Cape, London, 1938); Andrew Lang, *Old Friends: Essays in Epistolary Parody* (Longmans, Green, London, 1890), pp. 123–134; Michael Dyne Bradley, *The Right Honourable Gentleman* (Samuel French, London, 1966; first copyright, 1962 under title, "An Element of Truth"). On *Belinda*, see also T. W. Cole's (Tamie Watters) D.Phil. thesis, 'Rhoda Broughton', St Anne's College, Oxford, 1964; on *Vices Francais*, see Askwith, *Lady Dilke*, pp. 172–175.

12. 'The Physician's Wife' and 'A Vision of Learning' are in *The Shrine of Death and Other Stories*, pp. 37–56 and 57–76; 'The Idealist Movement and Positive Science. An Experience.' *Cosmopolis*, 7 (Sept. 1897), pp. 643–56.

13. Charles W. Dilke, 'Memoir' of Lady Dilke, in E. F. S. Dilke, *The Book of the Spiritual Life*, ed. Charles Dilke (London: John Murray, 1905), 1–128; and Gertrude M. Tuckwell, "Reminiscences," unpub. typescript with mss. notes, TUC Library, London.

14. Mary A. Ward, *A Writer's Recollections* (Collins, London, 1918), pp. 109–110.

15. Nina Auerbach, *Ellen Terry: Player in Her Time* (W. W. Norton, New York, 1987).

16. See Carolyn Heilbrun's important *Writing A Woman's Life* (Women's Press, London, 1988). For some partial parallels, see, e.g., Barbara Sicherman, 'Sense and Sensibility: A Case Study of Women's Reading in Late-Victorian America', in *Reading in America: Literature and Social History*, ed. Cathy N. Davidson (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1989), pp. 201–225; Katharine R. Goodman, 'Poetry and Truth: Elisa von der Recke's Sentimental Autobiography', in *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* ed. The Personal Narratives Group, (University of Indiana Press, Bloomington, 1989), pp. 118–128; and Mary Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses: A True History of Thirteen Respectable French and English Women Accused of Unspeakable Crimes* (Schocken Books, New York, 1977), *passim*, and Pat Jalland, *Women, Marriage, and Politics 1860–1914* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1988), esp. pp. 102–109, for examples which suggest the influence of romantic novels on young women readers' expectations and self-conception.

17. Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon*, pp. 190, 192.

18. Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon*, p. 193.

19. Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon*, pp. 187–89.

20. E. F. S. Dilke, 'The Idealist Movement', p. 652.

21. E. F. S. Dilke to Eleanor (Ellen) Smith, 10 November 1886, Bodleian Library, MS. Pattison 118, fol. 218ff.

22. E. F. S. Pattison, probably to Charles Dilke, n.d. but c. Feb./March 1881, Bodleian Library, MS. Pattison 140, fol. 40 (a mutilated fragment of a letter); cf. Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (The Women's Press, London, 1978), pp. 173–210.

23. Margaret Oliphant, *The Autobiography and Letters of Mrs M. O. W. Oliphant*, ed. Mrs Harry Coghill (Dodd Mead, New York, 1899), p. 277. Mrs Oliphant's visit was in February 1879.

24. His argument for the painting's accuracy is, in fact, that it resembled *other* paintings done of her in the same period. The other paintings he notes are by William Bell Scott and 'an unidentified artist, "J.P." perhaps Portaels the Belgian'; Dilke dates these as 1864 and 1865 respectively. I have not succeeded in locating either; Charles Dilke, 'Memoir', pp. 23–25.

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"'How could she?" Unpalatable Facts and Feminists' Heroines'*

DEA BIRKETT AND JULIE WHEELWRIGHT

For a woman today to be writing the life of a woman of the past holds a particular poignancy.[1] Until quite recently, the scarcity of biographies of women meant anyone whose life was reclaimed and rewritten was inevitably represented only in a positive, proto-feminist light. This was especially acute in the case of women who appeared to break with historical conventions of appropriate female behaviour. In both our work on female soldiers and women travellers, we have unearthed, researched and lived with women who appear courageous and daring in their challenges to appropriate roles for women of their time. The achievements of their lives in the face of seemingly unbreachable constraints, their capacity for enormous physical and mental endurance and their rebellion make them appealing examples – the perfect feminist heroines for us to admire, feel close to, inspired by and even imitate. Yet in the course of our individual researches we came across continued examples of a potential heroine's behaviour which was anything but exemplary.[2]

We began with the assumption that these unpalatable facts might shake our confidence in the knowledge of our subjects. We both put an enormous amount of effort into explaining – with the unarticulated but implicit aim of eventually forgiving – behaviour that did not conform to the challenging, provocative women we wanted to portray. It is an effort we would never have expended on anyone else; if our subjects had been male, we might have interpreted the same behaviour as a confirming instance of their inherent limitations. Our subjects were as a close friend; she might express views which were to us abhorrent, (she might be anti-feminist, for example), but we

* There is an interesting difference here between British and American uses of the English language. Whereas British feminist historians tend on the whole to favour terms such as 'heroines' in the United States the practice is not to use the female form but to refer instead to 'heroes' or 'female heroes'. Such semantic distinctions can be observed in a number of instances and extend to the names of biographical subjects and related matters. Thus, British practice favours refering to Flora Sandes or Flora whereas in the States the more acceptable form is Sandes. (Editorial Note).

still love her and find ways of explaining why she is anti-feminist. In personal relationships, this process of excusing breaks down still further; one finds ways of explaining why a friend appears to be anti-feminist, says she is anti-feminist, but isn't *really* anti-feminist, if only she knew it. One wants to believe, of course, that one knows her better than she knows herself.

A similar process developed in coping with unpalatable facts unearthed while researching women's biographies. But both of us began to realize that reducing these facts to unconnected incidents, to moments of folly, was a distortion of women's lives. Rather than explaining them away, we began to incorporate them into our subjects' biographies, making them integral rather than peripheral to our understanding of them. Our portraits became not those of simple feminist heroines, but of women rooted in their time, illuminating not only women's lives but the period in which they lived. As Martha Vicinus has written of contemporary lesbian historiography, 'Rather than raiding the past to find satisfactory models for today, we should look to the difficulties, contradictions and triumphs of women within the larger context of their own times.'[3] We endeavoured to question the role these women played in empire-building; to examine the price that other women or men paid for the freedom enjoyed by these largely middle-class rebels; and to discuss frankly their political conservatism. Exploring these difficulties, we gained a new understanding of our female subjects, as well as our need for feminist heroines. Here are our separate stories of this process.

On Becoming One of the Boys. (Julie Wheelwright)

While researching the lives of women who had dressed as men to enter male occupations, I had expected to find clear statements about their individual rebellion against the restrictions of their gender. What I found, in looking at women over a period of two centuries, was that most who chose this short-cut to a more privileged social and economic status cropped up in the military. They were often, or there were more recorded examples of, soldiers and sailors who expressed bold patriotic statements as frequently as they fired salvos against the patriarchy.[4]

I began to find women who were contradictions, who constantly challenged my own perceptions of their behaviour; I realized also that I had a purpose in wanting to mould them more closely to my own expectations of them. In part, I wanted historical heroines; I wanted to continue believing that they understood their courage in living out a new identity the same way that I did, I wanted them to use their experience to articulate why they felt oppressed by the expectations of their gender and most of all, I did not want to find heroines who cut themselves off from other women along the way to turn themselves into latter-day Rambos. In these expectations I was disappointed. I realized that my desire for politically-correct heroines was naive but secretly I harboured hopes for the women who had begun to occupy so much of my thoughts.

My endeavour to sift through the printed sources to their 'real' thoughts and feelings was inevitably frustrated. When could I trust that a woman was committing her actual experience to paper, untainted by the need for public acceptance, social propriety or a desire to sell books? I read between the lines of published memoirs, shaping and reshaping heroic images. But just when the task of divining the woman's spirit seemed impossible, I would be flooded with a rush of confidence. At last I could grasp some tangible insight and mutter to myself, 'this unhappiness, this frustration, I know because I've felt it too'.

This process I felt most poignantly while researching the life of Flora Sandes. Although she never disguised herself as a man, she lived for seven years as the only woman soldier in an all-male Serbian regiment. She was remarkably articulate about her desire for acceptance among her male comrades and her yearning for a life imbued with meaning. I followed her transformation into a Serbian officer from a middle-aged secretary, living at home with her father, single and frustrated. Her letters, diaries, books and photographs allowed me to see a vivid picture of a remarkable personality; my hunches seemed rooted in historical analysis. But the question persisted – how to resolve the contradictions that I believed Flora still so plainly presented?

While I admired Flora's courage to dramatically change her life by opting to leave England for Serbia as a nurse, I struggled to understand her lust for military life. According to friends and family legend, Flora had always wanted to become a soldier. If her motive was to reject the Victorian concept of domestic feminine ideology that left her with few options for an active, independent life, I could empathize. But she also repeated Rudyard Kipling's poem 'If' to herself, yearning to become accepted as a man. This process of male identification forced me to confront the contradictions and limitations that were inherent in her unconventional role as unofficial ambassador and military officer.

It was certainly a sense of liberty and new-found reserves of strength that brought Flora Sandes back to Serbia after her first gruelling three month assignment. But the real test came in Valjevo – known as 'the death trap of Serbia' – a few months later. She and Emily Simmonds, a surgical nurse dubbed 'Americano', turned a deaf ear to dire predictions from an American doctor who warned that the women would be dead within six weeks if they did not turn back. They remained undeterred. In Valjevo, both women were stricken with typhus but survived and literally took over management of the hospital as doctors, nurses and orderlies died around them. After this experience Flora felt prepared to realize a long-held but secretly harboured ambition – to become a soldier. It took several months of negotiating with the Serbs but eventually they agreed to place her as a nurse in an ambulance unit, which was the closest any British woman had been to the front. After only ten days, in November 1915, Flora was asked to stay on as a soldier when the army went into a retreat position, and happily accepted.

Here was another version of Flora Sandes. She felt most happy and comfortable with the men of the Second Regiment; with her comrades she was

accepted and praised as she had been in no other area of her life. For her, the only escape from the horror of ending up alone, unloved, and irrelevant was to seize the opportunity that had presented itself. As she wrote to her sister in 1916 about her male friends, 'for anyone to say they are proud of anything I do is such a novel experience – it's generally much the other way – that it has quite bucked me up'.

To her 'soldiering' meant having a purpose, having the freedom to travel alone and being enveloped by the warmth of friendship, respect and admiration. However, as she later mentions only in passing in her autobiography these rewards for the hard-slog of her seven years service vanished after her demobilization in 1923. But even after the searing pain and isolation she felt when cut off from male society after the war, Flora never seized the opportunity to turn her experience to the advantage of other women. Her unusual situation, combined with her effective fundraising skills, enabled her to become a minor celebrity during the war. The press naturally used Flora Sandes as a point of discussion about whether women should or could be soldiers and how the war was challenging received notions of gender. These arguments, however, held little attraction for Flora who saw herself as simply getting on with the job at hand.

After demobilization, her protest at feeling forced back into feminine passivity was registered only briefly in her autobiography. She had grown comfortable with giving orders to men and having her authority respected. Now she was expected to wait for male companions to make decisions for her: 'It was impossible at first', she wrote, 'to wait till I was asked instead of saying, "come along, where shall we go tonight?"'[5] But this frustration never became a rebellion against the circumstances that required these concessions. Instead, she appeared content to have played the role of an exception, even a mascot in her regiment. Even though her experience had become a focal point in the press for discussion about the changing gender order during the war, for Flora, it was never a central concern.

There are limits to the kind of questions and conclusions that can be drawn from historical evidence. Although Flora could easily have drawn connections between her position and that of other women, her survival in an all-male regiment depended on her identification with men. Often she stated that she prefered male company and shrank from the curious stares of Serbian women. Questions about the suffrage movement, feminism, and female friendships were subjects that never came up in Flora Sandes' papers; only by inference could I deduce her attitudes towards these issues and the part she imagined herself playing in them. I felt called upon to fill gaps and silences, an act to which I felt entitled because of my long association with Flora. But is this legitimate? History is not fiction, but in biography very often the writer is confronted with the need to fictionalize, imagine scenarios, fill in the details that can't be known – for which there's no tangible evidence. Like a novelist who has sketched a character, one comes to a point where one feels that the subject has acquired the status of a friend which justifies

conclusions drawn from hunches. And often those hunches force a writer to confront questions about a hidden agenda – they demand that the myriad of 'truths' that each life represents is, however inconclusively, divined.

In recent years a number of biographers have attempted to resolve this problem of the 'hidden agenda' either by inserting a first person narrative into the text or appending a dialogue with the subject. Carol Ascher wrote a very moving and eloquent letter to Simone de Beauvoir entitled, 'Clearing the Air – A Personal Word' which appeared in the middle of her 1981 biography.[6] Alice Walker used a similar technique in an essay on Zora Neale Hurston in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, in which she described her journey to find her subject's grave, a metaphor for the biographer's historical search.[7] While a few biographers have felt comfortable involving themselves so explicitly in the narrative, others have hinted at their presence. Elaine Feinstein, herself a poet with a Jewish Eastern European background, appears on occasion in her biography of Russian poet Marina Tseveteyava, but only as a figure holding a microphone. Even this allusion to her presence, however, implies her intense connection with her fellow poet.[8] All are recent attempts or reflections of the biographer's struggle to make sense of the demands that this intense relationship requires.

On Becoming an Explorer. (Dea Birkett)

I had read about Mary Kingsley canoeing down rapids, Mary Gaunt being carried along the West African coast and Marianne North walking through the Brazilian mountains, and I admired these convention-breaking Victorian women. The self-portraits they painted in published travelogues were of women who were brave but conformist. They wore long skirts but climbed mountains, galloped across the desert but insisted on riding sidesaddle, trekked through the jungle but never without a stout hat. Isabella Bird, breaking free from a young womanhood riddled with illness and physical incapacity, arrived in Hawaii in 1873. Here she was introduced to the Hawaiian riding dress, a pair of big baggy trousers gathered at the ankle and covered by a long split skirt, allowing her for the first time to ride astride. But when *The Times* reported that she had 'donned masculine habilments for greater convenience', the infuriated traveller responded immediately. She inserted a prefatory note in the second edition of *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*, together with a pen and ink sketch of the riding dress which had been so described. Her costume was 'the "American Lady's Mountain Dress"', she explained, 'a half-fitting jacket, a skirt reaching to the ankles, and full Turkish trousers gathered into frills which fall over the boots – a thoroughly serviceable and feminine costume for mountaineering and other rough travelling in any part of the world.'[9] To Isabella, this unconventional mode of fashion combined mobility and comfort with outer propriety. It was a compromise that seemed intelligent and admirable.

In writing biography, however, it is the unpublished accounts, letters and journals which bring the writer closest to her or his subject. For here is often their only actual physical contact, as biographers literally touch the documents touched by their subjects. The poignancy of that moment when you first trace a finger over your subject's handwriting is almost overwhelming. Behind this excitement also lies the knowledge that it is here, and not in the printed sources, that discoveries will be made.

I had read Marianne North's autobiography, first published in 1892, little more than a year after her death, and introduced by her sister Catherine Addington Symonds. *Recollections of a Happy Life* and *Further Recollections of a Happy Life* published the following year, told the story of her journeys through the Americas, the Indian Subcontinent, South Africa, Australasia and the Middle and Far East and her obsessive painting of plants en route. In these works, she presented herself to me as a nineteenth century feminist heroine. But on locating and reading the manuscript of her autobiography, I began to realise the significance of the editing undertaken by her married, homebound younger sister.[10] A different woman emerged.

While the published book merely records that on her visit to Washington, D.C., in 1871, 'We went in the evening to a women's meeting,' the manuscript revealed the full extent of Marianne's feeling before her sister's tactful editing.[11] The subject for discussion at the meeting had been women's suffrage. 'I should be terribly bored by the possession of a vote,' wrote Marianne.

> And those sensible women would certainly not use it if they had one, and thus give a dangerous majority to the wild women in the world of petticoat government – and another thing that struck me how ugly all those strongminded females and their pet parsons were! They ought always to be kept down.[12]

This revelation of the private, censored agenda of my women travellers' lives began to erupt in other places. While a few, such as Gertrude Bell, a founder member of the Anti-Suffrage League, were openly anti-suffrage, many more were covertly so. When Mary Kingsley received a copy of a mildly-worded petition asking for the admission of women to the learned societies, she wrote immediately to the Secretary of the Royal Geographical Society, 'I do not wish to alarm you but I feel it is my duty as a friend to warn you that there is a dangerous female after you . . . I enclose details.'[13] She sent him a copy of the petition and her own letter to its originator, botanist Marion Farquharson, which read:

> I feel I cannot add my name to your influential list . . . my personal feeling is that I would not ask any Society to admit me that had a feeling that that admission would be dangerous to the work of the Society . . . . In brief Madam I think that if we women distinguish ourselves in Science in sufficiently large numbers at a sufficiently high level the great Scientific Societies will admit women.[14]

She wrote again to the RGS, 'these androgines I have no use for.'[15] How could such feeling be reconciled with a life that seemed to challenge the limits of acceptable behaviour for her sex? How could the biographies of the women travellers be coherently written?

In writing their lives, I had always had to deal with their acceptance of contemporary racial theories and the indissoluble distinction between themselves and the people amongst whom they travelled, whether that distinction was expressed in biological, social or cultural terms. I had interpreted this unpalatable fact as an inevitable result of being raised in a time of expanding British colonial interests overseas. Unlike campaigns for suffrage and rights for women, there would have been little alternative thinking in the area of race relations. Racial differences might be explained in different ways, but were always accepted as a given. Against this prevailing belief, I had found the unpalatable fact of their racial attitudes easier to explain away.

The discovery of the women travellers' anti-women views brought new light, however, to their statements on race. Links between their attitudes towards racial and gender difference took on new and more important meaning. Mary Kingsley wrote, 'the mental difference between the two races is very similar to that between men and women among ourselves. A great woman, either mentally or physically, will excel an indifferent man, but no woman ever equals a really great man.'[16] It was her assumption of racial superiority, as a member of a colonizing country, that had allowed Mary Kingsley to travel so freely in West Africa in a way denied her within Britain. Her freedom as a white traveller was predicated on emphasising difference, not struggling to overcome it. For Mary Kingsley, as for many other women travellers, this translated itself to differences between the sexes.

Yet in West Africa, where the fact of her skin colour outweighed any considerations of gender, she both was called and called herself a 'white man'. In Baghdad, Gertrude Bell noted in her attempts to get in touch with religious opinion:

> Until quite recently I've been wholly cut off from them because their tenets forbid them to look upon an unveiled woman and my tenets don't permit me to veil – I think I'm right there, for it would be a tacit admission of inferiority which would put our intercourse from the first out of focus. Nor is it any good trying to make friends through the women – if the women were allowed to see me they would veil before me as if I were a man. So you see I appear to be too female for one sex and too male for the other.[17]

Gertrude Bell's and Mary Kingsley's transgressions of conventional behaviour were only made when and where their gender was not rigidly defined. Walking along Piccadilly in London, spinster Gertrude Bell was chaperoned by a male cousin. Neither made radical challenges to the limits of acceptable behaviour for women of their time, but reinforced, exploited and relied upon racial differences for their own personal opportunity of a

newfound freedom. When read in the context of this social and political conservatism, their anti-women sentiments lose their element of surprise.

Although our projects were not primarily intended as biography, we both took issue with the conventional notion that we were supposed to divine the 'real' Flora Sandes or Mary Kingsley. Rather, we felt that we would have to contend with presenting a woman who was full of contradictions, who resisted distillation into a monolithic whole. For, as Liz Stanley has written of the ways in which biographers attempt to reduce complexity to manageable proportions, 'The end product is a genre which all too often produces "she was like this". Any feminist biography, indeed any good biography worthy of the name, should instead firmly grasp the cup of plenty that a person's life and their contemporaries' views of it represents: "she was like that *and* like that" should be its motto.'[18] The biographer's relationship with the subject, full of its fraught, searching questions and compromises, should enrich that investigation.

Neither should a feminist biographer deny the challenge that seemingly contradictory thoughts and actions represent. To rewrite history to conform more exactly with current received notions of feminist thought serves to obscure rather than to clarify the past. In some instances this has brought questions of race and class into the discussion about feminist heroines; we have asked 'who paid the price of freedom that these women enjoyed?' Only by allowing these historical figures to live within their context, expressing views with which we might violently disagree, can we fully understand them. Bringing these often painful questions and the hidden desire for heroism into full view also injects new questions into the debate; we are provoked to ask what it means to challenge ideals of acceptable behaviour for women, and on what our own personal claims to an enriched sense of liberty rely.

Notes

1. This paper arose from a collection we are joint-editing, entitled, *My Significant Other: Women Biographers on their Female Subjects.*
2. Dea Birkett, *Spinsters Abroad: Victorian Lady Explorers*, (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1989) and Julie Wheelwright, *Amazons and Military Maids: Women Who Dressed as Men in Pursuit of Life, Liberty and Happiness*, (Pandora Press, London, 1989).
3. Martha Vicinus, '"They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong": The Historical Roots of the Modern Lesbian Identity,' unpublished conference paper, 'Homosexuality, which Homosexuality?', (Amsterdam Free University, 1987).
4. Julie Wheelwright, *Amazons and Military Maids: Women Who Dressed as Men in Pursuit of Life, Liberty and Happiness* (Pandora Press, London, 1989).
5. Flora Sandes, *The Autobiography of a Woman Soldier: A Brief Record of Adventure with the Serbian Army 1916–1918* (London, 1927), p. 220.
6. Carol Ascher, *Simone de Beauvoir. A Life of Freedom*, (Harvester, Brighton, 1981), pp. 107–122.

7. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, (New York, 1983), p. 93.
8. Elaine Feinstein, *A Captive Lion: The Life of Marina Tsevetayeva*, (London, 1987).
9. 'Note to Second Edition', in Isabella Bird, *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*, (London, 1879).
10. Insight also owed to Brenda E. Moon, 'Marianne North's *Recollections of a Happy Life*. How they came to be written and published,' *Journal of the Society of Bibliography of Natural History*, Vol. 8, (1978), pp. 497–505.
11. Marianne North, *Recollections of a Happy Life*, (London, 1892), p. 76.
12. Manuscript of Marianne North's autobiography, p. 382.
13. Mary Kingsley to Scott Keltie, 27 November 1899, Corr. 1881–1910, Royal Geographical Society [RGS] archives.
14. Mary Kingsley to Marion Farquharson, 26 November 1899, Corr. 1881–1910, RGS archives.
15. Mary Kingsley to Scott Keltie 1 December 1899. Corr. 1881–1910, RGS archives.
16. Mary Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa*, (London, 1897), p. 659.
17. Gertrude Bell to Florence Bell (stepmother), 14 March 1920, quoted in Lady Bell, *The Letters of Gertrude Bell*, (London, 1927), pp. 483–4.
18. Liz Stanley, "Biography as Microscope or Kalidescope? The case of 'power' in Hannah Cullwick's relationship with Arthur Munby," *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 10, No. 1, (1987), pp. 19–31.