community between work and value in subsistence and simple commodity production, they offered example after example of women whose endless toil indoors and out got them nothing but exhaustion, and of numerous others who ensured that they were full partners in the farm operation by sharing fully in the activities of their fathers, brothers, husbands and sons, learning to drive tractor, bail hay, and truck the produce to market. Hattie Bieber Smith, who came from some distance away and married a Nanticoke Valley man whom she had met during their one, precious year in college, said that 'we did everything together'. When the children were too young to help (they had five in the first eight years of marriage), they tucked them into an empty stall in the barn while Hattie and Edmund milked. She hitched the farm equipment to the back of the car and cultivated the fields by driving along the furrows while the children watched out the rear window. 'If we went to the barn and the field together, then after midday dinner we could have a nap, and in the evening we could read out loud'. Other women—including her mother-in-law—ensured that they knew as much about the entire enterprise as their husbands, not by working alongside them but by keeping the books and filing the income tax returns.

Still other women, Nanticoke Valley residents explained, conducted their own farm operations—keeping a small herd of Jersey cows or a large poultry flock, cultivating a berry patch or even a flower garden—and producing commodities they processed at home and sold directly to customers. These women saw their salvation as having control over the entire operation and earning money they could spend on whatever they wanted: clothing for a daughter in high school, buying a gas stove with hot water heater, even paying a 'hired girl' to do the housework. Over time, increasing numbers of rural women held off-farm jobs to earn the family's 'living' so that the 'receipts' from the farm could be reinvested in the operation, in some cases in order to expand it enough that it could support a son and his family.

'Putting the barn before the house'—spending what money families had or could borrow on farm equipment and improvements to the barn rather than on labour-saving devices and utilities for the household—was a common complaint among American farm women in the early twentieth century. Resentment of the burdens this asymmetry placed on rural women was featured both in stories by Midwestern writers and in magazine reports of surveys conducted among farm women.<sup>8</sup> In the Nanticoke Valley, however, few women complained that they did without running water or lights in the house when they were installed in the dairy barn, though some made a special point of crediting the men for making sure the pipes and wires were brought into the kitchen as well as the milk room. Only Janie Sulich Kuzma, who moved onto



an abandoned farm with her husband and three small children, suggested that her husband had been unwise in building a big barn while they were living in a shack. The real problem, though, was that he had got pneumonia felling trees and cutting the timbers in mid-winter and refused to go to the doctor, leaving her a widow with a new barn but no house. Janie took pride in the fact that she and her three sons were able to hold onto the land. When her younger son came home from the war, he filled the barn with cows and built her a snug cottage.

Reiterating 'that was your livelihood', Nanticoke Valley women explained that investments in farm operations paid you back over time and made 'luxuries' possible. They applied this logic to their own labours as well. Take Elizabeth Wheaton Graves' washing machine. A few years after they married, Elizabeth, the daughter of a sawmill operator, and her husband, who had grown up on his grandmother's farm, had bought a run-down farm which she ran single-handedly while he continued to work in the factory in order to pay the mortgage. Elizabeth explained why she bought a washing machine during the Depression. 'It wasn't just that I had two children in diapers at once. It was that I needed cash, and if I had a washing machine, I could take in washings for the widowed people who lived around here. So, in a year, or a year and a half, it paid for itself. When my husband got hurt on the job, I took in more washings to pay the hospital bill. I never knew, when I went on a farm, that I would become a laundry lady!' Since she could support the household, after he recovered, he could reclaim the meadows and orchard, build up a dairy herd, and peddle apples. Eventually, she 'retired' from the laundry business to farm alongside her husband.

I offer a final example that illustrates how individual women living on the urban-rural fringe could hold contradictory views at one and the same time that reflect different socio-cultural frames as well as historical change. Violet Burton Canaday, who was living on the farm her mother and father had inherited from her mother's parents, the Ashburys, described with great pride the physical labour that her mother and aunts did when they were growing up on a farm with no brothers and the things that her grandfather had taught her to do when she herself spent summers there as a young girl, including driving the team from atop the hay wagon. Violet reported that her mother always said that working outdoors made the sisters strong and healthy, developed their self-confidence, and offered freedom from the restraint that was imposed on city girls. Later in the interview, however, Violet explained that her mother and aunts had all suffered from 'female troubles,' alluding darkly to debilitating pain, prolapsed uteruses, and multiple miscarriages. Her mother believed that these problems were the result of 'having been forced to work too hard when they were young.' Chores such as lifting milk cans were too heavy for women's bodies, her mother had declared, and might cause permanent damage to their reproductive systems. The discrepancy was striking. I questioned Violet closely enough to ascertain that the notion that the 'female troubles' that afflicted her mother and aunts were caused by the farm

work the sisters had done during their youth came from an urban male physician whom she had consulted in mid-life. Her mother seemed to give this pronouncement credence and had communicated it to her sisters as well as her daughter. At the same time, she continued to tell stories about the pleasures of working outdoors on the Ashbury farm, even contrasting her current poor state of health with the robust vitality she had enjoyed in her youth. So, this seemed to be a contradiction that Violet's mother experienced throughout her life, not simply a change in her belief system over time.

Another story that hinged on the intersection of rural and urban definitions of womanhood clarified the issues involved. Violet said that her parents, who moved from the city to take over the farm as the Ashburys aged, were determined to send her to high school, which was located in the town some distance away, but they could not afford to lose her labour on the farm or to pay her board in town. So, every morning she rose early, helped to milk the cows, washed up and changed into the dress she wore to school, and drove the wagon to the creamery on her way to school. Her father lifted the milk cans into the wagon, and the creamery hands unloaded them. She was proud that at sixteen she could be a contributing member of the farm household and a 'respectable, educated lady' at the same time. However, she was anxious about one thing: that the smell of the horses and the smudge of the reins would brand her as a 'farm girl' in the eyes of her classmates in town. No matter how careful she was to keep clean and to wash her hands before going into school, she feared that a dirty neck, which she could not see herself, would betray her. So, as Violet travelled back and forth between the farm and the town, she tried to fulfil the norms of both. Though she took pride in her ability to be a hardworking 'farm woman' and a 'respectable, educated lady' simultaneously, she was still discomfited by the cultural distance between them, which seemed inscribed on her body as she moved from one domain to the other.

Nanticoke Valley people—like other working-class Americans—were quite conscious of the differences between their own way of life and the ideologies of gender that prevailed in the urban middle class. Articulating an alternative view of gender and economic relations that was largely shared by their menfolk, rural women struck various balances between their integration into the productive labours of the family farm and more independent ways of making money. Deliberately, though at times covertly, they sought more equal participation in decision-making. But this notion of mutual cooperation stood over against the legal and economic structures within which farm enterprises were conducted and reproduced. After all, title to the land was in men's names, and it was generally passed from father to sons. Women who 'married in' were at some disadvantage in multi-generational farm enterprises, especially if they were also newcomers to the open-country neighbourhood.

By the 1940s and fifties, sons who inherited land were having difficulty finding wives, even if they combined farming with wage labour. Some married local girls, but

others married girls who had grown up in the city. While the men worked in partnership with their parents and brothers, their wives—regardless of their background—generally insisted on having a house of their own, even if it was no more than a renovated chicken coop. They also negotiated their place within their new family economy, sometimes insisting on continuing to work off the farm until children came. This cohort of women drew not only on local traditions of cooperation in family farming but also on the popular culture's notion of heterosexual intimacy to bolster their role in decision-making. Some repeated suggestions offered by women's magazines and advice books that spouses have confidential discussions and even open 'family meetings' to talk over and resolve problems. They also emphasized that close relationships with other women, both kin and non-kin, were supportive of their marriages. In their country lives, they affirmed again and again, they relied on their own labour, their husbands who were always nearby, and their folks and friends; having to struggle alone within an isolated household and to juggle wage-earning with childcare was their nightmare image of urban life.

I thank the Nanticoke Valley Historical Society for its initial support and the residents of Maine and Nanticoke, New York, for their cooperation in this project. The Rural Women's Studies Association, which brings together scholars, policymakers and activists, has been crucial to the formation and articulation of all these ideas.

## Notes

1. Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990). Formative and summative works on the feminist practice of oral history in the U.S. include: Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Personal Narratives Group (Joy Webster Barbre, Amy Farrell, Shirley Nelson Garner, Susan Geiger, Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres, Susan M-A Lyons, Mary Jo Maynes, Pamela Mittlefehldt, Riv-Ellen Prell, Virginia Steinhagen), *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Women's Narratives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); and Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless, eds., *Handbook of Oral History* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, AltaMira Press, 2006). Rae Bridgeman, Sally Cole, and Heather Howard-Bobiwash, *Feminist Fields: Ethnographic Insights* (Peterborough, Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 1999), centered in anthropology and literature, is comprehensive in its geographic coverage. From the vast scholarship originating the UK, see especially Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader*, 2<sup>d</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2006); and Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury, and Penny Summerfield, eds., *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods* (London: Routledge, 2000). For psychological insights into autobiographical memory, the process of retrospection, and the social formation of the self, see David C. Rubin, *Autobiographical Memory* (Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press, 1986); David C. Rubin, ed., *Remembering Our Past: Studies in Autobiographical Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), especially Robin Fivush, Catherine Haden, and Elaine Reese, 'Remembering, Recounting, and Reminiscing: The Development of Autobiographical Memory in Social Context,' 341–59; Darryl Bruce, Douglas J. Hermann, David G. Payne, J. Don Reed, Charles P. Thompson, and Michael P. Toglia, eds., *Autobiographical Memory: Theoretical and Applied Perspectives* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998), especially Gillian Cohen, 'The Effects of Aging on Autobiographical Memory,' 105–24; and Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999). Selma Leydesdorff, Luisa Passerini and Paul Thompson, eds., *Gender & Memory*, 2d ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2007).

2. The insight that these peculiar features of oral history might be treated as assets rather than liabilities was first and most boldly advanced in Alessandro Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different,' in Perks and Thomson, *Oral History Reader*, 32–42. Portelli and Luisa Passerini, who were themselves influenced by the UK's Popular Memory Group, have done fieldwork both within and outside Italy. Although their empirical analyses pertain to social movements rather than individual life histories, their insights into memory and narrative are applicable to autographical narratives as well. See Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class*, trans. Robert Lumley and Jude Bloomfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Passerini, *Autobiography of a Generation: Italy, 1968*, trans. Lisa Erdberg (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1999); and Passerini, *Memory and Utopia: The Primacy of Intersubjectivity* (London: Equinox, 2007); Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli, and Other Stores: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991); Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997); and Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory, and the Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

3. Previously published portions of this community study include: Nancy Grey Osterud, *Bonds of Community: The Lives of Farm Women in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Osterud, 'Land, Identity and Agency in the Oral Autobiographies of Farm Women,' in *Women and Farming: Changing Roles, Changing Structures*, ed. Wava G. Haney and Jane B. Knowles (Boulder, CO, and London: Westview Press, 1988), 73–87; Osterud, 'The Valuation of Women's Work: Gender and the Market in a Dairy Farming Community during the Late Nineteenth Century,' *Frontiers* 10:2 (1988): 18–24; and Osterud, 'She helped me hay it as good as a man': Relations among Women and Men in an Agricultural Community,' in *To Toil the Livelong Day: America's Women at Work, 1780–1980*, ed. Carol Groneman and Mary Beth Norton (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 87–97.

4. On agrarian feminism and farm women's participation in

radical movements in the rural U.S., see Donald B. Marti, *Women of the Grange: Mutuality and Sisterhood in Rural America, 1866–1920* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1991); Marilyn P. Watkins, *Rural Democracy: Family Farmers and Politics in Western Washington, 1880–1925* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995); and Jane H. Adams, ed., *Fighting for the Farm: Rural: American Transformed* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002). For eastern Canada, see Louise I. Carbert, *Agrarian Feminism: The Politics of Ontario Farm Women* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995).

5. I undertook this long-term project as part of a collective effort to document and analyze the history of rural women and gender relations during the capitalist transformation of agriculture in North America. Joan M. Jensen's germinal works on women's history in rural America include: *With These Hands: Women Working on the Land* (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1981); *Loosening the Bonds: Mid-Atlantic Farm Women, 1790–1850* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986); *Promise to the Land: Essays on Rural Women* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991); *Calling This Place Home: Women on the Wisconsin Frontier, 1850–1925* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2006). Exemplary studies that draw substantially on oral history narratives and other first-person documents include: Elizabeth Hampsten, *Read This Only To Yourself: The Private Writings of Midwestern Women, 1880–1910* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982); Sarah Elbert, 'The Farmer Takes a Wife: Women in American Farming Families,' in *Women, Households, and the Economy*, ed. Lourdes Beneria and Catharine R. Stimpson (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987); Jane Marie Pederson, *Between Memory and Reality: Family and Community in Rural Wisconsin* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992); Sonya Salamon, *Prairie Patrimony: Family, Farming, and Community in the Midwest* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Jane H. Adams, *The Transformation of Rural Life: Southern Illinois, 1890–1990* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Mary Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the United States, 1900–1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Rebecca Sharpless, *Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices: Women on Texas Cotton Farms, 1900–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Melissa Walker, *All We Knew Was to Farm: Rural Women in the Upcountry South, 1919–1941* (Baltimore: University of Maryland Press, 2000); Lu Ann Jones, *Mama Learned Us to Work: Farm Women in the New South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Melissa Walker and Rebecca Sharpless, eds., *Work, Family, and Faith: Rural Southern Women in the Twentieth Century* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006). Excellent studies of kinship and gender relations among African American farming families include: Edward Magdol, ed., *A Right to the Land: Essays in the Freedman's Community* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977); and Elizabeth Rauh Bethel, *Promiseland: A Century of Life in a Negro Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981). Latina rural women's oral histories are collected in Patricia

Preciado Martin, *Songs My Mother Sang to Me: An Oral History of Mexican American Women* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992), and Martin, ed., *Beloved Land: An Oral History of Mexican Americans in Southern Arizona* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004). Two works that consider gender and draw on oral histories in tracing farming families from their Scandinavian origins to the Midwestern U.S. are Jon Gjerde, *From Peasants to Farmers: The Migration from Balestrand, Norway to the Upper Middle West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and Robert C. Ostgren, *A Community Transplanted: The Trans-Atlantic Experience of a Swedish Immigrant Settlement in the Upper Middle West, 1835–1915* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988). The formative work on oral history and rural women in Canada is Seena B. Kohl, *Working Together: Women and Family in Southwestern Saskatchewan* (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston of Canada, 1976). For an incisive analysis of the transformation in women's work in eastern Canada, with special relevance to dairy farming, see Marjorie Griffin Cohen, *Women's Work, Markets, and Economic Development in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988). Sally McMurry, *Transforming Rural Life: Dairying Families and Agricultural Change, 1820–1895* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), also offers a comparative perspective. Anthologies drawn from conferences of the Rural Women's Studies Association include: Wava G. Haney and Jane B. Knowles, eds., *Women and Farming: Changing Roles, Changing Structures* (Boulder, CO, and London: Westview Press, 1988); and Joan M. Jensen and Nancy Grey Osterud, eds., *American Rural and Farm Women in Historical Perspective* (Washington, DC: Agricultural History Society and University of California Press, 1994). Another useful collection is the special issue on Oral History and Rural Women in the United States edited by Michael Frisch, *Oral History Review* 17:2 (Fall 1989); see especially Lu Ann Jones and Nancy Grey Osterud, 'Breaking New Ground: Oral History and Agriculture,' 1–23. For a comprehensive, albeit dated, review of archival sources and the scholarly literature based on it, see Nancy Grey Osterud and Lu Ann Jones, 'If I must say so myself: Oral Histories of Rural Women,' *Journal of American History* 76:2 (September 1989): 551–64.

6. All names are pseudonyms; informants chose aliases that carry the same ethno-cultural overtones as their given names.

7. See Joan Jacobs Brumberg, 'Ruined Girls': Changing Community Responses to Illegitimacy in Upstate New York, 1890–1920,' *Journal of Social History* 18 (1984): 247–72; and J. Jill Suitor, 'Husbands' Participation in Childbirth: a Nineteenth-Century Phenomenon,' *Journal of Family History* 6 (1981): 273–95.

8. See especially Sally McMurry, *Families and Farmhouses in Nineteenth-Century America: Vernacular Design and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); and Katherine Jellison, *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913–1963* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

# The Pioneering Women Of Bletchley Park, 1940-46

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## Introduction

The history of women who worked at Bletchley Park during the Second World War can clearly be included in the genre of writings on women's wartime experiences. A raft of books focusing on the role of women in wartime, both in the services and on the home front, were produced during the 1980s and early 1990s, largely in response to a recognition that women should have been given a more notable presence in histories of the past. Writers from this period, such as Summerfield, Braybon, Higonnet, *et al* and Sheridan, highlighted the need for a re-focusing away from the previously male-dominated genre of conflict narratives where the involvement of women was largely omitted.<sup>1</sup> In these texts, war and warfare is mostly associated with the role of men, but as Sheridan states, '[T]wentieth-century warfare has seen a shift of women out of the wings and if not into the centre stage ... then at least on the stage itself', thus stressing the need to recognise women's wartime roles.<sup>2</sup> Woven into the weft of women's wartime narratives are a set of debates about the experience of war acting as a catalyst for the emancipation of women and a shift in established class boundaries, most particularly through the early writings of historians such as Arthur Marwick and Harold Smith.<sup>3</sup> However, Penny Summerfield has refuted these premises, stating that emancipation for women was only a temporary aberration engendered by the experiences of war and that fundamentally there was little change between the pre-war and post-war periods.<sup>4</sup> The work she produced in the late 1990s, which is based extensively on personal narratives, serves to widen the debate by looking more closely at women's internalised attitudes towards gender differences and opportunities for employment, as well as external perceptions of the gender role in society.<sup>5</sup> There have also been a number of texts produced which focus on more specific areas where women were involved, such as Hinton's work on the Women's Voluntary Society, Summerfield's study of women in the Home Guard and Day's research into women workers in naval dockyards.<sup>6</sup>

However, omitted for many decades from this matrix of wartime narratives was the history of Bletchley Park, the British government's decoding centre, and the contribution of women who were involved in its operations. The requirement for complete secrecy, both during and after the war, meant that official records were not released under the 30-year rule until 1977, so it was only from this time that the work of this important wartime location began to be uncovered.<sup>7</sup> But the early publications tended to focus on the technical aspects of the German Enigma coding machine and the British decoding processes, making them notable for their rather prosaic approach, one lacking any real acknowledgement of the people who were 'the cogs in the great enterprise'.<sup>8</sup> It was, therefore, not until more

recent studies that any real recognition was given to the thousands of women who played an invaluable role in the decoding operations.<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note that these latter texts were based predominantly on first-person accounts contained in the archives of the Bletchley Park Trust and mostly written by ex-WRNS or WAAFs. Many of the women workers were recruited from the WRNS, but the other services were also represented with the WAAF and ATS providing women to work in many of the ancillary areas of employment. In addition, female civilians worked alongside men as cryptographers and linguists.

Through oral evidence collected as part of a project on Bletchley Park, this article will demonstrate that whilst the experiences of the interviewees can be said to correspond in many respects with the models of women's wartime work postulated in the important studies referred to above, the very specific nature of the secret work at this location resulted in a singularity of experience for the women who worked there. These memories have been tempered not only through the wartime experiences themselves, but have gained a particular patina accrued through decades of silence.

## Background to Bletchley Park

Bletchley Park was the home of the Government Code & Cypher School (GC&CS), formed in 1920 under the control of Naval Intelligence. Advances in technology in the twentieth century served to accelerate the significance of encryption and its usage with new communication systems such as the telegraph and radio. The interception of enemy radio communications by the British became of paramount importance during the First World War and resulted in the establishment of the GC&CS in London. It was moved in 1938 to the Bletchley Park Estate, previously the home of Sir George Leon, a wealthy stockbroker. The estate was judged to be conveniently located since it was on the main line from London and was equidistant from the universities at Cambridge and Oxford. Its code name was Station X and its wartime operations were one of Britain's best-kept secrets, the gathering of intelligence, code-named Ultra.<sup>10</sup>

The first codebreakers were recruited through existing social and military networks and initially their task was to try to decode the intercepted Enigma codes used by the German Navy. Later recruits included Gordon Welchman and Alan Turing, both mathematicians from Cambridge and heads of the section involved in decoding enemy messages.<sup>11</sup> During the early part of the war, the de-crypting was done manually and a number of female graduates were recruited from Newnham College in Cambridge as linguists and cryptographers by one of the male cryptographers whose sister was the Vice-Principal. However, in late 1939 Turing designed an electro-magnetic



*Mrs Ruth Bourne in front of a rebuilt Bombe machine*

machine, called the Bombe, which enabled the de-cryption operations to be carried out mechanically.<sup>12</sup> Turing and his team were installed in Hut 1 in 1940, but by 1942, sites were added at other locations, including Stanmore and Eastcote in North London, to house the many more machines and their operators that were required for the enormously expanded decoding operations.

It was decided that women would be employed as operators for the Bombe during the course of the war and that they should be recruited from the WRNS, nearly 2000 being employed by the end of the war.<sup>13</sup> Although WRNS outnumbered other female workers, there was also an important input into the work of the Park from other service women. The whole decoding system was based entirely on the work of the intercepting stations, known as 'Y' stations, across the UK and overseas, and women from the WAAF and the ATS were selected as wireless operators and their skilled and exacting job was to listen to enemy messages. One interviewee, a telegraphist, remembers the first bomber raids for the D-Day invasion and says that '[W]e knew then that we had been responsible for passing some of the information. We didn't know to whom we were sending it or from whom we were receiving messages ... some were marked urgent ... and we knew we were involved in something important'.<sup>14</sup> These intercepted messages were sent to Bletchley Park by despatch riders or via teleprinters. In the Registration Room at the Park, the messages were then logged, again mostly by WAAF and ATS recruits, and passed on to the cryptographers.

Later in the war, the need for greater sophistication in breaking German codes led to the building of Colossus, the first programmable electronic computer, the brainchild of mathematician, Max Newman. By this time, in 1943, there were 4,486 personnel working at Bletchley Park, rising to a total of 8,995 by 1945, and a large percentage of these were women. It is no exaggeration to say that the women who operated the Bombe and Colossus machines were pioneering computer operators and it was this that became the stimulus for an oral history project to record their wartime memories.<sup>15</sup>

## The Oral History Project

The idea for an oral history project was first mooted in 2004 and it is significant that it was jointly funded by the British Computer Society (BCS) Anniversary Fund and the UK Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology (UKRC). Both bodies are concerned with the decreasing number of young women entering the science industries—including IT and computing—areas of employment dominated by men. It was with this concern in mind that Dr Sue Black, chair and founder of the BCSWomen networking group, felt they should foreground the role of women at Bletchley Park in helping to break German codes and as pioneers of modern computing techniques. As Dr Jan Peters, the project manager, explained, 'We wanted to ensure that women were not erased from this part of computing history ... as well as playing their part in the early days of computing, this was a period of time which changed the course of women's employment. We hope these stories [the oral testimonies] will play their part in helping to inspire and encourage more women into IT'.<sup>16</sup>

Collection and recording of the memories of those women, now in their eighties and nineties, who worked at Bletchley Park or its outstations, was undertaken over a five-month period. Interviewees were found through a BCS advertising campaign and through co-operation with the Bletchley Park Museum, who already hold a number of recordings with veterans in their archive. They organise annual reunions for ex-employees and one specifically for all the women as a tribute to their wartime contributions. Twenty interviews were conducted with twenty-three people, including two men, across a range of employment roles; two cryptographers, two teleprinter operators, a telegraphist/Morse Slip Reader and two clerical assistants in Naval Intelligence. The remainder of the interviewees were Bombe and Colossus operators and this skew was inevitable given the focus of the project.

## Oral history and life stories

It is no coincidence that many of these 'hidden histories' of the wartime have been opened up through the use of oral history as a key methodology. As Susan Armitage asserts, 'oral history is the best method I know for understanding women's consciousness and their coping strategies. Besides, it provides access to huge populations of women from whom we would otherwise not hear'.<sup>17</sup> The use of oral history in extracting information has been particularly apt for the secret world of Bletchley Park, where personal testimonies have helped to uncover the everyday experiences of the women who worked there and their stories exemplify how crucial this methodology can be when other records contain little or no evidence of women's activities and contributions. Of course, statistical data is available, but this does little to provide a full realisation of what the particular work involved or how women lived through what were, for many, a set of unique experiences. Memories form personal landscapes and it is the signposts within those landscapes that enable



the oral historians to negotiate individual life histories. Most importantly, these landscapes form the bedrock of individual identity, shaped both through experience and the remembrances of those experiences, and an understanding of such constructs of identity are crucial in determining shifts in levels of consciousness over periods of time. Layered within these life histories are questions of gender and how women's memories may differ from those of men. This may be particularly so for memories of war, with a dominance of male narratives in line with the hierarchy of roles assigned to male and female occupations.<sup>18</sup>

For many practitioners of oral history, or other practices where the use of oral sources is the predominant methodology, it is the specific topic of study that is central to the overarching narrative. Whilst, of course, this essentialist approach provides the narrator with a set of insights into the chosen subject through the foregrounding of personal testimonies, life history interviews can yield a wider contextualisation and can help to bracket the evidence within a biographical timeframe. 'The difference between a life story and an oral history is usually emphasis and scope. An oral history most often focuses on a specific aspect of a person's life, such as work life ... a life story focuses on a person's entire life'.<sup>19</sup> The constraints of time and cost precluded the use of a full life history approach for the Bletchley Park project, but, by ascertaining even a few rudimentary biographical details from the interviewees, more depth was added to the line of questioning, thus providing some of the identifying signposts. The interviews exemplify the need for at least a minimal level of contextual questioning, as further sections will demonstrate. These sections relate to the overall content of the interviews, which have provided an insight into what life was like at Bletchley Park during the wartime period. The main areas addressed include patterns of recruitment, the role of social life as a coping strategy, the effects of secrecy and the impact of the end of war.

## Patterns of Recruitment

The secret and complex nature of the work undertaken at Bletchley Park had an inevitable impact on the style of recruitment. Normal channels, such as newspaper advertisements or labour agencies, could not be used, as they were for other types of war employment, so different strategies had to be implemented. A set of informal networks were already in place, based on family and university connections, and these were exploited to find suitable people.<sup>20</sup> One interviewee was directed to Bletchley Park via the Foreign Office because she had read German at University College London and studied for a year in a Zurich university. She was placed in a section that consisted entirely of women, and as their head was called Dilly Knox, they were referred to as 'Dilly's girls'. At that time, all the decoding work was done by hand and, as she says,

It turned from a cottage industry to a production line ... it was amazing the number of people who came in, top engineers ... it was all so

experimental to begin with that they didn't really know what they wanted... as soon as the government knew how much could be done at Bletchley Park, they pumped more money in.<sup>21</sup>

With the arrival of the first eight Bombe machines in 1941, the need for machine operators had been identified and the first WRNS began to arrive to undertake this work. The WRNS had been re-formed in the spring of 1939 and existing networks for finding suitable workers again were utilised. It was noted that the requirement to obtain references from serving or retired naval men was '... making the service the most selective and nepotistic of the auxiliary', but it was this very nepotistic system that helped with the recruitment drive.<sup>22</sup> The first batch of WRNS were despatched to Bletchley Park as an experiment, although a report indicates there was some reservation about their employment as 'it was doubted if the girls could do the work'.<sup>23</sup> The 'girls' not only demonstrated clearly that they could operate these machines efficiently, but proved their worth so well in all areas that by 1945 there were hundreds of WRNS working at the Park and its various outstations. It is undoubted that the work of the cryptographers and linguists was instrumental to the success of Bletchley Park, but however brilliant they were '... the outcome of their work was dependent on the unremitting toil and endurance of almost two thousand Wrens'.<sup>24</sup> It would have been difficult to prove the effectiveness of the Bombe and Colossus machines without the women who operated them.

When analysing the responses from the interviews, and through gleaning biographical information, it becomes clear that the criteria for recruiting women to Bletchley Park was based on family background, level of education and personal abilities, such as language skills. Most of the interviewees were from professional families and had been educated to university standard. The majority were young at the time, some only having just left school at seventeen. For many, it was their first time away from home and from their families. Being sent to work at Bletchley Park was an adventure into an unknown world and meeting other young women provided new friendships, some of which lasted a lifetime. 'I had just left school and my first impressions were that this was incredible, this was grown-up life. It was really exhilarating'.<sup>25</sup> Becoming independent enabled many of them to break away from the patriarchal constraints of pre-war family life where 'the ultimate authority [of the father] remained'.<sup>26</sup> Meeting a range of men and women from different social backgrounds helped them to break out of their own personal boundaries and the largely democratic structure of Bletchley Park facilitated these social and cultural shifts. The evidence in some ways would seem to indicate a form of female liberation stimulated through wartime opportunities, as argued by Marwick, but for many of the women interviewed their experiences '... did not involve the removal of the gender hierarchy'.<sup>27</sup> What they achieved was a sense of personal independence and thus a more subtle shift of consciousness than the model of full liberation would suggest.



*A group of Wrens at Bletchley Park in 1941*

It is also evident from a number of the interviews that personal motivations were instrumental in the choices made by the women about the ways in which they wanted to be involved in the war effort rather than an adherence to the patriotic rhetoric of the period:

I joined the WRNS because I liked the black stockings, better than the grey ones they wore in the WAAF.

I like the uniform and I wanted to be in the WRNS because my father had been in the Naval Air Service during the First World War. I thought I'd be going to sea with a lot of handsome sailors!

When I was called up for the WRNS, I was very pleased because I thought it was the better service.

I joined the WRNS because the uniform was slightly more appealing than the other services.

I wanted to be boats' crew and meet all the jolly sailors.<sup>28</sup>

This emphasis on the relative attractiveness of the WRNS uniform is important as it concurs with prevailing ideas about femininity and the perceived need to maintain this within a masculine environment.<sup>29</sup>

A sense of duty was evident but based more on the actual work than the reasons for joining up. There was more of a tendency for pride and patriotism to be sentiments voiced retrospectively and therefore part of a reflective response to the women's wartime activities. The need for secrecy, and the compartmentalisation of their work at Bletchley Park, meant that most of the workers had little sense of the wider context of their contributions to the war effort, so it was not until many years later, when the carapace of secrecy was thrown off, that they began to see the decoding operations as a complete story and to recognise how their own experiences were located within this broader narrative.

The next stage from initial recruitment was the training process. For many of the WRNS this commenced at Mill Hill (previously a cancer hospital in North London) where they spent three weeks learning naval 'jargon', receiving lectures about the Royal Navy and undertaking household chores, which involved 'scrubbing long, long corridors on your hands and knees, with a bucket of cold water'.<sup>30</sup> Some WRNS remember going to Scotland to do their training, and others to Greenwich, where they 'played hockey with naval midshipmen'.<sup>31</sup> The two interviewees who were in the WAAF were sent to Leighton Buzzard, one to be trained as a teleprinter typist and the other to finish her initial training at Chiswick Radio College as a Morse slip reader.<sup>32</sup> Once the women arrived at Bletchley Park, the Bombe operators were taken to Hut 11 where the machines were located. They were given very rudimentary training on the workings of the Bombe by another Wren. As one woman remembers,

I was amazed, absolutely amazed. It all looked so complicated and I never thought, you know, that I would master it .... When we were taken to Hut 11, there was no fanlight, no windows, no air conditioning so it was very hot and very noisy. I was put straight onto night duty and fell asleep! It was the rhythm of the machines after the long journey and then having to stand for an 8-hour shift.<sup>33</sup>

Later on in the war, some WRNS were sent to work on the Colossus machines in Hut 10, called the Newmanry after Max Newman. They were trained for two weeks in the teleprinter alphabet and how to work the Tunny machine, used for preparing and copying the tapes for Colossus, and given a written test at the end of this period.<sup>34</sup> With such minimal training, most of the women interviewed remained doing the same work throughout the war, but one or two did succeed in gaining promotion, either as Leading Wrens, where they worked in a supervisory role, or they trained further to become a Petty Officer. Leading Wrens stayed in the same work areas as their colleagues, with little change in their relationship. 'There was a great sense of working as a team. This was our Watch and we were quite proud of what we did ... we worked together'.<sup>35</sup> Once promoted to Petty Officer, they would work in a separate office and use the dining room in the main house rather than the canteen. One woman said that she received training from a male technician so that she could help with routine maintenance on the Bombe machines: 'I had a rudimentary idea of how the Bombes worked, but once I had received some training I was able to coach other girls so that they could be made up to Leading Wrens. That was more interesting than just operating a Bombe'.<sup>36</sup>

What made these machine operators different from other female war workers is that they were not being trained to take over jobs previously done by men. As the Bombe and the Colossus were inventions predicated on the expediciencies of war, their operators were specially recruited for this particular task and the work was given directly to women. Of course, this is not to say that their work was more highly valued, but rather that parallels

were not made between them and male workers in terms of a replacement of employment. The machines were maintained by RAF or GPO engineers, but their status was not comparable to that of the women as the roles were separate. The women did not therefore experience gender subordination in quite the same way as other female war workers.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, as has been shown, by the end of the war they were highly regarded for their ability to undertake the operational work so efficiently and diligently.

### **Social life as a coping strategy**

The 8-hour shift system for the Bletchley Park women was not in itself unusual, but because the decoding machines had to be kept running over 24 hours, it was necessary for the women to work a three-shift system: 8am-4pm, 4pm-12pm, 12pm-8am. Each shift lasted for a week with one day off between the different shifts. Some found this quite arduous, especially when coupled with the working conditions, where noise and smell of oil from the machines and the monotony of the work were a problem. One woman found it particularly difficult to cope; 'I had to work in shifts and I found it difficult to adjust my sleep patterns. I asked the Medical Officer for a transfer but I was told "You're staying to the end of the war". The job was terrible and I wasn't really suited to this type of work'.<sup>38</sup> Although this was not the case for most of the women interviewed, they did talk about other problems such as their billets and the catering arrangements. These were voiced very much within a narrative of endurance in difficult circumstances and a rhetoric of working collectively for the war effort.

Most of the WRNS who worked at Bletchley Park were billeted in country houses in nearby areas, such as Woburn Abbey and Gayhurst Manor.<sup>39</sup> In the former, the dormitories, or the cabins as they were referred to in naval terms, were in the old servants' quarters at the top of the house, where '... it was very, very cold and there were lots of mice. I remember treading on one in the dark and then putting it down the toilet! We had basic washing facilities and often had to dry our clothes over the Colossus machine when we were working'.<sup>40</sup> There were also complaints about the quality of the food provided, both at their billets and in Bletchley Park, particularly during the night shifts when the food was reheated from the daytime. Lack of privacy in the billets was one of the most quoted problems, although as one interviewee says this was easier for some than for others. 'The bathroom facilities were very cramped and there was no real privacy. Some of the girls found this uncomfortable but those of us who had gone to boarding school found that we were more prepared for communal living'.<sup>41</sup> On a more positive level, a number of interviewees comment on the lack of attention given to class differences amongst the recruits and that '... everyone was treated the same, we all mucked in together'.<sup>42</sup>

As a way of dealing with the worst aspects of their wartime work, the women adopted a range of coping strategies through active social lives on their days off and leave periods. These were quite different for the female

civilians and the servicewomen, as the cryptographers, mathematicians and linguists were able to form a large number of their own societies and put on different types of entertainment in the main house at Bletchley Park. The WRNS and WAAF had no access to these activities and instead found their own antidotes to work. The proximity of Bletchley Park to London enabled many of them to catch a train to Euston and, if in uniform, obtain free tickets for shows and concerts there. Others would hitch-hike to local towns or travel back to their family homes during their leave periods. For those billeted at Woburn Abbey, the grounds were available for walks and picnics, or even sunbathing on the roof during the summer months. Dances were also held at Woburn Abbey and the women would sometimes be asked to

... entertain the "guinea pigs" ... they were airmen who had been injured with badly-scarred faces. We also went to dances at local airforce bases. Once, as we were approaching, I heard some Glen Miller music, only to find when I got there that it was the Glen Miller band playing! We were thrilled.<sup>43</sup>

A lot of the women talk about the American camps located near their billets, and say that they were transported there in lorries and provided with good food. These recollections were related as innocent experiences and there was no suggestion from the interviewees that any liaisons were formed. It is intriguing to speculate why this evidence counters the narratives relating to the presence of American soldiers and airforce men in Britain from late 1942. These are often couched within discourses which identify fears about sexual laxity or public morality and, as Sonya Rose has demonstrated, women were expected to uphold moral values as a way of maintaining a sense of citizenship.<sup>44</sup> Such a correlation is not demonstrated by the Bletchley Park interviewees, although it would be naïve to suggest that a definitive conclusion could be extrapolated from such sparse evidence. However, it could be mooted that these discourses are often based on government concerns about working-class women, in many cases in relation to the supposed sexual promiscuity of women in the ATS.<sup>45</sup> The women interviewed were predominantly from 'respectable' middle-class families, so may be perceived of as less likely to act promiscuously. This premise is open to debate about class-based moral behaviour, and is one that will not be explored further here, but it is interesting to note in terms of the peculiarities of Bletchley Park. The overall impression from the interviews is that whilst many of the women enjoyed a sense of freedom not previously experienced, they continued to adhere to the values they had inculcated through their earlier socialisation.

### **The effects of secrecy**

Another area that differentiated the women of Bletchley Park from many of the other female wartime workers was the requirement for them to sign the Official Secrets Act and to keep their work secret. This was, of course, also the case for women who worked, for example,

in naval dockyards or other forms of military employment. But in order for the work of the Park to be successful, the need for absolute secrecy was such that effectively the complete silence required from the women precluded any information about their work being passed to anyone else, including close family members. This need for silence continued for another thirty years after the end of the war and even when some of the women married, they did not tell their husbands about their wartime work. As one interviewee recounted, 'I remember signing the Official Secrets Act and being told that it was a very solemn thing and that if I didn't abide by it, I could go to jail or even into the Tower'. Another said that '... all the secrecy alarmed me in a way; I didn't know what I was going for. We were told that if we mentioned anything, there would be someone on the train keeping a lookout, so I was worried about travelling down to Euston'. One Wren was so overwhelmed about signing the Official Secrets Act that she didn't discuss her work for over fifty years.<sup>46</sup>

The high levels of secrecy were upheld not only through signing the Official Secrets Act and severe lectures from those in charge, but also through the physical separation of the Park's buildings and its work processes. This was unlike the experiences of other female wartime employees, such as those who worked in factories where there was more of a sense of working together as one unit.<sup>47</sup> In addition, women on the same watch were also billeted or quartered together, again ensuring that if they did ever mention their work, it was only with other women in the same work sector. Such was the success of this imposed silence that Churchill referred to the women at Bletchley Park as 'the geese who laid the golden egg and never cackled'.<sup>48</sup> But there was a price for this proud boast as '[T]he very fact that women were not permitted to celebrate their work, if asked they were skilled at feigning employment as writers [naval secretaries] or translators, meant that they did not receive public commendation which their female counterparts elsewhere enjoyed'.<sup>49</sup> Because they were entrusted with the secret operations at Bletchley Park, and had been selectively recruited, these women were disadvantaged by the very secrecy that shaped their experiences and which resulted in a lack of recognition for their work for many decades after the war. It was an inability to articulate their memories until more recently that has affected the ways in which they tell their stories. Only now can they display a sense of pride in their wartime achievements and many are proud to be able to tell their friends and families the truth about what they did in the war. They have now received veterans' badges from the Bletchley Park Trust and are able to attend the annual reunions held at the Park. Two of the interviewees act as guides at the Museum and also give talks and this has given them a re-identification with their wartime roles.

### **The impact of the end of the war**

At the end of the war, and as a result of British government concerns about the activities of the USSR, Churchill commanded that all the decoding machines at Bletchley Park should be destroyed so that the

Soviets should learn nothing of Bletchley Park's wartime achievements. This work was carried out mostly by the women who had worked as operators of these machines. Thus they were brutally reminded about their oath of secrecy and the need for continued silence about their wartime work. As one woman relates,

I was told that there was no more work on the Bombes and that they would have to be dismantled because they were one of the most secret machines in the world. I used a soldering iron to undo hundreds of connections and all the wires and the connections were put in boxes and sold as army surplus. Plans for the machines were torn up. All the Bombe operators had to be deployed and I chose to become a Writer. I was de-mobbed at Christmas 1946, picked up a handsome RAF type and got married!<sup>50</sup>

Married life was the future for many of the women interviewed, but the continuation of the war in the Pacific provided an opportunity for some of the WRNS to leave the UK and help with the decoding of Japanese messages from a British base in Colombo in Ceylon [now Sri Lanka]. A few of them spent a year stationed there, including two sisters who had been clerical assistants in Naval Intelligence at Bletchley Park. The end of the war for another woman provided her with an opportunity to join the police force, where she had a lifelong career and she expresses her feelings about the impact of war on women by saying, '[Y]ou suddenly realised that life was full of possibilities, that a new world was opening for us all, instead of being at home and helping look after the babies and put flowers in the vases, I could do something else, so I did ... never regretted it'.<sup>51</sup> This career was only possible because she did not marry, so she remained outside the normative female narratives of marriage and family, but it nevertheless demonstrates the wider career opportunities that became available for some women in the post-war period.

Reflecting on their wartime experiences has elicited a set of responses from the interviewees which resonate with sentiments about camaraderie, friendships forged and the uniqueness of this period in their lives.

It was a lovely time ... and you made lots of friends and it was fun, a lot of it ... It was such an amazing bit out of my life, I can't think of anything else like it.

It was a lovely feeling of belonging and doing something important and really feeling you were doing a worthwhile thing.

I have kept in touch with some friends from Bletchley Park. They are tremendous deep friendships and we have gone through life together. We all worked together from the time of our initial signing-on.

I think it was the feeling of comradeship we

found there ... I think I probably grew up there and certainly gained a lot of confidence there. It was wonderful to know I could do a job and do it well. And, of course, I've retained a lot of friends from there and it's certainly wonderful now to go back and see it all.<sup>52</sup>

## Conclusions

This brief survey of the women who worked at Bletchley Park would seem to indicate that their experiences did not result in a significantly greater degree of emancipation or liberation from the gender boundaries that had existed prior to the war, as argued in the early writings of Marwick. In line with numerous women engaged in forms of wartime employment, the majority of the interviewees left Bletchley Park or its outstations at the end of the war, married and started families. At the same time, it is difficult to agree with Smith's assertions that a '... renewed interest in marriage and family suggests that the war's most important legacy for women was a strengthening of traditional sex roles rather than the emergence of new roles'.<sup>53</sup> Arguably, marriage was not a 'renewed interest' but one which remained central for many young women. A number of interviewees had met their future husbands during the wartime and it is clear that, for them, courtship and marriage remained an important part of their lives.<sup>54</sup> However, marriage did not necessarily result in a reinforcement of pre-war gender roles, nor preclude a shift in consciousness. Indeed, some of the interviewees suggested that their wartime work had provided them with at least a semblance of liberation or had helped to change their attitudes with regard to their sense of worth. One interviewee felt that her wartime work had changed perceptions of what women could do and she was pleased that married women could continue to work after the war, an opportunity of which she took advantage.<sup>55</sup> The majority of the women interviewed revealed that their consciousness at the start of the war was shaped initially through accepted gender roles, but because they went on to undertake a range of different types of wartime employment they began to recognise that '... constructions of gender were not immutable and, indeed, could be remoulded to allow for shifts in male and female activities ...'.<sup>56</sup> Women were crucial to the secret work undertaken at Bletchley Park and although for many the work was monotonous and required a minimal level of skill, it did enable them to think differently about existing ideas of women's abilities.

As the interviewing of women about their wartime lives is inevitably a subjective process, then it has to be recognised that their responses are embedded in the discourses of both the wartime period and the present.<sup>57</sup> This case study demonstrates that to some extent the recollections have been influenced by the secrecy of the work and the silence imposed on the women's memories after the war, so the delineation between the two periods is less sharply defined than for other types of wartime remembrances. The re-telling of their stories has therefore necessitated the resurgence of memories

largely unarticulated for a number of decades and the lifting of that silence has clearly affected the particular ways in which they are now able to express themselves. These are not polished stories honed with telling across the decades, but ones that have only emerged relatively recently. By re-telling their stories during the past two decades, they have been able to define their experiences within the gender ideology of the present rather than that of the past, thereby acknowledging pride in their roles as women wartime workers rather than seeing themselves as eclipsed by the wartime activities of men. It is difficult to extrapolate a definitive statement about shifts in consciousness, but what is indisputable is that the experiences of these women have allowed them a form of retrospection that enables them to reflect more positively about themselves. Added to this, many of the women were only in their late teens or early twenties when they first went to Bletchley Park, and thus at a time in their lives '... when self-identity [was] being established away from parental expectations'.<sup>58</sup> The re-telling of their wartime stories is therefore embedded in memories of their first real sense of independence and the space to construct their own personal identity and sense of self-esteem. It is the singularity of experience through their work at Bletchley Park that has defined them and enabled them to now reclaim their role in the histories of the war.

## Notes

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3. Arthur Marwick, *War and Social Change in the Twentieth Century* (London: Macmillan, 1974), Harold L. Smith, 'The effect of the war on the status of women' in Harold L. Smith, ed., *War and Social Change, British Society in the Second World War* (Manchester: MUP, 1986), 225.
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  28. Interviews with Bletchley Park women.
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  30. Interview with Bombe operator, 16 August 2007.
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  32. Interview with two WAAFs, 20 August 2007.
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  34. Jack Copeland, 'Mr Newman's Section' in Copeland, ed., *Colossus*, 159.
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  38. Interview with Bombe operator, 31 May 2007.
  39. Hill, *Bletchley Park People*, Chapter 11.
  40. Interview with Colossus operator, 22 May 2007.
  41. Interview with Colossus operator, 25 May 2007.
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  47. Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives*, 167.
  48. Hill, *Bletchley Park People*, 'Prologue'.
  49. Bletchley Park Trust Archives, Message from Squadron Leader Jones [Head of Bombe Section], 8 May 1945.
  50. Interview with Bombe operator, 17 May 2007.
  51. Interview with WAAF telegraphist, 20 August 2007.
  52. Interviews with a variety of women on their dominant memories of Bletchley Park.
  53. Harold L. Smith, 'The Effect of War on the Status of Women', 225.
  54. For example, two of the female cryptographers met their husbands at Bletchley Park and one woman met her husband when she was stationed in Colombo.
  55. After the war, she went to work in a medical laboratory and later in a solicitors' office.
  56. Ann Day, 'The Forgotten "Mateys"', 375.
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# Classed, gendered, educated: life story narratives from the Mass Observation Archive

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## Introduction

My exploration of material in the Mass Observation Archive (MOA) has been ethnographically informed, moving from the sense-making narratives of Mass-Observation (MO) correspondents to metanarratives of class, gender, social policy frameworks and historical context, in order to produce a coherent account of the interaction of class and gender within working class experiences of education. In this article, I draw upon the 'quilted narratives' of four correspondents (two women and two men) that explore their feelings of ambivalence and dissatisfaction with the outcomes of their lives, produced from responses to four MO Directives from the Contemporary MO Project – Education, Growing Up, Close Relationships and Social Divisions.<sup>1</sup>

## The Mass Observation Archive

The Mass Observation Archive is held in the University of Sussex Library and consists of documents and books from the early project (1937 to early 1950s) plus the more recent papers (1981 to the present). Mass-Observation was formed in early 1937, by Charles Madge, a poet and journalist, Humphrey Jennings, poet and documentary film maker, and Tom Harrisson, an amateur ornithologist and anthropologist. The original founders proposed an 'anthropology of our own people',<sup>2</sup> and the primary objective of the initial project was to document in detail the experience of everyday life in Britain using observational techniques similar to those used by anthropologists to document other cultures.

The project was relaunched in 1981 by David Pocock, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Sussex, with the recruitment of a new panel of volunteer writers or correspondents to respond to Directives. Currently, the panel numbers 675 correspondents, with a response rate to each Directive of between 50-75 percent, while almost 3,000 people have participated in the Project over time. The volunteer writers to the original Project have been, until recently, predominantly younger male, upper working class or lower middle class, with an interest in self-education—Jeffrey cites their frequent membership of the Left Book Club.<sup>3</sup> Correspondents to the Contemporary Project have been, until recently, predominantly older women. However, an interest in self-education and a critical stance towards events in the world is a continuing characteristic amongst MO correspondents. Correspondents to the Mass Observation Archive are self-selected volunteers, who receive no payment for their writing, but have use of a pre-paid postage system to send their material to the Archive. All the correspondents are assured of confidentiality and, since 1983, have

been allocated an alphanumeric number so that replies to Directives can be made available for research without revealing names and addresses.

The term 'Directive' is used by contemporary Mass-Observation to mean a set of questions that are designed to encourage the correspondents to write. The term was used in the original MO Project to 'direct' the volunteer writers as to how they might approach the subject to be written about. Directives are sent out three or four times per year and are requests for responses on a particular theme. They are usually written by the Archivist, Dorothy Sheridan (now Head of Special Collections), sometimes in collaboration with a researcher who has commissioned a Directive, and they read like a personal request for information rather than an impersonal directive from an unknown researcher or institution. Correspondents are not given a deadline for return of their responses, but in practice, there is a 'mild request' to return responses to one Directive before the next one is sent, about every three to four months. There are no prescriptions regarding length or form of replies, nor are there any expectations about grammar or spelling. Dorothy Sheridan states that:

The emphasis is rather on self-expression, candour and a willingness to tell a good story and be a vivid and conscientious social commentator as well as an open and thoughtful autobiographer.<sup>4</sup>

The process and form of communication existing between MO correspondents and the Archive is therefore not simply a relationship with an institution, but is an interaction between people and with the writing process.

## Representativeness and the everyday

What or who MO correspondents 'represent' is a key methodological issue in the use of MO material. Dorothy Sheridan argues that 'representativeness' is itself an ideologically constructed concept, and cites the existence of other ways of interpreting human interaction. In particular, social anthropologists, in choosing 'key informants' effectively set them to 'represent' the community to the researcher. Correspondents' writing has the possibility to illuminate common sets of experiences; they consciously seek in their writing to 'balance their ... singularity' with their 'position within a collective endeavour'.<sup>5</sup> However, it is not whether they are representative that is at issue but who and what they represent and what meanings and links can be learnt from either any individual or group of individuals' writing. MO correspondents operate as informants in the anthropological sense, but also observers of social life including their own. They are asked to reflect on and make explicit the models that give meaning to their social lives.



*Images by courtesy of the Trustees of the Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex*

## Narrative and identity

In his discussion of literacy practices within MO, Brian Street describes correspondents as writers for whom writing for the Archive is a self-confidently asserted pleasure rather than a professional task.<sup>6</sup> Whilst this extension of individual literacy practice is an important and positive factor in explaining MO correspondents' reasons for writing, the need for an audience, for recognition, is also a key factor in the production of these narratives. Alistair Thomson<sup>7</sup>, explores how, in composing private memories we offer them in order to receive public recognition of the validity of our lived experiences: "Recognition" is a useful term to describe the process of public affirmation of identities and memories. Recognition is essential for social and emotional survival; the alternative of alienation and exclusion may be psychologically devastating.<sup>8</sup> Correspondents' motivations range from the wish to create a record of everyday life for researchers of the future, to provide a record of their experiences for their children, or to write in order to review their own life.

Rather than a simple response to a set of questions, MO correspondents often use the Directives as a general invitation to write, and follow their own 'narrative arc'.<sup>9</sup> By writing to the Archive, they engage in a process of narrating their selves, and set down the layers of their identity in their Directive responses, where their stories exist in sedimented layers of fragmented narrative. Liz Stanley indicates how the construction of life history narratives can be formative within a process of personal reassessment and re/membering.<sup>10</sup> Rather than our story unfolding as we live it, it takes form and meaning as we tell it, and each telling, each context, gives it different meanings. Polkinghorne's account of the unfolding nature of life story narratives is indicative of the nature of MO narratives, which are revised each time a correspondent sends in a Directive reply: 'We are in the middle of our stories and cannot be sure how they will end; we are constantly having to revise the plot as new events are added to our lives.'<sup>11</sup>

The significance of MO writing is not so much the 'product' of the writing but the process by which knowledge is produced through writing to the Archive. Sheridan, et al. argue that 'knowledge of the ordinary is contingent and changing' and that MO correspondents frequently reflect on their earlier contributions to the Archive, and write about how their knowledge and opinions have changed over time.<sup>12</sup> Such a reflexive relationship between the Archive, the MO writers and with the material illuminates the messy, 'contested and shifting nature of knowledge' production.<sup>13</sup> The following sets of case studies are indicative of the way

MO correspondents reflect upon their life experiences as they write. Their accounts can therefore be contradictory and disjointed as they seek reflexively to create a coherent account of their lives for their audience.

The following two case studies indicate the experiences of working class children educated in the English state elementary school system during the interwar years, and who left school at fourteen without any qualifications. During the early 1930s over 80 percent of children left school at fourteen to find work, with limited opportunities for further training, having 'failed' to transfer into the secondary school system and the opportunity of education until the age of sixteen.<sup>14</sup>

Jim McCormac [C1539] was born in May 1920, in Liverpool, as the eldest of two children. His father had spent four years in the Armed Forces stationed in India during the First World War, married on being demobbed and then managed a grocery store, before he became unemployed for the last five years of his life. Jim was eleven when his father became unemployed, and was sixteen at the time of his father's death at the age of 39. Memories of his father's unemployment and death dominate Jim's narrative: 'I had seen my father out of work for over five years, and was determined not to allow it to happen to me.' Jim attended the same council Elementary School from 1925 until 1934, and deals briskly with his elementary school experiences, before moving on to more critical events in his life:

I was educated from the age of 5 yrs to the age of 14yrs at a 1914 prefab corrugated iron school built as a temporary First World War premises, and still churning out semi-educated kids when I left in 1934, having completed my allotted span of training to face the brave new world ...<sup>15</sup>

Jim's lack of formal education returns at intervals in his narrative as a tense motif of regret and anger.

Conflict between a personal sense of worth and official judgements of success or failure interweave through many of the MO correspondents' narratives. Their response was often to turn to self-education and self-improvement, a theme evident in Jim's account: 'I found contentment in reading as many books as possible from the public library, copy sketching any illustration, oil painting, cartoon etc. which I could get my hands on.'<sup>16</sup> In his reflections on his formal achievements, Jim contrasts this personal 'contentment' with the judgement from his formal school reports:

I always considered that I gained little from my education, for the only subjects that my school thought I was any good at were:

Reading, Writing, Composition and Art, and on leaving school at the age of fourteen I was obviously not very knowledgeable on those subjects and to my life long shame was a bad speller.<sup>17</sup>

At the age of 14, he left school to become the family wage earner and worked in a 'mishmash of jobs' until he talked himself into work as a shop display trainee. Jim received his call-up to the Army in 1940 and spent five years overseas, serving in the 8th Army as a desert rat. In 1946, at the age of twenty-six, he returned to civilian life. Jim took night school classes at Liverpool Art and Craft School and eventually got a job in the evenings as a night school instructor at St Helens Art School whilst continuing to work in shop display work during the day.

Jim situates his occupational success within a retrospective consideration of his lack of formal education. This juxtaposition of his success and failure reinforces his achievements as an adult:

Now with hindsight, my lack of education possibly gave me more drive and an edge in progressing to the senior position in my job ... I had seen my Father out of work for over five year, and was determined not to allow it to happen to me ... Being conscious of the importance of being employed I always gave at least 50% more to my tasks than anyone of my colleagues, and found that they being mostly southerners were much slower and inclined to chew the cud instead of getting on with the job in hand.<sup>18</sup>

Jim uses the term 'southerners' to suggest northern integrity, application and resourcefulness, in contrast to the bovine attitudes of his colleagues.

Jim's education pathway demonstrates immense personal drive and tenacity, yet he articulates a sense of regret at his lack of education: 'Many regrets. For all of my life I have been conscious of my lack of formal education.' In his narrative, his desire and regret is linked directly to his reflections on the tensions he encountered in managing and training graduates later in his career, and to his underlying insecurity about his lack of formal education in general:

I became very pragmatic and applied the rule of common-sense to all aspects of my job which enabled me to cut the waffle, and 'tomorrow' will do syndrome, thereby getting things actioned so much more quickly. I must say that I always covered my back by anticipating in my mind any flaws or arguments which might arise, and having my replies at the ready.<sup>19</sup>

Jim's class of origin surfaces later in his narrative in the context of managing, lecturing and training graduates:

... when in later life I had to lecture graduates ... on ... sales promotion, ... I was always frightened in case I mispronounced a word or spoke with a Liverpudlian accent. ... Then the

BBC announcers began to speak ... normally ... tho' I never wanted my Liverpudlian accent back<sup>20</sup>

He eradicated much of his accent, the key marker of his regional and class origins: 'my slight accent was soon cured by my copying the southern accents of my colleagues'. Jim remarks, in an ironic aside, that as regional accents then became more socially acceptable and heard on the BBC, 'a broad Yorkshire accent ... in the textile department ... was worth an extra £1000 per year on your salary!' Despite such humorous asides, his accent continues to be the stage upon which his sense of intellectual inadequacy is played out, in his preoccupation with mispronunciation or misspelling of words.

Jim's maleness is emphasised through action rather than reflection. His time in the army; his search for better job opportunities to enhance his status as breadwinner; his emphasis on his responsibilities as a manager, are all metaphors of masculinity embedded in his narrative. Jim's working-class origins remain with him in his sense of insecurity, reflected in his preoccupation with a lack of formal education. For Jim, the knowledge gained through both combat and occupational experience cannot replace his lack of educational capital.

Like Jim McCormac, Rita Fenning's narrative is indicative of a childhood lived against a backdrop of economic uncertainty, and the narrow range of employment options open to young women during the interwar years, compounded by the restricted education they received in the elementary system. Rita left school in 1937 at the time of the Abdication Crisis in the UK, in the midst of the Spanish Civil War and as a second war became increasingly probable. She [R1468] was born in 1923, probably in or near Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, the eldest of three children. Her father worked on the railways as a train driver. She attended a council elementary school in Derby until she was eleven, in 1934, then a girls-only senior elementary school until she left school at the age of fourteen, in 1937. Rita was still writing to the archive in 2005, at the age of eighty-two.

In her education narrative, Rita recalls her annual two-month visit to her aunt in the Cotswolds. The schooling Rita experienced on these visits was very different to that in industrial Derby and is reminiscent of Britain before the First World War:

When I was on a visit to my Aunt I had to attend the Village School. It was one big room with the infants at one end and the rest of the children at the other. Some of the children came to school on ponies, some walked over the fields and hills, ... The clever children went on to colleges in Gloucester or Cheltenham, others left school to work on farms or go into service at the bigger houses.<sup>21</sup>

Rita's time spent in the Cotswolds is implicated in her failure to take the Scholarship exam, as she recalls:

I didn't sit my 11+ exams. At that time I was living with an aunt ... I do regret now, not sitting for the 11+. I would have enjoyed Grammar School if I had been lucky enough



to have passed the exams. I can't understand why my parents didn't insist that I try... I will never know now.<sup>22</sup>

She won a scholarship at the age of thirteen to Derby School of Art, although she did not take up her place, commenting that 'I can't remember being encouraged to go'. Rita counters this implied criticism of her parents by setting their actions against the economic reality facing her family: 'I was the eldest child of three, money was tight in those days, every penny was precious. I left school on the Friday and started work in a factory on the Monday. My wages were 8 shillings and 10 pence for 48 hours work.'<sup>23</sup>

In this brisk transition from child to adult, Rita's narrative indicates how poverty and economic need were a strong motive force propelling her into work to help support her family. With high unemployment and job insecurity, the local availability of work for young people encouraged early leaving. The poverty and unemployment of the period is remembered as other people's hunger or lack of proper shoes: 'There was a great deal of unemployment then, and lots of poor people, but we never seemed to go hungry but, I can remember some of my school friends sometimes had great holes in the soles of their shoes.'<sup>24</sup> Her parents' lack of encouragement of her aspirations for education is more understandable when set against the real hardships she recounts.

Rita reverses the usual opposition often found in childhood narratives between holidays and schooldays to emphasise her intelligence: 'I absolutely loved my school days. I hated the long summer holidays. I must have been a real pain in the neck, I was always thirsty for knowledge.'<sup>25</sup> She uses this narrative device because she lacks formal acknowledgement of her abilities that came with membership of the chosen scholarship elite. While her scholarship to Derby Art School supports her narrative as deserving of continued education, her failure to take up this opportunity also contributes to her feelings of regret for an education she was denied.

Rita's parents are the critical element in her scholarship narrative, where her language is a repeated refrain of regret and incomprehension: 'I think that my parents were pleased with my schoolwork. I can't ever remember it being mentioned; I can't remember being encouraged; I can't understand why my parents didn't insist that I try.' Although she says 'I will never know', her comments express her attempt across time to question and to understand her parents' actions during the 1930s. Writing for MO provides a space for Rita to explore her understanding as an adult about her experiences as a child. For Rita 'opportunity did knock again' in 1977, at the age of fifty-four, when she was awarded a Churchill Fellowship to study 'Opportunities for Women in Industry in the UK, Germany and Holland', a vindication of her desire for education, her untapped ability and her identity as a woman 'thirsty for knowledge'.

Recognition of their intelligence is central to both Rita and Jim's stories. The scholarship and grammar school serve as metaphors for missed opportunities, a better, more challenging future denied by circumstances. For Jim, writing for MO is, in part, an affirmation of his



*Images by courtesy of the Trustees of the Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex*

educational self worth, as he seeks to reconcile his working-class identity remembered from his childhood, with the successful occupational identity that has facilitated his social mobility. The tensions between the two are brought together in Jim's narrative through the process of retrospection and remain as potent elements in his narrative. While Jim McCormac's application and desire to improve his prospects despite his lack of schooling are driven by memories of his father's unemployment and early death, Rita recalls the 1930s as a conflict between her aspirations for knowledge and her parents' need to increase the family income. Unlike Jim, who frames his narrative within a public discourse about the Second World War and occupational success, Rita's narrative remains within the confines of the personal and domestic. She questions the course her education took and the responsibility of her parents in this. Her narrative offers an opportunity for Rita to interrogate her past, to fulfil her desire to acknowledge her family's struggles and to understand, retrospectively, the actions of her (now dead) parents.

During the interwar years, the significance of a grammar school education as a symbol of respectability against which other achievements were measured, combined with teaching as an aspirational pathway particularly for working class girls, served to further reinforce the position of the grammar school in the iconography of working class social mobility. In 1934, of every 1000 elementary school pupils in England, 119 had the opportunity to move into secondary schooling at eleven.<sup>26</sup> The following two case studies indicate the pivotal role played by a grammar school education, its totemic significance in correspondents' education narratives, but also ambivalence towards educational success that is still present as they write to the MO Archive.

Sophie Brassington [S2311] was born in 1924 in Bradford, Yorkshire, the fourth child in her family. She had two elder brothers and an elder sister who died of tuberculosis in 1945. Sophie's mother died in 1941,



before Sophie took her Higher Certificate, while her father died in 1951, a year after she had completed her MA. Her father's occupation is unclear, however Sophie does explain that he had been unemployed for nine years during the 1930s. Sophie attended a county primary school from 1929 to 1935, then Bradford Girls Grammar School from 1935 to 1942. Sophie graduated from Leeds University with a BA (Honours) in Geography in January 1945. She gained a Diploma in Education in August 1945 and later, in 1950, completed an MA. Sophie taught Geography in a grammar school until the late 1960s then spent seventeen years teaching in a further education college. She retired from teaching in 1985.

In her education narrative, Sophie focuses on her formal education, and most particularly, her progress to university: 'the prospect of going to University and having a profession had been beyond my wildest dreams during the unemployed 30s'.<sup>27</sup> She makes no comment on her move to grammar school, though this was highly significant for a working-class girl during the 1930s, and would not have happened without the active support of her parents, who would have had to forgo potential income while Sophie continued at school. Sophie's elder sister started work at the age of fifteen in 1934, when Sophie was eleven, quite possibly to enable Sophie to take up her scholarship place.

Parents' critical memories of their own frustrated educational experiences were often the motive force that led to the encouragement of their own children. Despite her father's unemployment, Sophie's parents invested in their children's education. Sophie and both her brothers progressed into professional training. Sophie's parents' view of education as an investment in their children's future underpins both her own achievements as well as those of her two brothers: 'my parents were determined that we should have a secure future.'

The significance of money recurs as a motif throughout Sophie's writing, whether it is the inequity of her salary compared to a less experienced male colleague, the amount of scholarships and loans she had in order to complete her degree and teacher training, or the Council loan her elder brother had to finance his professional training as a pharmacist. She mentions that one of her brothers had wanted to be a doctor or bacteriologist but ended up studying pharmacy at Bradford Technical College sponsored by Boots because other studies were 'beyond our means'. Poverty, the 'fundamental financial constraints' it brought, and the actions the family undertook to ensure professional and financial security in their future, are the key themes emerging through Sophie's exploration of her education life history. The choice of teaching as a route out of poverty also prompts one of her strongest expressions of regret: 'I have plenty of regrets and looking back is too poignant to enjoy. I should have liked more choice of career.'<sup>28</sup> Sophie explains that she went into teaching as a career because it was the only profession with state funding for training. This choice, and its implications for Sophie as a woman, weaves through her views on marriage, love and sexual relations, with the tension evident in her remarks:

when I embarked on my career it was with the

understanding that I should have to resign if I married. I wanted the independence of a career and was not expected to marry. After the rules changed in 1945 I was probably involuntarily single because I did not like being stereotyped a spinster.<sup>29</sup>

Sophie's writing about her childhood is dominated by her perception of her family's experiences during the Depression of the 1930s, while her father's refusal 'to go and kill his fellow men fighting in an imperialist war' had contributed to his nine years of unemployment during the 1930s.

Sophie realises through the process of recounting her past that it is 'only as I write this does it occur to me that my gaining an MA in 1950 probably gave him [her father] pleasure and a feeling of justification for the years of struggle'.<sup>30</sup> The process of writing has provided Sophie with the opportunity to both recount significant events from the past for her (unknown) readers but also to make new connections for herself in the process of re-creating her story.

George Osborne [D1606] was born in 1924 in Stepney, East London, and attended Cayley Street Elementary School, in Stepney, until 1935, when he won a Junior County Scholarship place at Raine's Foundation School for Boys in Bethnal Green, where he studied from 1936 to 1940. George was an evacuee in Brighton in from September 1939 until June 1940 when he left school at the age of fifteen. George worked in public libraries from 1947 until 1982, when he retired to Norfolk.

George's narrative is dominated by his father's story of early migration as a boy, and voluntary return to fight in the First World War. In his reflections on his parents' story, George encapsulates a brief social history of working class life during the early part of the twentieth century:

My parents had little formal schooling. Dad emigrated to Canada at 16, under the 'assisted passage' scheme whereby this country exported its socially deprived. He returned to England to fight for 'King and country' in 1914. Despite his lack of schooling he was an intelligent man who took a keen interest in politics and current affairs.<sup>31</sup>

His affirmation of his father's intelligence serves to highlight the disparity between his father's commitment to his country in wartime, and his wasted talents due to intermittent unemployment until the outbreak of the Second World War—he 'took any temporary work going; I can remember him helping to compile the Electoral Register.' George's memory of his 'mother giving up "relief" tickets to the butcher' captures the demeaning process his parents had to endure as recipients of unemployment relief. Pat Thane points to the way means testing affronted people 'by the investigations of their circumstances, the means and character tests, which stood in the way of unemployment relief.'<sup>32</sup>

Self-education and particularly the role of libraries in correspondents' journeys of self-improvement surfaces in a number of MO accounts: 'I was ... an assiduous reader. Indeed, I reckon that in many respects I learnt more by self-education from the public library than school

taught me.’<sup>33</sup> This theme of intelligence and knowledge is uncoupled from formal education institutions in George’s narrative, and firmly set within the context of auto-didacticism, of learning in informal settings. George provides limited detail about his formal education, although he acknowledges the contribution made by his grammar school: ‘it was grammar school and the public library which were the formative influences of my youth’. It is the informal knowledge acquired through social networks that are key to George’s development during his adolescence: ‘Frank, Alfie and Henry—the latter two also came from my primary school ... together we discovered books, music (jazz and classical), beer and girls.’<sup>34</sup>

As George writes about his evacuation to Brighton in 1940, he reflects that: ‘it has just occurred to me, those of us, like myself, evacuated and billeted on a middle class family towards the end of school life, experienced that little bit extra of ‘how the other half lives’.<sup>35</sup> The experience of evacuation provides a contrast with his parents’ lives of struggle and poverty in the East End of London. George also reflects upon his feelings towards the outcomes of his education:

My feelings towards my own education are ambivalent. I’m grateful for the education I received, which opened new vistas for me; at the same time I feel that I didn’t exploit my chances fully. Partly that was due to the environment in which I grew up; partly to my own shortcomings.<sup>36</sup>

George’s ambivalence about his formal education highlights a tension between his parents’ encouragement and support for his education and their lack of knowledge about potential occupational choices for secondary school leavers: ‘being brought up in the East End of working class parents does limit one’s horizons’. However, George affirms the depth of their commitment to his future: ‘I loved my parents and appreciated the sacrifices they made for me when I was a child. They didn’t receive the education I was privileged to have’.<sup>37</sup>

War is the backdrop to George’s narrative; first with the impact of the First World War on his father, then with George’s own disrupted education through evacuation in the Second World War. George locates his education story in the informal and the auto-didactic, where practical knowledge is valued and acquired informally through social interaction, in the playground, on the streets, with mates, and to a lesser extent, at home with family. The process of recollection enables George to articulate his regrets and to acknowledge the sacrifices made by his parents to ensure he received a secondary education. George and Sophie’s elaboration of an intergenerational educational narrative is also illustrative of the way narratives of the Self are not necessarily just those of individuals but can also be collective and transmitted across generations.<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

The process of responding to the MO Directives offers correspondents a space in which to consider the wider social and economic context of their childhood

circumstances. Recollection and remembering as correspondents write presents an opportunity for reflection on past events. These narrative patterns are evident across both the men and women’s narratives, although they manifest themselves in different ways. The women’s responses are mainly concerned with the personal and domestic consequences, while the dominant pattern amongst the male responses revolve around their own and their father’s education, employment and war service. This is indicative of their own social positioning within their family and the wider economy, and is illustrative of the socially embedded nature of class and gender formation.

For MO correspondents, socio-economic patterns and policy changes were experienced subjectively as direct influences upon their family and selves that shaped their choices and their subsequent lives. They are reflected in the case studies as regret, anger and disappointment at how things turned out, but also as relief and gratitude at the opportunities offered to them. Correspondents’ narratives demonstrate how working-class children subjectively experienced a class-based and deeply inequitable education system. These accounts also serve as reminders that particular patterns continue to recur in education debates from the 1944 Act onwards.

MO material, because of its subjective nature, offers insights into the experiences of ordinary people during a difficult and unstable economic and social period in British history. The state education system in Britain during the inter-war years, was firmly class-based; elementary education was intended for working-class children and secondary education was intended for the children of the middle classes. Elementary education suffered from neglect through lack of investment in infrastructure, and the limitations of a class-based curriculum. Secondary school scholarships were rationed, and the small numbers of children who were offered a scholarship place reinforced the view that working-class children did not have the intellectual capacity to profit from a secondary education. A weaving of the narratives of both women and men correspondents alongside each other illuminates both the similarities in working-class experiences of education and the differential impact that legislative change had upon girls and boys.

For correspondents, writing for MO is, in part, an affirmation of their personal self worth, as they seek to reconcile their working-class origins with their adult identities. The ambivalences and contradictions evident in the MO narratives about education trajectories, also serve to highlight the complex relationship between class, gender and education. Writing to the Archive offers correspondents a space within which they can reflect upon the meaning of past events. Sophie Brassington comments, in the course of detailing her successful completion of an MA, that only as she wrote, could she appreciate how much her academic success must have meant to her father. George Osborne comments similarly, as he reflects upon the limited horizons of his childhood home and neighbourhood in Stepney, east London during the 1930s, and the different outlook he experienced as a result of evacuation and his billet with a middle-class family in Brighton. Reflections, he admitted, that had

never occurred to him before writing about it for MO.

The nature of MO accounts as partial and subjective offers research material that captures the texture of everyday experience. Correspondents judge their writing as an important document of the history of everyday life, and consider it their task to record their story for the future so it will not be forgotten. Significant events and experiences ripple across correspondents' accounts and often are recalled in different ways across a number of Directives, thus underlining the significance of the event or experience in their lives. The possibility to read across an individual correspondent's Directive replies illuminates the shifting and socially embedded nature of knowledge.

The tensions within correspondents' stories, the silences and contradictions of their narratives, enable us to better understand the complex ways in which the structures and material circumstances of formal schooling interact with, and are subjectively understood by, classed and gendered selves. Subjective accounts also serve as a reminder of the potential for agency and exceptional endeavour by ordinary people in the most difficult of circumstances. These narratives provide diverse, complex, and contested accounts of education, and remind us of the finely nuanced differences within every life story.

## Notes

Quotes from MO correspondents below, with alphanumeric identifier, pseudonym and year of birth:

R1468	Rita Fenning	1923
S2311	Sophie Brassington	1924
C1539	Jim McCormac	1920
D1606	George Osborne	1924

1. This article is based on research in Teresa Mary Cairns, 'Class, Gender and Education in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: An Exploration of Education Life Histories of Correspondents to the Mass Observation Archive' (DPhil Thesis, University of Sussex, 2007).

2. *New Statesman and Nation*, 30.1.1937, quoted in Dorothy Sheridan, Brian Street, and David Bloome, *Writing Ourselves: Mass-Observation and Literacy Practices* (New Jersey: Hampton Press; 2000), 25.

3. Tom Jeffery, *Mass-Observation: a short history* (Mass-Observation Archive Occasional Paper No.10; University of Sussex Library, 1978/1999).

4. Dorothy Sheridan, 'The Mass-Observation Project: Recording Everyday Life in Britain in the 1980s and 1990s' (MOA: University of Sussex; unpublished MO paper, 1994).

5. Dorothy Sheridan, 'Writing for ...: Questions of Representation/ Representativeness, Authorship and Audience', in *Ordinary People Writing: The Lancaster and Sussex Writing Projects*, Working Papers series, no. 51. Centre for Language in Social Life, Lancaster, June 1993, 20.

6. Brian Street, ed., *Cross-Cultural Approaches to Literacy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

7. Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994).

8. *Ibid.*, 11.

9. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984).

10. Liz Stanley, 'The knowing because experiencing subject: Narratives, Lives, and Autobiography', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 16, 3, (1993) 205-215.

11. D. E. Polkinghorne, *Methodology for the Human Sciences: systems of enquiry* (Albany, New York: SUNY, 1983), 115.

12. Sheridan et al., *Writing Ourselves*, 286.

13. *Ibid.*, 287.

14. Brian Simon, B. *The Politics of Educational Reform 1920-1940* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1974).

15. MOA, C1539, Spring Directive 1991- Education, Part 1.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

21. MOA, R1468, Spring Directive 1991- Education, Part 1.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*

24. MOA, R1468, Spring Directive 1993 - Growing Up.

25. MOA, R1468, Spring Directive 1991 - Education, Part 1.

26. Simon, *The Politics of Educational Reform*, 256.

27. MOA, S2311, Spring Directive 1991- Education, Part 1.

28. *Ibid.*

29. MOA, S2311, Summer Directive 1990 - Close Relationships.

30. S2311, Spring Directive 1991- Education, Part 1.

31. MOA, D1606, Spring Directive 1993-Growing Up.

32. Pat Thane, *Foundations of the Welfare State* (London: Longman, 1996), 154.

33. MOA, D1606, Spring Directive 1991- Education, Part 1.

34. D1606, Spring Directive 1993 - Growing Up.

35. *Ibid.*

36. D1606, Spring Directive 1991 - Education, Part 1.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Mary Chamberlain, 'The global self: narratives of Caribbean migrant women' in Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury and Penny Summerfield, eds, *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods* (London: Routledge, 2000, 154-66).

# Women's Pages: Writing, Publishing and Historical [In]visibility in the Antipodes

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Paul's Book Arcade was a totally family thing. Blackwood had the impulse towards publishing whether he married me or not, but he might not have done it quite so well.<sup>1</sup>

When I first interviewed the New Zealand publisher, artist and writer Janet Paul in 1998, I assumed that the phrase 'quite so well' referred to the production responsibilities of the publishing enterprise: the aesthetics and readability of the books themselves. As a print historian my interest in Paul's Book Arcade and in Janet herself resided in these details. A closer analysis of those conversations, of the interviews conducted for an exhibition publication on Paul's Book Arcade and of the various texts written by Janet herself has revealed a much expanded role.<sup>2</sup> In addition to her responsibility for the production of the books she also brought to the commissioning and editing process an eye for the timely narrative and a concern for the under-represented. One of the first women to have played a major role in the country's publishing industry, she was a feminist, though 'not ... an activist' whose ideals were demonstrated in practice and in print.<sup>3</sup> This article will address issues of women's writing about women in the context of New Zealand history and how Janet Paul was instrumental in ensuring those issues were brought to public understanding. Two case studies, and a piece by Janet herself, will be used to give some idea of the scope of the issues. Although Paul's Book Arcade published a mixed list, the discussion will give shape to the publishing only as it advanced the writing of women's history and how that work contributed to an understanding of the role of women in the formation of a nation and a history.

Janet and Blackwood Paul began their publishing venture in 1945 with an aim to publish hitherto unheard voices in New Zealand literature. They chose writers whose ideas they felt would introduce an inherently conservative New Zealand, a 'narrow, conformist society', to themselves and to their country.<sup>4</sup> Blackwood Paul had taken over the family bookshop, Paul's Book Arcade, in 1933 and he began to change its stock from the general to the cosmopolitan and politically engaged, making it what the British Booksellers Association deemed 'among the 14 best ... in the world.'<sup>5</sup> Books were not commodities but repositories of culture and historical understanding. The First World War, the 1918 influenza epidemic and the international economic depression of the 1930s impacted disastrously on New Zealand and a concern was felt among intellectuals and radicals that an 'increasingly conservative' government ignored the hardships of its citizens.<sup>6</sup> These were mostly left-wing groups, as 'anyone with any decency' would have been at the time.<sup>7</sup> It was a

period when neither politics nor social life in New Zealand was what the Cook historian John Beaglehole called 'encouraging for the free human spirit'.<sup>8</sup> Comment and analysis was published in largely left-wing magazines, all of which were short-lived but provided a foundation for the growth of critical comment in and about New Zealand.<sup>9</sup> A further venture, the Progressive Publishing Society (PPS, 1939-45), exhausted itself and the country's meagre production resources through a punishing publishing programme. The market for the literary and political material with which it dealt was such that, without some additional guaranteed supporting income from an independent source, its grassroots support was insufficient to keep it afloat.<sup>10</sup>

Paul's Book Arcade stepped into the breach. Blackwood felt that a publishing arm of the bookshop would make it possible to add local perspectives to the issues expressed in the books he imported. With an aim to encourage critical debate the Pauls took over some PPS titles in production and began to build their own list through commissioned work and unsolicited manuscripts. While they maintained the political interest, their larger concern was with the social: the writing of New Zealanders about their country. Of no interest internationally and little at home, many of the texts were authored by those unknown in the wider community and they subsequently lacked both critical exposure and popular approval. This made booksellers loath to stock the books and if they did and the work received good reviews, they had little stock to sell. Publishing this work under these circumstances was an ideological commitment rather than a commercial enterprise, but did respond to the social economist W.B. Sutch's call for a local and committed publishing house without which he felt New Zealand could not hope to develop an 'independent and native literature'.<sup>11</sup> It is also important to note that many authors felt that an English imprint lent academic credibility and so eschewed local publishing.<sup>12</sup> Charles Brasch, editor of the literary journal *Landfall*, commented in 1954 that 'a society can be said to have come of age when it begins to live by the light of an imaginative order of its own'.<sup>13</sup> A growing awareness of and interest in, a history of a people or peoples connected to place is a harbinger of that process. In spite of the problem of periodization any notion of a static 'coming of age' presents, there was an outward growth of interest that flowered after the Second World War and was largely facilitated by Paul's Book Arcade, arguably making it the most influential publishing company in the development of the local industry. Assisted by an independent income from the bookshops, it was uniquely placed to publish adventurous titles of small commercial interest, in contrast to the PPS. Among their authors was a small group of

women who were beginning to write about their lives and the lives of the foremothers and whose work might otherwise not have found an outlet.<sup>14</sup>

At the start of the venture Paul's Book Arcade published just three or four books a year; the first was Gordon Mirams' book of film criticism.<sup>15</sup> The book was a success, selling 1000 copies, which goes some way to demonstrating the arid cultural climate of the day. By the 1960s they were putting out a dozen or so titles a year. The biographer Eric McCormick described their list as one of talented people with a fringe of popular, more commercial, work. In her article on women publishers in South Asia, Urvashi Butalia argued that the groundwork of adventurous publishing is often undertaken by small publishers, to be picked up, and made profitable by, the mainstream businesses when the market has been hard-won.<sup>16</sup> This is certainly true of the imprints of Paul's Book Arcade and Blackwood and Janet Paul, as it later became, in the history of New Zealand publishing. The publishing of New Zealand voices, and in particular, New Zealand women's voices is now commonplace, their authenticity having been established, against the odds and the grain, by the Pauls.

Janet Paul was involved from the beginning. In 1942, Janet Wilkinson, newly returned from a year's teaching at a country school found a job in the map planning department of the New Zealand Railways while she undertook Masters study at Victoria University. She didn't want to be a teacher, but it was one of the only career paths open to women and Teacher's Training College was a mechanism through which her undergraduate fees had been paid. New Zealand had been the benefactor of established practices of the education of women in other countries and was well placed ideologically to offer, even encourage, advanced education for women, with few restrictions to their entry in the late 1800s and into the 1900s.<sup>17</sup> There were also cultural reasons why women, once educated, should enter the workforce; idleness in these inheritors of colonial society was not condoned. Yet women's entry into the professions was arguably limited to 'women's work' — teaching, nursing or public service — all 'extensions to their child-rearing functions'.<sup>18</sup> Politics, the law, medicine other than nursing, university teaching and, indeed, publishing would have welcomed relatively few women. Beryl Hughes' comment epitomises the situation: '[w]omen cluster thickly at the bottom but are thin at the top ... at the very top are non-existent'.<sup>19</sup> Many who did enter these professions did not progress and often left when they married. Janet was fortunate in that a series of unrelated events presented her with the opportunity to pursue a domestic life and a career based on her education and interests, a matter of chance rather than choice.<sup>20</sup>

Janet's post-graduate lecturer was the historian John Beaglehole, who was also a fine typographer. He recruited Janet and her friend and fellow student, Ruth Ross, to positions as historical researchers in the Historical Branch of the Department of Internal Affairs. Janet soon found herself involved in typographic and design decisions. In 1944 Blackwood Paul, then on the executive of the PPS, asked Beaglehole to provide much needed typographical

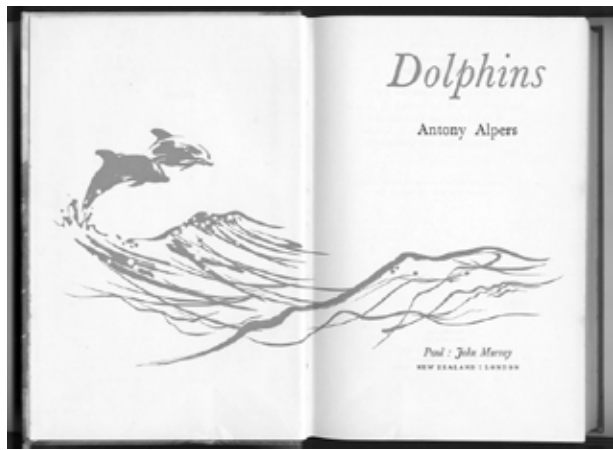
advice on the Society's publications. Beaglehole was already overcommitted and suggested that Janet would do the job just as well as he and she was willing. She and Blackwood began to work together, sharing tasks, then lunch and finally dinner. Blackwood had been keen to wed and asked Janet to marry him.<sup>21</sup> She demurred, engaged at the time in a long and apparently hopeless 'arrangement' with someone else.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless she was well disposed to the idea but felt she needed to appraise him of her situation. His response was to express regret that he had no similar experience to bring to her. Janet, whose own inclinations led her to abhor such characteristics as sexual jealousy and subordination according to sex, age or race, later described Blackwood as a 'socialist, dedicated to the concept of equal opportunity' and she clearly saw this in him in 1945.<sup>23</sup> She trusted him sufficiently that on 9 March 1945 they married, remaining 'the best of friends' until his death in 1965.<sup>24</sup> The Mirams book was published in May and Janet commented later that she wondered if Blackwood was looking, not for a wife, but for a partner to help with the publishing. McCormick felt that the two of them worked so closely together that it was 'difficult to separate one from the other' and indeed, the lines of responsibility were often breached.<sup>25</sup>

The historian with a training in searching out the evidence, questioning received wisdom and appreciating complexity does not find it easy to consider the simple myths which help to define national identity.<sup>26</sup>

Historian Frances Porter commented that she never encountered New Zealand history in her years at Victoria University College; indeed it wasn't until the 1960s that interest in that history was addressed at university level.<sup>27</sup> Both Blackwood and Janet had a strong sense of New Zealand history and were keen to capture some of the 'simple myths' from people still able to remember and recount them. He had a double degree in English and Latin plus an LLB, while she had taken a BAHons in history (her Masters remained unfinished due to publishing and family commitments). She also brought to the enterprise an understanding of New Zealand art and its artists. Blackwood felt that the works they began to publish would 'lay the compost' for the growth of interest in the stuff of New Zealand history, and in New Zealandness itself, in the wider population.<sup>28</sup> New titles were commissioned by both if either saw a need for public discourse on any matter.<sup>29</sup> In the 1950s, for example, Janet embarked on a project to commission, edit and publish a series of books on New Zealand artists. McCormick's contribution on the regionalist painter Eric Lee Johnson was the first and he concluded that it was 'a pioneer book in its field'.<sup>30</sup> Books on New Zealand artists, much like the artists themselves, were of scant popular interest and, predictably, it did not sell well. The series as such was not pursued, but Janet continued to publish, and to write, on the work of New Zealand artists, most notably on the colourist, Evelyn Page.

Local histories, also thought by the Pauls to be important in the 'laying of the compost' were equally a risk, largely unsuccessful commercially but undertaken





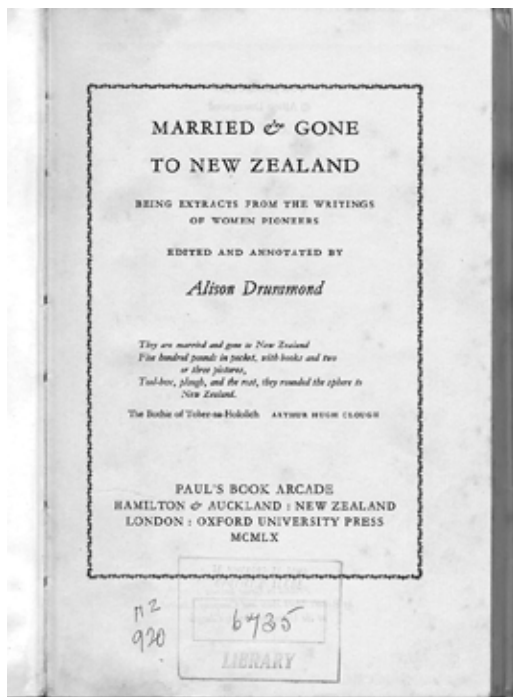
Title spread, Antony Alpers, *Dolphins* (Hamilton & Auckland, Paul's Book Arcade; London, John Murray, 1963)

nonetheless. Unsolicited manuscripts were chosen for their literary value or for their importance in the New Zealand social or historical context. It was not always great literature; some was what McCormick referred to as 'journalism'; the point for the Pauls was that it was worth doing because it told something of the history and the character of New Zealanders.<sup>31</sup> Mary Scott's popular light fiction, for example, brought them financial gains, selling in the later years 6000-7000 copies at a time when 3000 was considered to be a best-seller. These were not critical texts but, importantly, they served to provide inside views of rural women's lives. Phoebe Meikle, Paul's editor from 1960, described Scott as 'serenely unchanged by the Women's Movement'.<sup>32</sup> But Scott was a countrywoman and most of her books spoke of country matters, often as they were played out in the experiences of women. They provided that sense of place the Pauls were endeavouring to encourage in publishing indigenous stories. New Zealand was, and arguably is, a country whose identity can be expressed in terms of an, often imagined, rural heritage; it is part of the foundation, if essentialist, myth of an ideal Arcadian society.<sup>33</sup> Most New Zealanders, 'trying to belong to a place', can situate within their imaginings a personal and recognisable image of this heartland, their 'home in thought', Scott's laconic and amusing style of writing and her shrewd characterisations of both people and place was able to situate her fictional female characters to give them a part in the weaving of this fabric of culture.<sup>34,35</sup>

Janet's work as a publisher of women should not be read exclusively in terms of her sex. She was an innate feminist; her concerns stemmed from a desire to be inclusive and from a sense of fairness and equity for all. Intent on extending the intellectual, social and cultural boundaries of both authors and readers through the broadcasting of indigenous experience, women's experiences became a necessary part of that mission. Beaglehole's failure to confront (in 'The New Zealand Scholar') 'Maori history, [and] women's history'; found a corrective in the publishing activities of Janet and Blackwood, neither of whom approached publishing with an agenda to advance one sector of society over any other, but to ensure that all were included in the national conversation.<sup>36,37</sup> But the

writing of history is influenced by the concerns of those who are writing it at the time of writing it and in 1940s and 50s New Zealand, those concerns were predominantly white, middle class and male. An example of the absence of women from history can be found, as late as 1960, in Guy Scholefield's editing of *The Richardson-Atkinson Papers*.<sup>38</sup> It later became clear that most of what he left out in the editing process were the experiences of women. "Discards", as he labelled them ... men talked and wrote and carried history in their knapsack ... women, inconsequentially gossiping and chattering, pulled along in their baggage train'.<sup>39</sup> New Zealand historian, Bronwyn Labrum has argued that the exploration and writing of women's history was a quest to rescue female concerns from just this sort of 'historical invisibility'.<sup>40</sup> The Pauls' determination to expose the experiences of those in the baggage train encouraged women to write of their lives and the lives of those that went before them, and so including them in a 'world reckoning'.<sup>41</sup> Publishing some of these experiences brought the narrative of women's lives into the mainstream and also, in historiographical terms, began a process of privileging the anecdotal and the individual as sources of an enriched historical understanding. As a method of retrieving history it was ahead of its time, not fully flowering in New Zealand until the rise of second-wave feminism in the 1960s and 70s. The writing and publication of women by women begun by Paul's foreshadowed the scholarly concerns of women for women in the latter part of the century — writers and historians such as Barbara Brookes, Phillida Bunkle, Bronwyn Dalley, Bronwyn Labrum and many more New Zealand women who have made it their business to investigate and expose the lives and concerns of many other New Zealand women. It was, as Janet commented in *Landmarks*, 'like dropping a stone in a deep well, and occasionally you see the ripples'.<sup>42</sup>

The texts that Paul's published spoke of ordinary women who lived lives both ordinary and extraordinary. Among the autobiographical is *My First Eighty Years*,<sup>43</sup> Helen Wilson's account of her childhood on a South Island high country sheep station, her father's untimely death, and her mother's subsequent struggles to support her children and to send them to school during the Depression by giving dancing classes and selling watercolour sketches. Wilson brought a manuscript about Egypt to the Pauls for consideration but Janet found the writer's life much more appealing and requested an autobiography. The result was a narrative of two women, Wilson and her mother, that spanned the latter quarter of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. When Wilson was seventeen she accompanied her mother to the North Island where they broke in a block of land in the Horowhenua district. They built their own hut and managed to survive on the two crops that grew well in the area, pumpkins and peppers. When Wilson herself married, she repeated the feat on a farm in the King Country. The experience itself was not unusual in the New Zealand context; the value of the telling of it lay in the female perspective of that experience. It also told of Wilson's association with people who came to play quite pivotal roles in New Zealand's social and political life. Her husband was a farmer and a Member of



*Title page, Alison Drummond, ed., Married and Gone to New Zealand (Hamilton & Auckland, Paul's Book Arcade; London, Oxford University Press, 1960)*

Parliament. She was President of the Women's Division of the Farmers' Union, an association that brought many benefits to the lives of often quite isolated rural women. Wilson was self-effacing, a product of her time and place, and considered herself to be just a farmer's wife, explaining to her grandson, that he came from a 'long line of ... deadly uninteresting forebears'.<sup>44,45</sup> But her story matched the direction of Paul's publishing mission; it was also a text of literary merit, witty, wise and shrewd in its understanding of the significance of early events to the social and economic development of the country at large. The book sold well and went into six subsequent editions, which might say something about an emerging contemporary hunger among New Zealand women to hear their own stories. It was the Pauls' first success.

*Married and Gone to New Zealand*, edited by Alison Drummond, was a book of extracts from the writings of women who came to New Zealand from 1840 to 1850.<sup>46</sup> Drummond had an interest in early settler women and the exigencies of their lives. The book was the result of a great deal of scholarly research, an activity that was unusual for women outside the academy at the time. Independent scholarship, inasmuch as it existed at all, was usually undertaken by men, often leisured men. Drummond, like Wilson, lived rurally and her days were taken up with the activities involved in farming the land. The extracts, taken from diaries, journals and letters, document women's perspectives on the first decade of organised British settlement in the country. Colonial life was explored through the words of women like Marianne Williams, wife of the missionary Henry Williams. She knew nothing more of domestic affairs before she left England than the daily inspection of the kitchen of her family home in Yorkshire, yet she embraced her duty, providing moral leadership, feeding the hungry, saving souls and educating the illiterate.

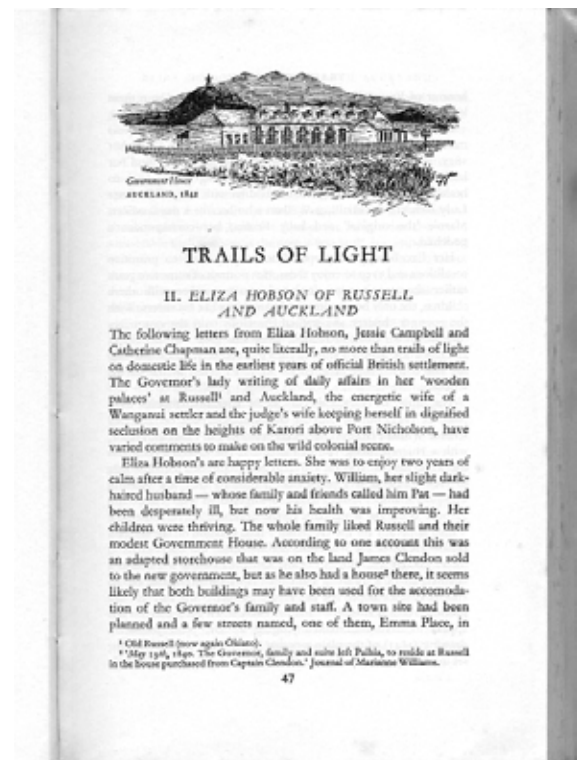
'Gathering up her skirts and crossing a muddy yard to an inadequate shelter that allowed the driving tropical rain to hiss against the hot iron of her cooking pots...was a new experience dictated by a new, raw country'.<sup>47</sup> The less privileged were equally expected to be 'an example of charitable and gracious rectitude' through the hardships of settlement and the loneliness of displacement.<sup>48</sup> Though their different experiences were obviously contingent upon place and circumstances, most of the women displayed courage and determination in their endurance of life in a new colony: 'variable famine, frail and uncertain shelter, disease, backbreaking labour, quantities of children ... born in primitive conditions', conditions that would seem now to be 'intolerable'.<sup>49</sup> Some stories were hard-won. Sarah Higgins, for example, arrived in Nelson in 1842 and, while she could read, did not have an opportunity to learn to write until she was in her seventies and so her life is told in retrospect. Many other women in *Married* sat down to pen letters or write in diaries only at the end of a long and arduous day. Evidence of strong hands and wills is laid out before us in these evocative personal records. Drummond comments on the style of the writing as one in which women, for the most part, wrote better, or it could be argued more evocatively, than men who were the products of classical educations, and inclined towards pomposity. They brought clarity to imagery of conditions as unfamiliar to their nineteenth century readers as they are to us. Explaining her daily activities in a letter to her mother, Sarah Greenwood relates that she was 'now complete maid of all work, and very, very fully my time is occupied', a circumstances that provided an eloquent contrast to the 'easier, softer life' she had experienced in England.<sup>50</sup> The determination of these women who wrote their stories, and that of Drummond who gathered them and Janet who facilitated their broadcast, supply an important connection to our past. They provide a context and a continuum that draws us into an ahistorical landscape of female occupation in this place. Drummond reflected on the inestimable historical value of the recordings of the women who took the time to supply the infinite detail so crucial to those whose work it is to unravel the past. As a postscript to this discussion the title *Married and Gone to New Zealand* points to the circumstances of a nineteenth century settler woman's life. It was invariably a married life, a structure outside of which she would be unable to exist. Marriage, as Lydia Wevers points out, was for these women at that time fact not subject. It was only later that writers and historians began to reconfigure the lives of colonial women within the context of their married state and in terms of their relationships with men.<sup>51</sup>

Meikle thought the whole publishing enterprise unprofessional with no 'standardised business systems' and delays due to a want of 'half an hour's...production time', but, as Janet's daughter Joanna Paul notes, it was a 'home-based publishing firm, where rules were implicit, tasks were shared, delays didn't matter and the whole enterprise was one of fostering a local literature and informing public debate'.<sup>52,53</sup> Janet confessed to a certain degree of amateurism when she commented that, while Blackwood was professional on the business side, the actual publishing often fitted itself into any spare time

among commitments to work (meaning the bookshops) and children.<sup>54</sup> Only when time permitted were manuscripts extracted from a trunk kept in the bedroom at the Pauls' home in Hamilton and read with a view to publishing. If one was thought to have potential, appropriately informed friends, such as writer and critic Dorothea Turner and historian Nan Taylor, read them and assessed their literary and intrinsic value. With the decision made to publish a particular work, the necessary funds then needed to be raised; only when the bulk had been found was it possible to approach the Literary Fund (set up in 1947 to provide funds for historical, imaginative and New Zealand literature) to provide the shortfall, 'working very hard to get very little'.<sup>55,56</sup> If this was forthcoming at all it was always less than was needed as there were many competing calls on its purse.

This 'amateur' way of working begins to address the issue of how the various strands of Janet's life expose her feminist principles, principles held 'lightly', but as of right. In some ways her life was one of contradictions.<sup>57</sup> Meikle's bitter reproach was rooted in the fact of Janet's secure financial and emotional position within her marriage. Meikle, not married and forced to fend for herself, felt marriage allowed Janet the luxury of indulging her interests. The times did not encourage the supporting sisterhood that evolved among women a decade or so later.<sup>58</sup> Those times were patriarchal in the sense that men's interests were privileged over women's; in middle-class New Zealand at least, the domestic/public sexual divisions were enshrined with 'definitions of gender...endorsed and reproduced' in, for example, popular magazines such as *Home and Building* and *The New Zealand Women's Weekly*.<sup>59</sup> Married women who worked outside the domestic sphere did so only if they were financially constrained to do so and were fewer in number in New Zealand than they were, for instance, in the United States and Great Britain.<sup>60</sup> Janet worked in the public sphere, but she did so in a domestic space. The publishing business was conducted almost exclusively from the Pauls' home in Hamilton *because* that was where Janet needed to be. Throughout her marriage, she was pregnant five times and gave birth to four live children, two of them delicate. She was wife, mother, designer, production manager and hostess, often required to nurse authors through the birth of their own creations. She managed still to be fully involved in the varied aspects of the publishing business and to gain some reputation as a practising and exhibiting artist from the early 1950s. Additionally, all her children, daughters, have enjoyed successful academic and creative careers at the same time as they have married and raised children themselves, following the model of their mother, at least in this respect. It is pointless to conjecture on the feasibility of the life she lived had she not had the support of her husband, a feminist himself, and the financial security of the bookshops. But it should be stressed that she worked within a relationship that fostered, rather than thwarted, her own desires and talents. She instinctively saw no difference between the aspirations of women and of men, and saw no reason for restrictions on the activities of either based solely on their sex.

It is possible to gauge something of where Janet



Chapter opening, Alison Drummond, ed., *Married and Gone to New Zealand (Hamilton & Auckland, Paul's Book Arcade; London, Oxford University Press, 1960)*

stood on the issue of feminism from the way she lived her life, and from her writings about herself and those of women artists in New Zealand. I mentioned earlier that she not only published but wrote about New Zealand artists and much of that was of women. She canvassed attitudes of women artists towards their work, its reception and the circumstances of its production, through their writings and their own words. She felt that history *may* remember early and contemporary women artists as part of a canon of sorts, but that they were unsung in their own time, and commented wryly that many of their male counterparts sported 'names' that were 'more valuable than their works'.<sup>61</sup> The construction of history, until then, had been as discussed earlier, the domain of men. Indeed, as late as 1981 in what might be considered a standard text for New Zealand history, W.H. Oliver privileged the work of mid-century male artists, sidelining the women as 'more modest...cautious...attaining an authentic personal vision within a narrow compass [with their] ability to transcend [societal expectations falling] short of the capacity to break new ground'.<sup>62</sup> As Anne Kirker argues, it was the men as teachers, critics and purchasers of art, that 'set the parameters for their [the women's] success'.<sup>63</sup> Janet used statistics to highlight these discrepancies and to determine the presence of women in gallery exhibitions, sale catalogues, public collections and as the recipients of grants. The ratio of men to women in these spheres varied from 1:7 to 1:6.5. Conversely, she detected little or no difference in the numbers of either sex working; in fact, she discovered that women tended to continue to work much later into life and suggested that it was at this time in their lives that women really only had the time

and energy to do so. Personal experience taught her that lesson, as her own 'deep centre, painting', was relegated to a few hours, once a week.<sup>64</sup> Searching for reasons for this 'historical invisibility', she felt that the women tended to work from within their lives, at a smaller scale and surrounded by the restrictions that militated against uninterrupted production, and that these became a basis for discrimination against the work itself. Janet pointed out that, while the critics who applied the discrimination grudgingly distinguished between the professional (who *might* find their names among the canon) and the amateur (who dabbled), both took sole responsibility for domestic duties, that amateur does not equal 'dabble' and that serious work is not inevitably the result of professionalism. She also remarked on the inverse relationship between the critical and financial success of so-called professional women artists and child-bearing. There are interesting continuities and discontinuities between her discussions of the situations of women artists and her own. Her life was an embodiment of what she wrote about these women *and* she lived it, as they often did, amid the chaos that is the domestic life of any woman with children. Describing the lives of women such as herself she used the metaphor of walking in sand, 'repetitive, difficult, ground-trudging; in danger of losing the precious sense of being in life;' with the putting off of one's own life until 'she goes to school' or 'when the children leave home'. She understood the need to find value for the children while maintaining 'a still centre for ourselves.'<sup>65</sup>

In her discussion on the domestic constraints on women artists, Kirker points out that there was a reversal of women's rights and opportunities after the Second World War; prior to this women artists were beginning to find their place in a creative life; after the war, as Janet was keen to highlight, the prevailing social climate determined home, family and childbearing as the predominant role for women.<sup>66</sup> In quoting Olivia Spencer-Bower: "I think we get condescension from the men ... [t]here is often a necessity for speed because the domestic scene is quick and the potatoes are boiling over', Janet might well have been discussing her thoughts about her own life and work.<sup>67</sup>

The publishing enterprise lasted until 1965 when Blackwood died. When it became clear he was dying, the publishing imprint was changed to 'Blackwood and Janet Paul' in acknowledgment of Janet's contribution. She carried on after his death, but became increasingly unable to juggle on her own the various responsibilities of family, publishing and bookshops (a second shop had earlier opened in Auckland), a burden which had previous been shared. In 1967 she merged the publishing arm of the company with Longman to form Longman Paul and in 1969 she relinquished the remainder of her share of the business. That said, in the years between Blackwood's death in 1965 and the merger in 1967, she published the 26 titles that were in progress when he died. The shops were subsequently shut and Janet moved to Wellington in 1970 where she took up a part-time position as art librarian at the Alexander Turnbull Library. This allowed more time and energy for painting: landscapes, domestic interiors and portraits of family and friends. It should be recognised however that Janet's friends were among



Chapter opening, Dorothea Joblin, *Harvey, Come Quick* (Auckland & Hamilton, Paul's Book Arcade, 1963)

the best, and most interesting, of New Zealand's artistic, musical and literary society. Thus she continued to bring into the public arena pieces of the lives and thoughts of those New Zealanders who had something to say. She retired in 1980 and, in 1992, was awarded an Honorary DLitt. by Victoria University of Wellington. In 1997 she was made a Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit to become Dame Janet Paul, an award she privately felt was more for the publishing than anything else, as it contributed so much to the cultural life of New Zealand, adding what she called 'a small, shaped pebble to the pile'.<sup>68</sup> She continued to exhibit paintings, drawings and prints up until 2002 despite failing health. She died in July 2004, aged 84.

## Notes

1. Interview with Janet Paul, 22 Jun 1998. I have referred to her throughout this paper as Janet to differentiate her from her husband, Blackwood Paul.
2. Janet Paul and John Mansfield Thomson, *Landmarks in New Zealand Publishing: Blackwood and Janet Paul 1945-1968* (Wellington, 1995).
3. Janet Paul, 'Hints of Becoming', in *Beyond Expectations: Fourteen New Zealand Women Write about their Lives*, ed. Margaret Clark (Wellington, 1986), 19.
4. James Bertram, *Flight of the Phoenix* (Wellington, 1985), 150.
5. John Roberts, *New Zealand Books* (March 1996), 12.
6. ESAU, review article 'Are we Politically Degenerate', in Andrew Cutler, 'Tomorrow Magazine and New Zealand Politics 1934-1940', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 24, 1 (April 1990), 25.
7. Interview with Janet Paul, 8 Apr 1998.
8. John Cawte Beaglehole, in Tim Beaglehole, 'Beaglehole, John Cawte 1901 - 1971'. *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, updated 7 July 2005. [www.dnz.govt.nz](http://www.dnz.govt.nz)

9. For example, *Phoenix: A Quarterly Magazine of the Auckland University Literary Club*, 1-4 (Mar 1932 - Jun 1933); *Oriflamme* (Apr 1933) and *Sirocco* (Jul 1933) edited through the Canterbury University Students' Association; *Tomorrow* edited by Kennaway Henderson and effectively shut down by government edict in 1940.
10. Rachel Barrowman, *A Popular Vision: The Arts and the Left in New Zealand 1930-1950* (Wellington, 1991), 145-8.
11. W.B. Sutch, 'Publishing in New Zealand', *New Zealand Libraries*, 8, 3 (April 1945), 37.
12. Paul, 'Hints of Becoming', 15.
13. Charles Brasch (1954), in James Bertram, 'The Achievement of Artistic Integrity in a Changing World', in *Towards Maturity* (Wellington, 1982), 54.
14. New Zealand publishers in 1945 were Whitcombe and Tombs and A.H. & A.W. Reed. Both seldom published poetry or women's writing. Caxton Press and Bob Lowry's presses produced fine books of New Zealand poetry, prose and commentary, but led a precarious existence. The Centennial Branch of the Department of Internal Affairs undertook official historical publishing and there were publishers, but few who published uniquely local experiences. There were, until the 1950s, no University Presses.
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## **Margaret Fletcher and Roman Catholic thinking on women before the First World War: An idea of woman and woman's intellectual education**

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From the beginning of the twentieth century, Roman Catholic hierarchy in England took a practical interest in women's intellectual education. Although intellectual training was not new for Catholic girls, general opinion deplored the fact that 'the appearance of womanhood too often conceals the mind and sense of responsibility of a child' among them.<sup>1</sup> The time of education had the purpose of laying a deep foundation of faith. However, faith could not be defended and fortified alone. The modern conditions of life required increasingly an intellectual structuring of the mind along with the traditional teachings of faith. Head of the Catholic Women's League, Margaret Fletcher was convinced that along with the general idea of women's intellectual education came moral training and the strengthening of character. Working inside the religious framework of Roman Catholicism, she successfully formulated progressive ideas on the issue of women's education. Asserting that moral education could not be separated from intellectual training, Fletcher opened the door to a promotion of women's dignity among Catholics. Considering both the Roman Catholic thinking on women and the English background, this article will discuss the way Margaret Fletcher articulated her ideas on the issue of women's intellectual training before the First World War.

By 1891, a major social upheaval had gripped industrialised Europe, especially Britain and Germany. The rapid technological developments of the nineteenth century meant that higher productivity was demanded from workers, so that company owners could make greater profits. This led to outrageous working conditions, low rates of pay, exploitation of women and children in the labour market and extreme poverty. In reaction to that, Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903) wrote the encyclical *Rerum novarum*, in order to define the social doctrine of the Church. Highlighting Christian conceptions of political and social life, the document insisted on the need for social justice in a modern world.<sup>2</sup> In his teaching, he included two general statements that had direct relevance for women, who formed a large section of the work force. Section 26 of the document stated that, although people had different gifts and talents, God granted equal dignity to both women and men. Further, the document laid down the right of all people to participate in society as a guiding principle for social development. However, women's participation was seen in the terms of the home, 'a woman [being] by nature fitted for home work'.

Femininity being conceived along with maternity, women were supposed to find the key element of their identity in motherhood. On the theological level, being associated with the image of Blessed Virgin Mary, women

were marked by an ideal of moral perfection that did not exactly apply to men in their own nature. From this perspective, women were expected to 'bear witness to the highest life man can attain to, ... to beckon man ever forward to greater moral achievement'.<sup>3</sup> Translating the Catholic view into words, Father Cuthbert expressed in 1903 the idea that:

Woman is not a lesser man, nor a greater; not even a man at all. She is ever woman, and her power and dignity are derived as much from that in which she differs from man as from that in which she is at once with him. Nay, her proper power depends upon maintaining the difference; for in so far as she loses the individuality of her womanhood, she becomes but a sorry double of the proper man.<sup>4</sup>

Increasingly it appeared that 'woman, in the eye of the Church, is the free and independent ally of man', whereas her 'nature never meant her to be a mere satellite of man, finding her life in revolving around his'.<sup>5</sup>

Following the Pope's encyclical on the social doctrine of the Church, Catholic feminism found its ground in the clear statement on women's equal dignity with men. In this respect, some Catholic women perceived the papal declaration as an opportunity to promote their own position in society, and the Roman Catholic doctrine as a chance to promote their own dignity as *women*. Far from being restrictive, the Catholic doctrine was, on the contrary, a framework within which to operate in order to achieve the equality of dignity. Catholic feminism relied to a certain extent on the equality of boys and girls before God to promote their own rights. As Margaret Fletcher put it: 'In the eyes of Almighty God a boy and a girl are of equal value. If a boy sins, his guilt is equal to that of a girl; the punishment is the same, each has the same certainty of forgiveness, the way of seeking and obtaining the forgiveness are identical'.<sup>6</sup> Focusing on interpretations underlining men and women's equality before God allowed an original branch of feminism to develop.

Pope Pius X declared, in 1906, his approval of the feminist movement as long as it respected Christ's morality and kept within the limit of purely social as opposed to political activity. 'There is much to praise in feminism in its desire to raise the social and intellectual status of women, but Heaven preserve us from political feminism', the Pope said, while recognising that a certain indirect feminine influence in politics was 'not only lawful, but necessary'.<sup>7</sup> The statement does not show so much distrust in the women's ability to enter the political sphere than it reveals a condemnation of the democratic system as a whole.





In the context of a dehumanising industrialisation, promoting the social doctrine of the Catholic Church became more and more a priority at the beginning of the century. At the crossroads between the laity's claim to participate in the life of the Church and the women's aspirations to demonstrate their ability on the public scene, different societies were created in Germany, France and England with the idea to 'unite Catholic women in a bond of common fellowship for the promotion of religious, intellectual and social work' (C.W.L.'s statutes).

Margaret Fletcher, the founder of the English Catholic Women's League in 1906, was to inspire the whole movement by her very personal experience and ideas on education. Born in 1862, the daughter of an Anglican vicar in Oxford, Margaret Fletcher was a pupil at one of the foundations of the newly established Girls' Public Day School Company. She studied Art and was allowed to go to Paris to pursue her curriculum—a decision taken because women in Paris were invited into the Art Schools on equal terms with men. Fletcher spent a rewarding time abroad with a freedom of experience that may seem extraordinary, such as a trip to Hungary with a girlfriend in 1889, with no fixed arrangements about accommodation or travel. Finally obliged to return home to care for her widowed father and a younger brother and sisters, she began to explore the religious dimension of her life and ended up at Farm Street seeking the advice of a Jesuit priest about conversion. She was received into the Catholic Church on 9 September 1897, and became a parishioner of St Aloysius, Oxford.

Margaret Fletcher's early life was significant in her subsequent commitment to the foundations of a women's movement within the Catholic Church. Her early experiences of education and travel had evidently given her confidence to affirm herself as a person. Well-educated and with an intellect trained and broadened beyond the normal scope for women in those days, she engaged herself into the promotion of the personal dignity of women just as she encouraged Catholicism to develop its thinking on the issue.

The years following Fletcher's conversion were spent in exploring the Catholic scene, of which she was almost completely ignorant. Although enjoying a new freedom in this world, she gradually became conscious

of something missing. She found the Catholic scene limiting, especially intellectually. Indeed, higher education was a new subject among English Roman Catholics in the early years of the twentieth century. The professional and upper middle classes were thinly represented in the Catholic body at that time. While comparing her former familiar circles to the new Catholic atmosphere, Fletcher felt the contrast quite striking:

Outside the Catholic Church were the very alive girls, the products of Higher Education eager for social reforms, very effective in purely practical matters, but their plans were like cut flowers severed from their roots. Inside were those who, having been trained to meditate and practise silence at certain times from quite early years, had developed more power of concentration. The specific teaching they had received had given them a philosophy of life and provided a thread of logic to their thoughts. These powers were turned onto the things of daily life, rescuing them from triviality. However, in secular objects they had not had the same advantages. Was there no possible way of combining the best of both worlds? Did it lie in raising the standard of secular education among Catholics?<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, she devoted herself to improving the standards of Catholic women's education through lectures on theological, social, economical and practical issues related to women's interests, the promotion of Catholic reading rooms and the development of Catholic Girl's Clubs. She was convinced that along with the general idea of women's intellectual education came moral training and the strengthening of character. Thus, she echoed some aspects of the educational debate of her time and translated them into Catholic terms.<sup>9</sup>

Women's need of intellectual education was a new issue for Roman Catholicism at the beginning of the twentieth century. Catholic girls' manuals were mostly reduced to pious talks, while the education of Catholic girls was extremely limited, and not fitted to the challenge of a life in a modern society.

English manuals aiming at middle-class women developed what historians called an 'ideology of separate spheres'—arguing that woman was 'the morally superior but socially and politically subordinate sex [and] connecting women with the domestic spaces. In this context, women were expected to be the subordinate partners and dependent on their husband'.<sup>10</sup>

Culturally dominant, this opinion restricted women's achievements in intellectual fields in England.

The period was increasingly preoccupied by the formation and training of character. 'Primarily, the word *character* signifies a distinctive mark, cut, engraved, or stamped upon a substance, and by analogy, this is likewise character in the sense in which it concerned education', stated a famous Catholic girls' manual of that time.<sup>11</sup>

Idealism and sensitiveness were supposed to be the fundamental virtues of woman's character. High-minded, gentle and persuasive, able to reach the head through the heart, woman was perceived as the embodiment of pure ideas in a man's world devoted to action and compromise. Thus, education was required to develop affective and intellectual qualities, if Catholic girls were to be equipped to respond to the challenge of a modern society.

The Catholic Church was then in need of educated and trained women to use for a healthy development of the society, according to both Catholic principles and the conception of the time that saw in women the pillars of morality responsible for the state of a whole nation. 'A nation grew great or became weak according to the strength and virtue of its women, so that in one sense the future of England was in the hands of its women.'<sup>12</sup> Fletcher was convinced that changed conditions of life required changed conditions of education. She was certain that the moral education of woman was intimately connected with her intellectual training. A mean intellectual outlook would distort the keenest moral judgement and render it ineffectual.<sup>13</sup>

The new century opened with the idea that woman must have her share in intellectual education. Addressing Catholic girls, Margaret Fletcher encouraged them to take the initiative in this matter:

The key-note of this generation is not that of the last; you are entering upon liberties that your mothers never dreamed of, you have new opportunities, you have also new dangers to face, you certainly have new work to do, and you have to fit yourself for the work.<sup>14</sup>

Step-by-step, the strengthening of character was perceived as a necessary element to safeguard Catholic girls against the erosive influence of secularised thinking. 'There is no European country today in which the Catholic woman, newly awakened to social responsibilities, is not finding herself confronted with women working in the cause of irreligion with all the advantage of developed intellectual powers'.<sup>15</sup> In the context of a renewed offensive from the Socialist propaganda against the Christian doctrine, Margaret Fletcher did her best to convince the Catholic hierarchy that:

It is not knowledge in itself that Catholics should fear but a one-sided learning, an intimate acquaintance with one side combined with an almost complete ignorance of the other side of a question and its bearing as a whole. They should fear, obviously, a knowledge of science for instance with no reference to God.<sup>16</sup>

Thanks to Margaret Fletcher and the Catholic Women's League's influence, it was felt that securing for woman a greater freedom for self-development was giving her the opportunity to exercise her womanly prerogatives in a larger measure than before. The objective was to widen the field of exercise of womanly qualities by broadcasting the idea that the moral education of woman

was intimately connected with her intellectual training. In this respect,

The main business during the time of education [is] to lay the foundation of ... Faith deep down [by] developing all the powers of mind, intellect and heart, [the first duty of a Catholic girl being] to use every opportunity in her possession to developing herself and continuing her education, in order to reach the very high level of intelligence which is the average intelligence of the present day.<sup>17</sup>

The distrust of English Catholicism for intellectual issues was then still very profound. For many years, the Church had forbidden Catholics to enrol at the older Universities. Archbishop Manning, although himself educated at Oxford before his conversion to Roman Catholicism, was particularly inflexible on the matter. His fear was of exposing Roman Catholics to the corrosive atmosphere of Oxford and Cambridge. However, the situation was to change after the Duke of Norfolk sent a petition signed by 448 leading English Catholics to the Pope in June 1894. Cardinal Vaughan, three years after the death of Cardinal Manning, allowed English Roman Catholics to register as university students. This was followed in August 1907, at the instigation of the Catholic Women's League, by the lifting of the ban on the residence of Catholic women in the older Universities. It was then felt that great things would be done for the Church by University trained women, just as it was hoped that trained women would be a valuable answer to the intellectual challenges of the time.

At the start of the twentieth century, Roman Catholic hierarchy took a practical interest in English women's intellectual education. However, while defending progressive approaches on the subject, it proved unable to think of the woman outside her conjugal duties. Women's participation was seen in terms of the home. Though recognising the pressing need for women's intellectual training in the fight against the de-Christianising influences of modern society, Roman Catholic thinking was not capable of escaping certain issues raised by the ideal of the mother. Fletcher recognised that

The learned woman was not to be the future ideal of the Catholic Woman's movement, but the mother – the Mother, adorned with all the gifts of true womanliness, but at the same time the intellectual equal of her husband, the trusted *confidante* of her grown-up sons, the kind friend of her daughters.<sup>18</sup>

Although she did not say it openly, reading between the lines we get the idea of an incompatibility existing between the married state and the pursuit of a professional career for women. The story of a fellow art student seems to indicate her true feeling on the question: 'Her work interested critics; she achieved a *succès d'estime*. But, her hard-won freedom was threatened when she fell in love and married. Though her husband was admiring and generous, she now looks to her son to carry out her unfulfilled dreams'.<sup>19</sup> On other occasions, she pointed

out woman's social inferiority, the lack of recognition of her achievements in any field other than that of domestic activity. 'When a man artist marries, he acquires a housekeeper, a model, a brush washer, and perhaps a publicity agent. When a woman artist marries, with rare exceptions she perishes as an artist, gradually and perhaps painlessly. Well, that was what the Academicians had felt—we were less worthwhile'.<sup>20</sup>

Developing the 'intellectual possibilities latent in women' was limited by the social conventions of the time. While defending the sacred character of the married state, Fletcher could only affirm that 'in no other state will you find a field for the mysterious powers within you ... The sacrament of marriage will furnish the key that will unlock the depths of your nature.'<sup>21</sup> Inspired by the Christian doctrine, Fletcher presented the married state as a state of perfection and accomplishment. However, unlike the literature of her times, she did not only address women as wife, mother or religious. She included in her list the growing phenomenon of single women, for whom 'marriage was not to come'. In this respect, Margaret Fletcher argued that a successful education can only develop a lovelier type of womanhood; lovelier in the sense that it allows woman to better develop an atmosphere of motherliness around her, motherliness being the 'most profoundly feminine quality of all'.<sup>22</sup> However, while presenting the 'career of matrimony' as the natural mission for women, Fletcher advanced a higher idea of the true interdependence between man and woman, far beyond the conceptions about the couple that society was able to accept. She demonstrated that doctrinal view on women can allow—if well interpreted—positive development of women's dignity, as well showing the way for further exploration of the issue.

## Conclusion

The particularity of Roman Catholic doctrine on woman is to affirm that 'the proper condition of the male-female relationship cannot be a kind of mistrustful and defensive opposition'. On the ontological level, humanity is considered as a relational reality. 'An ordered world is born out of differences, carrying with them also the promise of relationships'.<sup>23</sup> It is from this understanding that Roman Catholicism developed its thinking and issued documents, starting from Leo XIII.

Contemporary to the integration of Roman Catholics into English life, the feminine organisation led by Margaret Fletcher helped include women in the emancipation movement on the basis of the encyclical *Rerum novarum*. Working inside the religious framework defined by the Catholic doctrine, Margaret Fletcher opened up the door to more progressive attitudes towards Catholic women's education. Her means was to prove the great benefit the Catholic Church would get out of intellectually trained women, able to promote the social doctrine of the Church among their fellows, and ready to defend themselves against the anti-Christian propaganda of their time.

Stressing the need for educated women, the definition Margaret Fletcher gave to education was not limited to higher education nor was it restricted to intellectual training:

When I speak of continuing your education, I

am using the word in its deepest sense. An educated person has his faculties trained and disciplined; he has an accurate knowledge of his own place and significance in the order of things, and he judges of persons and events from an information that extends far beyond the bounds of his own personal experience.<sup>24</sup>

Addressing Catholic girls, Margaret was quite clear that 'there are multitudinous ways of working; an attempt to improve and widen the mind or to acquire the art of social intercourse is real work if it involves effort of one kind or another. 'But effort there must be, and some sort of struggle of your higher faculties toward development, or there is to be a wholesome life.'<sup>25</sup> In this sense, just like any other kind of education, intellectual education was considered as a means; a means that could lead to a wholesome life within the framework that the acceptance of the Catholic doctrine imposed on the believer. But it was also a way; a way that allowed women to enter the public scene for a better defence and recognition of women's dignity—as women.

## Notes

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3. Father Cuthbert (O.S.C.F.), *Catholic Ideals in Social Life* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1904), 44.
4. *Ibid.*, 43.
5. *Ibid.*, 57, 51.
6. Fletcher, *Light for New Times*, 31.
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8. M. Fletcher, *O, Call Back Yesterday* (Ware: Old Hall Press, 2000, first publication 1939), 105.
9. See Jane Rendall, *The Origins of Modern Feminism: Women in Britain, France and the United States, 1780-1860* (New York: Schocken Books, 1984), 'Educating Hearts and Minds', 108-49.
10. Susie Steinbach, *Women in England 1760-1914. A Social History* (New York: Macmillan, 2004), 42, 44.
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18. *The Crucible* (Dec. 1910).
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20. Fletcher, *O, Call Back Yesterday*, 75.
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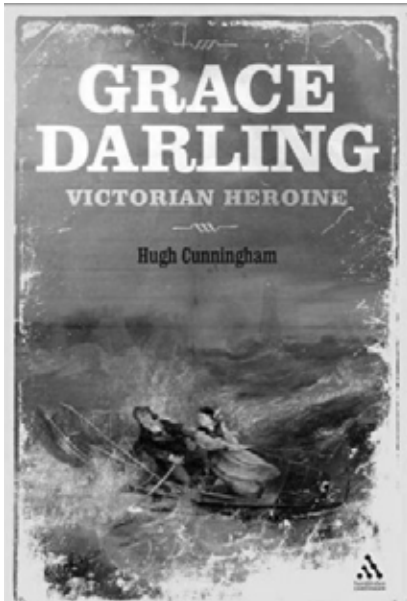
## Book Reviews

### Hugh Cunningham, *Grace Darling: Victorian Heroine*

Hambledon Continuum: London and New York, 2007. £25, ISBN 978-1-85285-548-2 (hardback), pp. 203 + 16 illustrations

Reviewed by Jo Stanley

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To the comment 'Pity the land that hath no heroes', Brecht, in his biography of the astronomer, has Galileo reply, 'No, pity the land that hath need of them.' By that token, we must pity the lands that needed to make a reasonably brave young woman into a semi-saint. Indeed, Grace Darling was not only elevated into a *hera* (to use that gender-free term). She was also constructed as a very feminine celebrity whose name

could be used to market almost any commodity, including self-sacrificing roles for girls.

This usefully-named personage (how different it would have been if she was named, say, Dorothy Dobbs, points out author Hugh Cunningham) hit headlines in September 1838 when she and her father William rowed out in a storm to rescue survivors from the steamer *Forfarshire*. He was a lighthouse keeper on Longstone in the Farne Islands. From then until she died four years later Grace was hectored and mined for hair, autographs, and public appearances. Her reputation later waxed and waned and waxed again.

This book elucidates the ways Grace was taken up by authors, and turned into an icon that could sell chocolates and soap. Peonies, hotels, mines and many babies were named after her, and the Royal National Lifeboat Institution gained favourable publicity from its connection to her. I say this as I sip my tea from the RNLI mug, which shows the most popular image of Grace: alone and muscular at the oars, her father—as usual—erased, as Professor Cunningham points out.

He has compiled the most definitive work yet on the 'Grace Darling' industry. This work is absolutely full of detail and interesting ideas, and is valuable for its awareness that class was crucial. Grace was lauded by the aristocrats; maybe the poor more sensibly knew that working-class women do courageous things all the time, unsung. Cunningham's work offers all that Jessica Mitford

unfortunately did not in her 1988 book.

Ideally, two central questions need to be tackled more forthrightly. First, what political and social use was such a *hera* to this (pitiably?) land at that and subsequent times? Cunningham discusses the other icons, Florence Nightingale and later Edith Cavell in Britain, Jeanne d'Arc, Grace Bussell (Australia), and Ida Lewis (US). It would be useful to examine why societies needed to elevate such women into 'heroines' at different periods. What did the process reveal about ideas of woman's place, gender roles, and threats to 'masculinity', for example, at this time when women's rights were starting to be publicly discussed? Was Victoria Drummond, Britain's first brave female ships engineer, treated so differently because she was brave 100 years ago, and in wartime, and because she was older and because women systematically entering male professions were a frightening prospect?

The second key question is 'Did this heroine do it (mainly) for the bounty money? If so, how should we understand this?' Some contemporaries denigrated the Darlings for being mercenary—as if bravery could not be admired unless it was selfless. Grace's mother tried to stop her husband and daughter rowing out but William said 'Whist, woman ... think of the premiums. That will stiffen thy courage.' Grace's economic motive will never be ascertained now. But it is interesting that this possibility was hardly discussed in public. Was this because it would reveal that lighthouse keepers' pay was low and therefore, of course, such employees would be driven to any (risky) lengths to augment their income? Or was it that courage is not necessarily nobly metaphysical but impelled by economic needs?

The Grace figure was used as exemplar of admirable behaviour, particularly in moral tracts for children, as Cunningham shows. As someone working on gender and the sea, I see this 'story' as also subtly highlighting issues about female mobility and women's use of the sea. The *real* Grace shows that women were part of family labour in lighthouse keeping, that they were perfectly capable of rowing competently, and therefore had both motility (a sense that one could be mobile) as well as mobility, rather than staying at the hearth. The *iconic* 'Grace' showed that society could accept women's mobility if it was rare rather, and if it women were mobile for supportive reasons than just seizing the freedom of the waves for themselves. Read against the grain, Grace's brief voyage was very public proof that women and water were not antithetical. Indeed, she may have inspired thousands of women mariners, as did Arthur Ransome's fictional Nancy Blackett.

I do recommend this thorough history. It will endure as the authoritative examination of the conflicted construction of this sub-saint, of a crucial—if troubling—role model for millions of girls worldwide.

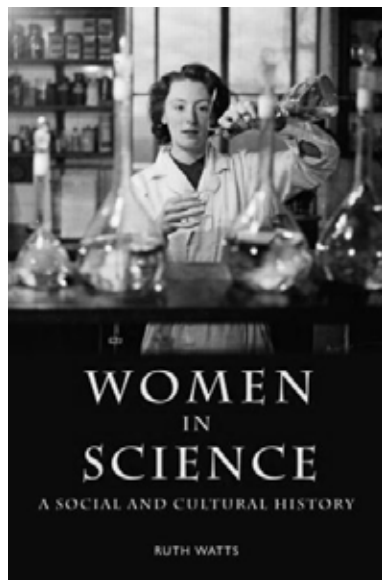
**Ruth Watts, *Women in Science: A Social and Cultural History***

Routledge, London and New York, 2007.

£17.99, ISBN: 0415253071 (paperback), pp. ix + 300

Reviewed by Claire Jones

*University of Liverpool*



The masculine colouring of science and mathematics is a tenacious phenomenon with a complex history. The idea that these disciplines are 'too hard' for girls, or in some way 'at odds' with true femininity, can be traced back (at the very least) to the origins of modern science and birth of the Royal Society in the seventeenth century. Today female fellows comprise just five per cent of that elite scientific institution

and organisations such as WISE (Women into Science, Engineering and Construction) are still needed to raise awareness of opportunities for women—and to persuade women to take them.<sup>1,2</sup> The issues surrounding this unequal representation of the sexes have received increased attention from feminist scholars and historians in the last two decades, especially in the USA. In this new study, Ruth Watts brings together this scholarship on gender and science and presents it to a wider audience in an engaging and accessible way. 'Science' is taken in its broadest sense to encompass medicine, mathematics and various levels of female participation; this allows Watts the scope to detail the contributions of women comprehensively and to examine the 'dissonance' between femininity and science. As a result, her book goes beyond synthesis in important ways, extending the discussion and asking new questions of the connections between scientific knowledge, gender and power.

It is difficult to impose order on such a vast amount of subject matter without it appearing arbitrary or forced. It is testimony to Watts' skill that she manages to combine her text into a coherent whole, largely through using education as an organising principle. Around this theme, Watts weaves discussions concerning the access of girls and women to scientific education and the implications of gendered curriculums; she also gives examples of how natural philosophy and science have produced changing understandings of the female body and intellect which have had serious consequences for scientific women. All too often these theories of female inferiority have resulted in the closing of doors to women although, as Watts emphasises, women have always found cracks

through which to negotiate a way in. Indeed, the book is particularly convincing when discussing the ways in which women have participated in science as part of informal networks, from within the domestic sphere, or have found a role at ease with their femininity as writers, translators, educators and popularisers of science. A pervasive question throughout the book is not just who makes science, but who owns science and why? Answers are explored in chapters that are presented chronologically albeit arranged around specific themes. The focus is on Britain, especially England, although within the European context and with reference to America. The time period covered extends from the ancient Greeks through to the middle of the twentieth century.

The introductory chapter sets out the theoretical debates which underpin scholarship in this area with an overview of the literature to date. Chapter two takes us 'From the fifth century CE to the sixteenth: Learned celibacy or knowledgeable housewifery', presented within the context of changing understandings of gender and science produced by Aristotle, Plato, Galen and less familiar philosophers. Watts places particular emphasis on the history of medicine which she identifies as 'both the oldest and the most common form of scientific activity for women' (191). The seventeenth century was pivotal in the development of scientific thinking; chapter three, 'Dangerous knowledge: Science, gender and the beginnings of modernism', examines the flux of revolutionary ideas surfacing at this time and assesses their implications for women. Watts debates the ways in which these changes created spaces for women in science yet at the same time heralded a conception of science as inherently 'masculine'. Chapters four and five take us to c 1815 with explorations of 'Education in science and the science of education' and 'Radical networks in education and science in Britain...'. Watts demonstrates how women from dissenting backgrounds such as Quaker or Unitarian, whose families were typically more engaged with scientific thinking and reforming educational ideas, were often advantaged in receiving an education equal to their brothers. This gave such women the learning to engage with science and, as teachers and writers, they could combine intellectual enquiry with womanly and religious ideals of service. Within this tradition, Watts provides a detailed discussion of Jane Marcet, in particular her *Conversations on Chemistry in Which the Elements of that Science are familiarly Explained and Illustrated by Experiments*. The analytical strength of this chapter is that Watts engages with issues of class and masculinity too. Marcet belonged to the upper class yet could only advance a limited way in science because of her sex. Men of the lower to middle class however, or men from the provinces, could find it equally difficult to gain a foothold in science, especially as scientific credibility and authority increasingly became associated with a manly, metropolitan masculinity.

Chapters six and seven continue in chronological sequence with 'An older and a newer world: Networks of science c. 1815-1880' and 'Science comes of age: Male patriarchs and women serving science?'—the latter

question addressed to science in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In chapter eight Watts goes beyond a synthesis of the scholarly literature to offer a detailed examination of 'Medicine, education and gender from c. 1902 to 1944 with a case study of Birmingham'. Professionalisation is a reason often cited as to why women became excluded from science at this time; this is a term that requires unpacking however and, in her case study, Watts manages to expose in detail the assumptions, formal and informal structures (and sometimes luck) that facilitated or prevented women's access. In her final chapter Watts weaves together the themes of her book and effectively refutes the notion that 'girls and women don't do science. They have always been involved in the scientific activities of the day, albeit in varying degrees and numbers' (193).

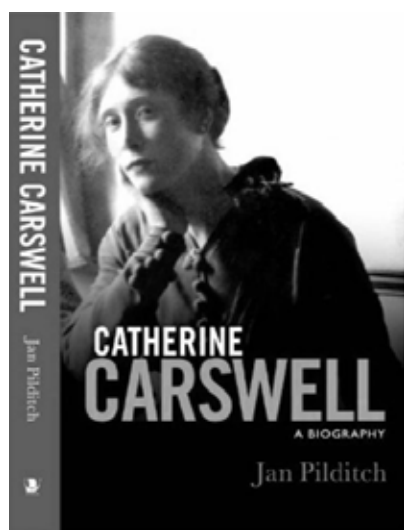
*Women in Science* is an expertly crafted introduction to the subject which also provides much of interest for specialist scholars. It promises to be an invaluable resource for many audiences, including students of history, education, women's studies, philosophy and science.

1. There are currently 1317 Fellows of The Royal Society of London of whom 66 (5%) are women. The gender profile of the Fellowship is published on the Royal Society's website: [www.royalsociety.org](http://www.royalsociety.org) [accessed April 1 2008]
2. For WISE's activities visit [www.wisecampaign.org.uk](http://www.wisecampaign.org.uk) [accessed April 1 2008]

### Jan Pilditch, *Catherine Carswell: A Biography*

John Donald: Edinburgh, 2007. £20, ISBN 9780859766852 (paperback), 225 pp. + 8 illus.

Reviewed by Deborah Simonton  
University of Southern Denmark



Catherine Carswell deserves a good biography. A prolific journalist, critic and editor, novelist and biographer, she played an important role in literary development in the early and mid-twentieth century, through a wide circle of Scottish and other writer friends. She wrote two acclaimed novels, *Open the Door!* (1920), which won the Melrose prize,

and *The Camomile* (1922), two explorations of young womanhood, sexuality and the trials of becoming an independent women. Her notorious biography of Robert Burns, which treated him as a human rather than as a godlike figure, was initially heavily criticised, but has since

become the 'classic' version of Burns' life. Her sympathetic biography of DH Lawrence reflects the close professional association they shared, she criticising drafts of *Women in Love*, he commenting on *Open the Door!*. Margery Palmer McCulloch argues that Carswell was 'the most significant and stylishly sophisticated' of the new Scottish women writers, 'a genuinely new voice in Scottish fiction [and] ... heralded a renaissance with a different agenda' before MacDiarmid's Scots-language lyrics and literary revival.<sup>1</sup> In addition, Carswell supported herself and ultimately her family as a journalist and critic for the *Glasgow Herald*, *The Observer* and the *Manchester Guardian*, as well as other publishing. Her son drew together her miscellaneous autobiographical writings in *Lying Awake* (1950), but she still needed a good biography.

In writing this biography, Jan Pilditch has had unequalled entrée to family materials, correspondence and memorabilia, as well as the assistance and clarification of family members, first Carswell's son John and, after his death, his wife Ianthe. In the preface, two of her granddaughters claim that their father had eschewed writing Carswell's biography because he was too close to it but he believed he had found the 'the right person at last', and willingly assisted giving Pilditch unique access to personal sources and reminiscences. Pilditch is an academic, with a specialism in literature, particularly Scottish literature and women writers, but she may be best known for her knowledge and writing on DH Lawrence. Indeed, her strength is her handling and understanding of Carswell's writing and the place she deserves in the literature of the period. Her analysis of the novels in particular is sensitive and helpful to potential readers, and her contextualisation of the Burns biography is similarly useful. Thus, readers will gain significantly from Pilditch's handling of Carswell's literary persona.

Where this biography is on less sure ground is in handling the historical narrative. This is often stilted and does not have the engaging touch that her literary analysis does. One suspects this may be a feature of radical pruning of the text, however, since sometimes characters are referred to as though we should know them, when in fact there has been no prior mention, and in the process the panoply of characters that weave in and out of Carswell's life become confused and perplexing instead of illuminating. There are a number of loose ends, and editing errors, also, which suggest that in the final stages a radical edit was required, and in the process much of the sense of the *life* of Catherine seems to get lost.

As a Lawrence expert, we would expect deft handling of the relationship between the Carswells and Lawrences, especially Catherine and DH. This we do get, since Pilditch clearly knows the material, has assimilated it and is able to examine their friendship and its subtleties with aplomb. But again this is where Catherine the person gets lost to the reader for long stretches, when the story of Lawrence seems to overpower Carswell's life. She is present, certainly, but one feels like she is an associate rather than the principal in sections of the biography.

Ultimately, this feels like an opportunity lost. Pilditch clearly has the literary understanding and empathy with



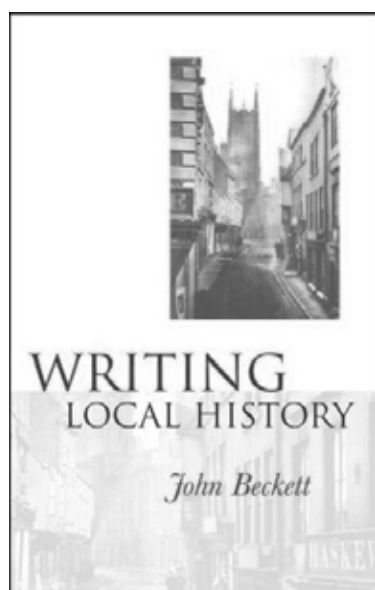
the subject to frame a convincing biography, her literary analysis is astute and helps reveal the significance of Carswell's literary legacy. One surely hopes that this biography is read. But its unevenness and lacunae makes the reader feel like much was excised that should have been here, that it needs rebalancing to put Catherine Carswell front and centre, and to get more mileage out of Carswell's own views and sense of self than we have here. Perhaps others will follow this with more research and help to make Carswell available to a wider public, both inside and outside of Scotland.

1. See 'Carswell, Catherine Roxburgh', in *The Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women*, Elizabeth Ewan, Sue Innes, Siân Reynolds and Rose Pipes, (Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 68-9 and Margery Palmer McCulloch, 'Women and the City in Early Twentieth Century Fiction', in *Gendering Scottish History, An International Approach*, eds Terry Brotherstone, Deborah Simonton and Oonagh Walsh (Glasgow: Cruithne Press, 1999), (100).

### John Beckett, *Writing Local History*

Manchester University Press: Manchester and New York, 2007. £14.99, ISBN 978- 07190-7660-2 (paperback) pp.xii + 244.

Reviewed by Dr Rosa Matheson



For those who have studied and researched women's history, reading John Beckett's book brings on a distinct sense of *déjà vu*. The questions he raises, the reasons he posits, the cry for a 'voice', have all been previously well rehearsed and argued within the women's history and, indeed, other so-called 'marginal histories', particularly as he argues local history's case against a 'hostile environment' among professional historians' (pxii).

The student of local history will find this a useful reference book as it highlights the significant milestones in the history of the subject, particularly that of the role of Professor William George Hoskins and University College, Leicester. Beckett charts the development and growth of local history from its early days, tracking back as far as the Venerable Bede in the eighth century, when it was regarded as the study of antiquities and the province of the learned few, right up to its University degree and modern day explosion of popularity. He examines the changing nature of 'local' from when it was the study of regions to how it

has also become micro-history with studies of areas such as 'our church'. He looks at how local history changed from being Traditional History in the sense of being a record delivered as an objective narrative with little engagement with analysis, to also become New History in its approach of being *inclusionary*, more interrogative and conceptualised. Along the way Beckett also explores the reasons and thinking of why, like other histories that were not established on classical foundations, local history struggled to become 'proper history'.

In the broader context, for the student of any kind of history this book raises recurring significant questions. Whilst setting out to define and interrogate the character of 'local history' Beckett also raises wider issues outside the subject matter. The book is a fascinating microcosm of the nature of the study of history itself as it parallels other 'waves' or 'schools' of thinking such as the Annales School of the 1920s, which it examines, and of the 1980s when books such as *What is History Today?* (1988 ed. Juliet Gardiner) raised similar thoughts and arguments. Issues of methodology, status, seriousness and popularity are defining frameworks that local history, like others before and since, have to battle against. Another new area of delineation for local history is that it has become big business in leisure and entertainment fields, creating more problems regarding the nature of its 'seriousness'. Beckett highlights, what he and others in his field, see as the continuing establishment thinking whereby histories only become validated when they have made the transition from 'amateur' to 'professional', and even then, some do not achieve 'status'. Yet for many decades it has been the volume and demands of the 'amateurs' that have brought these subjects into academia to become the province of the professionals.

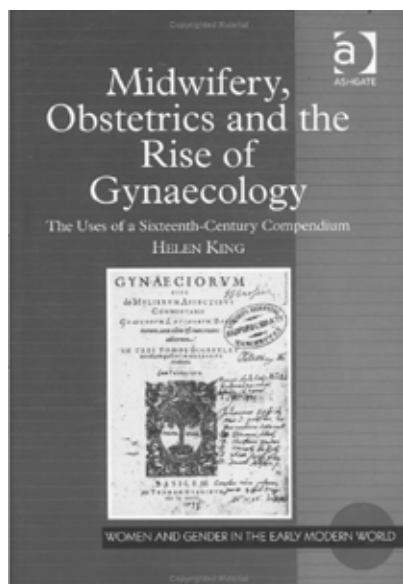
In conclusion Beckett asks 'Does it really matter?' Does it matter that local, i.e. amateur, historians will continue to do their thing apart from or ignoring the scholarly community? Does it matter that these two communities may continue to view each other 'across a chasm filled with misunderstanding'? (212) Perhaps, as any kind of historian, it is a question we should try to answer.

### Helen King, *Midwifery, Obstetrics and the Rise of Gynaecology: The Uses of a Sixteenth-Century Compendium*

Ashgate Publishing Limited: Aldershot, 2007. £55, ISBN 978-0-7546-5396-7 (hardback), pp. x + 219

Reviewed by Isobel Broome  
*University of Southampton*

As Helen King herself says, 'This is a book about books, and their users' (17) and the scholarly precision with which she approaches her material is already evident in the introductory chapter. Here, she details the publishing history of the compendium, *Gyneciorum, hoc est, de mulierum tum aliis, tum gravidarum, parientium, et puerperarum affectibus et morbis, libri veterum ac recentiorum*



*aliquot, partim nunc primum editit, partim multo quam antea castigatiores* (Of matters pertaining to women, that is, concerning both the affections and diseases of pregnant women, those bringing forth and those in labour, and other [conditions] of women, some books of ancient and more recent [authors], partly now edited for the first time, others more carefully

better access by international scholars. It was, according to King, a medical 'must have' (6-7) from the sixteenth through to the nineteenth century for those treating conditions affecting women. In her own book, King meticulously researches not only the history of the essays themselves, but also the earlier sources, particularly Hippocrates, who had been drawn on by the *Gynaeciorum libri* authors.

The referencing of the *Gynaeciorum libri*, in particular the 1597 Spach edition, forms one of the main themes connecting the three sections of King's book: analysis of the ownership and use of the volume in Britain; the work of William Smellie, man-midwife in the eighteenth century; and that of Sir James Young Simpson in the nineteenth century. Close analysis of library dispersal, handwriting, annotations, marginalia, underlinings and even, in the case of Smellie, comparison with his students' notes, has enabled King to tease out the response of the volume's owners to various authors, passages or essays in the *Gynaeciorum libri*.

revised than before), subsequently referred to simply as *Gynaeciorum libri*.

A pan-European collection of sixteenth-century essays, the *Gynaeciorum libri* was written or sometimes translated from the vernacular into Latin in order to permit

Gender issues form another major parallel theme throughout, as King considers the usurpation of women's roles in the birthing chamber, and particularly the selective (re-)interpretation of the medical past by both the men-midwives of the mid-eighteenth century and Simpson

## Books Received

### Call for Reviewers

*If you would like to review any of the books below, please send an email to Jane Potter: [bookreviews@womenshistorynetwork.org](mailto:bookreviews@womenshistorynetwork.org)*

Jenna Bailey, *Can Any Mother Help Me?* (Faber & Faber)

Julia Bush, *Women Against the Vote: Female Anti-Suffragism in Britain* (Oxford University Press)

Margaretta D'Arcy, *Loose Theatre: Memoirs of a Guerilla Theatre Activist* (Trafford)

Lorna Gibson, *Beyond Jerusalem: Music in the Women's Institute, 1919-1969* (Ashgate)

Carrie Hamilton, *Women in ETA: The Gender Politics of Radical Basque Nationalism* (Manchester University Press)

Janice Helland, *British & Irish Home Arts and Industries, 1880-1914: Marketing Craft, Making Fashion* (Irish Academic Press)

Cecily Jones, *Engendering Whiteness: White Women and Colonialism in Barbados and North Carolina, 1627-1865* (Manchester University Press)

Máire Kealy, *Dominican Education in Ireland 1820-1930* (Irish Academic Press)

Lesley Lawson, *Out of the Shadows: The Life of Lucy, Countess of Bedford* (Continuum)

Massimo Mazzotti, *The World of Maria Gaetana Agnesi, Mathematician of God* (Johns Hopkins)

Rosemary O'Day, ed., *Cassandra Bridges, Duchess of Chandos, 1670-1735: Life and Letters* (Boydell Press)

Luisa Passerini, Dawn Lyon, Enrica Capussotti, Ioanna Laliotou, eds., *Women Migrants from East to West: Gender Mobility and Belonging in Contemporary Europe* (Berghahn Books)

Lynda Payne, *With Words and Knives: Learning and Medical Dispassion in Early Modern England* (Ashgate)

Angela Potter, ed., *Shared Histories: Transatlantic Letters between Virginia Dickinson Reynolds and her Daughter, Virginia Potter, 1929-1966* (University of Georgia Press)

Rosemary Raughter, *The Journal of Elizabeth Bennis: 1749-1779* (Columbia Press)

Harold L. Smith, *The British Women's Suffrage Campaign 1866-1928* (Pearson Education)

James M. Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment* (Manchester University Press)

Jean Williams, *A Beautiful Game: International Perspectives on Women's Football* (Berg)

Charles Zika, *The Appearance of Witchcraft: Print and Visual Culture in 16<sup>th</sup> Century Europe* (Routledge)

and his contemporaries in the nineteenth. The way this male takeover of childbirth took place and its significance to women is explored through fields as varied as the use of instruments and the development of obstetric and gynaecologic vocabulary—that of science (male) over art (female). These considerations give rise to more general questions addressed by King concerning the authority claimed over the female body and the change in relationships implied by the development of gynaecology as a medical speciality.

Sub-themes emerge in this analysis of the evolving approach to the treatment of women's medical needs. The first of these is the use of instruments in childbirth. Ultimately symbolic of male power, they were initially used only for the removal of dead fetuses, but became the symbolic and literal keys which eventually gave men access to normal births. A second theme is that of the ambiguous, sometimes hermaphroditic, character of the man-midwife. Though male, he could be recommended for the female attributes of small hands and gentle touch, in part allaying the fears of husbands aware of the licentious reputation of some early male practitioners. Following on from this, King explores the parallel that men-midwives and later gynaecologists and obstetricians were also, 'seen as

crossing the boundaries between surgeon and physician established in the seventeenth century' (p. 182).

This scrupulously referenced work assumes that the reader has a working knowledge of not only Latin and Greek, but also French, German and Italian which are frequently used in the extensive footnotes. A minor criticism can be made about the unsatisfactory quality of the photographic reproductions. These are so unclear, for example, that the specific points King makes about the portrait of Sir James Young Simpson on page 156 and which is reproduced in Plate 1, cannot be discerned.

King sets out to look at the, 'texts of learned medicine and at 'great men' (17) without losing sight of the uses to which these books were put and the debates in practice that surrounded the discipline. This she achieves, and her book is a work of rigorous historical scholarship. Women may figure in the title of the Latin compendium, but in King's presentation they appear as objects of practice rather than as subjects of experience. Perhaps another volume will give a voice to the countless relieved or suffering women who were the patients of these 'great men'.

## Committee News

**T**he Committee last met on 16 February 2008. The main focus of the meeting was to review organisational processes and the following highlights the decisions that were made. We also discussed the September conference in Glasgow, the 2009 conference and the revamped website. We received a report back from the Finance Committee, a separate report from the Treasurer is included in the Magazine.

The Steering Committee felt that it was appropriate to review the organisational processes of WHN to ensure that we continue to work efficiently. We looked at membership of the Committee and who is responsible for each task. To recap, Steering Committee members should be domiciles of the UK to ensure that travel expenses are kept to a minimum, although members of sub-committees could be non-UK domiciles as the work is done via email. Further, they serve for two years on the Steering Committee and can stand again for a further two years. This way there is always experienced members working alongside new members. This rule applies to all members of the Steering Committee which means members responsible for certain tasks, such as the Book Prize or Clare Evans Prize, will also stand down. This year both June Purvis, who leads the Book Prize judges, and Gerry Holloway, who liaises with the Clare Evans Prize panel, will be reaching the end of their service on the Committee. The new panel for the Book Prize has already been agreed and Kathryn Gleadle will take over from June next year. This year June reports that there are ten books covering a wide range of topics nominated for the prize so the judges

will be busy over the next few months reading them all. You will notice that we have also advertised in this issue of the Magazine for members to join the Editorial Team, again this is to ensure that there is opportunity for people to share skills and keep the management of the organisation fresh.

The annual conference organisation is progressing smoothly and a good range of papers have been received (around seventy at the time of the meeting). We also discussed the 2009 conference. This will be at St Hilda's in Oxford, with the provisional title *Women, Gender and Political Spaces*, and we are beginning to put together plans for this conference. More details will follow in the next edition of the Magazine, in the Newsletter and on the website.

We hope that you have looked at our new improved website **[www.womenshistorynetwork.org](http://www.womenshistorynetwork.org)**. It is still work-in-progress and Jessica Holloway Swift, our website administrator, would like help from the membership with news, items and pictures to develop the site. The Committee thanked Jess for her work on this and the help of her friend Dylan James who helped her set up the site. Please send material to Jess at **[webadmin@womenshistorynetwork.org](mailto:webadmin@womenshistorynetwork.org)**

The next Steering Committee is at 11.30 Saturday 28 June at the Institute of Historical Research. You are welcome to attend the Meeting. For more details contact **[convenor@womenshistorynetwork.org](mailto:convenor@womenshistorynetwork.org)**.

The Committee hopes to meet you at the conference in September and in the meantime have a good summer!

## Ursula Masson

### An Appreciation



Ursula Masson, who died on 7 April 2008 after a difficult period of illness, made a significant contribution to the study of Welsh women's history. Ursula's research focused on the complex relationship between party politics, nationalism and feminism in Wales in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After many years of part-time study she was awarded her PhD by the University of the West of England in 2006. In her thesis, 'For Women, for Wales and for Liberalism: Women and Liberal Politics, 1888-1914', she argued that there was a distinctive Welsh women's liberalism at the end of the nineteenth century. It was distinguished from Welsh liberalism more generally through its commitment to feminism and the vote, while also differing from its English counterpart through its relationship with the national movement Cymru Fydd. She published a number of articles arising out of this research and co-edited, with Jane Aaron, a volume of Welsh women's political writings into the early twentieth century. (Honno, 2007)

Ursula's influence was not simply confined to research and scholarly publications. She was energetic in promoting women's history to as wide an audience as possible. A member of the history staff at the University of Glamorgan from 1994, she ensured that women's history courses were a key part of the curriculum and inspired students at all levels to take an interest in that area, giving particular encouragement to mature women students. In the current academic year, for example, she was supervising the research of six post graduate students whose topics ranged from the working lives of migrant women in Cardiff, 1870-1914, to women in the Rhondda Valleys in

the 1950s. Recently, with Professor Jane Aaron, Ursula established the interdisciplinary Centre for Gender Studies in Wales at Glamorgan with the aim of increasing the number of post doctoral research fellows and PhD students and promoting collaborative projects with other institutions.

For over ten years, Ursula was an active committee member, and most recently chair, of the West of England and South Wales Women's History Network, helping to organise its annual conferences and postgraduate study days. She was a founder member and chair of the Women's Archive of Wales which works to ensure the retrieval and survival of records relating to women's history in Wales. Ursula was keen to make sources for women's history more accessible and was the driving force in obtaining Lottery Funding for a new initiative, Women's History Road Shows. She was responsible for ensuring that *A Woman's Work is Never Done*, (1957) the autobiography of Elizabeth Andrews, first Labour Party Women's organiser for Wales, was reprinted by Honno in 2006. She also edited the Minute Book of the Aberdare Women's Liberal Association, published by the South Wales Record Society under the title, *Women's Rights and Womanly Duties: The Aberdare Women's Liberal Association, 1891-1910* (2005). In both cases Ursula wrote stimulating and clear introductions that placed the sources in their historical context.

As co-editor of *Llafur*, the annual journal of the Welsh People's History Society, Ursula helped to bring together women's history and labour history. In 2006 she organized a day conference at the museum in Pontypridd on the theme of women and politics in Wales. It drew an audience of over 100 and was supported by WHN, *Llafur* and the Women's Archive. In recognition of her writing, and her work in promoting women's history and education in Wales, Ursula was selected as a 'woman of achievement for 2006' by the Nominating Council of the Women of the Year Lunch.

Ursula was not someone who simply talked about raising awareness and interest in women's history—instead she just quietly got on and did something practical about it with great energy and enthusiasm. She initiated and helped to run key organisations, spoke to varied audiences at festivals, book launches, conferences and women's history roadshows and inspired others to become involved. Good humoured and supportive, she was a delight to be associated with and soon became a friend as well as a colleague. She will be sadly missed by all who worked closely with her.

**June Hannam, University of the West of England  
Vice Chair West of England and South Wales  
Women's History Network**

## Treasurer's Report

Following helpful discussion at the AGM about our finances, it was decided to form a Finance Sub-Committee that would meet annually to set a budget. The members of this Sub-Committee are the Convenor, Treasurer, a representative from the Magazine Committee, the Charity Representative and a former Treasurer. Members of this Committee met in November 2007 and set a budget to November 2008, which was subsequently approved by the Steering Committee. Our key aim for 2007-8 is to build up our reserves so that we have between £4,000 and £5,000 as contingency. As well as increasing our subscription rates, we decided to trial an electronic newsletter in addition to two magazines, and to retain the Book Prize, but reduce the prize amount to £500.

The good news is that these changes are already having a beneficial effect, and our finances are looking healthy. We have two life-members, more gift aid forms have been completed (Sue Morgan has been appointed as our Charity representative) and many members have altered their standing order subscription amounts. Expenditure is compared to the budget at each Steering Committee meeting, which means that we are able to keep a close eye on our financial position. I hope to give a positive report on our progress at the next AGM.

### Editorial roles

*Would you like to be more involved with Women's History Magazine?*

The editors would like to hear from any member with the interest, time and skills to join our team. At present there is a specific need for someone who is either a new or recent member of the steering committee to act initially as liaison between the committee and the editorial team.

Editors contribute to a variety of tasks which require regular input and culminate in major activity when an issue is due. Depending on the role, the work may involve:

- liaising with authors to evolve publishable articles
- editing copy
- issue planning
- ensuring quality and quantity of submissions
- managing the peer review process
- managing book reviews
- liaising with advertisers
- DTP (Adobe InDesign & Photoshop)
- Managing the printing process

Being a *Women's History Magazine* editor requires commitment but can be very rewarding, especially if you enjoy working as one of a supportive team.

Please email [editor@womenshistorynetwork.org](mailto:editor@womenshistorynetwork.org) with a view to arranging a telephone conversation with an existing editor who can give you more details and answer any questions.

## Steering Committee Convenor's letter

*The Steering Committee Convenor's letter, reprinted here, was sent to members earlier this year:*

Dear WHN Member,

We hope you have had a relaxing holiday and a peaceful New Year. Your Steering Committee's plans for the New Year include some important changes to the format and frequency of the magazine which are outlined below. We hope you will approve of these changes which we consider generally beneficial to the network.

As from 2008, instead of receiving three magazines each year you will get two slightly longer editions focusing principally on articles and book reviews. The printed magazine will no longer include news, calls for papers and conference reports. Instead these will be emailed to you on a more regular basis (at least 4 times a year) in the form of an electronic newsletter. This will ensure that our news is more up-to-date and that we miss fewer conference deadlines. It will also help us to cut postage costs, one of our major expenses. The first of the 2008 'new look' magazines will appear in the early summer.

Any members without an email address will receive the newsletter by post. If however you do have an email but have not given it to us, it would be very helpful if you could send it to us as soon as possible. The best way to do this is to send an email to [membership@womenshistorynetwork.org](mailto:membership@womenshistorynetwork.org)

One other change to note is that, in order to ensure that our finances remain healthy, we have reduced the amount of money given to the Book Prize winner this year from £1,000 to £500. We hope to be able to continue to award the Book Prize on an annual basis and in addition will also be administering a new school prize of £100 for the best AS or A2 essay on women's history. This award has been set up in honour of the late Carol Adams who helped pioneer women's history in schools. The deadline for this new prize will be in May 2008. Further details will be posted on the web site soon.

All good wishes for 2008,

Kath Holden (Steering Committee Convenor)

## Getting to Know Each Other



**Name:** Jo Stanley

**Position:** Writer and Honourary Research Fellow, Centre for Mobilities Research, Lancaster University.

**How long have you been a WHN member?**

Since the start. Some of my drawings are on the cover of our old WHN notebook, and I wrote a pack *How to organise a (brilliant) WHN conference*, after being on the organising committee of our oral history conference at Conway Hall.

**What inspired your enthusiasm for women's history?**

Nosiness and a sense of injustice. I was determined to help end the silences about our contribution, to allow our dignity its due space.

**What are your special interests?** The gendered sea. i.e. women and gender on ships, including female pirates; also the creative re-presentation of lifestyles, e.g. exhibitions, plays, digital animations, visual maps of our history, especially women of hidden sections of the community.

**Who is your heroine from history and why?**

Martha Gelhorn, because she lived life so fully and represented her experience in fiction as well as reportage.

*Women's History Magazine is keen to carry profiles that celebrate the diversity of WHN membership. If you would like to complete a Getting to Know Each Other questionnaire, or you would like to nominate someone else to, please email*

***magazine@womenshistorynetwork.org***

## Steering Committee Call for Nominations

**W**ould you like to be more involved with how Women's History Network is run?

Several members of the current Steering Committee are standing down at the next AGM at the Glasgow Conference and we need some committed individuals to take their place. Committee members serve a term of office of two years, with an option to stand again for another two years.

If you would like to nominate someone, or to put your own name forward, please email your name, affiliation, address and a brief CV (max 300 words) to our convenor at the address below. If you would like to know more about serving on the committee our convenor will be pleased to give you more details.

**convenor@womenshistorynetwork.org**

## Women's History Magazine Back issues

Back issues of *Women's History Magazine* are available to buy for

£4.00 inc postage (UK)

£4.50 inc postage (Overseas)

Most issues are available, from Spring 2002 to the present. To discover the contents of each issue please visit

**www.magazine.womenshistorynetwork.org**

To order your copies please email **magazine@womenshistorynetwork.org**





## Standing Order Reminder

Please could all members who pay by standing order remember to amend the amount to the new 2008 subscription rates:

<i>Student/unwaged:</i>	£10 by standing order £15 other
<i>Low income : (under £20,000 pa)</i>	£20 by standing order £25 other
<i>High income:</i>	£35 by standing order £40 other
<i>Overseas individuals:</i>	£40
<i>Life membership:</i>	£350
<i>UK institutions:</i>	£45
<i>Overseas institutions:</i>	£55

You can complete the form on the back page and return it to your bank to amend your standing order. If you pay your subscriptions annually on or around 1 September the new membership fee will not apply until then, but we urge you to amend your standing order now, so you don't forget.

## Remember the WHN in your Will

**D**o please consider leaving a gift to the Women's History Network in your will. Many people who give to charities also choose to leave something in their wills to a particular cause. Not only is this a fitting way to ensure that your commitment to the WHN continues in the longer term, legacies often constitute a very important income stream for smaller charities, passing on some excellent tax advantages not only for us, but also for you! Leaving a legacy to the WHN, for example, could save on inheritance tax, as the value of your donation, no matter how large or small, is normally deducted from the value of your estate prior to inheritance tax being worked out. There are several forms of legacies of which a Pecuniary Legacy (a fixed sum) or Residuary Legacy (part or all of your estate once all your other gifts have been deducted) are two of the most common.

If you are interested in finding out more about how to go about naming the WHN as a beneficiary of your will please contact the HM Revenue and Customs website which has some helpful basic information [www.hmrc.gov.uk/charities/donors/legacies](http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/charities/donors/legacies) or consult your own solicitor.

If you would like to discuss legacies, and the ways in which they could be deployed by the WHN, please contact our Charity representative, Sue Morgan, email [charityrep@womenshistorynetwork.org](mailto:charityrep@womenshistorynetwork.org)

No matter how small, your gift will make a difference.

## Getting to Know Each Other



**Name:** Charmian Cannon

**Position:** None—women's history has been my retirement interest with the help of the UEA and Sussex Universities.

**How long have you been a WHN member?** At least 15 years.

**What inspired your enthusiasm for women's history?** Teaching sociology of education at a time when gender and ethnicity became of interest as well as class, also women's achievements.

**What are your special interests?:** Women's education; women's social mobility; life histories, especially the use of letters as sources; the transmission of family cultures between generations via women/family members.

**Who is your heroine from history and why?** Not one woman in particular, but it would be 'ordinary' women rather than the outstanding public figures everyone knows about.

*Women's History Magazine is keen to carry profiles that celebrate the diversity of WHN membership. If you would like to complete a 'Getting to Know Each Other' questionnaire, or you would like to nominate someone else to, please email [magazine@womenshistorynetwork.org](mailto:magazine@womenshistorynetwork.org)*

## BURSURIES Appeal

### Your help – and money – needed!

The annual Women's History Network conference is an almost unique opportunity for scholars, both lay and professional, to discuss many of the issues with which they grapple, both intellectually and practically. The range, both geographical and chronological, of historical topics is truly inspiring, and the women—and men—who deliver the papers are from a similarly diverse range of backgrounds, many of whom are supported by the WHN to travel to (or within) the UK in order to do this: since our annual conference in 2004, we have awarded over £10,000 in bursaries. All bursary recipients deliver a paper at our conference and to qualify for a bursary they have to prove that they are on an income of less than £16,000 pa. Recipients of domestic bursaries have come from across the UK and bursaries awarded to those overseas have come from India, Africa, Australia, the US, and the EU.

The recipients of these bursaries are thus able to take an active part in discussion and debate about women's history – of as much interest and benefit to those who attend the conference without a bursary, as those who need that extra help to be able to deliver their paper. This act of delivering a paper at the conference allows postgraduate students to speak to a supportive audience and independent researchers to share their findings. In addition, the informal networking opportunities that the conference allows for delegates enables creative and fruitful relationships to develop.

However, competition for bursaries is fierce and there is always greater demand for bursaries than our funds allow. So, we are launching an appeal to raise money for a ring-fenced pot of money to enable us to continue to enable women and men from all over the world to attend your annual conference. If 60 public-spirited individuals gave £25, that would

raise £1500 – a sum that we often give in bursaries in a year.

If you would like to help scholars of women's history who might not otherwise be able to attend our conference, please send contributions to WHN Treasurer, Dr Elizabeth Foyster, Clare College, Trinity Lane, Cambridge, CB2 1TL, email: [treasurer@womenshistorynetwork.org](mailto:treasurer@womenshistorynetwork.org) Cheques should be made payable to the Women's History Network, and please fill out a Gift Aid Form (available to download on the WHN website) if applicable; this would help us to reclaim tax, adding even more to your gift. Thank you – and remember, every little helps!



*Bursary holders from the University of Southern Denmark attending last year's conference in Winchester. From left: Jannie Søgaard, Emelie Korsgaard and Trine Louise Bernicken*

### Exclusive 20 % Discount

To mark the centenary of The Women's National Anti-Suffrage League (founded on the 21st July 1908) Oxford University Press would like to offer you a special discount on:

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Julia Bush

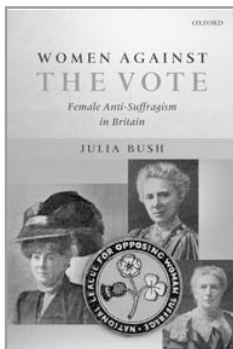
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## WHN Website Relaunch

Have you logged on to our new Women's History Network site? Go to

[www.womenshistorynetwork.org](http://www.womenshistorynetwork.org)



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or contact the MA convenor, Margaretta Jolly

**E** [m.jolly@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:m.jolly@sussex.ac.uk)

**T** 01273 873575



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**T** 01273 678537

## Calling conference organisers

Don't forget to request back issues of *Women's History Magazine* to sell at your conference on a sale or return basis.

To request copies please email:

[magazine@womenshistorynetwork.org](mailto:magazine@womenshistorynetwork.org)



Conferences, Calls for Papers, Events, Prizes, News, Notices, Publishing Opportunities...

All of the above now have a new home in the WHN electronic

## Newsletter

The WHN *Newsletter*, which will be emailed to members 4 times a year, will enable us to keep you better up-to-date with news, conferences and other events concerning women's history.

The *Newsletter* will also provide a more frequent forum for publicising your events and informing members about other activities and projects.

To advertise in the WHN *Newsletter*, please email its editor, Jean Spence, at:

[newsletter@womenshistorynetwork.org](mailto:newsletter@womenshistorynetwork.org)

To download current and back issues visit the Newsletter pages at

[www.magazine.womenshistorynetwork.org](http://www.magazine.womenshistorynetwork.org)

## Publishing in *Women's History Magazine*

*Women's History Magazine* welcomes contributions from experienced scholars and those at an earlier stage in their research careers. We aim to be inclusive and fully recognise that women's history is not only lodged in the academy. All submissions are subject to the usual peer review process.

Articles should be 3000-8000 words in length. Contributors are requested to submit articles in final form, carefully following the style guidelines available at:

[www.magazine.womenshistorynetwork.org](http://www.magazine.womenshistorynetwork.org)

Please email your submission, as a word attachment, to the editors at

[editor@womenshistorynetwork.org](mailto:editor@womenshistorynetwork.org)



# What is the Women's History Network?

The WHN was founded in July 1991. It is a national charity concerned with promoting women's history and encouraging women interested in history. WHN business is carried out by the National Steering Committee, which is elected by the membership and meets regularly several times each year. It organises the annual conference, manages the finance and membership, and co-ordinates activities in pursuit of the aims of the WHN.

## Aims of the WHN

1. To encourage contact between all people interested in women's history — in education, the media or in private research
2. To collect and publish information relating to women's history
3. To identify and comment upon all issues relating to women's history
4. To promote research into all areas of women's history

## What does the WHN do?

### Annual Conference

Each year the WHN holds a national conference for WHN members and others. The conference provides everyone interested in women's history with a chance to meet and it has become an exciting forum where new research can be aired and recent developments in the field can be shared. The Annual General Meeting of the Network takes place at the conference. The AGM discusses issues of policy and elects the National Steering Committee.

### WHN Publications

WHN members receive three copies per year of the Women's History Magazine, which contains: articles discussing research, sources and applications of women's history; reviews of books, conferences, meetings and exhibitions; and information on calls for papers, prizes and competitions, and publication opportunities.

## Joining the WHN

### Annual Membership Rates

Student/unwaged	£15*	Overseas minimum	£40
Low income (*under £20,000 pa)	£25*	UK Institutions	£45
High income	£40*	Institutions overseas	£55
Life Membership	£350		

\* £5 reduction when paying by standing order.

Charity Number: 1118201. Membership application/renewal, Gift Aid Declaration and Banker's Order forms are available on the back cover.

# Women's History Network Contacts:

### Steering Committee officers:

Membership, subscriptions, Dr Louise Wannell:  
**membership@womenshistorynetwork.org**  
or write to WHN Membership Secretary, c/o Dr. Jane McDermid, School of Humanities, Avenue Campus (Building 65), University of Southampton, Southampton, SO17 1BJ.

Finance, bursaries, Dr Elizabeth Foyster:  
**treasurer@womenshistorynetwork.org**

Committee Convenor, Dr Katherine Holden:  
**convenor@womenshistorynetwork.org**

Web Officer, Jessica Holloway Swift:  
**webadmin@womenshistorynetwork.org**

WHN Book Prize, Chair, Prof June Purvis:  
**bookprize@womenshistorynetwork.org**

UK Representative for International Federation for Research into Women's History, Prof June Purvis:  
**ifrwh@womenshistorynetwork.org**

Charity Representative, Dr Sue Morgan:  
**charityrep@womenshistorynetwork.org**

Newletter Editor, Jean Spence:  
**newsletter@womenshistorynetwork.org**

### Magazine Team:

Editors, submissions: Dr Debbi Simonton, Dr Claire Jones, Dr Jane Potter:  
**editor@womenshistorynetwork.org**

Book Reviews, Dr Jane Potter:  
**bookreviews@womenshistorynetwork.org**  
or send books to her at Oxford International Centre for Publishing Studies, Oxford Brookes University, The Buckley Building, Gipsy Lane Campus, Oxford OX3 0BP.

Advertising, Dr Gerry Holloway:  
**advertising@womenshistorynetwork.org**

### WHN Administrator

All other queries, including back issues of magazine, please email:  
**magazine@womenshistorynetwork.org**

## Membership Application

I would like to \*join / renew my subscription to the Women's History Network. I \*/ enclose a cheque payable to Women's History Network / have filled out & returned to my bank the Banker's Order Form / for £ \_\_\_\_\_. (\* delete as applicable)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Postcode: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_ Tel (work): \_\_\_\_\_

Tick this box if you DO NOT want your name made available to publishers/conference organisers for publicity:

Detach and return this form with, if applicable, your cheque to Dr Louise Wannell, WHN Membership Secretary, c/o Jane McDermid, School of Humanities, Avenue Campus (Building 65), University of Southampton, Southampton, SO17 1BJ. Email: [membership@womenshistorynetwork.org](mailto:membership@womenshistorynetwork.org)

### ----- Gift aid declaration

Name of Charity: Women's History Network

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Address: .....

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I am a UK taxpayer and I want the charity to treat all donations (including membership subscriptions) I have made since 6 April 2000, and all donations I make from the date of this declaration until I notify you otherwise, as Gift Aid donations.

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### Notes

1. If your declaration covers donations you may make in the future:
  - Please notify the charity if you change your name or address while the declaration is still in force
  - You can cancel the declaration at any time by notifying the charity – it will then not apply to donations you make on or after the date of cancellation or such later date as you specify.
2. You must pay an amount of income tax and/or capital gains tax at least equal to the tax that the charity reclaims on your donations in the tax year (currently 28p for each £1 you give).
3. If in the future your circumstances change and you no longer pay tax on your income and capital gains equal to the tax that the charity reclaims, you can cancel your declaration (see note 1).
4. If you pay tax at the higher rate you can claim further tax relief in your Self Assessment tax return. If you are unsure whether your donations qualify for Gift Aid tax relief, ask the charity. Or you can ask your local tax office for leaflet IR113 Gift Aid.

### ----- Banker's Order

To (bank) \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Account no.: \_\_\_\_\_

Pay to the account of the Women's History Network, Account No. 91325692 at the National Westminster Bank, Stuckeys Branch, Bath (sort code 60-02-05), on \_\_\_\_\_ 200\_, and annually thereafter, on 1 September, the sum of

(in figures) £ \_\_\_\_\_ (in words) \_\_\_\_\_.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_