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‘Deliberate freedom’: using speculation and imagination in historical biography

Abstract:

In this article, I explore the challenges and opportunities associated with using ‘informed imagination’ to write a speculative biography of an historical figure. In the process, I problematize the notion of the archival gap, which has been recently romanced by numerous writers, including myself. By citing archival gaps as a justification for creative license, we neglect the fact that all archives are inherently idiosyncratic in ways that invite, perhaps even demand, the use of both speculation and imagination. Here, I make a case for what I am calling the archival overlap. A careful examination of the existing sources, however sparse or abundant, is likely to reveal reoccurring clues that can be used to shape how we image and construct our subjects. Before we consider the gaps we should tend to these overlaps, I argue, using a current work-in-progress case study of the colonial artist Adelaide Ironside to explore how speculation and imagination are intrinsic to these stages of the biographical process.

Biographical note:

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Introduction

I am hunting the indexes and archives, sketchbooks and newspapers. As I push through the miscellanea, clutching onto every clue I find within and between the lines, I sense another equally elusive presence: the biographer's shadow. Pursuing my subject through the sources I sense this presence urging me towards the voice I need to write her story. The two processes are inextricably entwined. Just as form follows function, my voice is intimately connected to, and must, therefore, also reflect my subject and her sources. Which is why, even in the depth of my research, I sense that the success of this project depends upon these elements not only converging but also emerging into the light together.

It is not only a question of who and what, but also how and when. How do we know when we are ready to shift our focus from hunting and gathering, analysis and interpretation, to structuring and writing? As the historian Susan Ware observes, even though much has been written about biography, there has been little discussion of 'the choices and challenges' biographers make while crafting a life story into a narrative (2010: 425) And until the first decades of the twenty-first century there has been even less exploration of these methodological issues from an historical perspective.¹ There is, however, Leon Edel insists, a real art to writing a biography, something that may, at times, appear even a little mystical (1978: 3). And yet, because we are dealing with facts, there are also methodological concerns that require careful consideration, particularly when it comes to reconstituting a historical subject from archival sources.

In this article, I explore the challenges and opportunities associated with using 'informed imagination' to write a speculative biography of an historical figure. In the process, I hope to problematize the notion of the archival gap, which has been recently romanced by numerous writers, including myself.² By citing archival gaps as a justification for creative license, we neglect the fact that all archives are inherently idiosyncratic in ways that invite, even demand, the use of speculation and imagination. In the following pages, I make a case for what I am calling the archival overlap. A careful examination of the existing sources, however sparse or abundant, is likely to reveal reoccurring clues that can be used to shape how we image and construct our subjects. Before we consider the gaps we should tend to these overlaps, I argue, using a current work-in-progress case study to explore how speculation and imagination are intrinsic to these stages of the biographical process and not, therefore, something that needs to be justified as a solution to the challenge of an apparent archival gap.

The notion of 'informed imagination' was first coined by historian, Natalie Zemon Davis to describe her approach in her contentious award winning book, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983, see also Zemon Davis 1988, 1992). Since then, the term has been used by writers such as Drusilla Modjeska (2015) and Hilary Mantel (2017) to describe – in short hand – the techniques they use to construct narratives from challenging sources. Such techniques typically involve drawing upon contextual knowledge to speculate about what happened and why. In this article, I am interested in how we practice both speculation and imagination while researching historical subjects. Thus, the relatively recent variant of biography known as speculative

biography is also relevant to this discussion, precisely because it offers scope for experimentation and significant authorial invention.³ For those, such as myself, who are interested in reconstituting less well-known historical figures into biographical subjects, both informed imagination and speculative biography offer promising new approaches and possibilities.⁴

Previous discussions about speculation and imagination have often focused upon the creative challenges associated with archival gaps, however, as the historian Carolyn Steedman observes, it is, in fact, ‘the archive that grant liberties’ or ‘forbid the saying of certain things’ (2002: xi). They are like stepping stones upon which we leap from one firm fact to the next, advancing our understanding of our subject, while also progressing the plot. But, as Mantel reminds us, while ‘facts are strong’, they are not always ‘stable’ (2017). There is often wobble in the steppingstone, a need to question, double check, contextualize, note the possibilities before making a quick leap to something more reliable. And as we work with these sources, we are constantly filtering through the possibilities, speculating about the bigger picture, making decisions and conjuring possibilities that might encourage us to imagine what might have happened. All the while we are also seeking meaning; how does this evidence fit in with what I know thus far? What does it tell me about the wider world, and what, in turn, does the wider world illuminate this new discovery? This is a process that is not only inherently speculative but also intrinsically imaginative.

I am at the beginning of a three-year long project that involves writing a biography, then reflecting upon these processes in ways that I hope will encourage others who are also intent upon reconstituting historical figures into biographical subjects. Thus far, I have conducted less than a third of my archival research and, as I describe below, my findings are far from conclusive. Nonetheless, I have some materials, I am familiarizing myself with various methods and theories and I also have some first impressions about what lies before me. This discussion, then, is an opportunity to reflect upon what I have discovered as I focus upon the archival overlaps as well as the methods I have been employing to make sense of my subject and her sources.

The subject and her sources

My case study, Adelaide Eliza Scott Ironside, was born in Sydney in 1831 and in 1855 became the first native-born person to train overseas as an artist. Or at least, this is how she is typically described in the few secondary sources devoted to her life (Caine 2003, Pesman 1996, 2003, Poulton 1987, Teale 1972). Despite her contemporary standing, this once celebrated artist has received only scanty scholarly attention and is little known to most contemporary general readers. I hope to remedy this by writing a biography in which Adelaide also functions as a portal into the past, so that my reader can ‘see through the life’, as historian Alice Kessler Harris suggests, ‘into life itself’ (2009: 626). As well as learning about Aesi, I intend to weave a uniquely female perspective into the masculine world of colonial politics and to bring a distinctively colonial lens to the radical and romantic sensibilities that shaped much of the world during this period, including the numerous influential people with whom she associated.

Deeply embedded in the colonial intellectual and artistic milieu of her age, 'Aesi' as she preferred to be known, was a creature of many such enthusiasms. At the age of fourteen, possibly inspired by Sir Walter Scott, she added Scott to her name, abbreviating her initials, Adelaide Eliza Scott Ironside, to create a new persona. Thus, Ada or Adi as she had previously been known, became Aesi, and signed much of her artwork accordingly (Poulton 1987: 24). While Aesi's contemporaries often admired her patriotic poetry and politics, most considered her to be uniquely gifted as an artist. After achieving some recognition at the 1855 Paris International Exhibition for a series of Australian Wildflower water colours, Adelaide decided to 'marry art', leaving the colony with the explicit intention of returning to adorn Sydney's public buildings with republican frescos after a self-imposed exile of ten years.

Evidence of Aesi's adept social skills can be found in her personal network, which reads as a veritable 'who's who' of the Victorian era. Mentored by the controversial Presbyterian Minister John Dunmore Lang during her childhood, Aesi was also friends with the daughters of Lang's greatest rival, William Charles Wentworth (Wentworth Papers)⁵. It is also possible that Aesi was in love with Daniel Henry Deniehy, the darling of the native-born (Poulton 1987)⁶. Contemporaries gossiped that it was Deniehy's elopement with a woman described as 'younger and prettier' that compelled Aesi to leave the colonies.⁷ That Deniehy's new wife was also named Adelaide, must have added salt to the wound, if, indeed, these rumours are true.

In England Aesi enjoyed the professional attention of Dr James Clark, personal physician to Queen Victoria and John Keats before the poet died in Italy in 1821.⁸ She was also an associate of Sir Charles Eastlake at the time when he was serving as the first Director of the National Gallery.⁹ The great art critic of the Victorian age, John Ruskin, took Aesi on as one of his protégées, and their correspondence suggests she formed an affectionate bond with both Ruskin and his young Scottish niece, Joan Agnew.¹⁰ In Italy, where Aesi and her mother were primarily based, she mixed with a vibrant artistic and intellectual community, including the Brownings, the sculptors John Gibson and Harriet Hosmer, and their associates – Henry James, Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Makepeace Thackeray to mention a few. In Rome, a seventeen-year old Prince of Wales visited Aesi's studio and purchased a painting (Anon 1900: 3, Lang). Despite the fact that she was an ardent advocate of Garibaldi and *Risorgimento*, Pope Pius IX requested a private meeting with the colonial artist and invited her to paint his portrait (Poulton 1987: 55). Aesi declined. Her mentor, Dr Lang, the vociferous Anti-Catholic Presbyterian, would have been proud.

Hers was a life well lived, even if it was cut short in 1867, at the age of thirty-six, when she died of tuberculosis in Rome. Aesi worked hard to be recognized both in Australia and internationally. And she achieved this, as evidenced in both the obituaries published in the British press and the fact that, in contrast to many of her female contemporaries, Aesi left an abundant historical record. Thus far, I have found just under 150 letters, 42 pieces of artwork, ranging from unfinished pencil sketches, reproductions of her celebrated watercolour botanic illustrations, exquisitely finished portraits and self-portraits in crayon and charcoal as well as the only one of three large oil paintings to survive being stored in 'a sort of three-sided shed' (Poulton 1987: 111-13)¹¹. There are also 25 poems, of which 19 were published in Sydney's

most radical newspaper of the period, *The People's Advocate*.¹² Her papers also include a batch of calling cards, with the names of the numerous influential Victorians who wove through her life, elegantly printed onto thick cream card.

There are also newspaper articles, which can be divided into references made about Aesi during her life and after her death.¹³ The latter is most numerous and primarily comprises obituaries written by Ruskin and other luminaries. There are also some tantalizing descriptions of artwork since lost (See for example, Anon 1862: 5). Most recently, I found four references to Aesi in the correspondence of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning. These are particularly intriguing for they indicate Aesi made a 'memorable' first impression upon Robert Browning due to her 'enthusiasm and wild ways', and that she insinuated herself into their social circle by conducting what Browning described as her 'performances' of 'the celestial sphere'.¹⁴

In my first speculative biography I recreated the life of Mary Ann Gill, the daughter of two Dublin emancipists, who was born in Sydney, six months after Aesi (Lindsey 2016a: xi). Mary Ann's historical record clustered around a romantic scandal that occurred in 1848 and produced both legal records and newspaper reports. While these sources are abundant, otherwise, like many of native-born women of her class and education, Mary Ann's archive is sparse: there is nothing written *by* her; nor any record of interior world or her appearance (Lindsey 2016a: 280–87). Thanks to an obituary, however, I was able to sew together the broad plot line of her life in the years following this scandal. And so, with few records to guide me from one fact to the next, I drew upon historical context to speculate and inform my imagination in ways that allowed me to recreate what was otherwise an unevenly recorded colonial life. And in the process, the archival absences served, as Mantel notes regarding her own method, as a rich 'stimulus to creative thought' (2017: Lecture 2)¹⁵.

In contrast, Aesi's sources are not only more abundant than Mary Ann's; they are also much more subjective. Scattered across fifty years and three countries, they comprise artwork, poetry and correspondence, many punctuated with regular smatterings of German, French and Italian. While the majority of her records are held in private and public archival collections, I must also hunt down references to Aesi in the records of other well-known nineteenth-century figures, many of whom, such as Lang, Wentworth, the Brownings and Ruskin, have their own extensive archives and biographies.¹⁶ Although I have decided that I am not writing a literary biography, I need to be familiar with Romantic and Victorian poetry if I am to understand Aesi's verse. Similarly, while I am not writing an artist's biography, I am writing the biography of an artist and need to understand the tools and techniques she used in a host of different mediums such as watercolour, charcoal and crayon, oil and fresco.

A comparison of the historical record associated with these two contemporary native-born women demonstrates how archives typically contain their own unique methodological challenges that then shape not only what we can know about such characters but also how we write them. Not only is 'evidence always partial', but, as Mantel notes, what remains is often also rather random. 'History is a record of what's left on the record ... it is what's left in the sieve when the centuries have run through it ...' It is, however, also 'the best we have' (Mantel 2017: Lecture 1). And if we are to

write these lives we must find ways to make do. Nonetheless, this tenuous, arbitrary, even miraculous material raises questions about posterity. Why, for example, are there so many calling cards and so few paintings in Aesi's record? Why so many crayon and charcoal sketches and none of the *Australian Wildflowers* botanic illustrations that first established her international reputation when she exhibited them in Paris in 1855? Aesi's archive appears to be a snapshot of what was in her possession when she died. We can assume that sometime after her death, her mother sorted through Aesi's belongings, discarding that which she deemed ill-suited to her daughter's legacy. Later descendants also made decisions, keeping some records, selling others to cultural institutions, which, then, made their own assessments regarding the significance of Aesi's and her record.¹⁷ Now, Aesi's archive appears highly gendered, containing an abundance of minutiae relating to her social world, but comparatively less evidence with which to assess that which mattered most to her, namely, her artistic and intellectual contribution.

Finding a spine source

Keen to sculpt some order from this chaos, I begin my biographical research by searching my subject's historical record for what I call a 'spine source'. While it is unlikely that this source will be free of bias, I am looking for something that has sufficient historical legitimacy and immediacy for me to compare it with other sources while I search for reoccurring themes and overlapping clues. In short, this source must have a bit of backbone – or spine. In this project, my spine source is a four-page letter Aesi wrote from Rome in 1862 to 'her dearest friend' Caroline Clark (ML MS 272/188/97). In it, Aesi's fluid handwriting fills the page, punctuated with curvaceous flourishes, regular dashes and numerous exclamation marks. Of the 150 or so letters comprising Aesi's archive, only fifteen of those I have found, thus far, have been written *by*, rather than *to* or *about* her.¹⁸ While the rest of her record offers insight into how others perceived and interacted with Aesi, or how she mediated the world through poetry and art, this is one of a few records that offers a rare and intimate glimpse into my subject's personality as well as her life through her own eyes. This is so even in contrast with the other letters Aesi wrote, of which ten were written to her mentor John Dunmore Lang with whom she maintained a friendly but typically professional tone, while her other letters are marked by brevity or concern business matters. Aesi's letter to Caroline Clark is written to a dear friend with whom she grew up on the North Shore and who had previously visited her in Italy. As Adelaide's archives also include a response from Caroline we can glean much about these two intelligent, affectionate and ambitious women and their friendship, including the fact that Caroline is clearly invested in Aesi's artistic career. Such details reveal that both women shared both a patriotic fervor for Australia and a self-conscious awareness of their gender. By comparing this 'spin source' with the many other records in Adelaide's archive certain patterns begin to emerge that stimulate both speculation and imagination.

– *Consistencies*

As I immerse myself in Aesi's life, lowering myself, archive by archive, onto the ocean floor where I will remain while writing her story, I realize that if I am to see her world through her eyes, I must jettison my judgments about the Victorian age. For example, while it is tempting to construct Aesi as a nineteenth-century tubercular heroine who died in an impoverished European garret; or to surrender the contingency of her life to the tragic inevitability of her death; both my spine source and other documents challenge this in ways that I hope will ensure I instead honour what Hugh Trevor-Roper describes as 'the still fluid context' of her life (qtd. in Cochrane 2011: 8)¹⁹.

For example, in this spine source, Aesi mentions a 'very bad cold' she has recently had, describing the various efforts she has made to restore her voice; 'mustard poultices (which burnt her throat), 'colourifics', lemon and water and teas of all sorts', 'everything in fact but nothing did me any good', except for 'allopathy', which she cannot find in Rome. Despite the fact that she has 'quite lost my voice for a month tomorrow, and can only speak in a whisper', Aesi nonetheless reassures her friend, that she is 'perfectly well' (ML MS 272/188/97). Instead, she is writing to share her excitement that she is just about to finish, what will become her most celebrated painting, *The Marriage in Cana*:

I am delighted to tell you dearest that my Nozze is finished! The last stroke will be given tomorrow on the hands of the harpist striking the chords in honour of the festival ... I have represented the harpist as yourself!²⁰

When read alongside letters from her doctor, James Clark, as well as other sources in her archive, it becomes clear that while Aesi regularly suffered bouts of debilitating illness, she just as routinely ignored these so she could keep doing what she loved.²¹ Indeed it is her discreet defiance of both this fragility and other's concerns for her health that is fast becoming one of her core characteristics.²² Consider the following, from the same letter, where she recounts a conversation between her mother and the sculptor, John Gibson:

Gibson has been most affectionate and only anxious about my voice "make her go to bed Mrs Ironside and don't let her get at the picture anymore she'll be lost to us all if you don't" – but as I told you before, I am quite well and can't lie in bed making a show of being ill (Aesi's underlining) (ML MS 272/188/97).

Similar themes can be found in the largest batch of correspondence in her archive; 22 letters from John Ruskin. Composed at the peak of his career in 1865, these letters suggest that although he was a busy man, Ruskin, nonetheless, afforded his colonial pupil not only time and concern but also a surprising degree of affection. His often-dashed notes quickly shift from addressing 'My Dear Miss Ironside' to 'My dear sweet child' (MSS 272/1/195). They also regularly express concerns for Adelaide's health: 'Do be quiet', he writes from Denmark Hill, 'or you'll kill yourself' In another, 'observe how you waste your strength and fancy for no purpose' and yet another, 'Its alright if only you'll keep yourself quiet' (MSS 272/1/195). Some references also hint at how Aesi's health is already impacting upon her art. 'Nothing

can be done with shaky hands and beating heart' he insists in one letter. And in another:

Remember all the lines are drawn with a deliberate freedom. Even the flourishes are made calmly, with intention throughout. I want to cure you of your slovenly ways of seeing things in a hurry. Never do one touch in a hurry anymore (MSS 272/1/195).

Bit by bit, the sources coalesce, inviting speculation that Aesi was probably infected with tuberculosis at the very time she was completing her most celebrated work, energetically building networks and absorbed with the promotion of her art (ML MS 272/188/97). Such speculation encourages me to imagine how the tension between her illness and ambitions may have manifested in her everyday life. I begin to sense in my subject something of a 'feverish temperament', shaped by her determination to make her mark as well as the sheer frustration of her physical limitations. No wonder Ruskin observes that Aesi was not only 'very fast to pick things up', but also constantly 'moaning' about staying in England (MSS 272/1/195). Aesi wanted to return to Rome and then Sydney so she could commence what she believed would be her life's work: frescoing the public buildings of her beloved city. As the sources from this period are infused with Aesi's potent sense of urgency, it makes sense for me to ensure my own voice is also infused with such energy when I write this chapter of her story.

– Contradictions

I have also detected certain contradictions in the sources regarding Aesi's apparent 'genius', a term that was used by several of her associates in reference to not only her art but also what was described as her 'wild, impulsive and (often) irrational', 'heroics' (Nicholson 1860).²³ However, given what we know of nineteenth-century gender dynamics as well as the often-sweeping way the term genius was applied among fellow romantics of the period, such notions need to be approached with caution. There is, for example, little evidence of such 'irrational' 'impetuosity' in Aesi's 1862 letter from Rome, which is instead written with a steady hand and describes the admiration her work has been receiving with modest, good humour:

Overbeck has been to see the picture he likes it very much and was very much surprised to hear that I had come from Australia – he quite warmed up and pointed to the Pilgrim and said something about my being like him. He so much admired the little sketch of the genius, he took it to the light and said it was said it was exquisite, beautiful for colour and form and quite pure ... You know Reidel one of the distinguished German artists here – Gibson bought him up and he was quite astonished – Gibson said he praised you to your face – by George – he praised you enough after he left! My picture is the star this year as they say – you know I tell you all this praise and you will think I sound my own trumpet but I know you will enter into it all with kindest love and join with me in working to elevate our sex and "hoist the colours of our dear country" – Gibson says again "You see she wants to smash some of the old fellows, she wants to make sure those men are ashamed of their art!" (ML MS 272/188/97).

The above passage offers valuable insight into Aesi's character and motivations, suggesting she was highly conscious of her identity both as a woman and an Australian and that these shaped the way she experienced life and was understood as an artist. I also know that Aesi regularly associated in social environments where the same qualities were likely to have attracted both curiosity and varying degrees of condescension. Numerous sources suggest that Aesi was not only 'married to her art' but also determined to be recognized on her own terms for this talent. It is, therefore possible that her apparent impetuosity was in fact impatience, perhaps even irritation towards those who sought to patronise or constrain her. Could Browning's reference to Aesi's 'wild ways' indicate that she was prepared to flout social conventions when she found them tiresome? If so, references to Aesi's 'irrational' genius need to be carefully considered for they may reveal more about their authors than Aesi herself.

Such textual inconsistencies invite me to speculate that Aesi experienced and expressed a degree of defiant self-consciousness regarding both her gender and nationality. By situating such speculations within the broader cultural milieu of the period, including not only nineteenth-century gender dynamics and the often-heightened sentiments of the romantic era but also the neglected but nonetheless nascent strain of native-born patriotism that informed Sydney society between the 1830s and 1850s, I can begin to imagine and advance a plausible interpretation of Aesi's character that will allow me construct certain episodes that are only hinted at in her archive but are nonetheless likely to prove crucial to telling her story.

– *Reading across the sources*

Conducting a survey *across* the archive is also likely to reveal patterns, which in Aesi's case, point to a character that was shaped by a potent sense of personal destiny as well as a particular talent for the theatrical. The earliest example I have of this involves Aesi's self-conscious creation of a public persona, when she fashioned her penname aged fourteen. Another example, involves the poetry she published in the newspapers during her early twenties. Typically in the form of dirges, stirrings songs and patriotic verse that were rich with martial metaphors, these poems resonate with rhythm and were obviously written to be recited.²⁴ Indeed, as I study these works I find myself imagining Aesi commanding a parlor of astounded guests as her admiring mother watches on. I also wonder how such performances translated in the various European and British contexts through which Aesi travelled. Did her fervour wash with the Brownings, for instance? Or did our colonial patriot sometimes find herself awe-struck and mute in the presence of those she emulated?

Such an appetite for performance is also evident in an event Aesi orchestrated, shortly before she left Sydney, when she produced a banner for 'the three arms of the volunteer Force, the Artillery, the Cavalry and the Rifles', who assembled in the Outer Domain of Sydney's Botanic Garden to receive it, along with a rousing speech and a highly self-referential poem from a self-proclaimed 'daughter of Australia'.²⁵ The accounts of this well documented episode which occurred on a bitterly intemperate day in June 1855 are so vivid I am able to imagine the wind thrashing at what I know to have been Aesi's long black hair, as she stood above the harbor

beating out her declarative verse to those marshaled below. It is a scene I frequently muse over as I suspect it was a particular triumph for Aesi, and one she revisited in her memory during her long ‘self-imposed exile’ in Rome and England. Did it fuel her desire to return to Sydney? I suspect so, and am planning to use it as a trope that will allow me to introduce then continue exploring her character and motivations.

Again, shortly before leaving Sydney in 1855, Aesi produced a self-portrait that, subject matter alone, speaks to her desire to record a threshold moment of her life for future posterity. Having visited *The Newcastle Regional Gallery* and poured over the original sketch for several hours, I can appreciate the confident, yet subtle lines and delicate flesh tones Aesi used to record herself. However, closer inspection of this work also highlights the contrast between the exquisite execution of two thirds of this self-portrait and the bottom third, which she hastily filled with a scrawl of charcoal, before dashing the word ‘Ideal’, with her signature and the date. These two portions of the work contradict each other and reveal tensions in Aesi’s character in ways that also lend weight to Ruskin’s urgings that Aesi take more care with her work.



Fig. 1. Adelaide Ironside, *Self-portrait* 1855, Newcastle Region Art Gallery, NSW. Pencil, wash and crayon on grey paper, 26.2 x 36.8cm

Aesi’s taste for the theatrical also offers a way of understanding her reputation in Rome as a medium who sketched visions from a crystal ball (see Poulton 1987: 57-8²⁶). As well as providing an outlet for her interest in the metaphysical, such performances must have offered ‘Adelaide de Australie’, as she was sometimes known in Italy, with a way of distinguishing herself socially; allowing her to command an audience as well as a degree of authority that may have been otherwise difficult for a colonial woman to secure among her British peers. Other records in her archive hint at such elements, including a letter from Gibson in which he refers to her ‘My Dear Spirit’ and a terse response from Ruskin in which admonishes her for thinking herself in ‘a higher sphere’ (Gibson; Ruskin 1865).

Reading across the archive these events and episodes suggests that Aesi was adept at stage managing social occasions and using these to command attention. Combined with other clues in the sources I have begun to speculate that such behaviors were not always beguiling but, sometimes even misjudged and off-key. My historical knowledge of the native-born demographic to which Aesi self-consciously identified, also invites speculation that her desire to be seen, heard and admired was, at least, partially motivated by the way she understood and experienced herself as a colonial woman intent upon ‘hoisting the colours’ of her country, as she wrote to Caroline Clark in 1862. In recounting her life, I need to take these influences into consideration, all the while tempering these observations with the fact that what remains of her record is random, partial, porous and highly subjective.

Patriot – Republican – Poet – Artist – Medium. Aesi clearly experimented with and expressed herself in ways that embodied many of the great preoccupations of her age. However exceptional she may have been as a colonial woman, her life nonetheless suggests that colonists cannot be simply generalized as obscure or passive recipients who perched on the periphery of empire. Instead, her life suggests that nineteenth-century Australians could operate as energetic participants, even performers capable of commanding attention at the very heart of the so-called metropole. For me, it is, perhaps, this fact and the entwined relationship between Aesi and the romantic age that I find most fascinating. It also explains my working title for this biography, which comes from an unpublished poem Aesi wrote in her diary 1852, around the time Deniehy eloped with the other Adelaide:

Have I not followed thee, followed thee,
 With a faithful constancy?
 And thro’ long, long years of woe
 Have nev’ even let thee know
 The secrets of my soul!

True is my wild love, true to thee!
 Deep, deep as the fathomless sea!
 Tis the love of soul to soul allied
 Of the long and faithfully tried
 And that asks not to be lov’d (SL NSW PXA1759).

Aesi’s only other biographer suggests these lines refer to her unrequited love for Deniehy. Recently. I was lucky to see the ‘ideal’ sketch Adelaide did of Deniehy, which is still part of a private family collection. This portrait is one of a few of her works still in its original frame and this, coupled with the intricate gilt paper that carefully surrounds the image itself suggests it was one of Adelaide’s prized possessions in ways that add weight to speculations regarding this unrequited love. For me, however, the notion of *Wild Love* not only opens up these possibilities but it also evokes Aesi’s feverish temperament, her great passion for her art and her country, as well as the very romantic and radical ideas that inspired so many during this period and which, in Aesi’s case, may perhaps have eventually ‘consumed’ and killed her (Poulton 1987: 28-36)²⁷.

Structure and voice

Already a structure for *Wild Love* has presented itself. Divided into sections that loosely correspond to Aesi's preferred artistic mediums, I will draw inspiration from the watercolour botanic illustrations, which first propelled Aesi to international fame, using this palette to inform her colonial years. Aesi's time in England parallels with an increase production of charcoal and crayon portraiture in her sketchbook and will influence how I write the shades, smudges and sharp lines of Victorian London. In Italy, Aesi produced several large oil paintings, which will inspire how I capture both her ambition and the sensory evocations of Italy. Throughout all of this, Aesi remained fascinated with fresco, and with its metaphysical subject matter and method, fresco promises to offer a potent metaphor for the last years of Aesi's life.

And what of my voice? I am still preparing my materials. With so much research before me it will be sometime before I wet my brush. However, when I was writing my first speculative biography, I recall sharing the road with the romantic fiction writers, social novelists and satirists who influenced how I wrote my imagined these historical characters and shaped the narrative. This time, however, I am working with a different story and need fresh horses and new riders. There is the troubled colonial poet, Charles Harpur, who Aesi so admired that she wrote him a sonnet. He and Deniehy's satirical prose will guide me through the early years of her life. I also know Adelaide admired Browning's *Casa Guidi Windows* and that Browning's radical poem *Aurora Leigh* became a massive popular hit at the very time Adelaide first meet the Brownings in Florence. These influences will shape my thinking as will Germaine de Staël's novel *Corrine, or Italy*, which concerns a female artist living in Italy who is crowned for her artist genius. This novel inspired generations of expatriate artists to visit in Italy, including, no doubt, Aesi herself, whose works include at least one self-portrait crowned in a laurel. There is also Aesi's own verse. Drawing upon her poems works will help me find her rhythm, to see things as she once did. Drawing upon these various influences will, I hope, summons the biographer's shadow and allow me to find what Aesi described as the 'secrets' of her 'soul'.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to explore how speculation and imagination inform the way we engage with the archives as we craft a historical figure into a biographical subject. I have suggested we should resist the impulse to romance archival gaps by devoting our first attention to that which actually remains. The innately idiosyncratic nature of archives ensures that there will be plenty of challenges in overlapping and contradictory sources that are likely to necessitate the use of not only speculation but also imagination. Identifying a spine source with which to compare other records is a helpful way of detecting such patterns. In addition to this close attention to textual overlaps, reading across the archive is also likely to yield all sorts of other possibilities. And as patterns begin to coalesce, they encourage speculation and invite decisions that invariably inform the way we imagine, then write our subject.

It is precisely this process of dwelling with the sources that ensures our imaginings are deeply embedded within and informed by the historical record. This is what

historian Peter Cochrane calls ‘the paradox of groundedness and transcendence’, that imbues historical biography with both ‘weight and wings’ (2011: 83–97). For me, such respect for the record is how we earn the right to write our subject our way. In addition to this, the longer we linger with the sources, the more likely we are to sense the biographer’s shadow guiding us in certain directions. Perhaps the image of Aesi hastily scrawling charcoal across the bottom third of her self-portrait also serves as a useful cautionary tale. By avoiding the temptation to rush the gaps and by focusing instead upon the overlaps, we might instead attune ourselves to Ruskin’s advice ‘to never do one touch in a hurry anymore’. By looking calmly at that which actually remains, we might begin to craft our subject with careful but ‘deliberate freedom’.

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Endnotes

1. For an overview of the relationship between biography and history see; Meister (2018) and Caine (2010). Both discuss a recent ‘biographical turn’, signaling a shift from disinterest and suspicion to biography within historical scholarship to a new respect and interest. However, Meister’s more recent survey suggests this ‘turn’ has been exaggerated, at least within Canada. There are a number of Australian historians exploring the intersections between history, biography and imagination, see, for example, Cochrane (2011), Hamilton (2005), Margery (2008) and Russell (2009).
2. There has been much recent discussion about archival gaps, see, for examples, Burton (2005), Baker, Brien and Sulway (2017), Ludmilla (2000), de Matos and Nelson (2015), Kineke (1994). For my own work, see Lindsey (2016a, 2016b).
3. Donna Lee Brien is Australia’s leading expert in speculative biography. Her publications on this topic include: Brien (2014, 2015, 2017).
4. For an overview of those who have used speculative biography for these purposes see Brien’s articles cited in endnote 4 above. Other notable examples include Painter (1990); See also Baker, Brien and Sulway (2017) for examples of recent experimentation within Australia.
5. In 2009, Vaucluse House purchased a sketch by Ironside thought to be one of Wentworth’s daughters.
6. Daniel Henry Deniehy (1828-1865) was the native-born man thought to have coined the phrase ‘Bunyip aristocracy’ in reference to Wentworth’s efforts to establish a colonial aristocracy. In fact, the precise term he used in this context are often misquoted and somewhat disputed.
7. See ‘Ironside sketchbook’ PXA1759 SL NSW. In Ironside’s original ‘album’, this poem is titled ‘Song’ and dated 1852. Deniehy’s late 19th century biographer appears to be responsible for perpetuating the notion of Ironside’s unrequited love for Deniehy, see Martin (1884: 3-5).
8. There are 9 letters from James Clark in State Library of NSW Mitchell, MLMSS272/1/5 - ML/MSS272/1/39, commencing 19 February 1857.
9. SL NSW Mitchell Library contains letters from Charles Eastlake and his wife, Elizabeth: ML/MSS/272/4-6. These date from June and July 1865. The Society of Australian Genealogists (SAG) holds additional letters from Charles Eastlake dating 1865, 4/12973 Ironside SAG.

10. 22 letters from John Ruskin are held SL NSW ML MSS272/190 onwards. SAG holds 10 letters from Joan Agnew, Ruskin's niece and caretaker.
11. The most extensive collections associated with Adelaide Ironside are in the SL NSW's Mitchell Library: ML A1826, PXA1759, MSS 272/1 and PA1759 CY2620 and SAG. SAG also holds a body of original records that are yet to be accessioned, indexed and available to the public and which I am consequently waiting to review. Records relating to the Redman Family are in NSW State Records. Aesi's artwork is held in both private and public collections including the National Gallery of Australia, Art Gallery of NSW and Newcastle Regional Art Gallery. Aesi's most celebrated oil painting, *The Marriage in Cana* (her Nozze) is with the Art Gallery of New South Wales.
12. Between 1850 and 1855 Adelaide wrote a series of poems in her 'Album' PXA1759 SL NSW. Between 10 January 1853 and 1 April 1854, she also published 20 poems in *The People's Advocate* and 1 in *The Empire*, 10 January 1853. One of these was also published in the *Leicestershire Mercury*, 4 June 1853.
13. There are numerous newspaper clippings relating to Ironside in the Mitchell holdings. These include articles published during her life such as *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 May 1863, numerous obituaries syndicated from *The Athenaeum*, 11 May 1867, 625 and later pieces.
14. EBB & RB to Harriet G. Hosmer, 27 March 1856. 3755, *The Browning's Correspondence*, 22, 161 - 165, HGH to EBB & RB, 30 April 1856, Rome, *The Browning's Correspondence*, 22, 199-202; EBB to Isa Blagden, 17 September 1857, *The Browning's Correspondence*, 24, 140-142
15. 'We should seek out inconsistencies and gaps and see if we can make creative use of them. ... I'm someone who doesn't regard the facts as a constraint. I regard them as a stimulus to creative thought.' (Mantel 2017: Lecture 2)
16. John Ruskin's archives are voluminous and held in a number of institutions including the Manchester University Library; University of Leeds Special Collections; the University of Lancaster's Ruskin Library; the Royal Academy of Art and the National Gallery of Art.
17. For example, SL NSW MLA1826 contains correspondence between descendants discussing various attempts to locate Ironside's lost artwork. While much of this archive is divided between SL NSW and SAG, in mid May 2018 I also learned that a considerable collection of sources and artworks are held in a private family collection.
18. While editing this article I found and viewed a batch of correspondence from Ironside to J.D. Lang, in SL NSW: John Dumore Lang Papers, 1823-1887, A2221- A2249, MLA 2228, vol 8. I have also had the opportunity to review the sources and artwork held in the private family collection. This material will add further 'spine' to the key sources I use to speculate, imagine and write my subject.
19. Cochrane was quoting from Trevor-Roper 1981.
20. Aesi referred to 'The Marriage in Cana' as her 'Nozze', which is Italian for 'wedding'.
21. See note 8 for the reference details of correspondence from James Clark. References to Aesi's health can be found throughout her archive. See SAG correspondence from Joan Agnew and Virginia Somers and in SL NSW MSS 272/1, from Charles Nicholson, JD Lang and Caroline Clark.
22. Aesi describes not only 'great pains in the chest' and how Gibson said she 'looked quite blooming', but also that she is 'transparent in the skin'. Such descriptions may correspond to some of the early symptoms of tuberculosis.
23. See also endnote 9 for Eastlake correspondence and note 10 for Ruskin correspondence.
24. 'Thank you so much for the poetry but you must read it to me your own dear self in your own way' (Joan Agnew to Adelaide Ironside, n.d., 4/12973 SAG).
25. SL NSW PXA1759. 'Banner Poem', 5 February 1855: 'Glory to ye banded few/ Of Gallant fellow sworn and true! / Take the Banner Sons of Fire!/ Hoist the warlike to inspire!/ Each to

win Historic name,/ Roll god of war in lists of Fame! / Maim of honour! "Union Jack"/ AESI waiting onto tack/ Now the Red Cross joins these three/ Nerve yourself to send it me!'. See also the reply from Henry Holloran of the Volunteer Crops (1855: 2).

26. The English Painter Seymour Kirkup was so impressed with Aesi's abilities as a spiritualist that he compared her with his 'old friend, William Blake' (Sharp 1892: 261, 266-7). See Ironside's Sketchbook, PXA1759, which contains several apocalyptic images that look like they may have been executed during such a state.
27. See also Sketchbook, PXA1759 SL NSW.

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