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Chapter 20

“Resourceful Reinvention”: Speculative Biography as Public History?

“Only Connect!” That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer.
E.M. Forster, *Howards End*, 1910

What is speculative biography and how might it constitute a form of public history that enlivens the way we make histories in the twenty-first century? I am something of a hybrid-historian, trained by the academy but with roots that draw their sustenance from the subversive waters of literature. I am interested in writing, how we bring the past alive and make it enjoyable for general readers. For me, the answer lies in great stories that convey their arguments, as Peter Cochrane once suggested, in narrative, “by stealth” (Cochrane 2007, np). I am excited by the relatively new subgenre of speculative biography for a range of reasons, all of which relate directly to the imperative issued by Margaret Schlegel, the fictional heroine of Forster’s *Howards End*.

In this chapter I want to tease out how speculative biography can encourage ways of writing the past that might connect us to that which is not at our fingertips nor the forefront of our consciousness. In the process, I will also reflect upon how the motivations and methods associated with writing speculative biography blur the boundaries between so-called expert and amateur historian in ways that are aligned with the more capacious understanding of public history being explored in this book.

First, however, I would like to respond to an invitation offered by Hilda Kean in her 2010 article *History: Demystifying the Process of History Making*, where she suggests that if we are to create more expansive and egalitarian conceptions of what public history might be in the twenty-first century we should begin by weaving personal pasts into our thinking about public pasts (Kean 2010, 31). In so doing, these new conceptions of public history can be predicated, she hopes, upon the common “need to share, participate and engage”, not so much as “experts” in “history”, but as “people with an interest in the relationship between the past and the present”. Kean’s ideas speak to a formative moment from my childhood that has shaped my own practice. Recounting this personal past therefore seems a fitting beginning to my exploration about what speculative biography can bring to the contemporary history making.

There are things adults say when you are young that remain. An idea just beyond grasp, a paradox that delights, or a principle, perhaps, that tugs and teases at you until it gets its grip in your interior world and begins to carve a space within. For me it was something said by my grandfather, an English doctor who migrated to Australia in the early 1950s, with his wife, my father and uncle. In the late 1970s, Grandpa and I used to walk along the old railway line that ran at the back of our property in the Yarra Valley. At the time I think I was about nine and he must have been in his seventies. He was a large man who walked with the assistance of a polished wooden stick and at a 150-degree angle as if his torso and legs were held together with a rusted hinge. I liked his voice and his avuncular interest in things, particularly me. On this occasion I recall Grandpa's liver-spotted feet clad in their solid leather sandals stumbling over the broken path still littered with old bolts from the long-abandoned train track. I was an odd child, perhaps, with a heightened sense of injustice. I had been ranting about some defect I detected in an Australian politician, when Grandpa responded by stating that "we were all born between the faeces and the urine."

He had said it before. More than once, in fact; at the table over dinner, while warming his back against the fire, and most likely on the same walk but a different day. Yet for some reason, on this afternoon I understood that he was not only reminding me of the common denominators that define all human experience, but also cautioning me against judgment and assumptions of exceptionality. Now, forty years later, as I think about what it means to be an do "public history", I find myself reflecting upon my grandfather's lesson and realising that he was also inviting me to think more deeply about "that which connects us all"; how this might shape not only the course of our lives, but also what, and, just as importantly, how we contribute to the world in which we live.

My grandfather's assertion was typical of doctors of his generation. These were men who had been exposed to horrific atrocities during World War Two and become so familiar with the human detritus of medical life that their talk of human body parts and excrement was deliberately glib. Indeed, some seemed to derive pleasure from shocking those of us who were not and I am pretty sure my grandfather took particular delight in blending the profane with the provocative. He was that sort of man. It worked. His saying carved a space in me such that when it comes to thinking about my role as someone who has been trained in the discipline but who strives to "make history" within, across and beyond the academy, I see myself as part of the public rather than reaching out to it from my ivory tower.

The “Slow-Motion Suicide” of Scholarly History

It is for these reasons I consider the distinction between expert and enthusiast something of a false binary. As my grandfather insisted, we share a common humanity and, to varying degrees, are all embedded within family, community, national and global networks that matter to our sense of belonging and the way we shape the present and future. And, at this specific historical moment, when the dwindling influence of religion is resulting in the erosion of that once influential form of community and meaning making, many of us live in societies, as Hayden White notes, “when it comes to thinking about ‘the meaning of life’,” history may well be “all we’ve got”? (White 2005, 2–3, 151).

But the news is not bad. As this book attests, history making proliferates – not only in books, darkened cinemas and shimmering television screens. But also over kitchen tables, in debates about what should remain in our public squares and, of course, throughout cyber space. As Paula Hamilton observes in her lecture *History and Memory in Public Life*, the question is no longer “if and why history matters” but rather, how academic historians can maintain their relevance in a world where the boundaries between “inside and outside history” are increasingly subject to “fruitful indeterminacy”, at the very moment that the modalities of “publicness” are also being transformed (Hamilton 2018, author’s notes). For Hamilton, such conditions mean that “history making” can now quite happily continue “with or without scholarly history” and it is up to academic historians to demonstrate their relevance. This we must do, she insists, and I agree, by developing connections between the “different knowledges and registers” within which history making fluctuates and by finding new ways to both engage and be engaging.

This is where I find speculative biography exciting. As a hybrid form of biography, fiction and history, speculative biography consciously employs literary devices such as narrative, metaphor and plot and licenses speculation and imagination in ways that traditional history cannot. Authors embrace a spirit of “resourceful reinvention” that allows them to not only write about pasts that might otherwise be difficult, even impossible to recount, but to do so in ways that involve interiority. Yet, while those of us who write thus may draw upon fictional technics, we are emphatic, as Pope Brock insists in regards to his acclaimed, *Indiana Gothic*, that the final product is not fiction but “a true story reconstructed”.¹ We use historical method to research and contextualize all the

¹ See Brock 1999. Interview cited in Donna Lee Brien, “‘The Facts formed a line of buoys in the sea of my own imagination’: History, Fiction and Speculative Biography.” *TEXT* 28 (2015): 10.

evidence at our disposal. Only when those sources run dry do we seek solutions that involve what I call “contextually informed imagination” (Lindsey 2019, np). But by doing so speculative biography exposes the constructed nature of all history writing, challenges the authority of scholarly history and raises those old questions regarding “What is history?”, how it should be done and by whom? In the process speculative biography invite new possibilities, about how we write the past, who and what we write about, as well as who writes it and why.

Until recently, however, there has been little approval, let alone support, from the academy for historians who experiment with writing the past and privilege narrative over argument with the intention of making their research accessible for general readers. Those of us who want to steal fire from the gods of good writing and infuse our work with what Hamilton describes as “enjoyment, pleasure and entertainment” have all too often been dubbed sell-outs whose intentions are populist and work superficial. Ironically, such opinions have often been based upon assumptions rather than research, as many “serious historians” would not be caught dead reading anything but scholarly work. Indeed, in her 2017 ABC Reith lectures, Hilary Mantel recalled a confession from one such historian, who admitted to hiding historical fiction between the covers of an academic journal.²

So, perhaps academic historians only have themselves to blame for the “slow motion suicide” Brand and Gavin recently observe within scholarly history, which is responsible, they believe, for the fact that “the study of history is now also becoming something of a relic of the past” (Brands and Gavin 2018, np). American historian Jill Lepore attributes such trends to a general retreat from public life that has taken place across the humanities, which has resulted, she reflects, in academics preferring to write for one another rather than a general audience.³ Preoccupations with journal rankings and the constant threat of “publish or perish” has certainly made us anxious and insular and it is no wonder some have greeted the imperative to produce “impactful” work with a degree of exasperation. To connect in these ways signals a significant change of register and focus that requires different skills from those we painstakingly acquired to secure our place in the academy. But, to maintain our relevance and be engaging we must find ways, to recall Margaret Schlegel, “to connect the prose with the passion.”

² Hilary Mantel, “The Iron Maiden”, (London: BBC Radio Reith Lectures, 2017) <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08v08m5>>

³ Jill Lepore, cited in Brand and Gavin: np.

To do that we need to rethink our writing cultures. Public history offers a way beyond these troubling trends, but only if we allow for a more expansive conception of public history and our intentions and processes. It also requires us to reflect more deeply about not only who we are making history with and for, but also why and how. Such questions have helped me think through the different styles and voices I use when writing the past. They have clarified, for instance, why I tend to produce what might be considered traditional scholarly work when I am organizing and processing my resources, ideas and arguments, but then shift to a more narrative-based approach when sharing this work with a broader audience. Although it takes time to develop different voices and shift gears between them, I recognise this impulse to share my research with a general audience as crucial to my obligations as a taxpayer funded historian. Although the intentions and processes involved in these distinct registers are different, they do not need to be incompatible.

Indeed, discussing his process of supplementing scholarly research with fictional renderings, American historian Richard Slotkin insists that such accounts have the potential to provide a “truer and more accurate account” than some scholarly accounts of the past (Slotkin 2005, 222). For Slotkin, writing fiction is of great value to the historian because it provides a context in which to test their theories to see if they “fly”. Narrativising the past can also offer the historian a “mental exercise”, he argues, that encourages empathy and imagination as well as a greater appreciation of “the differences of the past, the contingent nature of the historical experience and the rooted subjectivity of all historical actors” (Slotkin 2005, 225). In the process we can access different understandings and insights into the past and share it with the reader in a way that is nonetheless imbued with historical integrity and authority. Thus, he concludes, it should be possible to have “a type of historical fiction that is responsive to the new, critical historiography and uses its insights” (Slotkin 2005, 230).

I wrote my first speculative biography in this spirit. I drew upon my training in archival research and contextual analysis as well as my appreciation for the arguments then shaping scholarly conversations about the nineteenth century time period I was writing about. Rather than force these ideas upon my readers, I chose to weave these through the book, so the reader could encounter them incidentally, perhaps, as if by osmosis. My methodological premise was, that the easier it was to infuse these through the book, the more probable and plausible they were. So, as Slotkin suggests, writing the narrative of a little-known colonial woman embroiled in a romantic scandal, allowed me to test theories of respectability, scandal and the doctrine of the separate spheres and determine they applied. Far from surrendering history integrity, I tested it in ways that also accentuated the contingencies and particularities of that specific past.

This approach was also necessary because the historical records relating to my subject, Mary Ann Gill, were partial, porous and problematic. There were only two sentences which I could, with any confidence, attribute to this historical individual. These were also a cluster of legal and newspaper records that described her actions and attitudes but always in ways that suggested prejudice regarding her gender and class as the daughter of two Irish emancipated convicts. As these prevented me capturing the spirit of a woman who they described as “the Mistress of her Own Consent,” I decided to undermine their authority and embrace the defiant spirit she expressed when she disobeyed her father by shimmying down the drainpipe outside her bedroom window to elope with the wayward second son of the Attorney General.⁴ Thus, the partialities of the sources provoked me to supplement them with speculation and to transgress the strict conventions of historical and biographical practice in ways that complemented my subject’s own spirit of defiance.

Speculative Biography

What then is the difference between biographies that blend what Virginia Woolf called “the substance of fact” with “the freedom of fiction” and those “openly speculative biographies” which, the leading expert in speculative biography, Donna Brien insists, go further by including a greater degree of “conjecture, intuition and even guesswork into the process of creating biographical narratives?” (Brien 2015, 4). How might such “alliances between speculation and biography” push the boundaries of form? And how is this relevant to discussions in this book concerned with the making of (public) history? To answer these questions, we begin with a definition from Brien that highlights the way speculative biographers use imagination and literary technics to enrich character, plot and narrative:

While beginning with the historical evidence, the speculative biographer extends and supports the account generated from this evidence by (re)inserting into the narrative biographical elements without which the life story of the subject is incomplete. These elements can include the emotional responses, thoughts and motivations [. . .] also information which is tangentially related to the life being explored but which assists in creating a richer and complete and, therefore, more “truthful” life story. (Brien 2015, 4)

⁴ Kiera Lindsey, “‘A mistress of her own consent’: The Abduction of Mary Ann Gill, Sydney 1848,” *Written into History, Melbourne Historical Journal: Special Anniversary Issue*, University of Melbourne, April 2012.

One of the best-known and most contentious examples of speculative biography – though not described as such at the time – is Natalie Zemon Davis’ *Return of Martin Guerre*. Davis’ 1983 book won numerous awards for its compelling account of a sixteenth-century French impostor and was sufficiently “enjoyable, pleasurable and entertaining” to be transformed into a feature film.⁵ To bring her subject alive Davis drew upon both her disciplinary skills and delight in narrative. She worked carefully and instinctively, I suspect, and responded to the demands of both historical integrity and imagination as she crafted a work that was, as Anne Haebich evocatively suggests, “factually informed but imaginatively conceived” (Haebich 2015, 5). For me, such approaches demonstrate a sophisticated degree of synthesis that represent a stage of cognition beyond historical thesis. For while it one thing to develop an argument that use logic to persuade and convince, it is another to craft those arguments into a story that invites the reader to decide for themselves. Yet, despite, indeed perhaps because of such nuanced craft, Davis’ book attracted the ire of many within the academy who asserted that what she had done was “not history”.⁶ Davis responded firmly by insisting she had used her historical knowledge to supplement the record in ways she described as informed imagination. Many were convinced, impressed and inspired but the ruffled feathered remained.

In 2016 I had a similar experience with *The Convict’s Daughter: The Scandal that Shocked A Colony*.⁷ Like *Martin Guerre*, this book was informed by historical research I conducted during and after my PhD. Even before publication, however, *The Convict’s Daughter* provoked contradictory responses from those the publisher approached for an endorsement. I had either “fearlessly carved a new path between history and fiction”, as one generously stated in her endorsement, or I had gone “beyond the historian’s remit” in a way that “infuriated” another historian who declined the invitation to endorse the book (Lindsey 2016b, np).

My biographical subject, Mary Ann Gill, was a native-born Sydney woman born in 1832 to two emancipated convicts. *The Convict’s Daughter* concentrates upon a brief period during her late adolescence when her elopement with James Butler Kinchela caused a colonial cause célèbre that produced an abundance legal and newspaper records. Set against the backdrops of a jostling Sydney on the brink of responsible self-government and the so-called Springtime of the Nations in 1848, *The Convict’s Daughter*, sought to “see” this threshold period

⁵ See Davis 1983.

⁶ See Davis 1987; 1992; 1988.

⁷ See Lindsey 2016a.

through the eyes of young woman caught up in these fraught circumstances. The records allowed me to glean the beginning, middle and end of her life as well as many intricate details of her romantic scandal. And yet, there were dead ends, loose threads and perplexing silences that made it impossible to determine the motivations of those involved and crucial plot points. I had enough to know the general outline and key episodes but not to construct a coherent narrative.

If I had abided by the conventions of scholarly history my book would have been dominated by a discussion of sources and appealed to a much smaller audience. As it was, I was able to play with the tropes associated with romance fiction popular during that period to weave a female perspective into a neglected period of colonial history and share this with a general reader. But to do so, I had to break faith with some of the strict conventions of my history training. For example, there were occasions when I found myself poised upon one steppingstone of firm fact and facing a yawning gap between the next solid ground of evidence. In such instances, I drew deeply upon my knowledge of the era and speculated about what may have happened so that I could weave together sufficiently credible circumstances to progress the narrative.

One example of this relates to the fact that despite the fact that Mary Ann's slippery suitor, repeatedly disappointed his would-be-wife and even served prison time for his part in their botched elopement, the unlikely pair eventually married in San Francisco, with none other than Mary Ann's father, Martin Gill, as their witness. This occurrence was all the more remarkable, given that Gill responded to their elopement by shooting two pistols – point blank – and unsuccessfully into Kinchela's face. To find a probable explanation for these improbable facts I not only read in and between the lines of multiple archives, but on occasion also speculated about what I thought most likely. This was a process that required me to chart a course from the rupture I knew had occurred between Mary Ann, her suitor and her father in 1848, through prison, public shame and bankruptcy to the reconciliation that must have happened sometime before their San Francisco wedding in 1853.⁸ To do that, I scoured the primary sources for every possible clue, and drew upon everything I knew about the period including public attitudes to women embroiled in romantic scandals, the economic depression that crippled Sydney during the 1840s, the fact that Martin Gill was declared bankrupt in 1851 and that the discovery of gold in San Francisco offered this damaged daughter, her convicted abductor and bankrupted father a much needed fresh start. Stitch

⁸ See "Married by special license, 16 October at St Mary's Church, San Francisco, by the Rev Father Scanlan, Mr James Butler Kinchela to Mary Ann, eldest daughter of Martin Gill of Sydney", *Bell's Life in Sydney* (22 January 1853), 2.

by stitch the threads of contextually informed imagination allowed me to piece together the frayed ends of this past and fashion it into a coherent narrative, until it “no longer lived,” to recall Margaret Schlegel, “in fragments”.

Again, as I wanted my reader to experience a sense of being swept up in the drama of this runaway romance in much the way the historical characters had been, I refused to stay each narrative twist and turn with qualifications, explanations, “probably’s and perhaps”. Instead, I quarantined my explanation about these decisions to the Afterword and Endnotes, supplementing these with a bibliography and index that allowed the reader to interrogate my research and approach. In so doing, as Brien notes, I probably pushed the boundaries of speculative biography further than many writers of this genre would and certainly further than historical conventions allow. But I felt guided to do so, not only by the subject, her story and sources but also the popular romantic and social novels of the period, by Jane Austen, William Makepeace Thackeray, Charles Dickens and Walter Scott, whose work very likely encouraged these historical characters to embark upon their adventure and were therefore, appropriate inspirations for my rendering of it.

In the process, I was able to develop a different type of imaginative relationship with my reader than is possible within scholarly history writing. While the historian must make their argument and do what they can to eliminate doubt, I could employ one of core principles of fiction, “Show Don’t Tell”. I could also create interior worlds and motivations for my characters and use sensory detail to invite the reader to experience the contingency of the past and decide about the events and personalities themselves. While *The Convict’s Daughter* has enjoyed multiple print runs and sold, at last count, just under 15,000 copies, what I have enjoyed the most about this experience, has been the hundreds of emails from readers, who hunt me down to share their excitement about this neglected period of colonial history and to offer their opinions about what might have happened, how and why. This book has forged a deeply cherished connection with readers which is grounded in the twin pleasures of speculation and imagination. When I read these emails I get the sense that readers while certainly appreciate a less didactic transmutation of evidence and ideas, they most enjoy the opportunity to be swept up in the playful, transgressive spirit of both that runaway romance and this way of writing the past.

Conclusion

A relatively new and hybrid subgenre of biography can offer a way of making public history that is aligned with the more capacious definitions outlined by Hamilton and Keane. By piecing together porous and problematic sources with contextually informed imagination, speculative biography provides a way of crafting the past into narratives that allow previously silenced and shadowy figures to be reincorporated into our consciousness. As the skills associated with this approach can be developed and employed by so-called experts, amateurs and enthusiasts, speculative biography also provides a way of democratising both the past and how we write it. It is for these reasons that while I work on my second speculative biography, I am also facilitating workshops aimed at, who are uncertain about how to ensure their ancestors no longer “live in fragments”. I want to collaborate within, across and beyond the academy to test the motivations and methods of this genre and encourage experiments that have the potential, I believe, to bring new depth and dimension to our understandings of the past.

Such work has implications for contemporary public histories. As Hamilton cautions, history making now “quite happily” proliferates without academic historians. We have insights to contribute but the onus is on us. To combat the slow-motion suicide of our discipline we must resist the impulse to be anxious and insular and look instead, for ways to honour Schlegel’s imperative to connect “the prose and the passion”. Part of the solution lies in the development of new and different writing cultures. We need to encourage resourceful reinvention and actively experiment with writing the past. When it comes to biography, our first obligation should lie not with the conventions of any discipline but with our subject and their sources. It is their story we are striving to share. As *The Convict’s Daughter* attests, by attuning ourselves to their idiosyncratic particularities, we might discover ways of connecting that are not only liberating, but, heaven forbid, perhaps even pleasurable and fun.