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# Historic Passion

## The Other Place

*by Julie Wheelwright*

A few years ago, while visiting my ageing parents before they moved from the family home of more than forty years, I asked my mother for a book. Bound in dun-coloured cloth spotted with age, its dust-cover long since lost and its binding frayed, my inheritance was Holling Clancy Holling's exquisitely illustrated *Paddle-to-the-Sea*, which now sits on my writing desk in London and links my mother's childhood with mine. Even before I could read, I spent hours travelling with Paddle, a carved figure in deerskins, his hair thickly braided and trailing an eagle feather, who canoes from Nipigon, Ontario to the 'Big Salt Water' of the Atlantic. In the story, his creator, 'an Indian boy', inscribes a message on the underside of his foot-long birch-bark carving, asking whoever finds the little traveller to return him to the water. The boy places Paddle on top of a rise and waits for the snowmelt to carry him away. Paddle follows inland waterways to Lake Superior where, en route, he escapes a forest fire, is transported by dog sled and sea container, freezes in Lake Huron and slips over Niagara Falls into Lake Ontario and through the St. Lawrence to the Grand Banks.

The short, simply written chapters are accompanied on every page by vibrantly coloured illustrations of Paddle's perilous journey through an often hostile natural landscape. My mother's copy, published in 1941, was equally fascinating for its pencilled inscription, 'Goodbye and Good Luck Tish, from Andrea and Barbara, May 13, 1944'. I seem always to have known that my English mother, who had been a 'war guest' since 1939, aged seven, was given this book by her classmates when she left her Toronto school and later made her own journey back across 'the Big Salt Water'. This gift was uncannily appropriate as Clancy Holling's illustrations depict the tiny Paddle's precarious movement through vast landscapes where he encounters ever-present dangers. Artist Margaret Haydon, writing in *Ceramics Monthly*<sup>1</sup> (2005) describes how Paddle inspired her to spend a lifetime creating ceramic boats: 'It is a small presence moving through a large and overwhelming world. Journey, ideas of exploration, survival and the possibility of destruction are strongly evoked ... Here

was a small boat on a continuous journey within the heightened and symbolic presence of life and death.’

This was my mother’s story: a ‘Paddle’ who navigated an alien landscape, twice in her childhood, and again as an adult when my family emigrated from England to Canada. But employing my historian’s eye, now when I skim Holling’s text I wince at its portrait of First Nation’s characters as mute, passive and silently heroic. Paddle is an object to be handled by the European Canadians he encounters on his journey: Jo, the French lumberjack (himself a stereotype) who rescues him from a chainsaw, the fishermen who release ‘the red Injun’ from their nets, the elderly woman who adds him to her collection of curios. Like his un-named boy creator, these First Nations characters are without subjectivity and only through their encounters with the settlers do they play a role in the story of Canada’s nation-building. The text illustrates perfectly Thomas King’s identification of ‘the Indian’ in popular culture who ‘could be a cultural treasure, a piece of North American antiquity<sup>ii</sup>’. A mythic figure who could reflect the strength and freedom of an emerging continent’.

Reading it as a child I was oblivious to the larger story of colonization that was the background to my family’s arrival at Calgary as new English immigrants in the early 1960s. My father, a GP who had trained on a naval scholarship at Oxford and then at Guy’s Hospital, London, had previously worked for the Colonial Service in Bermuda. Like other women of her generation, my mother, with a degree in English literature from Trinity College Dublin (her second choice after failing to gain a place at Oxbridge), had given up her professional ambitions to have a family. We were her life’s project and photo albums chart how my parents, as they gradually sloughed off English formality, reinvented themselves in their adopted country. An early entry records my youngest sister’s christening, taken within a year of our arrival. My mother wears a formal grey suit and boxy hat perched atop her ‘do’ while her children are caught mid-squirm in their Sunday best. The eldest at age four is my brother, in a navy jacket with white piping and tie, his hair firmly parted at the side with the aid of water and a sharp-toothed comb.

At Ghost Lake, three years later, the four Wheelwright children stand in the shallows as the cold, clear water laps at our ankles. Oblivious to the leeches and slippery rocks beneath the surface I grin into the camera, big-toothed and dimple-cheeked, my older brother, clowning, crouches down to fit beneath my arm while my sisters stand on either side. We sport jagged pudding-bowl haircuts and shorts with

shirts and dark-coloured cotton jackets; my brother in paisley and my baby sister in someone's too-big hand-me-downs. My parents are out of shot, as if the spectacular scenery has swallowed them while their offspring claim the lake as a playground. To our English relations, this was evidence that we had adopted the norms of our host nation and 'gone native'.

Despite my memory of a wild, uninhabited land, breath-taking in its majesty, in reality the lake was created in 1929 with waters diverted from the Bow River at the completion of the Ghost Dam, on land leased from the Stoney-Nakoda Nation. Uninterrogated, this childhood memory sounds a false note as I realize now the significance of connecting that seemingly empty space with the Stoney-Nakoda Nation whose people performed their cultural past at the Calgary stampede, or with the story of the mute and passive Paddle. Alongside the memory, I carry within me Zora Neale Hurston's desire for 'formalized curiosity', to prod and poke at that history to mend the gap between the lived and the imagined pasts.

Rather than understanding my childhood within a colonial context, with its lopsided power relations, Englishness embodied what went before and its constant presence awakened my historical consciousness. The Second World War ended only fifteen years before my birth, and had shaped my parents' childhoods in different ways. My father had lost his elder brother Irvine, a nineteen-year-old RAF pilot when he was killed when his plane was shot down over the English Channel on 30 May 1940 and he was declared missing, presumed dead, for two years. My mother had been sent from Hampshire on a troopship in 1939 to live with a foster family in Toronto for the duration, before returning, a changed creature. These details came to me first as stories (my mother often narrating my father's) but they required investigation since I had no relatives to corroborate the details and no memory of my parents' country.

I was, however, surrounded by the physical evidence linking me to my absent English family: my grandfather Wing Commander Jack Wheelwright's watercolours of the dirigibles he flew and, in the basement, the scale model had had made of one. There were trunks of scrapbooks that once belonged to long-dead relatives who posed in spotted, sepia photos at Mediterranean seashores, on Swiss skiing holidays and aboard sailing ships in Asian ports. After the death of my maternal grandfather Major Charles Ball, in 1972, we inherited objects from his wars: a copy of the Treaty of Versailles, acquired when he was appointed to assist in demilitarizing the Rhineland;

the bearskin coat he wore to cross the Atlantic in an unheated plane to Nevada (where he established a magnesium processing plant for the British government) and a Christmas card from 1938 with a photograph of Hitler shaking Chamberlain's hand after signing the Munich agreement. These artefacts made history vividly alive to me. The more I learned about the past that had produced my parents, and their reasons for leaving England, the better I could understand my place in the white settler world of our suburb.

England was the Other Place, the land of extended family who remained foreign. Calgary had yet to be transformed by oil money and seemed brand-new, from our aluminium-clad home perched on the edge of the newly cleared prairie to my father's GP practice in a shopping mall and our recently-opened primary school. When a relative sent me a Ladybird book for Christmas, my child's eye interpreted Peter and Jane's lives – their formal clothes and table manners, their be-suited parents and neatly organized High Street – as enticingly exotic. These children were living my parallel life; if my parents had not rejected it, along with their war-ruptured histories, I would have led that cosy Peter and Janet existence.

History was inextricably bound up with trying to understand our adopted home while always looking back at the country of my birth, a place from which my parents were estranged. Our alienation was made plain when my mother's parents came for a rare visit in 1965. Before their arrival my siblings and I were expected to know what Peter and Jane might take for granted. We were schooled in 'manners'. The elderly grandparents arrived in suits of shiny, steel-coloured materials and there were rules that we could only surmise but which had to be observed to save my parents from embarrassment. Of course we failed miserably at this.

In my single surviving memory of my grandmother's only visit we sit side-by-side on the front steps of our home on a brilliant autumn afternoon. I don't trust this memory because my grandmother suffered from arthritis, our steps were shallow and her perching next to me in matching tweeds and pearls, seems improbably informal. But the image persists. She clutches a perspiring bottle of Coke in her bent hands. Together, we peer at it with intense concentration; I wave a can-opener in my hand saying, 'Granny I know there's a way to open the bottle with this thing'. This was directed at a woman who, so the stories go, never boiled an egg in her life. In that Other Place, the rich repository of history, there was staff.

From that well of displacement my mother Tish, an aspiring writer, told her story of crossing the Atlantic. I seemed always to have known that the ship carrying my mother and her elder brother Peter was chased by German submarines and when they landed in New York their American guardian, who was meant to meet them, had gone AWOL. They made their own way by train to Toronto; small presences navigating through a large and overwhelming world. My mother, who had only known nannies, nurseries and boarding school, loved her foster family and the local school where she was feted as a representative of plucky England. Our pedestrian childhood challenges were met by my mother's mantra, 'You think that's difficult, we were chased by Germans subs crossing the Atlantic ...'

The historian and novelist Ian Mortimer has written that although some historians equate imagination with intellectual weakness, it is essential to any great work of literature, including history.<sup>iii</sup> I endorse this view and appreciated that my mother's narratives stimulated my inner life and provoked my intellectual curiosity. I baulked at the lack of concrete detail and other witnesses to fill in the gaps in her stories; why had she been sent away? Did she miss her parents and did they miss her? What did it mean to be 'at war'? What happened when she came back?

From densely-illustrated history books I moved on to the autobiographical fiction of *The Little House on the Prairie* series in which a loving white settler family establishes a home for themselves on the great, wide prairie. The parallel with my parents' perception of their 'Canadian adventure' is obvious although Pat Louw argues that post-colonial critics have read this classic series as a 'valourisation of the pioneering movement and subsequent displacement of indigenous peoples'<sup>iv</sup>. Among them is Frances W. Kaye writes, 'I honestly cannot read *The Little House on the Prairie* as other than apology for the "ethnic cleansing" of the Great Plains.' Kaye suggests that unless readers and critics 'ask different questions' of the text, we become complicit with the genocide of the Osage people that is the backdrop to Laura Ingalls Wilder's story.<sup>v</sup>

It is only through the interrogation of the past where one delves beneath the comforting patina of nostalgia, painful though that may be, that historical complexity and fresh insights are revealed. For me, that historical delving has required a re-reading of race but also of gender. As a child I wondered where, as a girl, to place myself in the stories that gripped me. If the adventures of Paddle or of Almanzo Wilder threatened to shut me out because of my gender, I projected myself into that

masculine space. I had been a 'tomboy' who preferred trousers to dresses, eschewed anything 'girly' and delighted in competing against my brother. I dreamed of being not Maid Marion but Robin Hood; it seemed simply a matter of changing the costume.

No wonder then that after I had moved to London in the mid 1980s, my first book turned to this theme. *Amazons and Military Maids: Women Who Dressed as Men in Pursuit of Life, Liberty and Happiness* (1989) traced the extraordinary lives of women who transcended the boundaries of their gender by swapping their identities. The book's genesis was the story of Isabelle Gunn, an Orcadian who stole her brother's clothes to disguise herself as John Fubister and enlist with the Hudson's Bay Company at Stromness in 1806. Although Isabelle as John canoed 1,800 miles through rough inland waterways to James Bay and even earned a pay rise, her female body proved her downfall. At the Hogmanay celebrations of 1807 at the Pembina fur-trading post on the Red River, Northwest Company Officer Alexander Henry took pity on an Orkney lad 'feeling indisposed' who bedded down on his hearth. Moments later, Henry describes in his journal, the boy 'stretched out his hands towards me, and in piteous tones begged me to be kind to a poor, helpless unfortunate Orkney girl, pregnant and actually in childbirth'.

Poor Isabelle! The adventure over, she was despatched home to Orkney where she was socially shunned for her son's illegitimate birth. Isabelle belonged to a hidden history of women who ventured into masculine spheres and proved that a gendered division of labour was a social construction. Among my discoveries was that of Flora Sandes, the rector's daughter who had left Surrey for the Balkans as a Red Cross nurse in 1914 and then became a soldier in the Serbian Army. Other women, it seemed, were operating in the theatres of war that had so preoccupied the youth of my grandfathers. Perhaps I saw in these cross-dressed Amazons a flicker of that same spirit that had driven my mother in her youth.

My next two books, written decades apart, further investigated female experiences of war. *The Fatal Lover: Mata Hari and the Myth of Women in Espionage* (1992) placed the espionage agent who was executed by the French in 1917 in the broader context of women's role within the intelligence services. Inevitably, it seemed, whatever part they played in gathering military information was sexualized and 'Mata Hari', stage name for the Dutch dancer Margaretha Zelle, became immortalized as an icon of female betrayal. The reality was much more

mundane but no less tragic: Zelle had followed the trajectory of other women who, through hard luck or bad marriages, ended up selling sex for money. Mata Hari had lost her family while still in her teens and, in a bid for financial security, married an abusive officer in the Dutch East Indies. She fled when she could and, in a marvellous twist on the fin-de-siecle story of ruined women, she became a celebrated dancer and French double-agent during the First World War. While adventuring had released her from domestic tyranny, however, her naïve attempt to operate within the treacherous world of espionage was her downfall.

More recently I drew upon my family history with *Esther: the Remarkable True Story of Esther Wheelwright: Puritan Child, Native Daughter, Mother Superior* (2011). My ancestor was taken captive, aged seven, by Wabanakis people from her staunchly Puritan Maine family in 1703 and lived in a Catholic mission in New France for five years. During my research, I was struck by the parallel with my mother's own experience of displacement which spanned the same childhood years as Esther's. But unlike my mother, Esther never returned to her Wheelwright family, converted to Catholicism and was baptised before undergoing another dramatic change of identity when her ransom was negotiated by the Jesuit, Father Bigot. With him, Esther canoed up the St. Lawrence to Quebec City where she lived with the colonial governor and his family before being sent to the local Ursuline convent school. Later she became the Mother Superior of the Ursulines and was instrumental in preserving the French Catholic institutions in Quebec after the city fell to General Wolfe's forces in 1759. Although the Wheelwrights across the border failed to bring her home, she inspired generations of my relations to pay homage to Esther at the Ursuline convent as she became the namesake to seven generations of Wheelwright women.

Esther's life spoke to me of multiple identities and how the centrality of her Wabankis identity had been rendered invisible, then recovered by later generations. It was a narrative of alienation from her once beloved family and spoke of her ability to survive through psychological adjustment. Like my mother, she was a child of war. And while I suspect that all historians read their lives, aspects of their personality, their trauma or their passions and obsessions through the subjects they choose to explore, when the subject *is* your kin, however distant, there is another dynamic at work. Writing history has taught me the value of challenging one's narrative subjectivity and that being 'ever the infidel' can equip one well for journeying into

the foreign countries of the past. From this point of difference, nothing is taken for granted, and evidence must be gathered to make inferences about people's thoughts and feelings.

The writing of *Esther* coincided with my father's descent into Alzheimer's and my regret, shared by so many children, that I had not asked him more about his family when I could. So now pieces of the past are snared in the plaques and tangles within my father's brain; memories have atrophied or, as he tells me, they've all been swept away. Only now can I appreciate my parents' need to put so much land and water between their new family and the country of the past. But they also provided me with the resources to construct my own stories, ones that I now read critically, and can pass on to my children and share with my siblings. There is a quiet strength in identities that can encompass more than one country, offer multiple perspectives and differing interpretations of the past. In this endeavour, I embrace my complicated, imperfect selves.

#### ABSTRACT:

This short memoir piece explores how growing up between cultures can produce a dual perspective on one's individual history, concepts of home and belonging. Here the author meditates on how her English parents' distancing of their past from 'the other place' made their children curious about their 'home' country and their relationship to it through the development of narratives. The essay also touches upon the perception of British immigrants to Canada as white settlers in the mid-twentieth century.

Dr Julie Wheelwright has been the programme director of the MA creative writing non-fiction at City, University of London since 2007. She is currently working with the Fries Museum in Leeuwarden on a major new exhibition about Mata Hari to coincide with the centenary of her execution this year. In addition to her writing on women's history, she has produced radio and television documentaries and written feature articles for newspapers and magazines in the UK and abroad.

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<sup>i</sup> Haydon, M. 'The journey continues', *Ceramics Monthly*, September 2005, Vol. 53 Issue 7, p42-44, 3p

<sup>ii</sup> King, T. (2003) *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*, Toronto: House of Anansi Press, p.79

<sup>iii</sup> Mortimer, I. (2012) Creative non-fiction – where does history go from here? The Friends of the National Archives, London, 12 June, 2012.

<sup>iv</sup> Louw, P. 'Contested Spaces in Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House in the Big Woods* and *Little House on the Prairie*, *Mousaion*, 29 (3) 2011, pp. 166-178.

<sup>v</sup> Kaye, FW, 'Little Squatter on the Osage Diminished Reserve: Reading Laura Ingalls Wilder's Kansas Indians, *Great Plains Quarterly*, 20 (2), Spring 2000, pp. 123-140