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Writing in the Borderlands: A critical review of literary journalism and historiography, 1989-2011

PhD by prior publication

Julie Wheelwright, City University London, February 2014

ABSTRACT

In this review of a body of literary journalism and historical writing over three decades, the author identifies shared epistemological and methodological challenges between these areas. The research questions arose out of the author's three historical books, 'Amazons and Military Maids: Women Who Dressed as Men in Pursuit of Life, Liberty and Happiness' (1989), 'The Fatal Lover: Mata Hari and the Myth of Women in Espionage' (1992) and 'Esther: The Remarkable True Story of Esther Wheelwright: Puritan Child, Native Daughter and Mother Superior' (2011) and a selection of related journalism. The research questions related to how historians and literary journalists identify subjects as marginal and central; what methodologies are employed in their investigations and their writing; the centrality of an inter-disciplinary approach to narrative writing in both fields and how the professional authority faces significant challenges of identity and methodology in the digital age.

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Julie Wheelwright

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Chapter 5. Conclusion

Chapter 1. Introduction

Throughout my three decades of writing history books and journalism, my working practice has been informed by both disciplines, a cross-fertilisation that has proved enormously rewarding. My journalistic methods and epistemological outlook enabled me to approach my choice of subjects, arguments and sources in ways that were often antithetical to those of a professional historian. Conversely, I employed historiographical methodology and frameworks within my journalistic work, prompting me to delve more deeply and often to ask different questions of my subjects. Between the mainstays of printed journalism and published books, I applied my training to producing documentaries for film, and radio, and even acted as a consultant to museums, to a feature film-maker and to playwrights. Working across so many media enabled me to constantly refine my approach to scholarship and to its popular dissemination and that, in turn, has enlivened my journalism.

In this critical review of my career as a journalist and writer of both academic and narrative history, it emerged that the disciplines which I had imagined as very distinct in the late 1980s, had reached a point of overlap by the second decade of the twenty-first century. My writing, which grew out of a political and an intellectual interest in the history of women, was influenced by these changes and they, as I will argue, even shaped my style and approach. The research questions in this thesis arose out of this convergence of literary journalism and historiographic practice and they operate as an indicator of how much has changed within these respective fields. The challenges are still present and urgent for writers of history and for literary journalists who are faced with constant negotiations with their editors and publishers over the boundaries and ethical practices within their disciplines.

Working as a journalist where I often reported on feminism, while a history undergraduate in the early 1980s at the University of British Columbia, led me to understand the scope for using a narrative approach in writing about historical subjects. This also coincided with developments within historiography away from structural history and towards a narrative mode that, among other things, concentrated on individual stories rather than on circumstances (Stone, 1979: 3-4). Moreover, the

‘new historians’ (or social historians) were concerned with studying ‘feelings, emotions, behaviour patterns, values, and states of mind’ (op.cit.:14). These historians coupled narrative with a more subjective form of investigation and writing. They reflected the feminist movement’s tenet that ‘the personal is the political’ (Hanisch, 1970) and De Beauvoir’s concept of female oppression within patriarchal structures where ‘One is not born but becomes a woman’ (De Beauvoir, 2010: 267). Historical investigations began to include gender as a category, an idea that has resonance with a readership beyond academia. A whole new history was being uncovered and written about by women, for women. In this context, the ‘political’ was redefined as relating to all power relationships rather than the narrow sense of electoral politics, opening up a space for feminist researchers and journalists to write about the reality of women’s lives. Narrative writing favouring clear prose, dramatisation and the use of arresting images and individual case histories suited this ideal of a democratisation of knowledge and the creation of a shared history among women.

My choice of subjects was influenced by these major changes within the field of women’s history. From its 1970s origins, where feminist historians catalogued the lives of great women, the practice moved to recording those of ordinary women, and in the 1980s, to exposing the oppression of women and examining how they responded to discrimination and subordination (Bailey & Arnold, 2005). Central to this was the need to challenge received notions of appropriate and worthy historical topics: in my case, women’s participation in warfare. While historians such as Keegan (1993) defined warfare as an exclusively masculine arena, feminist historians were discovering women’s long neglected involvement in conflicts around the globe (Enloe, 1983, Macdonald, Holden & Ardener, 1988, Trustram, 1984). What bolstered the conviction that women as combatants was a central, rather than a marginal subject of investigation, was the context in which this research was conducted. The women’s peace camp at the RAF base in Berkshire (1982 -1991), the opening of military occupations to women in the US and the UK and the active recruitment of female servicewomen were all on the public agenda through the 1980s and 1990s (Wheelwright, 1992a). As contemporary interest in women in warfare developed throughout these decades, the feminist history attempted to correct the erroneous media perception that female combatants were an exclusively contemporary phenomenon.

1.1 Identifying areas of interest

What arose from this critical review of my writing was a realisation that my approach to defining a subject of interest was rooted in journalistic practice and influenced by debates within historiography (the study of historical methodology).¹ Historiography, within academic history, refers to the study of the methodology and development of 'history' (as a discipline), or to a body of historical work on a specialized topic. It encompasses the historical and contemporary interpretations of a subject and includes analysis of those interpretations and of scholarly debate. The term may operate as a sub-category with references to, for example, 'the historiography of women or 'feminist historiography'.

But what are the differences in how issues are identified as worthy of investigation in these seemingly disparate fields of history and narrative journalism? This is explored more fully in my first chapter but perhaps a brief overview of the issues is useful here. Professional associations identify a historian's choice of subject as one that aims to improve a *collective* understanding of the past by engaging in a critical dialogue (AHA, 2005). The subject choice must make an original contribution towards this on-going discussion within agreed and identifiable epistemological and theoretical frameworks. Since historians need to be transparent about their methodology to argue for the validity of their subject, and their *interpretation* of that subject, they must leave a clear trace of evidence. While 'telling stories about the past' is part of the historian's remit, these stories are only considered professionally valid if they have been constructed using accepted methods. Scholarly apparatus such as a bibliography and appropriate referencing, therefore, is an essential element of a historian's methodology.

Historians (who may work in museums, libraries, government institutions as well as in higher education) are engaged in this critical dialogue with their peers and with the public. As history is not researched nor written within a cultural vacuum, subject choice is also influenced by conversations outside the academy. For example, social

¹ For a more detailed discussion see Burke, P. (1992) *History and Social Theory*, Oxford: Polity Press, and Cannadine, D. (ed.) (2003) *What is History Now?* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

historians (often referred to as the New Historians) from the 1970s worked towards establishing a discipline that expanded definitions of the past to include ‘a close interest in the conditions of daily life, the texture of lived experience in a household and home, in patterns of consumption, in the worlds of work and leisure’ (Feldman & Lawrence, 2011: 2). By researching subjects related to class, gender and race, social historians developed a reciprocal relationship between their political beliefs and their scholarly expertise. In the 1980s the second wave of feminism, the rediscovery and republishing of forgotten women writers (most notably in the UK by Virago Press), the launch of new academic journals devoted to women’s history, all helped formulate a dialogue about gender that fed into historical output (Smith, 1998).²

An interesting parallel with how historians and literary journalists evaluate a possible topic for investigation is that both begin with ‘empirical data collection’ (Kramer & Call, 2007: 163). The value of a subject deemed appropriate for long-form narrative non-fiction is inextricably bound up with the value of its evidence. In order to construct a factual narrative, which is the basis of all literary journalism, the writer must support their observations with different forms of ‘data’. Much of literary journalism is concerned with scene-writing, developing characters and with using immersive detail to bring authenticity to their work: and ‘sources’ must give their informed consent. Kramer and Call (2007) describe a process of identifying topics that is predicated on the writer entering into protracted negotiations with their living subjects. If this access falls through or if their initial idea cannot be back up by ‘data’, then the literary journalist cannot proceed. The topic may even be further defined in the writing process itself:

[Literary journalists] offer a range of emotional, political, and scholarly discernments, seemingly on personal authority but also on behalf of the publications in which their stories appear. Meanwhile, by means of stylish writing, they lead readers toward specific feelings, insights and conclusions (op. cit.:163).

² The launching of these journals illustrates the rise of academic interest, and growing respectability, of this field: *Women’s Studies International Forum* (1978), *Journal of Women’s History* (1989), *Women’s History Review* (1992).

This quote highlights two important differences between the literary journalist's role and that of the historian. The writer of long-form narrative non-fiction must concern herself with the commercial expectations of a publisher and with the narrative expectations of her readers. While historians' choice of subject is also influenced by concerns about publishing and about readership, they are secondary to engaging with the 'collective' enterprise of historical research and construction. The literary journalist is usually a lone operator, writing from 'personal authority' and under no compunction to leave a trace for other writers to follow, nor to address a broader intellectual context for her subject choice. Moreover, the weight of evidence may be much lower for a literary journalist whose writing is based primarily on their observations, their internal concerns and their encounters.

The following chapters of this thesis discuss the overlaps and differences between history and literary journalism that arose from my books and from my feature articles. In this critical review of my writing over three decades, a number of general questions arose, namely: whether and how the need for detailed historical research can be reconciled to a genre of narrative writing which places an emphasis on immersive detail, sensual writing and scene making. I also address whether compromises might be made to accommodate both and what rich forms of new writing this process might open by combining their respective strengths. Chapter One discusses how my writing on women in the military raised questions about the methodological differences within these fields, how phenomena are identified as marginal or central and how evidence is used. Chapter Two explores these issues in relation to the particular ethical challenges for historians and literary journalists in writing within the field of intelligence history. In Chapter Three, the research questions that grew out of my *Esther: The Remarkable True Story of Esther Wheelwright*, raise the possibility that literary journalists and historians may now be moving towards a position of convergence.

As this critical review of my working practice will demonstrate, the style and approach of my historical writing shifted greatly over time but was firmly rooted within the context of historiographical concerns of the 1980s. When my first book, *Amazons and Military Maids: Women Who Dressed as Men in Pursuit of Life, Liberty and Happiness* (Wheelwright, 1989) was published, I had recently finished my MA in

history at the University of Sussex and my first academic article had been accepted for publication (Wheelwright, 1987). This coincided with the rise of a general interest in feminist history so that my readership crossed academic and popular interests. Given that my subject, historical cases of women who disguised themselves as men to pursue male occupations (most of whom were soldiers and sailors), had until recently been regarded as insignificant, my feminist approach implicitly questioned historical methodology. The dismissal of these cases, up until the late 1980s, had focussed on traditionally accepted empirical evidence, so that these female combatants were regarded as anomalies.³ But my research found that by consulting accounts in a range of ephemeral sources, including newspaper accounts, memoirs and ballads, a consistent pattern emerged of women's participation in warfare that was subsequently erased from the historical record.

My books and articles joined the swell of feminist writing that identified gender as an important category of historical investigation to redress the balance of women's neglected historical record. After the positive critical response to *Amazons and Military Maids*, I wrote regularly for British publications on related subjects throughout the 1990s. This ranged from articles about female pirates to women soldiers during the Gulf War, and to the contemporary phenomenon of 'Drag Kings' (see appendix). My interest in women who operated within male spheres of influence then extended to women in espionage. Still writing within the tradition of 'new history', I published a cultural study of the 'spy courtesan' in *The Fatal Lover: Mata Hari and the Myth of Women in Espionage* (Wheelwright, 1992b). Chapter two demonstrates how my concerns about the identification of sources and the need for transparency for both literary journalists and historians writing about intelligence arouse out of my work on female agents.

Among the challenges faced by writing about women's lives was the difficulty of finding appropriate sources and this led to taking a multi-disciplinary approach to gathering evidence, using methods such as oral history, more often associated with anthropology, and textual analysis which is a tool of literary critics (Stone, 1979:16-17). The value of documents also came under scrutiny: if official records and histories

³ See Stone's (1979) for a discussion of how the 'new historians', which included feminist historians, had rejected the idea of producing 'a coherent scientific explanation of change in the past'.

routinely marginalised or neglected women's lives or shaped evidence to suit prevailing expectations of gender, what was their intrinsic value? Social history (of which feminist history was a subset) was predicated on the assumption that if more were known about the lives of these overlooked groups – women, workers, slaves, for example – this would produce more detailed accounts of the past. Feminist historians argued that the past had always been intensely ideological rather than 'objective' and, as they rejected this assumption of neutrality, they also acknowledged their political positions (Appley, Hunt & Jacob, 1994). Their questioning of objectivity, truth and authenticity in arguments had echoes of debates within journalism scholarship and practice. These will be discussed in both chapters two and three.

1.2 The centrality of the objectivity debate to literary journalism and to the historiography of women's history

Writing belonging to a subset of journalism, known most widely as 'literary journalism' or 'narrative journalism' with particular, defining characteristics, shared the epistemological concerns of feminist and social historians during the 1970s and 80s.⁴ Connery defines the genre as 'nonfiction printed prose whose verifiable content is shaped and transformed into a story or sketch by use of narrative and rhetorical techniques generally associated with fiction' (in Hartsock, 2000: 10). Kramer and Call describe it as 'the genre of telling true stories that goes by many names: narrative journalism, new journalism, literary journalism, creative non-fiction, feature writing, the nonfiction novel, documentary narrative' (Kramer & Call, 2007: xv). Many practitioners define 'literary journalism' by its stylistic qualities such as the use of dialogue, description, immersive detail, plot or scene-building, emotional insight or transformation and character description (Gutkind, 2005: xix). Central to this style is the narrator who may offer an intimate personal perspective or even operate as a character within the text, recording their responses to experiences and subjects (op. cit.: xxiii). While the literary journalist's authenticity lies in her ability to convince her readers that the text keeps faith with a 'truth claim' about people, places and

⁴ Other terms for literary journalism include: 'literary nonfiction', 'lyrics in prose', 'the confession', 'the nature meditation', 'literature of fact', and 'non-imaginative literature'. These terms are used to cover generic and subgeneric categories of such as 'personal essay', 'travelogue', 'memoir', 'biography' and 'autobiography' (Hartsock, 2000, p.5).

events, there is no need for transparency of sources. But this ability to appear convincing or to meet ‘conditioned expectations of genre’ rests with the writer’s very personal style. As Kramer has described it: ‘The defining mark of literary journalism is the personality of the writer, the individual and intimate voice of a whole, candid person . . . speaking simply in his or her own right’ (in Keeble & Tulloch, 2012: 5).

The licence given to literary journalists stands in contrast to contemporary concepts of objectivity, neutrality, impartiality and balance in news journalism that are understood as the need to strive for truth in the face of subjective anarchy and propaganda bias. In reporting news, according to the conventional view, sources must be balanced, fact is separated from fiction, value-judgements are avoided (Keeble 2009). However, the rules within literary journalism are different. According to Hartsock, the distance between the writer, their subject and the reader, ranges across a spectrum. ‘In effect, literary journalism’s objective is to engage the objectified Other. Such a form proves dynamic rather than static, spilling over into conventional objectified journalisms at one end and solipsistic memoir at the other’ (Hartsock: 42).

The aim of engaging the ‘Other’ is still central to literary journalism where writers may regard their investigations, observations and intimate style as being capable of fomenting social change. Just as the socialist, feminist historians were arguing against traditional notions of objectivity and detachment in historical analysis, Hartsock observes that the 1960s and 1970s wave of American literary journalism arose from writers reacting against an objectifying form of journalism. Among this group were Joan Didion, John McPhee, Hunter S. Thompson and Tom Wolfe, who were attracted to this form because it attempted to narrow the gap between subjectivity and the phenomenal world (op. cit.: 153). For these writers too, the personal was the political.

Hartsock made the critical observation that the ‘new journalists’ actually belonged to a long tradition of American literary journalism dating back to the late nineteenth century and even earlier in Britain. In the eighteenth century James Boswell, for example, uses novelistic techniques in his ‘true-life accounts’ in his *London Journal* and employs what Thomas Connery describes as the ‘feel’ of facts (op. cit.: 25). In the same spirit that Wolfe, Thompson or Didion rejected the distanced style of ‘factual’ or ‘objective’ news writing, their nineteenth century counterparts were

resisting a 'rhetorical objectification of human experience, much as the form still does today' (ibid: 41). This distanced approach, however, placed writers of long-form non-fiction with an intimate narrative style, outside the literary and journalistic mainstream.

Perhaps it is only from the borderlands that writers can shift paradigms both in terms of subject matter and in terms of rhetoric. The rise of feminism within British mainstream journalism in from the 1970s illustrates how openly subjective and deeply personal writing can challenge the status quo. Feminists called for journalism to take seriously women's perspective on issues ranging from fertility to childcare, and as the eighties progressed, contemporary mass media converged with a trend towards a focus on emotions and intimate experiences (Coward, 2013). According to some commentators, however, the shift towards a more personal, intimate writing style and away from a distanced, neutral stance in mainstream journalism, has become problematic. Bernstein and Rothe have noted a trend across mass media in the UK and in the US, where 'absolute authority is given to the first-person account' to the exclusion of evidence-based arguments (Bernstein, in Rothe, 2011: 84).

Concepts of objectivity and subjectivity are relevant to a critical review of literary journalism and historical writing for two reasons. The first arises in chapter two over a reading of espionage literature and documentation relating to Mata Hari and other female agents during the First World War. Here, the subjectivity of the biographers of Mata Hari can be traced to deduce how and why they perpetuated distortions about her life and her career in order to further particular political ends. Important questions arise about how to evaluate sources that offer, within the same text, a vital eye-witness account (historical 'data') and inaccurate and distorting evidence. As I demonstrate, the need for historiographic methodology is key here to ensure that myths, especially as they relate to female agents, are identified and challenged.

The second instance arises in chapter three where I consider how in my biography of Esther Wheelwright, I insert myself as a first person narrator into the text to fulfil certain narrative expectations. The importance of questions about subjectivity, as they relate to Bernstein's concerns about 'the first person account', and the prioritising of emotionality in historical accounts, arose from my critical review of the differences

between writing for broadcast and for a printed biography. I co-wrote and co-produced *Captive! Esther's Story*, a drama-documentary about Esther Wheelwright, for a Canadian cable channel in 2003-2004 (Captive!, 2004) and the following year presented a BBC Radio Four documentary, where, for the first time, I narrated the script and described my personal connection to a subject (Captive, 2005). This experience influenced my approach to writing the biography *Esther: The Remarkable True Story of Esther Wheelwright* (Wheelwright, 2011) and suggested that a first-person narrative not only works to compensate for a dearth of sources but may enable a reader to engage with a deeply historical subject. The consequences of using a more subjective, even intimate, narrator will be explored in that chapter.

1.3 The question of professional authority

During the period of this review, feminist historians (Bailey, 2005) and literary journalists (Hartsock, 2000) were engaged in parallel battles for critical acceptance. Since literature was then defined as 'imaginative works of high quality', most non-fiction works were excluded from academic consideration and 'as unsuited to the rigorous critical analysis we routinely apply to novels and short stories' (McCord Frus, 1985: 748). Connery, in his review of the subject a decade later, found little progress, with scholars dismissing literary journalism as a 'bastard' form of writing or 'an academic orphan with no clear ancestry or home' (Connery, 1994: 1- 2). Throughout the 1990s, the growth of published anthologies of narrative non-fiction, the establishment of the Nieman Conference on Literary Journalism at Harvard University, the critical writing of Anderson, Hartsock and Lounsberry, among others, operated to legitimate scholarship in this field (Anderson, 1989, Lounsberry, 1990, Hartsock, 2000). The critical study of literary journalism, however, reached a turning point in 2006 with the founding of the International Association of Literary Journalism Studies and a new journal that emerged from that process (Sims, 2009). Writing three years later, Sims (2009) identified that, while the position of literary journalism in the academy had developed since the beginning of this century, it remained tenuous and further critical discussion was needed.

Within academic history, gender may have gained legitimacy as a category for historical analysis alongside class and race, but the study of female lives has remained

more problematic. Historians of women's history have even expressed concern that it has once again become marginalised as the 'history of men as a sex' has proliferated (Bailey, 2005). Bailey cites one example of the remaining difficulties within this field where most historical studies of early-modern or eighteenth century English masculinity expose the diversity of male identities but there are few parallel studies of the construction of femininity (ibid). Moreover, the British government's rewriting of the national curriculum has led to a new Anglo-centric focus where political history is emphasised to the exclusion of 'social history' (Eales, 2013). This seems a further indication that, like literary journalism, the historiography of women's lives keeps a 'tenuous' hold within academic studies.

In addition to tensions surrounding academic acceptance of women's history and literary journalism, writers in these fields increasingly confront challenges to their professional authority. Chapter three considers debates within both fields that focus on the link between professional identity and concerns about evidence, transparency, authenticity and the use of rhetorical techniques. Post-modern historians such as Jenkins have observed these parallels, commenting on a shared set of endeavours: 'journalists, politicians, media commentators, film makers, artists – can and do successfully access “the before now” often in ingenious ways which pay scant regard for the “skills and methods” of the historian' (in De Groot, 2009: 2). Munslow has argued for a greater awareness of the shaping consciousness behind the historian's work that would free her to write in more imaginative and narrative forms. 'Important as the “truth of the facts” is in the sense of deriving justified or truth conditional statements, of equal importance is how we see as meaningful the connections we draw between them' (Munslow, 1997: 15).

In a direct parallel with Sims' concern for 'the problem of what I call the “reality boundary”' (Sims, 2009), the American cultural historian Robert Darnton points to the dangers to their profession's reputation when historians fail to make clear distinctions between interpretation and dramatisation: 'I think the invention of anything that is passed off as factual violates an implicit contract between the historian and the reader . . . we historians should never fabricate evidence' (in Munslow, 2010: 27). Munslow, however, uses this quote to illustrate how historians dodge the issue about how to address the epistemic complexities of 'data', 'meaning'

and ‘expression’. In his reading, the line between the factual and the imaginative is uncertain. For Sims, the clarity of such divisions is central to literary journalism’s credibility as an emerging field of scholarship (Sims, 2009: 8).

However, within the field of history, the use of narrative and concepts of subjectivity have been highly contentious and much debated.

In 1998 Novick addressed the American Academy of Political and Social Science, in response to challenges by the ‘new historians’ (advocates of social history) and by post-modernists⁵ who embraced deconstruction and linguistic analysis. Novick argued for historians to admit that they were making no greater (but no lesser) truth claims than poets or painters (Novick, 1998). He suggested they admit to the public that they are ‘making up interesting, provocative, even edifying stories about [history] as contributions to self-understanding’ (ibid: 39). A decade later, Lepore echoed these thoughts, acknowledging the contingent nature of historical writing: that every historical work is incomplete, every work is written from a particular perspective and the historian must rely on unreliable documents, written by people who were not under oath and cannot be cross-examined (Lepore, 2008). The problem articulated here relates to the historian’s changing professional identity as the explosion of online sources has made historical sources infinitely more accessible and publisher’s demands for narrative prose more urgent. Therefore, the historian’s ability to discern which sources and documents are verifiable, how they fit into a wider context and the interpretation of their meaning, has become all the more imperative. But claim to a superior or professional understanding of sources and a valued perspective, has come under increasing public scrutiny. These drivers are explored through my critical review of *Esther* in chapter three.

Since the 1990s, the problems that arise from the need to acknowledge history’s tenuous nature have become more acute as a consequence of history’s popularization. As new forms of narrative non-fiction proliferated, book publishers saw the commercial potential of historical writing that adopted literary journalistic techniques.

⁵ See Ethan Kleinberg for a more fulsome account of the tensions within the field of academic history over concepts of deconstruction and how it might prove useful for historians. Kleinberg, E. (2007). Haunting History: Deconstruction and the Spirit of Revision. *History and Theory, Theme Issue*. 46. P. 113-143.

For example, Schama began his historical novel about the death of General Wolfe's in 1759 (later published as *Dead Certainties* in 1991), as a contribution to a special edition of *Granta*, which featured the literary journalism of Ryszard Kapuscinski (Schama, 2013). Other best-selling historical works that used these techniques followed and focused upon science or cultural artefacts including Mark Kurlansky's (1997) *Cod: A Biography of the Fish that Changed the World*, Dava Sobel's (1997) *Longitude: The True Story of a Lone Genius Who Solved the Greatest Scientific Problem of His Time* and Anna Pavord's (1999) *The Tulip*. A decade later, Kate Summerscale's (2009) *The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher* was regarded as a 'cross-over' book and its success spawned a sub-genre: a historical work that could sell into the crime market. Critics such as Porter noted that until the 1970s, non-fiction books had never been marketed to achieve sales comparable to bestselling fiction. There had been less pressure on academic writers to publish and certainly not to the general reading public; 'non-fiction was most often the by-product of an authorial passion necessarily subsidised by the day job' (Porter, 2000).

A consequence of these publishing successes, combined with the popularisation of history and genealogy as a pastime, the accessibility of documents online and the rise of historical programming on British television, led to a questioning of the historian's role.⁶ Did the boom in historical publishing and television erode the historian's commitment to honouring the integrity of the historical record and to engage 'in investigating and interpreting the past as a matter of disciplined practice' (AHA, 2011)? Historians, according to De Groot, are suspicious of television's superficiality and its inability to present complexity, rendering it 'populist, problematic, impressionistic rather than clear [and] too interested in narrative' (De Groot, 2007: 151). In my critical review of *Esther* in chapter three I ask whether the old artificial split between imagination and rationality cannot be reconfigured so that, whatever the media, the possibility exists for the inclusion of both.

Was methodological rigour eroded when translated into these new forms for popular consumption? Stone expressed his concerns as a dichotomy between 'a new interest

⁶ For a discussion of the impact of these changes on British culture, see De Groot, J. (2009) *Consuming History: Historians and heritage in contemporary popular culture*, London: Routledge.

in *mentalité* [storytelling]’ and the ‘decline of the analytical and structural approach’ to history (Stone, 1979: 17). Twenty years on, De Groot’s study of history and heritage in contemporary popular culture suggests that the epistemic tensions, presented as a choice between rationality and imagination, remain unchanged (De Groot, 2007: 151-157). The new dissemination of history through reality television programming, blogging, historical re-enactment societies, online archival resources, genealogy and DNA testing, all present historians with problems of interpretation. How then are the demands of storytelling to be balanced with the need for the careful analysis and data-collection that were the hallmarks of professional writing? How can historians, in a media environment that may place the drive for narrative above concerns for factual accuracy, agree on professional standards? How does the historian’s ‘collective endeavour’ survive under these pressures?

The issues concerning professional practice are equally urgent for the literary journalist and are addressed in chapter three. Debates within this field about professional practice often turn to questions of the ethical conduct. Among their responsibilities, the historian and the literary journalist are pledged to neither distort their evidence nor deceive their readers. But in the case of journalism, the very act of unearthing evidence, which may involve living with their subjects and gaining their trust, can itself carry additional ethical responsibilities. And while historians only occasionally need to concern themselves with impact on the public, the consequences for individual lives or social groups are of particular concern to literary journalists.

Alongside these developments, journalistic practice came under greater critical scrutiny in the 1990s and early 2000s with the rise of digital media and the growth of ‘hyper-connectivity’ (Pieterse, 2012). Debates about ethics within literary journalism suggest a shared desire to speak to ‘the nature of our phenomenal reality *in spite of* the fact that our interpretations are inevitably subjective and personal’ (Sims, 2009: 15). Harrington, among others, has argued that while journalists claim the right to determine their own ethical relationships, this is more complicated for narrative journalists because ‘it is impossible to go intimately into people’s lives without having to wrestle with what should be revealed’ (Kramer & Call, 2007: 170). Within literary journalism there has been a growing recognition of the particular responsibility such practitioners have towards their subjects of investigation and

towards how they are presented. For the literary journalists, this concern has focused both on process and most centrally on rhetorical techniques.

An illustration of these ethical complexities is illustrated in the critical response to Norwegian journalist Asne Seierstad's (2002) *The Bookseller of Kabul*, an intimate portrait of an Afghan family written with all the hallmarks of literary journalism. Although the original Norwegian edition sold in small numbers, its English edition was number one on *The New York Times* bestseller list for almost a year and the book was translated into another forty languages (Steensen, 2013). However, the eponymous bookseller Shah Mohammad Rais (who appears in the book as Sultan Khan) claimed that Seierstad had betrayed his trust and he sued the author and publisher in Norway, for invasion of privacy. Although a finding against Seierstad and her publisher was subsequently quashed in 2011, the case generated debate among its critics about the ethical boundaries of such an investigation. Seierstad describes the conflicting tensions of literary journalism:

It is also important to think that what you write has to pass a second test – am I comfortable with the people I am writing about reading what I have written? Have I been fair? But on the other side, you have to stand by your choices and your angle because that is journalism (Topping, 2011).

Unni Wikan, a social anthropologist who specialises in Arabic culture, criticised Seierstad's methodology and her professional ethics. Wikan argued that Seierstad's methods of investigation as a literary journalist remain oblique and therefore questionable (Steensen, 2013: 69). For McKay (2012) criticisms of *The Bookseller of Kabul* exemplify a tension at the heart of journalism and other avenues of social and cultural research: the relationship between the observed and the observer. McKay identifies an issue that will be raised later in this thesis, that although in her judgement Seierstad broke no journalistic conventions, 'global communications are now such that its subjects were able both to read it *and* to communicate their grievances to a Norwegian court' (McKay, 2012: 178). The need for literary journalists to demonstrate methodological transparency, because of the consequences for living subjects, has become increasingly important to their professional reputation

and to the ethical practices upon which it rests.⁷ The examples of Seierstad and Mortenson illustrate how the literary journalist's unspoken 'contract with the reader' can be broken and the challenges writers face in an age of hyper-connectivity (Lounsberry, 1990; Gutkind, 2005; Sims, 2009).

The question about the relationship between professionalism, ethics and authenticity is explored more fully in chapters two and three, as it applies to my second and third books.

1.4 Conclusion

This opportunity to re-examine my creative practice has revealed that literary journalism and historiography face similar challenges in how they engage with their readers. In this thesis I have highlighted three main areas where concerns appear to be shared: the difficulties of identifying issues of central versus marginal interest; the problems arising from the concepts of objectivity and subjectivity and questions of professionalism as they relate to evidence, namely, transparency, authenticity and the use of rhetorical techniques. All of the issues alone are worthy of much fuller explanation and exploration but I have limited my critical review to how they arose from my writing within three decades that spanned a period of enormous change.

However, in reviewing my work and in looking at the context in which these changes have taken place, I can also see where each field might benefit from learning more about the other. Indeed, my own difficulties in formulating an appropriate approach and writing style may represent a struggle towards a hybridization of form where it remains possible to reconcile the need for professional rigour with the demands for storytelling. How difference disciplines face such challenges reveals much about certain core values which will be discussed further within this thesis.

⁷ For a more recent example of this debate about the ethics of literary journalistic methods and the question of transparency of evidence, see *Three Cups of Deceit* (2011) John Krakauer's investigation of Greg Mortenson's best-selling book about his experiences in a remote Pakistani village, *Three Cups of Tea* (2006). Krakauer, J. (2011) *Three Cups of Deceit*. Online. Available from: <https://www.byliner.com> [Accessed: 17 January, 2014]

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Chapter 2: Women as Combatants and Gender Transgressions, 1989-1992

2.1. Issues in historiography

In the early 1980s, as the debate within historiography about women in war had concentrated on their role as peace activists, my interest turned to the anomalous cases of female combatants. Those who chose the most masculine of occupations, even disguising their identity to achieve their ends, posed interesting questions for historic understandings of gender. Moreover, much of the writing about women in war regarded women as passive victims, to the exclusion of those who had benefitted from an expansion of their wartime role or who found the military an attractive alternative to domesticity. They presented an interesting set of problems since Dr. Helen Caldicott and other feminist peace campaigners were then arguing that women were inherently more pacifist than men (Caldicott, 1984). The historical female cross-dresser appeared to be drawn towards this profession because of its association with masculinity, therefore, contradicting this thesis. My historical research asked what had motivated these women to reject their female identity and how they managed to convince their fellow soldiers and sailors of their disguise. Was it possible that the signifiers of uniform and work could override considerations of gender, suggesting the social power of seemingly superficial appearances? Were these anomalous, gender-rebels offering a critique of an essentialist concept of gender?

My interest in this subject formed the basis of my master's thesis in history at Sussex University and coincided with the growth of publishing lists devoted to women writers on feminist topics, including history (Rendall, 1991). Pandora Press, a new feminist imprint of the academic publishers Routledge, Kegan and Paul, published *Amazons and Military Maids: Women Who Dressed as Men in Pursuit of Life, Liberty and Happiness* in 1989. It detailed historical examples of female combatants from the eighteenth century to the First World War, contributing to an emerging social history of sexual representations, attitudes and behaviours and offered psychological insight into this phenomenon and their importance as neglected symbols of female rebellion. The book rediscovered and resurrected these women's lives while introducing a new understanding of how the narratives about their exploits reflected thinking about

gender divisions within different historical periods and in different societies, how different versions of the same stories revealed changes in attitudes over time and how the women themselves understood their actions. *Amazons* also contributed to a history of women and war which historians recognised as a strong international body of work (Pickles, 2005).

Set against the background of contemporary debates in North America and Northern Europe at the end of the Cold War when combat specialities were being opened to women, these historical precursors to contemporary female pilots and front line soldiers were regarded as politically important. Feminists used the cases of disguised female combatants to disprove arguments against women's participation in front line services based on biological differences, notions of masculinity or concepts of male bonding (Enloe, 1983; van Creveld, 2001; Mitchell, 1998). Moreover, they argued that military policy that drew strict boundaries between the 'rear' – where women historically maintained support services – and the 'frontline' where combat takes place, were arbitrary and increasingly irrelevant. Service women in conflicts like the US invasion of Panama in 1989 and the Gulf War of 1991 were exposed to military action as they worked in transport, communications and medical units (Wheelwright, 1992b). An interesting parallel to the servicewomen's fight to gain entry into front line positions can be seen with female front line correspondents during the 1990s who describe having to justify their presence (Sebba, 2010; Tumber & Webster, 2006). The historical examples proved that women had always been active participants and had performed effectively but that their participation had been systematically written out of the historical record.⁸ They also challenged notions of women's passivity in the

⁸ Lauren Cook Burgess (1994) offers a fascinating example of how women activists have used these historic examples to argue for their inclusion in arenas closed to them. A participant as a cross-dressed soldier in an American Civil War re-enactment in 1989, Cook Burgess was 'caught' when she was seen exiting the women's washroom. She refused to accept her discharge and sued the National Park Service on for sex discrimination after banning her participation on the grounds of historical 'authenticity'. After documenting 135 cases of women soldiers, she won her case in the US district court and set a precedent for re-enactment societies through North America. When filming in Deerfield, MA in 2003, a female re-enactor told me that she had used *Amazons* to argue for inclusion with her local re-enactment society.

face of their limited professional and domestic options, suggesting a hidden history of female resistance and gender liberation of working and middle-class women.

My arguments within *Amazons and Military Maids* addressed a number of underlying epistemological issues. Working at the nexus of cultural studies and social history led me to draw upon literary contexts and anthropological theory, interpreting the women's disguise as a socially significant mode of symbolic sexual inversion (Davis, 1975; Hunt 1989). According to Easton, the case studies in *Amazons* were framed within a feminist debate about their importance as disruptive figures. 'The concept of inversion is certainly a powerful symbolic tool: Julie Wheelwright, for example, convincingly uses it to show how female soldiers provided an "enduring fantasy" of gender liberation for early modern women' (Easton, 2003: 134). However, Easton argues that for these women, there was more at stake than an opportunity to bypass prevailing gender restrictions. By comparing the female husbands with the female warriors, he found that at the intersection of sex, sexuality, class and social standing these two groups are differentiated. The criminal penalties aimed at the female husbands included in his study were intended to redefine them as disorderly vagrants or cheats deserving of punishment. The female warriors were valourized, romanticised or made objects of humour but they were rarely punished. Easton concludes that it was the imitation of male virility rather than male work or privileges that demanded a redefining of social distinctions between the genders (op. cit.:170).

While my identification of female cross-dressing as a powerful symbolic tool had currency in a feminist historiography that drew upon literary and anthropologic studies, military historians regarded it as a peripheral subject. 'Warfare is . . . the one human activity from which women, with the most insignificant exceptions, have always and everywhere stood apart . . . it is an entirely masculine activity' (Keegan, 1993: 76). Keegan's dismissal of these 'insignificant exceptions' is repeated elsewhere in military history and literature. Until the late 1980s, articles or books that mentioned women who chose to disguise their gender to enter the military were recorded in three categories: as military anomalies or exceptions that proved the rule, as case studies of female sexual perversion or as emblems of patriotism (Bullough, 1976; van Creveld 2001; Anon, 1824; Carter 1860; Dowie 1893).

Keegan and van Creveld exemplified the counter-argument to those who used history to demonstrate women's continued presence in a variety of roles, including combat. Instead, they assumed that women fulfilled ancillary domestic roles or acted as sex workers (sometimes combining both roles) in military conflicts. Such generalisations, however, deterred these historians from finding and making fresh interpretations of contrary evidence. The dozens of cases unearthed in *Amazons*, ranging across a wide span of history and in many different conflicts and contexts, suggested that women throughout the centuries adopted the simple act of cross-dressing to subvert barriers to their participation. Moreover, an acknowledgement of their significance by military historians and social theorists would have demanded that gender be included as a category of investigation. In North America, Goldstein's study revealed the interest of political scientists and historians in 'the puzzle of gendered war roles has been minimal' (Goldstein, 2001: 36-37). Major works on the history and origins of war ignored gender completely. Without this professional engagement with the subject, therefore, it remained marginalised and new studies where gender was a defining feature, given little serious consideration (op. cit.).

2.2 The historiography of women at war and gender transgression

2.2. 1 Methodology

While academic historians broadly praised *Amazons* for offering 'new ways to see the workings of gender in the paradigmatic narratives of war' (Sullivan, 1992) my approach was regarded as journalistic. At the time of writing *Amazons* I was writing without an academic affiliation so that my professional identity was that of a freelance literary journalist. My book was written to reflect the narrative expectations of an informed but general readership and my methodology reflected this hybrid approach with reviews reflecting how these disciplines differ. So while UK newspaper and magazine reviews focused on the novelty of the stories, giving details of individual cases, academic reviewers both praised the discovery of a neglected subject and questioned the book's methodology.

Although *Amazons* was not written for an academic readership, academic journals reviewed it, often alongside a book on a similar topic by the Dutch historians, Lotte C. van de Pol and Rudolf M. Dekker, *The Tradition of Transvestism in Early Modern*

Europe (van de Pol & Dekker, 1989). Academic historians identified two main areas where *Amazons* diverged from conventional historiography. The first was in its approach since the case studies were drawn from a wide range of historical periods ranging from the late eighteenth century to the First World War and into the 1930s. Unlike much contemporary historiography that places an emphasis on temporal and geographical specificity, my reach was very wide because of my lack of sources. Consequently, some expressed concern that the specificity of the historical context of individual cases was lost along with some nuances of understanding the women's motives and how their experiences were received. As Sullivan commented in the feminist journal *Signs*:

Wheelwright's decision to structure the book this way highlights the many differences among her subjects: there is no coherent "model story" here. The reader risks not grasping one woman's story, jumping from paragraph to paragraph between upper-class and peasant women, heterosexuals and lesbians, World War I and the Napoleonic War, civilian and military contexts, and the experiences of cross-dressed women who were known to be female and those whose gender masquerade was total (Sullivan, 1992: 486).

Hunt, however, regards *Amazons* as making 'an important contribution to women's history' and suggests that the methodological challenges were inherent to the subject.

Ranging freely between England, America, Russia and Serbia, with a time-frame stretching from the 1680s to the 1930s, this book does not claim to be a definitive study of cross-dressing in any of these societies; indeed it is not really "history" in the usual sense at all. Rather it is a cultural foray combined with a group biography of women who served as soldiers (Hunt, 1989: 11).

The second area in which my methodology was regarded as unconventional was in my reliance on evidence from personal accounts. As Hunt observed, by drawing upon letters, manuscript diaries and even photographs, *Amazons* had a 'richer set of primary materials' than van de Pol and Dekker (ibid). She concludes that while my methodology placed *Amazons* outside 'historical narrative', 'Wheelwright's forte lies in sensitive textual analysis and a free-ranging feminist imagination that is anything but doctrinaire . . . [her book] is well worth reading for its thought-provoking

mediation on an enduring cultural phenomenon and because it steps where feminists often feared to tread (ibid)'. Gomez Dearmond (1989) agrees that the rich documentation of *Amazons* ensured that it countered contemporary arguments that women in the military were a twentieth century innovation.

The 'richer set of primary materials' at my disposal for *Amazons*, however, could not make up for the lack of information and detail about the cross-dresser's sexuality. This was an especially critical point in the late 1980s with the rise of lesbian historiography including Lillian Faderman's *Surpassing the Love of Men* (1985), Jeanette Foster's *Sex Variant Women in Literature* (1985) and Diana Souhami's biography, *Gluck: Her Biography* (1988). Without the evidence upon which to suggest how the cross-dressers understood their sexual identity, this issue was raised where relevant but not explored in detail. A reviewer in the *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, for example, criticised *Amazons* for 'merely mentioning the fact that some women involved were lesbians', and suggested the book should have further explored the links between the lesbian writer Radclyffe Hall's 1929 trial of her novel *A Well of Loneliness* and the cross-dresser 'Colonel' Barker aka Valerie Arkell-Smith tried on fraud charges the same year (van der Meer, 1990). This criticism was echoed by Rose Collis in her 2002 biography of Colonel Barker when she mentioned that *Amazons and Military Maids*, though 'ground-breaking', offered an oversimplified theory of cross-dressing as a phenomenon that allowed women access to male privileges, rather than an early form of transsexuality (Collis, 2002: 1-2).

Since the book was aiming to establish that female cross-dressing was a phenomenon worthy of attention – a riposte to the military historian's dismissal of its 'insignificance' – the scope was inevitably broad. My methodology in uncovering these cases was hampered by lack of subject indexes, bibliographies and source materials so that my focus remained on the detailed personal accounts that were available. Despite the criticism by academic reviewers, academic historians universally applauded the contribution that *Amazons* made by defining a new subject area and one that would later be taken up by 'queer' historians (Garber, 1992; Vernon, 2000; Oram, 2007; Torr & Bottoms, 2010).⁹

⁹ Despite these criticisms, *Amazons* was reviewed by the gay press at the time and recognized as making a contribution to an evolving history of transgenderism. For example, Roger Baker's review in

The inadequate primary source material made it difficult to confidently employ the kind of psychological and structural analysis suggested by van der Meer and by Collis. However, central to the feminist historians' argument was that only by taking such methodological risks would neglected subjects gain credence as matters worthy of serious consideration. Since the records of women's lives were routinely ignored or distorted in official documents, a narrowly focused archival project would have been unfeasible and unrealistic. *Amazons* was an attempt to identify a shared experience based upon individual case studies and to offer arguments that would be developed by future historians. For the next two decades, historians built upon the work undertaken in *Amazons* and by van de Pol and Dekker. These books demonstrated that because historical ideas of gender were malleable and therefore not biologically determined, it was possible for women effectively to live and labour as men in North American and European societies.

2.3. The literary journalism of women at war and gender transgression

2.3. 1. Methodology

While the academic reviewers of *Amazons* were concerned with debates about methodology – how evidence was identified and how conclusions were drawn from it – a debate flourished within the mainstream press about female combatants and other forms of gender transgression. My freelance journalism that stemmed from my research into female cross-dressing led me to write about women in the military and about gender transgression. The first was by responding to relevant events so that during the Gulf War in 1991, for example, I wrote feature articles about concerns over women's active role in combat (Wheelwright, 1991a, 1991b) and about the debate on whether servicewomen who were also mothers should be employed in active service (Wheelwright, 1994). In 1993 I covered the independence referendum in Eritrea for *The Financial Times* where I interviewed women combatants who had fought in Eritrea's war against Ethiopia, for broadcast packages featured on Woman's Hour, BBC Radio Four, and for the BBC World Service (Wheelwright, 1993). Throughout

Gay Times, April 1989, described it as: 'a genuinely pioneering book venturing into regions only vaguely known or even trivialised or sensationalised'. I was also interviewed for the gay and lesbian magazine, *Square Peg*, in issue 24, 1989.

the 1990s and into the 2000s, I continued to write feature articles on female servicewomen and reviewed books on this subject (Appendix, p. 3-4).

My writing about gender transgression led me from theorising about historical cases to adopting the techniques of a literary journalist. In November 1994, I was commissioned by *The Independent* to participate in performance artist Diane Torr's 'Drag King for a Day' workshop in Amsterdam. In this piece I described my experience of disguising myself as a man, providing the immersive detail, scene-setting, dialogue, interviews and intimate narrative voice that are the hallmarks of literary journalism (Wheelwright, 1994b). The following year I was a consultant on a BBC television documentary about people who define themselves as neither female nor male, and wrote an accompanying booklet (Wheelwright, 1995c). I also wrote an article in *The Independent* to promote the documentary, supplemented with interviews with transgender activists, transsexuals and medical specialists on gender dysphoria but offered little editorial comment (Wheelwright, 1995d).

Although still working outside of an academic institution, I presented and published academic papers related to my research on female combatants, namely to the Swiss Army's International Symposium on Women in Armed Forces at Wolfsberg, Ermatingen in October 1990, to the Berkshire Women's History Conference in June 1990, to the Forum on the Problems of Peace and War, European University Institute, Florence, Italy, 17 November 1991 and to the Development Studies Association, University of York, 29 May 1993. I continued to write as a journalist and an academic, including a chapter for a book on female pirates in 1995 (Wheelwright, 1995a) and to a historical collection on female infanticide in 2002 (Wheelwright, 2002b). This seemed to suggest it was possible to operate simultaneously within both fields and to benefit from their respective strengths.¹⁰

However, this is not to elide the methodological and epistemological differences that belong to these respective genres. As a literary form, literary journalism is defined by its practitioners and critics as conforming to an agreed list of formal characteristics or rules that includes accuracy and reliability (Keeble & Tulloch, 2012; Kramer & Sims,

¹⁰ In 2002 I began collaborating on a series of drama-documentaries with my sister Penny Wheelwright. The first was *The Orkney Lad* [2001], directed by Anne Wheeler and produced for WTN, a Canadian cable broadcaster. Accessed from: <http://vimeo.com/69168983> [password: workforce]

1995). How a reader can judge the accuracy of an article may involve explicitly reflecting upon the reliability of their information within the story through the consistency of the narrator's presentation. 'Evidence, in other words' (Keeble & Tulloch, 2012: 4). The evidence, carried through a strongly identifiable narrative voice (often using the authorial 'I'), derives from accurate, precise observation and an emotional response that is appropriate to the data presented.

When turning to questions of evidence, the divide between literary journalism and historiography grows wider. What constitutes evidence and how is it used; what is the role of the writer/historian as interpreter of events; what constitutes an appropriate relationship between the reader and the writer? In literary journalism evidence is gathered and verified through the verifiability of the narrator while in academic historical writing, the narrator and his/her subjectivity, is hidden. For the literary journalist evidence can be impressionistic, highly subjective and may be shaped by endless editorial decisions based on readability and conformity to editorial expectations. The journalist as narrator may also gather evidence from experts or provide factual contextual detail to accompany the story. But within the text, the narrator, whose voice establishes the truth of the information provided through his/her tone and style, evaluates the evidence. A literary journalist avoids abstract concepts and instead, uses exemplifiers and anecdotal evidence to make his/her points (Sims & Kramer, 1995).

Literary journalism defines evidence and arguments differently with a thesis often made implicitly rather than explicitly. A feature or series on a topical issue like servicewomen during the Gulf War, would be less concerned with the on-going theoretical debates that prompted this issue into the headlines. More broadly, if allusions are made to these deeper, philosophical concerns, they are in passing, as the literary journalist often has neither the time, nor the space, nor the editorial support for such detailed contextualisation. Neither would the depth and detail of an academic historical treatment of the subject meet reader's expectations. Moreover, the dominant journalistic culture stresses 'on the job' experience and given the technical and time constraints under which they work, 'the reflective, analytical, ethical approach is downgraded' (Keeble, 2008: 2). The main thrust of the UK editor's code is to ensure that a journalist has reasonable grounds for an investigation, ('is it in the public

interest?') and gets their facts right but if there is a debate, it takes place on letters or comment pages or in editorials. The journalist does not begin with the debate and is not addressing his/her fellow journalists but their readers (Beale, 2012). The journalist, unlike the historian, is not required to further a debate nor add to the sum of knowledge on the subject.

Framing one's writing within a defined and agreed set of methodological parameters is central to historiography but peripheral to literary journalism. Although Kramer and Call draw a parallel between academics and journalists' writing within a collective discipline predicated on shared honesty and open sourcing, literary journalists acquire their professional authority differently (Kramer & Call, 2007: 164). Since the principal sources within literary journalism are typically interviewees (rather than documents) that constitute the central narrative, they must convey authenticity through the mode in which they are recorded and reproduced. Literary journalism uses different methods to ensure the writer's 'truth claim', that central contract with their reader that conveys the truthfulness of people, places and events. '[S]ources can be checked, places revisited, but in truth the claim to authenticity can chiefly be tested by consistency of detail and the character/authority of the narrative voice and the level of confidence in it' (Keeble & Tulloch, 2012: 7). Unlike academic historians, literary journalists are not required to leave a detailed trace of their document or data research (nor do they have the time nor space for this). Although this may be changing as Kramer and Call note that 'meticulous disclosure of sources had become more common in narrative nonfiction' (Kramer & Call, 2007: 164) it is far from standard practice. Therefore, authority with their readers is most often acquired through reputation and through the use of particular stylistic devices.

Among those stylistic devices that determine a literary journalist's credibility is the use of scenes and anecdotes. However, in academic historical writing 'anecdotal evidence' is anathema. Mortimer observes that historians equate imagination (a 'dangerous thing') with 'intellectual weakness' and lack of factual reliability (Mortimer, 2012). The very voice and narrative style that makes a literary journalist trustworthy may bring doubt and suspicion upon the historian. Anecdote which is derived purely from observation, without a methodological framework and without

accompanying empirical evidence, cannot be used to support an argument.

Underlying Mortimer's assumption is that certain schools of historians regard their discipline as a branch of science while the literary journalist's style of observation, belongs to literature (Smith, 1998).

However, there are schools of thought within academic history that draw comparisons between history writing and literary journalism since both are concerned with the challenges of representing real people, events and places. Despite their reliance on documents and other artefacts as forms of a verifiable 'truth', the 'new historians' identified by Stone, for example, admit that their writing can only ever amount an illusion of authenticity and an approximation of what might have happened.

[H]ow is the illusion of authenticity produced, what creates a sense of truthfulness to the facts and a warranty of closeness to past reality? . . . The implication is that the historian does not in fact capture the past in faithful fashion but rather, like the novelist, gives the appearance of doing so. (Appleby, et al., 1994: 227)

Post-modern historians also argue that they cannot capture the fullness of past experience any more than individual memories can, they can only hear the traces of the past and their accounts are necessarily partial (Appleby et al., 1994: 235).

Furthermore, this argument recognises that narrative, which inevitably involves making subjective editorial choices, is a defining element in historical writing. These narratives are always evolving since history is itself a story about how change works which historians use to make sense of the past. What both disciplines of writing share is a recognition that it matters whether the historian and the literary journalist construct their narratives as truthfully and fully as possible. The contract with the reader to present a verifiable 'truth claim' is a shared central tenet.

No conclusions can be drawn from the academic historians' debate over the importance to their practice of theory and of non-empirical evidence. Many are preoccupied with discarding the idea that historians, through the collecting and ordering of evidence, can bring their readers closer to the 'full and complete truth' about the past. They believe that the historian, like the literary journalist, transforms

‘what happened’ into a narrative construct that gives it meaning and makes it understandable (De Certeau, 1988). Instead, the post-modernists advocate that historians acknowledge their engagement in an act of imaginative, narrative writing, where contemporary notions of ‘common sense’ – their own subjectivity – must be suspended (Haskell, 1998). Furthermore, they make use of non-empirical evidence and, however consciously or openly, operate within a theoretical framework that is worthy of articulation (Jenkins et al., 2007; Munslow, 2010; Wood, 2008).

As these discussions suggest, historians operate within the clearly defined boundaries of their discipline. Kramer and Call’s notion of a ‘collective discipline’ within literary journalism, however, is more difficult to discern because, as a genre, it is regarded as relatively new and has struggled to overcome its reputation as an ‘inferior form’ of literature (Frus in Hartsock, 2000: 31). As Hartsock has argued, the historic dismissal of literary journalism from serious critical consideration was bound up with ‘what journalists do for a living as determined by their means of production’ (ibid). In other words, ‘hacks’ write for commerce rather than from an aesthetic sensibility and lack appropriate professional standing. However, Hartsock observes that these attitudes may be changing in the early twenty-first century. A parallel to the professionalisation of literary journalism is the rise of creative writing as an academic subject with both university lecturers and students now regarded as makers of ‘literature’ (ibid: 32). Moreover, the founding of professional associations such as the International Association of Literary Journalism Studies (IALJS) and the production of scholarly publications, contribute to a consensus on the genre’s guiding principles.¹¹

A second important methodological distinction in the sphere of literary journalism is the emphasis on conveying an emotional dimension through a strongly identifiable writing style. (Kramer & Call, 2007: 24) Literary journalists employ rhetorical techniques such as the use of immersive detail (‘colour’), the development of vivid characters and the arrangement of quotes. This style is defined by its resistance to the formulas newswriting requires but conforms to its own set of rules, habits or reader expectations. For example, in my article for *The Independent* on the Drag King

¹¹ One indication of the development of these ideas within literary journalism as a discipline is the special issue of *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism* (to be published in 2014), which attempts to articulate an agreed set of ethical practices.

workshop, I disclosed intimate details (I was wearing a nursing bra and this was my first trip away from my seven-month-old baby) because they provided a graphic contrast to my male persona (Wheelwright, 1994b). The piece was written as a fast-paced chronological account of my day without the addition of historical context on the subject of female cross-dressing. The personal details about the narrator operated to stimulate the reader's empathy (assuming a large female readership as this was for the *Life* pages), and conforming to the narrative expectations of confessional writing. Journalists use this tone of intimacy and self-deprecation to ward off envy and accusations of boasting by casting themselves in a non-threatening, vulnerable, human light (Frank in Coward, 2014: in press).

While my article for *The Independent* used description to develop scenes, historians would use 'descriptive' as a criticism. Where literary journalists use 'colour' to convey a sense of authenticity – being there, in the moment, and observing their subjects – the historian regards it as performing exactly the opposite function. Since the historian cannot be there, on the scene, the more detail they include, the more possibility of invention or exaggeration. Historians also eschew the use of rhetorical techniques that move the reader's emotions, instead striving towards 'a level of abstraction' that deals with the philosophical and the theoretical implications of their findings (Lepore, 2007). In fact, the long-standing debate within historiography about the place of 'literature' (and the imagination) dates back to the nineteenth century when it was associated with 'tawdry trappings' as opposed to the 'science' of history (Smith, 1998: 139).

Aside from the licence to write imaginatively, if *Amazons* had been written as a series of literary features, the current concerns about female servicewomen, their role as mothers, their access to the front line and the impact on male combatants would have been in the foreground. Observation, immersive detail, intellectual and emotional engagement through a variety of writing techniques would have taken precedence over the articulation of a socialist feminist argument that framed *Amazons*. An illustration of these differences is provided by an article written for *The Nursing Times* in 1989 about Flora Sandes who appears as a central case study in *Amazons and Military Maids*. Since Sandes was a British Red Cross nurse before becoming a soldier with the Serbian Army in 1915, the story was appropriate for *The*

Nursing Times primary readership. The piece focused on Sandes' early career in nursing during typhus epidemics in Serbia, the circumstances in which she became a soldier, her active combat and her fundraising efforts for her adopted country (Wheelwright, 1989b). How historians, or indeed feminists, interpreted Sandes' dual nursing and soldiering career within the wider debate about historic understandings of gender and the position of women was irrelevant. The only comment on the wider significance of Sandes' story came in the final paragraph suggesting that the relative freedom she found during her active service during the war proved 'fleeting, illusory and contradictory' (ibid). This questioning that denied the reader the narrative closure, however, is perhaps more closely associated with literary journalism than historiography, leaving the meaning of her story open to interpretation.

The methodology of literary journalism is therefore shaped by the expectations of the genre, of readers, and by the commercial considerations of publishers and editors. Where historians are concerned about addressing debates within their field and assuming a level of knowledge on their reader's part, literary journalists write to engage their readers through a range of rhetorical devices. The literary journalists' credibility must be established through their employment of techniques that convey the authenticity of their subject and their point of view. Since their methodology cannot be made completely transparent through the use of references, the writer's 'voice' must engage the reader's trust. Since their methodology often focuses on gathering interviews with living subjects there are ethical considerations in how that research process is conducted that will be discussed more fully in chapter three.

2.4. Defining central/marginal phenomena

Despite the conventional idea of historiography's objective to 'discover and record the objective truth about the past' (Novick, 1998), many social historians of the 1980s were motivated by political ideas, including feminism, to undertake research about subjects and peoples that had previously been deemed marginal. My motivation for writing *Amazons* stemmed partly from a desire to argue for women's physical and psychological ability to engage in the military as active combatants. Second wave feminists were deeply divided over this issue. As Elshtain described in 1987: 'feminists are not only at war with war but with one another' (Goldstein, 2001: 38).

‘Difference feminism’ where gender difference was understood as biologically based so that women were considered inherently more pacifist than men, led to an essentialist position. The case studies of cross-dressing women contradicted this view and lent credibility to a feminist argument for women’s inclusion in positions whether they were deemed ‘masculine’ or not. The readership for my book, I assumed, would be familiar with these contemporary debates and would appreciate the case studies as evidence of women's historic involvement in a masculine sphere.

Therefore, if the cross-dressed female soldier or sailor appeared as a marginal historical subject until the late 1980s, the subject was loaded with significance for wider debates about gender. However, since feminist historiography was still very new, there were few sources and few methodological models to follow when I embarked on my research for *Amazons*. Given that women combatants were traditionally regarded as peripheral to the narrative of war, finding records of their participation in primary and secondary sources was a piecemeal approach. How then to evaluate the significance of the cross-dressed women who persistently appeared in ballads, newspaper stories and military memoirs?

My first task was to determine whether individual and unrelated stories in a series of sources across geographical and temporal distances actually described a phenomenon. The women in my study fell into the categories of ‘passing women’ who were not known to their fellow soldiers/sailors/workers, or those ‘warrior women’ whose disguise was either known and tolerated, or who had been openly enlisted as ‘warrior women’ and whose ‘passing’ was largely psychological. As described in the introduction:

It is impossible to know how many women actually chose to live as men by adopting male clothing and assuming a “masculine” occupation throughout British history. Only those women whose identity was discovered or who, for various reasons, publicly surrendered their masquerade, have come to light. Aside from newspaper reports that recorded an occasional discovery, there is rich material evidence of these women’s existence in ballads, songs, dramas and court cases from earlier centuries (Wheelwright, 1989a: 6).

Materials that academic historians might have dismissed as ephemeral such as newspaper accounts, ballads, memoirs and chapbooks, I defined as significant evidence of women's experiences. Newspapers were included as a primary source even though some historians regard them as useful only for their reflections on *how* events are understood rather than as a reliable record of actual occurrences (Lepore, 2007). It was, however, beyond the scope of my study to systematically trawl through the newspaper accounts over two centuries and since even *The Times* subject indexes did not include a category for 'cross-dressing', I followed up references in military collections, memoirs and other printed sources. The fact that during certain periods newspapers carried headlines like, 'Another Female Sailor Found', suggested this was a common occurrence and the cases I found were representative of a wider phenomenon (Wheelwright, 1989a: 174).

Cross-dressing soldiers or sailors were routinely reported in newspapers and magazines throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, often providing the only record of their existence. Since these women were often recruited informally or by using pseudonyms and since they were relatively rare, a systematic review of primary sources such as recruitment lists and other military documents may have yielded few results and was beyond the scope of my study. Furthermore, newspapers only recorded cases of women whose disguises had been uncovered and the details of their military, or other masculine careers, were often conveyed in fictionalised popular representations. Although it was difficult to judge the accuracy of each account, distinct patterns emerged that suggested authenticity. These indicators were: a consistency in the details of their motives, in how the women managed their disguise physically and psychologically, in their means of authenticating their disguise with their fellow soldiers or work colleagues, in their discovery and in the consequences of returning to a female role. Particular identifiable details about the conflict in which they fought, descriptions of their experience of warfare and of their surroundings, for example, also lent authenticity to their accounts. The most valuable were those whose experiences were corroborated by several sources including other witnesses, newspaper accounts or even personal diaries and letters (Wheelwright, 1989a: *passim*).

Given the constraints on identifying these women, my limited primary sources expanded to include: printed diaries, legal manuscripts, printed crime reports and printed memoirs either written by the women themselves or dictated by them. Records were also located through miscellaneous secondary materials such as ballads that provided enough detail to search out primary sources. However, given this range of sources and the extensive temporal period, my research uncovered only representative cases. Where more detail about individuals emerged either from a collection of primary sources such as the case of Maria Botchareva, Emma Thompson, or Flora Sandes, a fuller account was supplied. The study of working-class women by the nineteenth century English civil servant and diarist A.J. Munby who suggested that this phenomenon was widespread in the UK, proved immensely useful. In a contemporary article Munby provided at least 16 examples of passing women and 'scores' of women who worked in male clothing as bricklayers, grooms, navvies and in other masculine occupations (Wheelwright, 1989a: 121; Munby, diary, v. 34, 18 February, 1866, 24 March, 1866). Among the histories that provided useful additional sources for cross-referencing were: James Adams Vinton's 1916 article on the American War of Independence (1775-1783), Michael Lewis (1960) on the Royal Navy and Myna Trustram (1984) on domestic arrangements in the Victorian Army during the Peninsular wars (1807-1814), Sylvia Dannett's *Noble Women of the North* (1959) on the American Civil War (1861-1865) and Richard Stites (1982) on the women's participation in the Russian civil war (1917-1922).

Other historians, writing contemporaneously, had uncovered many more cases of female cross-dressing and therefore strengthened the argument that these were a phenomenon rather than aberrations. The female cross-dressed sailor, for example appeared in both eighteenth century Dutch naval records (van de Pol & Dekker, 1989) and in Anglo-American ballads (Dugaw, 1988). Easton's exhaustive study of articles in *The Gentleman's Magazine* found records of 19 cases from 1731 to 1780 and another 15 cases from 1781 to 1830. He also found more than sixty cases drawn from a variety of non-literary sources between 1160 and 1832. Studies like Munby's provided evidence that many more women were engaged in this practice than

previously thought. Easton summarises their significance as a legitimate field of study: ‘at stake within the social history of sexual representations, attitudes and behaviours is another history, the genealogy of such notions as “sex” and “liberty”’ (Easton, 2003; Easton, 2006). Although my choice of subject may have been considered marginal and my approach unconventional, my work was cited in many subsequent studies (Easton, 2003; Oram 2007; Garber, 1992; Sullivan, 2006; Torr & Bottom, 2010). Like the work of literary journalists my writing aimed to disrupt and transform my field, exposing a reality or ‘truth’ about which my fellow historians may have been unaware.

2.5. Conclusion

My early writing on female cross-dressing was set against the background of the second wave of feminism and my particular interest in debates about women in the military. The different positions that arose from these discussions within feminism about the nature of gender were the inspiration for my first book and for much of my early writing as a literary journalist. This critical review of the period reveals that my methodological approach to my historical work was influenced by literary journalistic techniques. This cross-over form of writing raised questions about how historians and literary journalists identify the centrality or marginality of subjects. What my review uncovers is how fluidly a subject can move from the borderlands to the centre when it offers insight into contemporary ideas and debates. Narratives about female cross-dressers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries resonated with late twentieth century readers discovering new historical understandings of sex, gender and identity.

That my writing on cross-dressing broke new ground is reflected in the range of reviews, in the number of newspaper and magazine articles I wrote, in the academic papers I presented and published and in the journal reviews of *Amazons and Military Maids*. Although my methodology was criticised, my conclusions about the importance of these cases as a riposte to an essentialist view of gender and to assumed passivity of women, were broadly supported. As Hunt noted: ‘*Amazons and Military Maids*. . . teach[es] us to look for the fluidity of gender categories cross-culturally and trans-historically. . . they also present us with the possibility, one which people of an earlier time may have understood better than we do today, of turning the world upside

down' (Hunt, 1989: 13). Her quote conveys a sense of urgency about discussing these new ideas and the optimism during this period that if we could understand the past differently, it would radically alter life in the here and now.

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Chapter 3. The Particularities of Intelligence History, 1992 - 2004

While the late 1980s saw an expansion of scholarly interest in women's history generally, studies moved from a focus on the oppression of women to an examination of their responses to discrimination and subordination, as *Amazons* had done (Bailey, 2005). Investigations moved beyond concerns about women as victims to studying how women negotiated power within social structures and within relationships. Women's history from the 1990s onwards began to chart female agency, recognising the need to identify normative gender constructions and conflicts around them. One subject area that seemed especially resistant to gender analysis was intelligence history, a branch of diplomatic and political history, which was slow to embrace concerns about women's participation.

Related to this concern was, as Christopher Andrew, the leading historian on intelligence studies, has identified, the possibility in the late 1990s of a growing divide between popular and academic history (Dorril, 2010: 4). While academic historians regarded the history of women's involvement in the intelligence services as a marginal subject, it was of perennial interest in more mainstream histories. However, the treatment of women, like the female cross-dressers, was viewed through a very narrow lens. Inevitably sexualised or regarded as a nuisance, an incompetent, a martyr or a victim, female agents had rarely been given serious critical consideration. But by the 1990s, just as Andrew was identifying this rift, my biography of Margaretha Zelle MacLeod aka Mata Hari and other publications about female agents, attempted to bridge the gap between the popular and the academic.

Moreover, during this period literary journalism had also evolved as a genre. Literary writing, especially forms where the narrator was present and disclosing personal details about her life, had become a staple for magazine and newspaper feature writers while long form narrative non-fiction books had grown in popularity (Gutkind, 1996, Sims & Kramer, 1995). As detailed in the introduction, the 1990s was a boom period for narrative non-fiction books as the 'new journalism' combined the discipline of scholarly research with a more accessible narrative style. Although literary journalism had always belonged to the mainstream it now began to gain serious consideration as

a form of literature. Among the pivotal studies of the late twentieth century were Chris Anderson's *Literary Nonfiction: Theory, Criticism and Pedagogy* (Anderson, 1989), Barbara Lounsberry's *The Art of Fact*, (Lounsberry, 1990), John Hellman's *Fables of Fact: The New Journalism as New Fiction* (Hellman, 1981), Norman Sims, *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century*, (Sims, 1990) and John Hartsock's *A History of American Literary Journalism* (Hartsock, 2000). While Hartsock ended his study highlighting the challenge that literary journalism faced in gaining academic acceptance, his historiography served to mend the artificial rift between literature and journalism. Meanwhile, historians of intelligence were crossing the bridge from the other side, attempting to reach a wider audience without compromising their scholarship. Writing from the borderlands of gender, as I was, to study a female agent who was a perennial subject of popular history, literary journalism seemed a perfect vehicle for reaching that general readership. This chapter will explore how, by introducing gender as a category of analysis, my work on Mata Hari identified the importance of mythology to intelligence history. I will then explore the particular challenges for literary journalists and historians of identifying and using evidence in this field and, finally, how they establish their subjectivity and professional authority.

3.1. Marginality versus centrality in intelligence history

My second book, *The Fatal Lover: Mata Hari and the Myth of Women in Espionage*, published in 1992, was, ostensibly, a biography of the First World War spy, Margaretha Zelle MacLeod (Wheelwright, 1992a). Although it could be defined as a biography – a book about a person's life written by another – it also examined the meaning of MacLeod's life after her execution by the French in 1917. It equally satisfied the requirements of a narrative history, developing a chronological story that connected the significance of Mata Hari (the stage name MacLeod adopted in 1905¹²) as a female icon with representations of other women operating in the intelligence field during the First World War, and in later conflicts. My methodology, therefore, was informed by a scholarly approach to historical investigation, framed within a theoretical debate and provided a trail of evidence with endnotes and a bibliography. As a narrative, it provided the reader with a sequentially ordered story, immersed in

¹² Throughout, Zelle will be referred to under her stage name, Mata Hari.

detail, building to a climax before exploring the social and historical consequences of Mata Hari's career.

The Fatal Lover built upon the feminist framework developed in *Amazons and Military Maids*, making the thematic link between women in the field of intelligence and the female combatants, whose accomplishments earlier historians had overlooked or marginalised. The consequence of this, as will be developed later in this chapter, is that the female agents were invariably dismissed as either insignificant or assumed to be trading sex for information. A brief example below illustrates the context in which, like the debate about female agents, the issue of their marginalisation appeared pressing. Moreover, women's role in intelligence highlights the challenge of bridging the gap between academic and the popular writing in this field.

In the late 1980s Michael Hartland, Chapman Pincher and co-authors Nigel West and Oleg Tsarev all wrote about the twice-decorated KGB agent Ruth Beurton who appeared at public rallies in her home of East Berlin, to shore up the floundering GDR government in 1989. Until then, Beurton's work as a Soviet agent in China, Poland, Switzerland and the UK during the Second World War had been described in passing by several histories of British double agents. While Pincher briefly acknowledges Beurton's importance as an agent, he concentrates on her role as a 'spy-mistress', claiming that, 'in her younger days in the Far East she, no doubt, obliged her comrades with some easy sex' (Pincher, 1984:18, Pincher, 1987: 94, 98).¹³ He provides no evidence for this. Moreover, Pincher describes Beurton, married to a British agent working for the Soviets with whom she had two children, as 'playing the ordinary housewife and mother' [emphasis mine], to avoid arousing suspicion (Pincher, 1987: 164). Hartland, in a novel based on the Sir Richard Hollis case (the former MI5 director thought to be a double-agent), suggests that Beurton became involved with Soviet intelligence while living in China in 1930, because of an affair with Soviet agent Richard Sorge (Hartland, 1986). However, as Beurton described in an interview, she was seven months' pregnant with her first child when Sorge

¹³ My interview with Ruth Beurton was published as an article in 1993; see Wheelwright, J. (1993) in 'Poisoned Honey: The Myth of Women in Espionage', *Queen's Quarterly, Special Issue on Intelligence*, (vol. 100, 3), p.291-309, and Wheelwright, J. (1991) 'Revamping the Vamps: When a Woman Spy Speaks Out', *Women: A Cultural Review*, Vol. 2, Issue 2, pages 117-123. Julie Wheelwright in *Sonia's Report* (1990) Documentary Film. Directed by Chris Watson UK: Television South West.

recruited her and far more concerned with the risks, including death, of acting as a Soviet agent in occupied Manchuria than affairs of the heart. In fact, she was recruited through her friend, the American writer Agnes Smedley (Wheelwright, 1992b; Wheelwright, 1991).

West and Tsarev, while giving a more factual account of Beurton's role as a KGB radio operator and courier in their 1998 history of Soviet agents working the UK, downplay her activities (West & Tsarev, 1998). In Pincher's case, Beurton's role as a 'spy-mistress' is emphasised over the intelligence activities she conducted while running a household with small children. The roles of mother and intelligence agent appear incompatible to these writers and therefore, are not considered. In reality, Beurton had operated, undetected, as a Soviet agent for seventeen years, first in Manchuria, then during the Second World War in Poland (a particular risk as she was Jewish), then in Oxfordshire where she was the courier for the German physicist Klaus Fuch who handed her information about the development of the atomic bomb (Wheelwright, 1992b).

To West and Tsarev, Beurton is marginal to the bigger story of Soviet agents and their controllers operating in the UK. Aside from making gendered assumptions about women's contribution to intelligence, historians such as West, Tsarev and Pincher often speculate due to lack of documentation. More generally, in the absence of empirical data, historians rely on such journalistic accounts and on memoirs that present problems of transparency and accuracy. These challenges are even more acute when dealing with the histories of female intelligence agents where, as Beurton's case illustrates, gendered ideas about the role of women, distort an interpretation of the evidence.

In the history of intelligence, Mata Hari occupies a unique position. Not only does she remain one of the few women associated with the history of the First World War in France but the powerful associations between female sexuality and national betrayal became a myth against which other women agents were measured until very recently. The case of Margaretha Zelle MacLeod is also remarkable because her prosecutors left a wealth of information about how agents were recruited, trained, investigated and interrogated. On 3 December 1984, the Direction Générale de la Gendarmerie

declassified the files documenting her 1917 trial that offered details about her early life, her dancing career and her intelligence activities (Waagenaar, 1987). Drawing on these and other documents, my book began with a description of Mata Hari's early life.

Margaretha Geertruida Zelle (1876-1917) was born into a prosperous family in Leeuwarden, northern Holland but her childhood was marked by tragedy. Her parents divorced and then, after her mother's death in 1891, she and her three brothers were sent to live with relatives in different cities. At nineteen she married Rudolf MacLeod, an officer in the Dutch East Indies; she lived with him there from 1897-1901 and they had two children. However, Rudolph was violent and their marriage unhappy (including the fatal poisoning of their son by a servant) so in 1903, after their return to Holland, her husband left, taking their daughter with him. She moved to Paris where she reinvented herself as an exotic dancer and launched a successful career in 1905. She was approached to become an espionage agent for the Germans and then by French intelligence during the First World War. However, in 1917, the French military arrested her on charges of passing information to the enemy; a court martial found her guilty and she was sentenced to death by firing squad. Although Allard in 1933 and Newman in 1956 had challenged Mata Hari's guilt, neither of these writers had access to the French military files on her case. Until the first revisionist biography was published in the 1960s, Mata Hari was known as 'the greatest woman spy of the century' (Wheelwright, 1992b: 90). My 186-page book devoted five chapters to developing an alternative narrative of Mata Hari's life and career up to the point of her 1917 execution, while the last section examined how and why she achieved an iconic status after her death.

My book was the first to claim that an examination of gender politics was central to understanding her case. Since the evidence in *The Fatal Lover* was based upon an analysis of all the available primary documents, it was regarded by other scholars and by the media as a credible source (Wheelwright, 1991). After its publication, I continued to write articles for magazines, journals and newspapers and to appear in documentaries about Mata Hari as new documents were released by the National Archives in the UK and a 1995 campaign in France to overturn the verdict in Zelle's case (Wheelwright, 1996a, 1996b, 2001, 2002). Historians, cultural studies scholars

and documentary filmmakers built upon my central argument that Mata Hari was condemned not for the evidence against her as an enemy agent but for her unspoken crimes as a sexually independent woman. Moreover, my central insight into Mata Hari's case provided me with a framework for understanding the experience and challenges of other female agents, including Ruth Beurton, mentioned earlier, and Kitty Harris (1899-1966), a decorated KGB agent, about whom I co-produced and wrote a film for the History Channel Canada in 2003. In addition, I participated in nine television documentaries about Mata Hari as a consultant or interviewee, developed a stage play with Diane Samuels (Wheelwright, 2001), a film script with director Martha Fiennes, and presented a feature-length radio documentary for BBC Radio Four in 1995. My roles included working with a producer or scriptwriter, offering dramatic interpretations of the primary sources. My most recent contribution was to a documentary on Mata Hari made for the History Channel Canada, aired on 5 October 2012 (*The Secret Life of Mata Hari*, 2012). Not only have these contributions required me to revisit and refine my arguments about Mata Hari's meaning but have enabled me to keep abreast of new sources and reinterpretations of existing ones. The continuing media interest in Mata Hari suggests that while she has remained a popular subject what has changed, as I shall discuss below, is her place within the historiography of, and cultural study of, intelligence. Moreover, this shift suggests that gender has also become increasingly accepted as a category of analysis within this field.

Since its first publication, several scholars have identified *The Fatal Lover* as a significant contribution towards a cultural understanding of intelligence agents within history and within cultural studies. Darrow referenced my interpretation of Mata Hari as an important female icon in her study, *French Women in the First World War* (Darrow, 2000), a study of the contribution French women made to the war effort. Instead of being praised for their hard work, she discovered that women were portrayed as indifferent or brutally insensible to the soldiers' privations. Darrow pointed to Mata Hari as the only recognisable, although dishonourable, female icon of the First World War in France (Darrow, 2000: 272). Proctor also focused on the discrepancy between image and reality in women's contribution to the intelligence services in Belgium, Britain and France (Proctor, 2003:3-4). In *Female Intelligence: Women and Espionage in the First World War*, Proctor, building on scholarly

histories of women spies, compared their role in the popular imagination with their actual wartime contribution. 'Julie Wheelwright found in her study of Mata Hari the myth of the "spy courtesan" has a strange resonance in fiction, film and autobiographies, but [she] suggests that these myths reflect male fantasies and fears of betrayal more than they mirror any reality in the world of espionage' (Proctor, 2003: 125). Proctor found that by concentrating on the fantasies about women's role in the intelligence services, previous historians and biographers had ignored both the reality of women's experience and the potency of their meaning as fantasy figures.

Scholars of cultural studies also made reference to my identification of Mata Hari as an enduring icon. Miller's study of espionage in film and television introduces gender as a meaningful category of analysis, writing that 'a different kind of critical politics' was needed to supplement the rigorous work already done by feminist scholars.

Julie Wheelwright's feminist history traces a nostrum in popular accounts of spying that stereotypes women as the "poisoned honey" . . . Throughout there is a question of legitimacy hanging over the female agent – a fundamental untrustworthiness pervades her representation, and not only in terms of her honesty (Miller, 2003: vi, 155).

Miller's work traces how, long after her execution, Mata Hari's mythic status became the touchstone for dramatic representations of the female spy on screen. Miller's writing on film and television from the 1930s to the 1960s exposes the nature of espionage itself: a mode of activity that is about 'self and society, about fiction and truth'. White acknowledges the dichotomy in popular culture where the female spy operates in both legal and illegal spheres, between public and private spaces, between fact and fiction. *The Fatal Lover*, according to White, 'provided invaluable historical and cultural resources' charting how Mata Hari's myth was dependent on disparaged ideas of gender, race and class (White, 2007: 8). White agrees with Darrow and myself in concluding that what Mata Hari did as a spy is less important than what she represented (White, 2007; Darrow, 2000). By referring to my feminist reading and detailed archival research, other writers have been able to identify her importance within their domains of scholarship.

3.2. Sources, evidence and forms of argument

While a major critical difference between historians and literary journalists is how sources are identified and exploited, there are particular issues in writing about intelligence matters, whether historical or contemporary. Historians and journalists agree that intelligence sources may be difficult, even impossible, to confirm and in this field, ‘the focus of journalism shifts from objective, verifiable “facts” to myth: in effect, there is a crucial epistemological shift’ (Keeble, 2004: 49). Others have identified a problem of political discourse in which facts or ‘discernible reality’ are now considered antiquated and spin doctors create what Garton Ash has called ‘a neo-Orwellian world of manufactured reality’ (Keeble, 2004: 49).¹⁴ Even when the source is verified, the literary historian faces the possibility of an additional ethical challenge, in the form of a source’s expectation of a favourable interpretation in exchange for access. As Trevor-Roper commented: ‘When a historian relies mainly on sources which we cannot easily check, he challenges our confidence and forces us to ask critical questions. How reliable is the historical method? How sound is his judgment?’ (Dorril, 2010: 6).

There may be a symbiotic relationship between the historian, who carries the weight of professional authority, and the literary journalist. Since it is usually beyond the journalist’s remit (with or without the aid of fact checkers) to check the primary sources upon which the historian has formulated her opinion, they may take their evidence at face value. As Trevor-Roper suggests, neither can the literary journalist assess the historian’s judgment without having access to the same documents and without a deep knowledge of the context within which they are read. The literary journalist relies on the historian, and other experts or inside sources, to do this archival spadework and in effect translates often complex and detailed arguments or ideas into language and a format suitable for the ‘general-interest’ reader. The key difference is that a historian is committed to an empirical inquiry that must take into account all other relevant existing ‘data’, hence the reliance on primary sources (Munslow, 2007). Only by amassing data on individual and comparative cases can the historian build an argument that will be credible within the historical field while the

¹⁴ See Christian Salmon’s (2010), *Storytelling: Bewitching the Modern Mind*, for a Marxist analysis of how narrative is used as a replacement of evidence-based reality within contemporary politics.

journalist, in constructing a narrative, is not required to state a thesis, to review the existing literature nor to enter into a theoretical debate. The journalist's sources are selected to provide immersive detail, contextual elements, action, movement, description and above all, emotion. As Hallman writes: 'Feelings are more important than rules . . . Once the story moves you, the writer, you arrange the events, words, imagery and structure of the piece to *make the reader feel something*.' (Hallam, 2007: 212)

But how one defines the sources – the evidence – selected to make the reader 'feel something' is crucial and operates differently within different genres. For example, within early biographies and memoirs relating to Mata Hari 'evidence' included limited references to official records but also to rumours, anecdotes, unattributed interviews and a conflation of events. These writers claimed to offer 'the truth' about her life, constructed into a narrative that invariably justified Mata Hari's execution and exaggerated her alleged crimes. Their work, which was often serialised in newspapers or magazines, implied that the narrator's authority stemmed from his previous experience (all were male and most were ex-intelligence or ex-military officers) and from his access to 'secret' papers. French officer Émile Massard illustrates this point with his *Les espionnes à Paris* in 1922. Massard was among the few witnesses to Mata Hari's court martial in 1917 where she was condemned to death, and he claimed to have consulted 'Mata's dossier'. In the introduction to *Les espionnes* Massard states: 'This book is not a novel, it is a document' (Massard, 1922: 3). However, he claims, among other things, that she disguised herself as a volunteer nurse to gain access to soldiers for the sole purpose of gaining military information (Massard, op. cit.: 219). While the actual 'Dossier Mata Hari' contains no evidence for this, the story of Mata Hari as a nurse appeared in subsequent biographies (Newman, 1956: 53; Coulson, 1930a: 110). Undoubtedly Massard used this potent image of a corrupted care-giver to touch a raw nerve among his French readers who believed that Mata Hari was personally responsible for the 'deaths of 50,000 men'. He encouraged his readers to 'feel something'. But to fabricate evidence for this purpose, whether in history or literary journalism, strays into the territory of propaganda and breaks the rules of both genres (Darrow, 2000: 273).

Since history must be evidence-based, and since my argument in *The Fatal Lover* involved a deconstruction of Mata Hari's myth, the widest range of sources was consulted. The files related to her 1917 espionage trial were open at the French national police archives and in the French military archives at Vincennes in late 1984, so were accessible during my research. This wealth of source material made possible a comparison between the official documents that contained Mata Hari's lengthy interrogations by her prosecutor Pierre Bouchardon, a summary biography and many of her letters and the claims made in biographies and memoirs. The earlier works were, however, valuable as secondary sources partly because of the useful context they provided for the First World War and for contemporary attitudes about female spies. These included the memoirs of Bouchardon, the head of the French counter-intelligence services Georges Ladoux, who had hired her as an agent in 1915, and the head of Scotland Yard, Sir Basil Thomson, who twice interrogated her in London and her prison doctor, Dr. Léon Bizard (Thomson, 1922; Bizard, 1923). Biographies by French journalist Charles Heymans (Heymans, 1930), former British intelligence officer Major Thomas Coulson (Coulson, 1930a), French journalist Edmond Locard (Locard, 1954) and Bernard Newman (Newman, 1956) also contributed details. However, none of the claims made by these authors were based on full access to the official military records.

It was only in 1962 that two French journalists, Alain Presles and François Brigneau, were given limited access to the Mata Hari files in the Service Historique de l'Armée de la Terre at Vincennes. Two years later, Sam Waagenaar published a new account of the case, based on more details from the closed files. *The Murder of Mata Hari* (Waagenaar, 1964) also contained valuable interviews with figures central to Mata Hari's story. Waagenaar, as European publicist for the 1931 MGM film *Mata Hari*¹⁵ had interviewed close friends of Mata Hari's and those of her former husband, who commented on her early life, relationships, personality and circumstances. Furthermore, Waagenaar claimed that Mata Hari's maid, Anna Lintjens, gave him her employer's scrapbooks and letters that formed the basis of his biography thirty years later (*An Orchid Among the Buttercups*, 1997).¹⁶ Waagenaar's collection of Mata

¹⁵ The film was based on Major Thomas Coulson's biography, *Mata Hari*, published in 1930.

¹⁶ Sam Waagenaar provided me with this information in an author interview in Rome, 1989, and on camera in the 1998 Sophidoc documentary, *An Orchid Among the Buttercups* in which he said that

Hari-related papers acquired by the Frysk Letterkundich Museum en Dokumintaesjesintrum in 1990 provided another valuable resource. These files included Mata Hari's letters, diaries, photographs, press cuttings and a large volume of related ephemeral material (Collectiebeschrijving GAL inventaris, Fries Museum). In addition to these primary documents, Waagenaar's claims were further corroborated by evidence in the Archive of the Dutch Embassy in Paris, the Public Record Office Metropolitan Police files and the Imperial War Museum files in London, the Hoover Library in Stanford, and the Department of Justice records in Washington DC. My methodology involved consulting all open state and relevant private archival sources, allowing a comparison between competing claims made about Mata Hari, not only as an intelligence agent, but also about her early life, her marriage, her dancing career, her attitudes towards men, her patriotism and a wide range of other subjects.

Although the depth of archival research and comparative analysis with secondary sources enabled me to provide the fullest possible account of Mata Hari's life and career, it raised interesting challenges. While gathering the evidence for my analysis of gender as integral to understanding Mata Hari, it became apparent that in constructing a narrative there was a balance to be struck between constructing an argument and, as Hallam describes, including information to make 'the reader feel something'. Was it possible to create a compelling narrative with supporting documentation, which inevitably draws upon reader expectations about the spies, while deconstructing the very myths upon which these are made? Although literary journalists and historians share the need for transparency and an ethical responsibility in using source material, they have different rules concerning disclosure. Conventions within history are, of course, subject to change but the credibility of contemporary historians relies on leaving a biographic trail for other researchers to follow. While scholars may disagree over their interpretation of the sources, they should be able to easily reproduce and verify each other's findings. Literary journalists are under no such compunction and, as various theorists have argued, it may be their writing style alone that enables a reader to determine their reliability as narrators. While literary journalists may worry about annotation and attribution ruining the narrative, for

Mata Hari's scrapbooks were immensely important because she left behind so little biographical material.

historians, transparency is the foundation upon which the narrative is built (Kramer & Call, 2007).¹⁷

3.3. Establishing subjectivity and professional authority

The Fatal Lover employed a range of methods that related to the requirements of professional historical writing and of literary journalism. My research methods were framed by the contemporary debates within historiography about women in intelligence, as outlined earlier, involving the particularities of Mata Hari's case and her legacy for later female agents. Through a close reading of the primary, secondary and tertiary documents, a pattern emerged where the female agent, whatever her actual role, was always represented first and foremost as a sexual threat. Once identified, the 'spy-courtesan' became short hand for the sexualising and trivialising of female agents, long after Mata Hari's execution in 1917. Wherever possible, a comparison was made between the more accurate portrayal of people, places and events offered by primary documents and the less reliable representations made by early historians, memoirists and biographers. Finally, the subjectivity of these earlier writers was explored within a feminist framework to expose how assumptions about gender had operated not only to distort the facts of Mata Hari's case but of women agents in general.

The particularities of the sources are especially important to historians because they serve as evidence to support their arguments. By comparison, literary journalists informally contribute to a debate about the subject of their investigation but their primary readers are not specialists, nor are these writers expected to make an original contribution to knowledge. Their primary goal is to construct a detailed and engaging narrative for their readers while providing an implicit, rather than explicit, analysis of their subject. The economics of literary journalist production – the lack of time, space

¹⁷ An interesting suggestion of how alive this debate is for writers of history, is revealed in my recent review of Carole Seymour-Jones' biography of SOE agent Pearl Witherington, see *The Independent* (2013), 'Review: She Landed by Moonlight: The Story of Secret Agent Pearl Witherington by Carole Seymour-Jones. 28 June, 2013. Despite applauding her research in reconstructing Pearl's accomplishments during the war, I was critical of her use of the historical present, of creating dialogue and lack of appropriate references, all of which weakened her 'truth claim' and undermined the book's usefulness to other scholars.

and research resources – usually restrict the kind of exhaustive comparison between primary and secondary sources employed in *The Fatal Lover*.

However, what they may share is an ethical and logistical problem of gaining access to privileged sources. In the field of intelligence history, the problem stems from its nature, which is defined by clandestine operations that cannot be made public for obvious reasons. Therefore, writers function as intermediaries to offer, through popular literature, versions of the ‘truth’ as biography or popular history. A writer of history, like Sam Waagenaar or Nigel West, may gain access to sensitive written or recorded material but are either unwilling or unable to produce that essential trail for others to follow required of professional historians (White, 2007; Hiley, 1985; Dover & Goodman, 2010)¹⁸. Journalists, writing on contemporary intelligence issues, may need to rely on trusted interview sources where sensitive documents are inaccessible. Carl Bernstein (1977) identified more than 400 American journalists who carried out covert missions for the Central Intelligence Agency in the post-war period while in the UK Dorril and Ramsay (1991) conceptualised a secret state (the security services, the cabinet office and the upper echelons of the Home and Commonwealth Offices, the armed forces and the Ministry of Defence, the nuclear power industry and a network of senior civil servants) that uses senior journalists as conduits of information. More recently Davies, Keeble and Knightley have described the enormous impact of British spooks on mainstream politics and the media (Keeble, 2010). In this reciprocal relationship, the writer gains access to protected sources while the intelligence agency helps to disseminate information and to justify its existence. But the reader, who is engaged in a relationship of trust with the writer, is unaware of this hidden agenda.

Related to the ethical issues surrounding a writer’s access to privileged information is the issue of subjectivity. But the extent to which a writer’s subjectivity is disclosed, when, where and how that disclosure is appropriate and when it becomes manipulative, is the subject of much contemporary debate (Wheelwright, 2014: in press). Where the issue of subjectivity overlaps is in the dilemma created when

¹⁸ It should be noted that Waagenaar worked for the Allied counter-intelligence during WW2 while Rupert Allason aka Nigel West, was described by *The Sunday Times* in 1984 as ‘the unofficial historian of the secret services’, an indication of his close relationship with the officials who provide him with privileged access to sources.

readers are invited to trust a narrator whose subjectivity slips over into sensationalism. In Berger's definition, as applied to film, this is 'the reducing of the experience of the other into a pure framed spectacle from which the viewer, as a safe and separate spectator, obtains a thrill or a shock' (Hartsock, 2000: 186). To take the historical example first, when intelligence historiography after the First World War included research about female agents, it invariably conformed to the cliché of the 'spy courtesan' in the absence of an alternative, because retired male agents dominated the literature and because the mythology was so pervasive. Former agents-turned popular historians, turned novelists, perpetuated this myth, offering a 'truth claim' to their readers, based on their previous experience in the field. By employing a methodology in *The Fatal Lover* where primary documents were read against popular accounts of the same espionage case, it was possible to detect how and where myths about female agents were manufactured.

The 1935 memoirs of Mata Hari's interrogating officer Pierre Bouchardon, read against the actual transcripts of his 11 interviews with her at the Palais de Justice between February and July 1917, illustrate this point very clearly. Bouchardon provides a vivid impression of Mata Hari that is contradictory and factually inaccurate. In his need to underline his portrait of her as a moral degenerate, he intimated that she was suffering from venereal disease. Like all other female prisoners, Mata Hari was incarcerated at St. Lazare, a prison-hospital where police brought prostitutes for treatment if they showed any signs of sexually transmitted diseases. All prisoners were subject to regular sexual health checks but Mata Hari's attending physicians provided no evidence of her receiving treatment for venereal disease. In fact, a Dr Socquet rejected her request for hospital treatment after contracting a chest infection, considering her too healthy. Since Mata Hari had pleaded with Bouchardon to arrange this, he clearly knew that she was not 'syphilitic' as he later claimed in his memoir (Bouchardon, 1953: 315; Wheelwright, 1992b: 74). Bouchardon's subjective treatment of Mata Hari, long after her execution, is also illustrated by his mis-identification of her racial background. Although Mata Hari, a Dutch citizen, claimed in press interviews to be an Indian princess and an Indonesian temple dancer, Bouchardon knew from government records and police reports that she was neither. Yet his descriptions are couched in racist language: '[she was] a tall woman with thick lips, dark skin and imitation pearls in her ears, who somewhat

resembled a savage' (Bouchardon, 1953: 315). A later interrogation session referred to in the memoir conjures up a woman with 'the swollen lips of a negress, teeth as big as plates' (Wheelwright, 1992: 71). Throughout this account, Bouchardon expresses an ambivalence towards a formidable opponent who displays both the masculine characteristics of a 'cool logic', who plays a 'duel', but one who is weakly feminine when she resorts to 'cries, tears, smiles, indignation, invective' (Wheelwright, 1992b: 76). Bouchardon also selectively used evidence in preparing his case against Mata Hari for the prosecutor Lieutenant André Mornet. His biographical report, for example, mentions only two of her many public appearances as a dancer in France and ignores her international reputation but provides elaborate detail about her role as a courtesan, creating the impression that this was her primary means of earning an income (Wheelwright, 1992b: 74).

The memoirs of Bouchardon, Ladoux and Massard who were all involved in her case, set the tone for later biographers. Their message that France had been saved from destruction when this female traitor was executed at Vincennes became deeply embedded in French consciousness (Darrow, 2000; Coulson, 1930a; Ladoux, 1937; Massard, 1922). Without an articulation of subjectivity and in an absence of verifiable information and transparency of method, Bouchardon's views went largely unchallenged. But the boundary between fiction and history in memoir is unstable and, while the reader has to trust Bouchardon on the facts (after all, he was there), his methods do illuminate a live debate within historical writing. Historians, argues Ermarth (2007), use a commitment to empiricism, to gathering 'facts', to create a comforting form of writing that distracts their readers from the tricky issue of methodology. She questions whether historians are any better than writers of memoirs since they present their work as an objective interpretation of historical action and consequence. This is not a criticism of memoir but a recognition that, as a genre, autobiographical writing is more realistic and perhaps more honest about the shaping consciousness that lies behind the writer's editorial choices.

While *The Fatal Lover* is an openly feminist text my methodology could be criticised for suggesting that it offered a more 'truthful' and, therefore, a less subjective, interpretation of the evidence. Aspects of my own methodology could be analysed with the same scrutiny applied to the French memoirists, asking whether the sources

deemed to be reliable were those that ‘fit’ my interpretation of Mata Hari’s story. This problem relates to the wider one explored by Ermuth and other post-modernists who have argued that historians would be more honest if they explicitly identified their criteria for a reliable source. The problem arises in *The Fatal Lover* where the same memoir was used to illustrate how Mata Hari’s French prosecutors were highly selective in their presentation of evidence, exposing an obvious bias that questioned their reliability as narrators but was also used as a primary document. Memoirs by Massard, Bouchardon and Ladoux, as primary agents in Mata Hari’s case, were valuable as source texts because they provided details about events and actions where there were few witnesses. However, this poses the problem of a text being valued in some sections – the detailed observations – and ambiguous in others where the narrator is regarded as less neutral in his recording of events.

A careful reading of texts and a comparison between sources, wherever possible, allowed for a corroboration of evidence in *The Fatal Lover*. It was difficult, however, to apply this consistently as the following examples illustrate where the same text was used for different purposes. The English translation of Morain’s 1930 memoir, *The Underworld of Paris*, was cited because he was present at Mata Hari’s trial and execution and afterwards interviewed other witnesses to these events. This memoir proved valuable because Mata Hari had been tried in camera, by court martial, so there were no press reports against which comments from these witnesses could be compared. Morain, for example, includes a long interview with Dr. Léon Bizard who ministered to Mata Hari during her last hours in her cell at St. Lazare before she was transported to the firing squad at Vincennes. These crucial details were used in *The Fatal Lover* to create a narrative, written as a chronology of events, leading up to her death. This evidence enabled me to employ literary journalistic techniques: the use of dialogue, immersive detail, the attempt to make an emotional connection with the reader, and quoting from the sources without a disclaimer about their potential bias (Wheelwright, 1992b).

However, Morain’s memoir also contained the racist language and assumptions that, arguably, influenced the French witnesses in their retelling of the story. Morain’s quotes from Dr. Bizard who described his Dutch patient as ‘of Asiatic type . . . something of a savage’ (Morain, 1930: 201), was quoted to illustrate this point.

Morain himself described Mata Hari as possessing ‘a strange Oriental beauty, so different from the European, the exoticism of which could not be explained from her origins’ (Morain, 1930: 213). But since the criteria for assessing the reliability of primary and secondary sources were not clearly identified within *The Fatal Lover*, it would be difficult for a reader to judge whether Morain was a consistently reliable narrator. Moreover, I read Morain’s memoir in English and nuances have been lost from the original French text. Despite my reservations about Morain’s accuracy – and several other French post-war histories on Mata Hari proved to be equally incorrect – I relied on their unique access to events and historical details to construct a narrative of my subject’s last few moments.

It is the job of both the literary journalist and the historian to assess the accuracy, validity and authority of sources and documents before they are quoted. For the historian, however, these expectations are different because their thorough grounding in the contextual material is assumed to enable them to judge the authenticity of their sources. This detailed analysis of sources might be included in an end or footnote or even within the text itself. Moreover, since a historian situates his/her evidence within a particular intellectual debate, they assume their readers will be familiar with the context, if not the other source texts cited. Their professional reputation rests on ensuring a high degree of transparency and a carefully documented record of their findings.

A major difference between historians and literary journalists, therefore, lies in assumptions about their reader’s expectations. Although this may be changing, as the controversy surrounding Asne Seierstad in the introduction suggests, until recently the ‘general-interest’ reader was regarded as uninterested in issues about the validity of sources and paraphernalia such as endnotes or source notes, devices that clutter up the text. The literary journalist is a form of temporary expert who must weigh the validity of his/her sources before they are quoted in the text and find corroborating evidence for their claims. But the sources – documents and interviewees – from which a narrative is constructed, are regarded as private, even commercially sensitive, information rather than empirical data to be shared with readers and other journalists. While historians must read widely and deeply, often spending years over a research project, sharing empirical data and interpretative arguments with colleagues is vital to

ensuring the validity of their own claims. Literary journalists, especially those writing for magazines and newspapers, however, more often regard another writer working on the same subject as competition rather than as a potential collaborator.

Where these fields overlap is in developing a critical self-awareness of subjectivity. Some theorists regard literary journalism as a reaction against conventional journalism where the writer eschews a 'disguised perspective' or objective stance, placing themselves in the piece and through the employment of other literary techniques, acknowledges the creative nature of their production. Another school argues that these writing techniques communicate to the reader that the writer is attempting to be as transparent as possible about their creative process and about the personal or political framing of their work (Keeble & Tulloch, 2012: 5). Within historiography, it is post-modernist writers such as Frank Ankersmit, Keith Jenkins, Alun Munslow, Joan Scott and Hayden White, among others, who have argued for a similar transparency and writing style.

Writers of biography and other forms of 'cross-over' history books during the period discussed in this chapter had begun to share with literary journalists a writing style that exposed and embraced subjectivities. The post-modernists have suggested that by examining the prejudices and assumptions they bring to what should be regarded as a creative process – the writing of history – they would engage more honestly with their readers. What they share with the literary journalists is an understanding of writing as an act rooted in ideology. Sims regards narrative journalism as a genre which 'pays respect to ordinary lives (Sims, 1995: 3), while Kramer sees it as an anti-establishment and populist form displaying 'narratives of the felt lives of everyday people test[ing] idealization against actualities' (Kramer, 1995: 34). These sentiments appear to echo Scott's ambition for a 'critical history' that would result in historians unmasking their 'unexamined presuppositions (including those of critical historians themselves) that served to legitimize social inequality' (Jenkins, Morgan & Munslow 2007: 24).

Critics of a post-modernist historiography, however, have observed that while this call for a revolution in history's theory and practice has been in circulation for more than forty years, it has had little impact on how history is actually written (Timmins,

2011). But if the revolutionary call had not been heeded, the arguments, debates and ideas are still very current with perhaps more influence over the popular historians that so concerned Andrew in the 1990s. The degree that writers of ‘cross-over’ books, a category into which *The Fatal Lover* might fall, experiment with style, form and with expressions of subjectivity will be further explored in the next chapter.

3.4. Conclusion

The examples used here reveal the consequences of ignoring Scott’s ‘unexamined presuppositions’ in the cases of female intelligence agents whose accomplishments have been dismissed or distorted by previous historians. Moreover, intelligence histories reveal the complex position of writers who may be former agents and often deeply compromised by the access they are given to previously confidential files. Their writing may operate as a form of propaganda, as it did in the case of Mata Hari, where the female agent becomes an icon of feminine betrayal, an enemy within who must be sacrificed to ensure the continuity of the state. Literary journalists may face similar ethical dilemmas over access to sources that are heightened because they are not required to divulge their sources. The spy writer, whether in a book of history or a lengthy journalistic piece, occupies the position of being simultaneously a reliable and an unreliable narrator.

There are fundamental differences between the two disciplines – namely how subjects are identified as worthy of investigation, how evidence is identified and evaluated, the notion of a subject expert, and how professional authority is established. But the similarities are strong. Although most schools of professional historians shy away from the notion that they are writing literature or employing narrative techniques, they do share a desire to communicate their findings in a clear, accessible and engaging style. While this is a primary concern for literary journalists, this is also the historians’ remit although they may engage with readers by using different rhetorical devices. While the literary journalist uses observations and detail to make the reader ‘feel something’, the historian aims to make that same reader ‘think something’; both have the potential to exploit their position for ideological ends and both benefit from shared guidelines of professional practice.

What seems to arise from this exploration is the need for historians (especially those engaged in the field of intelligence) and for literary journalists to examine and offer up to their readers the subjectivity they bring to their writing. Without this self-conscious approach to the framing of their work, the writers in these different disciplines may find themselves straying beyond the boundaries of the unwritten and unspoken agreement with their readers. As Kramer, Keeble and Tulloch, and Sims have identified, the ‘truth claim’ is the foundation of all narrative journalism. These are issues to which I will return in the next chapter.

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Chapter 4. The convergence of literary journalism and historiography 2004-2013

The writing of Esther Wheelwright's biography, *Esther: The True Life Story of Esther Wheelwright: Puritan Child, Native Daughter, Mother Superior* (Wheelwright, 2011a), could be used to illustrate how women's history has developed since the publication of *Amazons* in 1989. In writing this biography about an eighteenth-century nun, it was no longer enough to provide the details of her story and to overturn expectations about life within a cloistered order. I argued that Esther's position within a French Catholic convent in Quebec offered her more political and personal power than life as a married woman in her hometown in the English colony. Although Esther's story had a built-in narrative arc – her captivity by Abenakis Indians from Maine to Quebec at the age of seven and her later role in negotiating with the British to ensure the retention of a French Catholic presence in the new colony after 1759 – my publisher insisted on a narrative that engaged the reader emotionally. As will be explored in detail further on, source material that would bring alive a character or provide a solid sense of Stone's *mentalité*, were absent. Narrative expectations had changed so that writers of women's history could now paper over the archival gaps by inserting themselves into the narrative to create an intimate connection with the reader.

The foregrounding of narrative techniques designed to engage the reader emotionally, however, raises a number of ethical issues with which historians and literary journalists are still grappling. My particular difficulties with *Esther* raise much larger questions about how these two disciplines are not only confronting the same issues but have yet to resolve the most pressing problems that gave rise to my research questions about the marginality of subjects, the use of evidence and the establishment of professional authority. For historians, the issues raised by the post-modernists about making history more relevant, accessible and honest have, it could be argued, become even more acute in the digital age. In the 2000s I was researching a book where, for the first time, I had access to online archives where key word searches enabled me to scan eighteenth century documents and where my readers could (and have) retraced my sources. All of which lends a new urgency to the need for accountability of sources, while simultaneously giving the reader a sharply detailed read. My publisher's decision to entitle the book, 'the true life story of Esther

Wheelwright' (as part of their 'marketing plan') encapsulates the paradox. While a historian is wedded to telling as much of the 'true life story' as they possibly can through the deployment of their skills, they are always aware that this goal remains elusive.

Previous chapters have outlined the specific and meaningful differences between literary journalism and historiography in shaping methodology, use of evidence and theoretical approaches. This chapter explores what these genre boundaries contribute to an understanding of their epistemological differences and similarities using examples drawn from *Esther* (Wheelwright, 2011a). The outlines of the debates have been touched on in previous chapter but will be expanded upon here. I will explore how, in early twenty-first century, historians and literary journalists grapple with questions of whether rhetorical techniques (the use of a first person narrator, the invention of character, the direct address to the reader and the use of contemporary interviews) can resolve problems of subjectivity and veracity. Finally, I question whether the use of literary journalistic methods and the straddling of subject disciplines are opening up subject areas for historians restricted by a paucity of evidence.

The family story of my relative Esther Wheelwright (I am directly descended from her elder brother John) was known for generations and told to me by my uncle Peter Wheelwright. To my ancestors, it was a story about an innocent English girl, taken captive by 'savages' and then rescued by the French, a view endorsed in early New England captive historiography (Wheelwright 2011a). There, the story is relatively well-documented because Esther's capture was part of several raids by Algonquin (Abenakis) Indians in 1703 that swept along the putative border between the English colony and New France¹. Esther was taken at the age of seven from her home in Wells, Maine and, although her family was devoutly Puritan, she was adopted into an Abenakis family who were Catholic converts. When she was twelve, Father Vincent Bigot, the Jesuit Superior in New France, negotiated her ransom and took her to the colonial capital, Quebec City. From 1712 she lived with the family of the colonial governor, the Marquis de Vaudreuil, who enrolled her in the Ursuline convent school where she began to express a desire for a religious vocation. Meanwhile, her parents were negotiating with Vaudreuil for their daughter's return through the Massachusetts

government. Despite their pleas, the Ursulines advanced the date of Esther's noviciate by an unprecedented 18 months to prevent her returning and she was accepted into the order in 1714. She eventually resumed contact with her family in 1752 when her nephew Nathanael Wheelwright was trading into New France and another nephew named his daughter Esther in her honour, a moniker passed down through ten generations of the Wheelwright family. Despite her mother's continued pleas, however, Esther never returned to New England, which would have involved her re-conversion to her family's Protestantism since the English colony did not allow Catholic residents (Wheelwright, 2011a). She served three terms as Mother Superior to the Ursuline convent and died in 1780.

4.1. Arguments and approach in relation to the historiography of captivity: marginality versus centrality

Of my three books, *Esther* presented the greatest challenges in both research methodology and approach. If *Amazons* and *The Fatal Lover* required me to straddle different fields in my research, *Esther* necessitated an even greater range of investigative tools. For an eighteenth-century woman, Esther Wheelwright's life is comparatively well-documented because her family were influential Puritans, members of the Massachusetts government and later, because the Ursuline convent has a well-preserved archive. Major works on the New England captives by Alice C. Baker (1990) and Emma Lewis Coleman (2004) written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, added important details to her story and modern reprints have brought it to a new readership. Esther Wheelwright's long life spanned not only an early childhood in Puritan New England but five years with the Abenakis Indians and then, from the age of fourteen, life as a choir nun in the Ursuline convent in Quebec City. Her geographic dislocation has meant that her story found resonance in New England's history but also in Quebec and amongst the Abenakis. Moreover, since the history of North America's aboriginal people touches on a wide range of fields and many different debates, writers and critics in fields ranging from literature to anthropology, gender studies and ethno-history informed my theoretical framework. One overarching theme that brought together the disparate strands of Esther's life came from reconceptualising 'frontier history', not as a border between settlement and wilderness but a place of interaction between different cultures (Haefeli &

Sweeney, 2003: 3). This new direction chimed with my epistemological approach where I sought to emphasize the similarities and overlaps between cultures rather than their differences.

Since the construction of a narrative history requires character development and narrative tension, my version of Esther's story explored areas of conflict and co-operation between the French Catholics, the English Puritans and the Aboriginal peoples. Viewing them as individuals with inter-dependent lives and histories enabled me to challenge the narrative of Esther as a victim of barbarous intruders, acknowledging instead that she may have benefitted from her captivity. As I wrote in the epilogue: 'In the absence of documented evidence, I have tried to move Esther's story beyond the racism inherent in earlier readings of her life as a white girl rescued by Europeans [the French] from her "savage" captors' (Wheelwright, 2011a: 266). My research on *Esther* revealed a complex story about the benefits of cultural accommodation during her childhood with the Abenakis, offering a counter narrative to the trauma of captive experience. My new reading of Esther acknowledged feminist scholars who have argued for a gendered history that 'moves away from an emphasis on cultural difference' and towards 'the implications of the many similarities between Indians and Europeans' (Little, 2007: 2). This required an innovative reading that questioned received notions of the master/slave relationships within these cultures, observing how captive narratives, including Esther's, articulated often contradictory ideas about their economic, cultural and religious experiences (Burnham, 1997).

Feminist historiography on the role of female religious communities in New France was also helpful in my interpretation of the evidence surrounding Esther's conversion to Catholicism, which classified her as a heretic to the English Puritans. In trying to determine whether Esther chose to become an Ursuline nun at the age of twelve or whether she was coerced, for example, was a challenge given the lack of first-hand accounts. Although twelve was not an exceptionally young age for a novice according to the Ursuline records, Esther had more at stake than her French Catholic counterparts. While these girls were actively encouraged by their families and would be supplied with a dowry for the convent, for Esther's parents, taking her vows would condemn her to heresy and would risk severing all ties with her homeland (Wheelwright, 2011a).

This scholarly work enabled me to appreciate the material, cultural and intellectual benefits that attracted an English captive convert like Esther to Catholicism and to relinquish her Puritan religion and family. My thoughts on the potential for individual female agency within an eighteenth century were informed by a lively debate within feminist historiography that argues against an assumption that convents were oppressive institutions and suggests that they may have been places of relative female power (Zemon Davis, 1995; Noel, 2001). Feminist scholars have made nuanced claims about the paradoxical position of religious women who experienced power within these institutions as both sacred and distinctly profane (Gray, 2007). Feminist historians such as Gray, Zemon Davis and Noel have argued against a simplistic notion of women as victims of patriarchy by demonstrating that religious women were capable of negotiating with the outside world and using their kinship networks and ambassadorial skills to shape colonial governments. These scholars have argued against a universal female experience through their revelations about women living in an environment far removed in time and philosophy from our own.

Canadian reviewers of *Esther* regarded this blending of academic and journalistic techniques as an advantage, observing that it enabled readers without a specialist background to understand the story's human dilemmas. The split narrative, which alternated between sections written in the first person, documenting my research trips to Maine and Quebec, and those written in the third person, chronicling Esther's life, were, according to Moore Burns, 'seamlessly woven together, allowing the reader access to the minds and hearts of both women' (Burns, 2011). Cuder-Dominguez writing in the academic journal *Canadian Literature* observed that 'Julie Wheelwright's biography stresses her ancestor's survival skills and her insight into three different cultures and languages, which allowed her to keep playing a major role as an ambassador' (Cuder-Dominguez, 2011). A reviewer in *Canada's History*, a general interest history magazine, regarded my split narrative technique as one that allowed me to 'play the role of detective', and to 'place [Wheelwright's] relative vividly in the place and time' (Roberts, 2011). The reviewer in the Toronto *Globe and Mail*, which nominated *Esther* as among its top books for 2011, described it as 'highly readable and meticulously researched', and the author as 'a precise and inviting historian' (Livesey, 2011). The idea that the book's appeal crossed academic

boundaries and reached general readers led to *Esther* being featured on Canada's national radio, CBC's 'The Sunday Edition', where it was described as having 'the making of a mini-series' (Howes, 2011). Although *Esther* has yet to be published in the US, it was featured on Boston's online literary magazine *Drum* (Wheelwright, 2011b).

4.2. Use of sources, evidence and forms of argument

In writing *Esther*, which underwent four separate drafts before publication, my approach was informed by the debate within historiography about new literary forms discussed in previous chapters and explored in further depth here. Rosenstone acknowledges that postmodernist innovations in history have been a response to the critique of the feminists, philosophers and literary critics who required new forms to better address their content (Munslow & Rosenstone 2004). But as historians and literary journalists share an epistemological anxiety centred on the related issue of subjectivity, what form should an admission to one's shaping consciousness take? How to express this complex idea? Is authority eroded when an author admits to the limits of his/her knowledge? What are the ethical boundaries of dramatization? While Hayden White has long argued that history 'is never innocent ideologically or otherwise', historians rarely use the authorial 'I' to address the perspective from which they research and write (White, 1987: 76). Literary journalists, however, regard techniques such as use of the authorial 'I', dramatization of events and an openly subjective stance as central to their working practice. Here professional authority and authenticity is conveyed through the creation of a convincing narrative voice: the author is, quite literally, the voice of authority. Where the narrator's role in fiction is an aesthetic choice, in non-fiction it involves ethical and professional issues since trust in journalism lies not in objective observations but in the truthfulness of reporting. However, the verification of the narrator's first person singular presents difficulties as well since, even with the invention and widespread use of recording devices, it often cannot necessarily be trusted (Forde, 2008).

In comparing rhetorical techniques, therefore, the narrator's role and perspective is pivotal. Within literary journalism this may extend to the creation of a narrator-as-character that acts to persuade readers of an argument, a style that forms part of a new

writing paradigm where imagination is reclaimed from the exclusive preserve of fiction. In this 'poetics of fact', the creator acts as a shaping consciousness, 'noticing things, imagining new possibilities about the ways in which they may be connected and then communicating that to others' (Greenberg, 2011: 170). But paradoxically, while literary journalists regard the intimate narrator as the basis upon which their authority rests, many historians regard such practices as performing the opposite function, exposing intellectual weakness (Kleinberg, 2007). Rosenstone and Munslow argue, however, that a direct address to the reader, sharing problems of sources and composition, all framed within an open subjectivity, are useful because they acknowledge the past as specular rather than concrete (Munslow & Rosenstone, 2004). The post-modernist claim is that, as a form of corrective, historians indicate in their texts that behind the smooth flow of narrative 'is a person who has made a series of choices -- aesthetic, political and moral -- to create this work of historical representation' (ibid: 4). Judith P. Zinsser's (2006) *La Dame d'Esprit: A Biography of the Marquise Du Châtelet*, illustrates how a historian makes such choices by offering three possible introductions to her subject, involving the reader in making choices about which is the most 'truthful'. She remarks that while each is based on evidence, the historian (in this case, a biographer) decides which aspects of her life and personality to expose. In other words, these are highly subjective decisions, dictated by the author's preconceptions, interests and tastes.

However, such paradigm-shifting experiments are not often reflected in mainstream academic publishing and many historians regard the expression of doubts, conflicts and ambiguities as either irrelevant or a threat to their professional status. Novick expresses his reservations about a position that sees even less distinction between history and propaganda than history and fiction, while acknowledging that historians 'make up interesting, provocative, even edifying stories about [the past] as contributions to collective self-understandings(s)' (Novick, 1998: 39). There seems a growing consensus that history, whether inside or outside the academy, is irredeemably ideological but remains committed to factual honesty and intellectual exploration. *Esther* perhaps illustrates an example of a 'literary history' (Sims, 2011), a term that suggests a hybrid of historiography and literary journalism that requires factual honesty, intellectual exploration and engagement but allows for a wider range of narrative styles. A response to postmodernist concerns about subjectivity is perhaps

found in *Esther*'s use of rhetorical techniques identifiable as literary journalism. For example, the narrator-as-character created an intimate, emotional and immediate experience that involves the reader in the text while defying the possibility of narrative closure. This technique also allows for reflection on the porous relationship between fiction and non-fiction as equally constructed texts.

4.3. Establishing subjectivity and professional authority through rhetorical devices: the 'narrator-as-character'

The first of these rhetorical devices, the role of the narrator-as-character, in academic history is usually confined to a prologue or introduction. Within the text itself the narrator is implied, and therefore appears more neutral, objective and distanced. However, within literary journalism the narrator is often undertaking an active investigation, with the reader following events as they develop. This conforms to a style of 'naïve narrator' who admits to the limits of what s/he knows, allows for ambiguity in the text and for speculation on issues about which the writer feels an emotional connection (Seabrook, 2000). In the reviews of *Esther*, for example, one writer commented on this technique where I inserted myself into the text, reflecting on my process of uncovering Esther and my insights into her character through those discoveries: '[these chapters] detail the author's quest to determine whether her ancestor actually chose a convent life, or was pushed into her vocation and cruelly kept apart from her family' (Burns, 2011). Moreover, such a technique in these short, 1,000-2,000 word chapters acknowledged a lack of evidence and my speculation based on material related to Esther's internal world. 'Esther left no record of her story, so I am feeling my way through it, relying on my emotional connection to her to fill in the blanks where the black hole of documentation gapes wide. But this story refuses to shape itself into one of simple religious conversion' (Wheelwright, 2011: 137). This approach defies narrative closure, involving the reader in making choices and, therefore, recognising how history is actually constructed as a series of logical surmises filtered through the author's own preconceptions as they interpret and recreate an individual's unspoken or undocumented feelings (Zinsser, 2006)¹⁹.

¹⁹ Zinsser's biography, however, antedates the type of 'interactive' reading that many online readers are now familiar with and, although beyond the scope of this study, points to possible areas for future research in how history is 'read'.

In limited ways, historians have begun to include such ‘self-reflexive’ techniques in their writing about subjects and ideas that have long been excluded from the canon and cannot be carried by traditional forms (Munslow & Rosenstone, 2004). By using this confessional approach the historian, like any other writer, cannot write outside literary conventions altogether but creates variations on conventional tropes. In these ‘quest narrative’ sections, in the classical definition, the narrator unconsciously re-enacts a pattern from mythology – a ritual journey of descent (represented by the conflict to resolve an intellectual and emotional problem) and rebirth (finding answers) (Berryman, 1987). The reader is taken on both a physical journey described in chronological order -- in this case from New England to Quebec and then onto London -- and an emotional one which requires moments of psychic and intellectual transformation. My ‘quest’, as identified by Burns (2011) was to confront my own conflicted and unstable national identity through an understanding of Esther Wheelwright’s.

However, in the book’s introduction an emotional register is struck not by the ambiguity of my national identity but by the connection between my mother Tish Wheelwright’s wartime experience and Esther Wheelwright’s. Both lived through a war during childhood and both were separated from their families at age seven. My mother was a British ‘war guest’ (an arrangement of private fostering) in Toronto from 1939 to 1945 where she lived with family friends:

At the age of twelve, she was sent back to England. But her mother seemed a stranger after such a long separation, and she never settled there. I was always haunted by my mother’s story of that terrible rupture and its powerful echoes of Esther’s life. My mother’s experience was linked with my fascination for my eighteenth-century ancestor (Wheelwright, 2011a: 6-7).

While I suggest the fusing between Esther’s story and my mother’s happened in childhood, in reality it was an adult reflection. I worded this sentence to invoke the connection for the reader’s benefit and to bridge the distance between an eighteenth-century Puritan girl and her twenty-first century readers.

Narrative convention requires such shaping of ideas and evidence; a smoothing out process of editorial choices ignored material that interrupted the story's flow. In *Esther* this included my neglecting to acknowledge in the 'quest' chapters where interviews were originally conducted for the 2006 BBC Radio Four documentary or that two trips to Quebec were conflated into a single journey. Moreover, in creating a journey of discovery, I posed as an amateur rather than a professional writer and historian, putting the reader on an equal footing to reinforce a sense of simultaneous investigation. As Burns comments:

The approach allows Wheelwright to stay neutral in recounting historical facts while still injecting emotion into the story, a style that should appeal to even reluctant readers of history. Wheelwright's care in exploring multiple viewpoints lends her book nuance and emphasizes the fact that here can be no definitive statements when three separate societies . . . are so closely linked in one person (Burns, 2011).

Clearly the biographical chapters, which are rich in fact and detail, are not 'neutral' but alongside the 'quest' chapters appear to be more distanced and therefore, more objective.

Another area where the 'quest' chapters conform to narrative expectations is in the shaping of the narrator as a flawed, and therefore, believable and sympathetic character. In the prologue, the narrator describes exploring Belmont cemetery in Quebec City, en route to the airport where she is due to catch a flight home to London. Written as reportage, the narrator here is self-deprecating (sweaty and dishevelled) describing her anxiety about missing her flight and using her frustration as to engage the reader's sympathy: 'I begin musing on the complexities of historical research: 'The thing about trying to recover someone's biographical details is that it can turn into an obsession . . . ' (Wheelwright, 2011: 6) There are intimate details given throughout these sections about the author missing her children and a reference to being a single mother, the excitement of reading Esther's handwriting, reflections on her national identity, arguments with interviewees and reactions to events. These

sections demonstrate most clearly the cross-over between the rhetorical techniques I employed as a literary journalist and my approach to literary history.²⁰

However, these narrator-as-character sections work in conjunction with – and the story could not be sustained without – the alternating historical chapters that are much longer in length, roughly 5,000 words each. These chapters were written in a conventional biographical style with endnotes and detailed references to the sources consulted. The text was divided into three parts: the first section chronicled Esther's early life in Wells, Maine, her captivity and childhood with the Abenakis and her entry into the Ursuline convent school; a second section described her early years within the convent and her progress from novice to her renewed contact with her family in the 1750s; the final part explored how she and her Ursuline sisters survived the English bombardment of their convent in 1759, her election and reign as Mother Superior, her role negotiating with the new British governor and her relationship with the Wheelwright family in her declining years. The epilogue, which brings together the two styles and narrative voices, uses the first person narrator to explore the significance of *Esther's* legacy for my family, and her meaning as a significant historical figure in Canadian history.

This is, however, a contradictory approach. Throughout the book I appear as both an amateur and naïve investigator in the 'quest' chapters and a professional writer and historian in the biographical chapters. I am therefore asking the reader to hold both of these contradictory ideas and to regard them as intertwined, leading to a more honest and richer text. Given the interest in family history and in 'empathy-driven reality history' (De Groot, 2009: 74), this was another way that *Esther* conformed to narrative conventions. As readers (and television audiences) are increasingly willing to accept history told via a narrator with a deep emotional connection to a subject, my narrative role in *Esther* therefore appears not as contradictory but conventional. What is glossed over in my book is the long, slow tedium of research, my reading of a vast body of secondary material, and the many redrafts of the manuscript of which my research trips represented only a tiny moment. When efforts are made to smooth out

²⁰ Between 2000-2008 my mainstay as a freelance journalist was writing profiles of authors for *The Independent*, *Image Magazine* (Ireland), *Scotland on Sunday* and for *New Books Magazines*. During this period I wrote more than 200 profiles which included interviews with Umberto Eco, Doris Lessing, Alice Sebold, Susan Sontag, Mario Vargas Llosa, among others.

the narrative by disguising the complexity of the subject and the professional demands of interpreting and shaping the material, the history itself may become distorted.

4. 4. Use of evidence in establishing professional authority

The research for *Esther* presented a series of challenges that are probably more familiar to historians than to literary journalists since their respective sources are selected to perform different narrative functions. There were two main areas where sources were lacking for *Esther* and for which there was no clear methodology. The first came from the Abenaki lack of a written language and the paucity of material that would enable me to recreate Esther's five years with them. One area that particularly concerned me was whether Esther maintained contact with her adopted family after she left the village of Odanak in 1708. This was an immense frustration as her nephew Nathanael Wheelwright on his visits with his aunt in the 1750s hinted at Esther's continued contact with the Abenakis throughout her life but there was no evidence to support this speculation. The second 'archival black hole' as I described it in the book, was the absence of Esther Wheelwright's autobiographical writing. Although the Ursuline archives have preserved her letters written as Mother Superior and even one letter to her mother Mary Snell, there is nothing personal or intimate that would give insight into her interior world. Given these silences, any attempt to write a narrative drama of Esther's life was in danger of misrepresenting her thoughts, feelings and attitudes. In many ways her *mentalité* was beyond my reach.

Although there was no clear way to investigate Esther's life, I was able to consult a wide range of primary and secondary sources that have addressed both problems. Fortunately, Esther's great grandfather the Reverend John Wheelwright was a Cambridge-educated friend of Oliver Cromwell for whom there are published biographies as well as mentions in genealogical society publications. In effect, I was building on the published sources of New England's history and on primary documents from public and private sources related to the Wheelwright family. More than in my previous books, I consulted visual materials such as maps, diagrams, illustrations and paintings. For example, an eighteenth-century fur trader's sketch of Odanak, the Abenakis village where Esther lived from 1705-1708, led me to

understand that Esther was once again living within a military garrison (Wheelwright, 2011a, p.74). This was a crucial insight as it enabled me to draw a parallel between her parents' home in Wells, where she also lived within a garrison which was under regular bombardment, and the replication of that fear in her adopted home. An oil portrait of Esther, painted during her tenure as Mother Superior of the Ursuline convent and given as a gift to a niece, also provided with a powerful visual image and symbol of her enduring connection with the Wheelwright family (Wheelwright, op. cit:12).

This material enabled me to construct a context, rich in detail, for Esther's life, in lieu of her own accounts. Another piece of luck was gaining access to the sermon that Father Vincent Bigot gave at Esther's investiture in 1712, which provided a graphic account of her capture, her life among the Abenakis and her conversion. However, this document was written as a public sermon, to celebrate Esther's entry into a cloistered order and as a testimony to Catholic supremacy over the Wheelwright's Puritanism. Moreover, the surviving sermon is a nineteenth century hand written transcription of the eighteenth century French original and has not survived in extant. As this suggests, the 'truth' of Esther's experience is mediated through several layers in such a document and cannot be taken at face value.

For the Abenakis, the best source was *The Jesuit Relations*, a series of ethnographic documents written by the Jesuit missionaries, to record their conversions and to persuade French donors to support their work. The 73 volume set which was translated into English and edited by Reuben Gold Thwaites in the late nineteenth century is available online and well-annotated. The observations of the Jesuits Fathers Vincent Bigot, his brother Jacques Bigot and Father Sebastian Rales, who all lived at Norridgewock, provided details about the context of Esther's life there. Other sources written by nineteenth and early twentieth century anthropologists, by contemporary ethnographers and even journalists, provided useful background material. One extremely useful source was the Boston Public Library's online newspaper collection that contained first-hand accounts of early eighteenth century raids, details about the Wheelwright's business transactions and even reports about the Abenakis. Elsewhere, contemporary captive accounts, including those from Esther's relations, gave insight into her experience. However, these were often written (or dictated to others) after

they had returned home and often conformed to particular literary conventions about religious redemption so had to be read within their historical context (Demos, 1994).

While these disparate sources enabled the biographical chapters to include some detailed scenes of Esther's life, other literary journalistic techniques, such as the use of dialogue, detailed character portraits and immersion, proved impossible. *Esther* illustrates the difficulty of producing a 'literary history' as Sims defines it. For example, his essay on 'The Personal and the Historical: Literary Journalism and Literary History', examines the methodology of Michael Norman, author of *These Good Men: Friendships Forged from War*. Norman explains his research in writing a contemporary military history: 'I'm looking for . . . moments that I can pull out of history and recreate on the page in such a way that what's going on become an actual simulacrum of experience itself. The reader must enter the text to finish the text' (Sims, 2012: 213). Presuming that Norman is substituting 'history' for 'sources', he reiterates the problem that many historical writers face: that documents (or oral histories) are not necessarily reliable; they are contradictory, they are strange and they often pose more questions than they answer. In the case of deeply historical figures like Esther and others for whom sources are sparse, the writer must rely more on their imagination to read the palimpsest. The more an author relies on his or her imagination, the greater the chance of misrepresenting or distorting the subject's lived experience.

4.5. Use of contemporary interviews to reflect on historical events and people

The challenge of uncovering details about aboriginal people given the paucity of written material about their eighteenth century lives and world-view is one shared by scholars in history, ethnography, ethno-history and archaeology. Morrison argues that the study of Indian history poses difficult intellectual questions so that it becomes critical that scholars discuss what they study and *how* they study it. Moreover, in exploring new ways to study ethno-history, academics are required to experiment with their methodology which, for Morrison, includes oral traditions which offer insight into attitude and values (Morrison, 1985). Wiseman, an archaeologist and Abenakis Tribal Council member, describes the oral history he has conducted as 'strands' of language which draw upon 'the remembered wisdom of the Abenakis

community' (Wiseman, 2001: xv). Academics in these fields often use techniques more commonly associated with literary journalism, including oral testimony and imaginative reconstructions. Examples from these scholars proved useful in my approach to *Esther* since they provided me with models of new approaches to a shared epistemological problem.

An example worth exploring in detail is McBride's dramatised inter-generational portrait of Abenakis women's lives over four centuries in her collective biography, *Women of the Dawn* (McBride, 1999). Based on referenced sources, McBride's work challenged stereotypical views of American Indian women by showing 'the vital roles that Native women played in the cultural survival of tribes' (McBride, 1999: xi, xii). Her stylistic use of dramatised sections attempts to redress the lack of source materials and openly acknowledges the role imagination plays in her process. She shares Morrison and Wiseman's appreciation of oral testimony and bases dramatic scenes on interviews with Abenakis and Penobscot women. As she writes: 'I cannot overemphasize the value of consulting the present-day descendants of the people one writes about from the past' (McBride, 1999: 135).

McBride argues that without these techniques the experience of Aboriginal peoples, especially women, would remain hidden or distorted. However, despite a section on methodology and research at the end of the volume, her process remains opaque, with no information about the relationship between the oral testimony and McBride's insights into the internal world of her fictionalised characters. One might question to what extent the interviews can offer an understanding of women in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, whose beliefs and ideas were shaped by such vastly different forces. What remains problematic is whether McBride's representation of the Abenakis women, even with its openly acknowledged subjectivity, offers a representation of lived experience that is any less ethno-centric than other historiographic methods.

Moving beyond a Western or Euro-centric perspective is a complex undertaking that requires scholars to think creatively about what constitutes a reliable source. Oral testimony in McBride, Morrison and Wiseman's examples, are taken not from professional historians but from Abenakis people who embody their tribe's history.

Taking Morrison's point that Abenakis traditions have been remarkably consistent over several centuries, my methodology included interviews with an Abenakis museum curator and a historical re-enactor to comment on Indian attitudes towards captives (Morrison, 1984). Patrick Cote, a curator at the Musée de Abenakis on the Indian reservation at Odanak, Quebec, guided me round the collection, commenting on Esther's captive experience as he showed me the material objects of her world such as snowshoes, wigwams and tomahawks. Like Morrison and McBride, I asked Cote to explain Abenakis attitudes, in this case their treatment of English child captives, and asked him to speculate on Esther's treatment by her captors. His comments offered useful details and an Abenakis perspective on events that, in turn, prompted me to interrogate my own emotional reactions. As I wrote: 'Despite the [museum's] clean, warm images of the wigwam and Patrick's assurances about the humane treatment of English girls by their adoptive families, I can't shrug off Esther's status as a captive' (Wheelwright, 2011a: 68). This resistance, however, provided an insight that in history, 'you are forced to look beyond an individual story to understand the actors' options and choices within a given context' (ibid), acknowledging that my ancestors had broken treaties and driven the Abenakis from their ancestral lands. My reaction recorded here was an attempt to reflect on my ambiguous responses to the tragedy of Esther's story and on the wider political and religious forces that lead to her captivity.

However, as a reflection of my struggle to find an appropriate form and style for *Esther*, the interviews with Patrick Cote, with the historian Denys Déloge and with the Ursuline archivist Sister Marie Marchand, were all originally conducted for a BBC Radio Four documentary (BBC, 2005). The interviews represented a moment of cross-over in terms of narrative conventions where I was using these experts to provide factual information and emotional content. Given that all three were interviewed in significant locations in Quebec (in Cote's case, in the village where Esther had lived) and in a sense, were asked to speak for their respective constituents, (the Abenakis, the Ursulines, the French Catholics of Quebec), their presence in the text added more than simply the content they supplied. Moreover, my interaction with them, as Esther Wheelwright's relative rather than as a more distanced historian, also worked to heighten the emotional exchange. Although Sister Marie Marchand asked to have her name removed from the manuscript before publication, I was allowed to

include her parting remark: ‘Just write something good for our mother’ (Wheelwright, 2011a: 246). This quote was used to convey my excitement at making this connection with a living part of Esther Wheelwright’s history and to explain my shared sense of mission with Sister Marie at bringing ‘our mother’s’ story to light.

All of the interviewees were in a sense used to represent more than their historical expertise and, for the aboriginal historians this was especially significant given the lack of source material. My oral testimony in the historical/biographical chapters also included an interview with Ken Hamilton (Wheelwright, 2011a) whose credentials as a historian are based on acquired knowledge and on lived experience. Hamilton appeared as a historical re-enactor in the Canadian drama-documentary about Esther Wheelwright and was interviewed for the BBC documentary as ‘a living history interpreter of Ottawa descent’ (BBC, 2005). The performances of historical events by ‘living historians’ or re-enactors are, however, regarded by historians as quite distinct from more conventional forms of historiography (Agnew, 2004). Hamilton, who appears as an Abenakis warrior in the annual re-enactment of the 1704 raid on Deerfield, may be understood as ‘performing’ an historical investigation where his lived experience of the event (and others like it) and his Ottawa heritage lend credibility to his interpretations. While historians have mixed views on re-enactors as historical experts, Agnew argues that their engagement in dramatic recreations is a political act that gives a voice to marginalised people in the tradition of E. P. Thompson and Raphael Samuels (Agnew, 2004). Moreover, she notes that re-enactors by supplying ‘knowledge entertainingly and authoritatively presented’ (op. cit.: 330) address the failed premise of academic history to educate the wider public about its significance.

This is especially relevant for Abenakis history where, as Morrison and McBride have already illustrated, interviews can provide evidence about attitudes and insights from people with a strong tradition of oral history. This methodology lies outside conventional historiography because, like the use of a ‘naïve’ narrator, it blurs the boundaries between the expert assumed to have total knowledge of a subject, and a witness who has acquired information and detail through lived experience. But while historians grapple with the authenticity of such testimonies, literary historians do not necessarily share these concerns. While the latter are ‘informed and animated by the

central journalistic commitment to the truth' (Yagoda, 1997: 13), the sources that supply that 'truth' are given greater leeway. The use of interviews in *Esther* therefore provides an illustration of my approach towards developing a hybrid form. I combined the ethno-historians' desire to move away from an ethno-centrist history by employing oral testimony from non-traditional authorities while respecting the journalistic need for engaging storytelling that draws on a wide range of sources.

4.5. Conclusion

This chapter has explored what the genre boundaries between literary journalism and historiography contribute to an understanding of epistemological differences in these fields using examples drawn from *Esther*. Rhetorical techniques have traditionally defined these differences but in response to changing epistemological concerns within history, boundaries of form have begun to blur. Post-modernist historians have increasingly looked to other prose genres to engage readers and to acknowledge with greater authenticity their methodology and research constraints. Their use of techniques more commonly associated with literary journalism, such as a first person narrator, immersive details, emotional engagement with their readers, and the use of contemporary interviews, all attempt to make their writing more accessible and their research methods transparent. Moreover, inquiries into the history of colonial women and native peoples in North America have demanded the use of innovative investigative techniques to illuminate the lives of previously marginal subjects.

It was only by using a combination of methodologies from both historiography and literary journalism to create the hybrid of 'literary history' that I was able to write a biography of my ancestor Esther Wheelwright. Like many other historians within this field, I would have learnt that without an interdisciplinary approach, the paucity of source material would have made it impossible to reconstruct her life and to make it relevant to a contemporary reader. While in *Amazons and Military Maids* (Wheelwright, 1989) and in *The Fatal Lover* (Wheelwright, 1992), it was relatively easy to create a historical space for these subjects, Esther proved infinitely more difficult. To understand Esther's extraordinary transgression across three such vastly different cultures with such divergent philosophical attitudes could only be achieved by reading deeply into ethno-historical material.

Moreover, the sources I consulted for *Esther* challenged the notion of what constitutes a professional historian and how expertise is authenticated. My inclusion of contemporary interviews forced me to balance the need for insight into Abenakis attitudes and ideas with the need for verifiable data. By quoting subjects such as the re-enactor Ken Hamilton and the Abenakis museum curator Patrick Cote, I signalled to my reader my attempts to take Esther's story beyond an ethno-centric interpretation. Within my 'quest' chapters, I acknowledged the uncertainty of my factual discoveries, indicating to the reader that with limited source material a historian or a literary journalist can only provide his/her best interpretation of events. Hence, the narrative closure at the end of *Esther* is about my personal insight into the racist and gendered interpretation of this story by my Wheelwright relatives and my desire to provide an alternative. Finally, I acknowledged the ambiguities of history that remain unresolved: 'Now I can see better what lies beneath the official documents and obscuring institutional histories, can see better how to interpret the subtle, symbolic meaning of silver spoons, fake family crests and painful silences' (Wheelwright, 2011a: 271).

What I hoped to guard against, as any historian must, is that by taking on such difficult but significant subjects, a balance is struck between the reader's emotional and intellectual engagement. If narrative historians, or Sim's 'literary historians' meaning historians who use literary techniques – a category in which I include myself – want to enter a debate about their subject with others, they need to make their methodology transparent. But if they wish to engage their readers honestly, they may need to acknowledge their subjectivity and along with it, the uncertainty that exists in factual discovery while anchoring their story in an external reality that is persuasive and trustworthy (Hartsock, 2000: 247). Authenticity will be lost, of course, if the writer 'emotes-to-order' and, without this careful regard, the text may descend into solipsism, fiction or even into propaganda.

I began this chapter by questioning the paradigmatic shifts since the 1980s and speculating on how much the post-modernists have actually influenced how academic history is produced and written. My use of new approaches to the shared challenges of history and literary journalism in *Esther* may represent a way forward. By resisting

the pressure to provide a narrative that divorces the text from its 'truth claim', a literary historian can still open up and explore distant historical subjects by acknowledging their limitations. Perhaps the limitations themselves can become part of the story and force readers to understand and appreciate the complexities of history. This 'new deal with reality' (Greenberg, 2010) that is taking place almost everywhere in the media emphasizes the need not just for authenticity but for an intellectual honesty to accompany it.

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Chapter 5. Conclusion

Several major research themes have emerged from this review of my working practice. Over the span of three decades there have been significant changes in how history and literary journalism are produced, how they engage with readers and how their professions are defined. This period has seen a considerable growth of interest in history as a popular subject that has coincided with a proliferation of bestselling non-fiction titles and the establishment of interest in literary journalism as a subject for critical study. While my research questions about how subjects can move from the margins to the mainstream, how evidence is identified and made transparent for readers and the role of an author's subjectivity have been explored in this review, the answers are always in flux. There are, however, identifiable challenges to how non-fiction texts are written and read that appear to overlap and may warrant further investigation.

In the context of academic scholarship my three main areas of research – women in the military, gender and intelligence, captivity narratives – gained acceptance in areas that were often highly conservative and resistant to new methodologies. By using innovative techniques in researching marginal women whose lives had previously been neglected as impervious to serious research, my writing was often considered ground-breaking. My books opened up subjects for further investigation as evidenced by the number of scholarly works that have referenced them. *Amazons* contributed to a flourishing discussion about historical understandings of sexual identity and gender through research about women who refused to accept their socially assigned roles. *The Fatal Lover* was the precursor of other studies addressing the involvement of women in the intelligence services and of the meaning attached to the 'spy courtesan'. Finally, the interest in *Esther* from academics suggests how far scholars have moved in accepting a multi-disciplinary approach to research, to theoretical frameworks and to presentation of their work.

Moreover, these subjects, which might have previously been considered part of an obscure debate among a few historians, writers and commentators, were brought to a much wider public than is normally the case for scholarly works. The impact of my books can be demonstrated not only through the number of book reviews they

received but by their currency in popular culture as subjects for television and radio documentaries, plays and even in film.

My scholarly and journalistic contributions in this review have highlighted possible areas for further research. One centres on the matter of how journalists identify sources (evidence if you will), how these sources are documented, and the process of investigation is made transparent. Although literary journalists on the whole write for general, rather than specialised, audiences in the digital age consumers of our writing can do their own research and can instantly respond to our work. Perhaps style and a convincing narrative voice are no longer enough to win and maintain a reader's trust. There are recent examples of how practices in narrative nonfiction may be responding to these changes; for instance, Kramer and Call (2007) suggest that the meticulous disclosure of sources has become more common. Katherine Boo's detailed description of her methodology, interviewing slum dwellers in Mumbai for her narrative non-fiction book, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* (2012) is a case in point, while Artur Domoslawski's biography of literary journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski (2012), as a kind of riposte to his former mentor's distorting of evidence, places himself in the text to question the value of his sources. The French writer Laurent Binet offers a fusion of history and fiction in *HHhH* (2013), based on the assassination attempt against Reinhard Heydrich, incorporating questions about historical accuracy and literary theory into the narrative.

These new attempts to deal with perennial issues regarding evidence have become more pressing as digital sources have expanded. However, another vital question concerns how readers engage with texts where sources are not presented as offering definitive evidence and where they are invited to evaluate their authenticity. In reviewing my writing, it became apparent that the question of how literary journalism or literary history is to be read, or indeed listened to or watched, requires further research. In a period when non-fiction book sales, including biographies, are expected to compete with those of historical fiction, writers and publishers are extending the idea of the 'cross-over' text. However, this is deeply problematic for texts and for documentary productions where the conventional definition of a 'truth claim' is violated and the writer, without signaling her intentions, takes liberties in dramatising people, places and events.

While it could be argued that such dramatising techniques are regressive – Mata Hari’s biographers invented dialogue and fictionalised scenes – editors at major publishing houses are currently promoting such practices. In response to my reservations about failing to signal where she had invented dialogue in her biography of Pearl Witherington, Carole Seymour-Jones (2013, personal communication) indicated that this technique of turning indirect speech into direct speech had come from her editor. Furthermore, she claimed her editor said that many publishers now are making similar requests of their biographers to make their writing more ‘relevant’ to readers.

This appears to give biographers the licence to violate the code shared by literary journalists and historians that they must not invent. Moreover, in taking liberties and violating authorial promises, the text may become discredited or transferred out of the category (Lounsberry, 1990: xvi). Whether British non-fiction editors have decided such risks are worth taking for potential increase in sales is a moot point. For the scholars of literary journalism (of which biography is surely a subset) and narrative history, how such decisions are made and whether readers believe that dramatisation makes subjects more ‘relevant’ is an area for further consideration. When writers obfuscate their process or blur the boundaries between evidence and dramatisation, this seems to run counter to the experiments of the ‘good practice’ suggested by Binet, Boo and Domoslawk.

My review touched on the centrality of subjectivity to the establishment of professional authority. This is especially important to historians who are currently engaged in debates in the UK over the highly political issue of how future readers should be taught history. In England, for example, the government’s new draft History Curriculum was widely criticised in 2013 by the British Academy, the Royal Historical Society and the Historical Association for being too narrow, nationalistic and for being ‘angled at political history with hardly any social history’ (Eales, 2013). Included in the phrase ‘social history’ is, of course, women’s history so that even after the long fought battles of the late twentieth century to ensure that history would encompass the lives of marginalised groups and emphasise individual experience alongside broad movements, a conservative reaction may have set in. How then, in

the face of such changes can contemporary historians of women's lives ensure they produce texts that will appeal to readers who have some context for, and perhaps sympathy with, their subjects? It seems even more imperative than ever that the process of historical investigation is not glossed over or simplified so that readers understand the relationship between evidence, analysis and narrative.

The emphasis on political versus social history also suggests a move back towards an earlier notion of an 'objective truth about the past' that most historians have long since discarded. At a point where there are interesting experiments in form and much research conducted about the nuances of research and the subjectivity of interpretation, what underlies the government's suggested changes appears regressive. This is taking place as the debate about the value of popular history, which ranges from re-enactment societies to big-budget historical dramas to genealogy websites, circles around how historians should engage with these new media. Priestland (2013) suggests that historians are now so careful of stressing the ways in which identities flow, overlap or are contested that they find it difficult to communicate their analyses to a broader public. He fears that this leaves the field clear for 'the crude simplifiers and polemicists' (ibid). How then can historians retain the value of their methods and skills, while finding new ways of reaching general readers? The examples of popular biography and the proposed curriculum suggest just how difficult this process has become. Perhaps the answer lies in ensuring that these ethical issues continue to be debated within both fields so the process of writing is regarded within and outside academy as vital to producing works of excellence.

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