



***Penny Russell reflects on what she loves about history before she takes up her new post at Harvard University ...***

I didn't have to be a historian.

In my late adolescence I had a passion bordering on addiction for historical novels, especially historical romances. I read Jane Austen with an enthusiasm undimmed by endless repetitions. I developed an obsession for epistolary novels, for novels disguised as diaries (usually women's diaries), and even for actual, historical diaries that had been published as books. All this reading lay in a realm of imaginative pleasure that to my mind seemed far away from the sterner demands of history.

The world of female domestic experience that so appealed to my imagination seemed to have no place in the history I learned at school, which dealt with wars and the rise of nations, economic fluctuations and political processes, only occasionally – in ways I found difficult to grasp – touching on something I would now call social history. So my interests, talents and loyalties lay primarily with literature.

***Shock of the old***

Not until I began an Arts degree at Monash in 1979 did I begin to discover that the ordinary female lives I found so absorbing could come under the purview of History.

Though ultimately transformative, the discovery crept upon me by degrees. Studying medieval English history in my first year, I was swept for a term into the lives of the Pastons, a Norfolk family caught up in the vicissitudes of English politics during the so-called Wars of the Roses. I was fascinated by the way the rhythms of their family life adapted to the disruptions of the conflict; awed by Margaret Paston's adept, authoritative handling of crises large and small. And again and again I was jolted by the recognition that – although it appealed to me in the same way – this was not an imagined world.

Again and again the seductive illusion of familiarity, the comfortable aura of fiction, would dissolve to reveal what Tim Hitchcock has called the 'shock of the old' – persistent reminders of the real, never fully knowable, but significantly *different*, world of the past. It was my first encounter with the politics of emotion that Hitchcock associates with 'history from below', with its 'demand that the reader empathise with individual men and women caught in a whirl of larger historical changes'.<sup>1</sup> And it still didn't feel to me quite like 'real' history.

***Poet of the revolution***

My assumptions about the proper subject matter and methods of History were again challenged the following year, when in a course about the American War of Independence I was set an essay on the poems of Philip Freneau, called the 'Poet of the Revolution'. Here I could exercise talents I had developed in my literary studies to probe the sentiments and meanings of Freneau's delightfully banal verse – and at the same time could set his poems into their historical context in ways that my English tutors would have firmly discouraged.



Hitherto, I had found the ‘primary source exercises’ in my History courses dauntingly difficult, lacking the skills that could extract expansive meaning from a laundry list or a wages bill. But wallowing pleasurably in the volumes of Freneau’s verse was different. Here, I felt at home. During that year I had to choose between pursuing honours in History or English. My essay on Freneau was one of the reasons I chose History.

In my third year, I began to specialise in Australian history. Suddenly, traces of the history I was studying were all around me. And the primary sources I drew on for my essays felt *real* in a whole new way. That was the year I discovered the sensory pleasures of the archives: the tactile joy of opening one of those brown cardboard boxes to delve through the ordered chaos within, the shiver of excitement that comes when you untie the tape around a compact bundle of letters or ephemera, the musty tang that rises from the pages of a crumbling newspaper.

### ***Pleasurable discoveries and unexpected successes***

It was also the year that – notwithstanding my earlier enthusiasm for Margaret Paston – I discovered women’s history. When the Australian history course subdivided into specialist themes for a term, I chose the one on ‘Women’, and was thus introduced to the relatively new field of feminist historical scholarship in Australia.

Until then, I had assumed that feminism had little to do with me. Only by studying women’s history did I begin to realise just how precarious, how fortunate, was my right, as a woman, to the education I had taken for granted. And only in those tutorials did I find, at last, the confidence to speak for myself. I found, too, a history of other women for whom it had been difficult to speak in public, difficult to own the confidence or assume the authority that seemed to come so much more easily to men. Through women’s history I found a voice and a purpose.

Discovering the strenuous opposition and misogynist contempt women had encountered when they first demanded a political voice made me a feminist on their behalf, long before I was comfortable with the label on my own account. Realising just how little attention earlier historians had paid to those struggles, or to women’s experience more generally, made me a feminist scholar. I adopted with pride the badge of a ‘feminist historian’: not just a historian of feminism, but a scholar eager to correct the gendered imbalances of history. The rich, complex, largely unexplored terrain of women’s history beckoned to me irresistibly, and my personal politics were forged as I trod these new paths.

I didn’t have to be a historian. Thinking back now – and re-reading some of those formative essays of mine – I am reminded of choices once made and long forgotten, of opportunities seized or left lying, of disappointments that might have turned my path, of pleasurable discoveries and unexpected successes that confirmed it. I am reminded of inspirational, supportive, bracing and downright critical teachers, tutors and lecturers who all played a part as I gradually harnessed my interest in the particular, the personal, the domestic and feminine, and my preference for imaginative, subjective and creative forms of writing to the rigorous disciplinary demands of History – demands for evidence, structured argument, critical thinking, and a sense of the broader significance and patterns to be found in the small stories I so love. And I realise, too, that these days I reach automatically for historical interpretations,



so that when asked to reflect on my love of history, I dig back into my own past to trace a story of cause and effect, of the interplay of individual purpose, social forces and historical accident. I didn't have to be a historian. But these days, it feels as though I always was.

***Penny Russell is Bicentennial Professor of Australian History at the University of Sydney, with a particular interest in gender and colonial society. In 2016-17, she will be at Harvard University as the Gough Whitlam and Malcolm Fraser Professor of Australian Studies, where she will teach courses on emotions in history and the 'intimate frontiers' of nineteenth-century Australian society.***

### **Suggested Readings**

Dever, Maryanne, Sally Newman and Ann Vickery, *The Intimate Archive: Journeys Through Private Papers* Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2009.

Farge, Arlette, *The Allure of the Archives* [transl. Thomas Scott-Railton] New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013.

Grimshaw, Patricia, Marilyn Lake, Ann McGrath and Marian Quartly *Creating a Nation* Ringwood: McPhee Gribble, 1994.

Griffiths, Tom, 'The intriguing dance of history and fiction', *TEXT* Special Issue 28: Fictional histories and historical fictions: Writing history in the twenty-first century, (eds Camilla Nelson and Christine de Matos), April 2015.

<http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue28/Griffiths.pdf>

Hitchcock, Tim, 'Sources, Empathy and Politics in History from Below', in Mark Hailwood, Laura Sangha, Brodie Waddell and Jonathan Willis (eds), *The Voices of the People: An Online Symposium* (2015)

<https://manyheadedmonster.wordpress.com/voices-of-the-people/>

Russell, Penny 'Almost Believing: The Ethics of Historical Imagination', in Stuart Macintyre (ed) *The Historian's Conscience* Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2004.

Russell, Penny, *Savage or Civilised? Manners in Colonial Australia* Sydney: UNSW Press, 2010.

Steedman, Carolyn, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002.

---

<sup>1</sup>Tim Hitchcock, 'Sources, Empathy and Politics in History from Below', in Mark Hailwood, Laura Sangha, Brodie Waddell and Jonathan Willis (eds), *The Voices of the People: An Online Symposium* (2015) [<https://manyheadedmonster.wordpress.com/voices-of-the-people/>]