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Fictional Fears and Guarded Facts: An Experience in Writing a Ficto-Historical Novel

In the play *Loot*, by Joe Orton, a character who has been hale and hearty at the end of one scene comes on at the beginning of the next scene in a wheelchair. He is swathed in bandages and the following lines paraphrase his entrance:

'What happened to you?' a character asks him.
'Well,' he replies, 'we set out in high spirits.' (see Orton 1967: 49)

I have come to think the journey of a researcher can be a bit like this.

I set out, if not quite in high spirits at least with interest and hope, to write a postmodern, feminist novel for my PhD. Through a postmodern playing with notions of truth and historicity I intended my novel to join others in the process of re-inscribing women into the narratives of history, particularly late nineteenth-century Australian history.

Although its genre was fairly amorphous, my novel seemed to be shaping up as a fictional work with a large factual component. I was looking for a project that would enable me to make space for another female in existing historical narratives of Australia. Historical source books - such as *Colonial Eve: Sources on Women in Australia 1788-1914* edited by Ruth Teale (Teale 1982), *The Real Matilda: Woman and Identity in Australia 1788 to 1975* by Miriam Dixson (Dixson 1978) and *Damned Whores and God's Police: The Colonization of Women in Australia* by Anne Summers (Summers 1982) - document the hard, but largely unacknowledged slog women have done in Australia from European settlement onwards. Despite these excellent works, women are still noticeably absent from the Australian public record. With some exceptions like the philanthropist, Caroline Chisholm, pioneer agriculturalist Elizabeth Macarthur and writers such as Ada Cambridge, Catherine Helen Spence and Rosa Praed, information about women whose names did become part of the public record is scarce, and when it does appear it is rarely given weight in mainstream cultural and social history. As Anne Summers says in *Damned Whores and God's Police*:

Biographies of women suffer a mixed fate. Scholarly works like Margaret Kiddles's *Caroline Chisholm* (Melbourne, 1950) are read by fairly select groups and are occasionally referred to by historians of the period but they too generally fail to be integrated into any tradition because the subject of their research is too often relegated to a footnote in the

more general studies... [B]iographies about women are seldom taken seriously, certainly not in the way that a political biography of a male politician or some other prominent man is... (Summers 1982: 17)

Like Summers, my aim was to give value to 'women as historical subjects worthy of detailed analysis' (Summers 1992: 18) but in my case through the use of fiction as well as fact. I planned to find a suitable nineteenth-century subject and use fiction to flesh out her existing skeleton of fact.

Although the exact ratio of fact to fiction was undecided, the theoretical underpinning was clear. Along with strategies of postmodernism, other major theoretical contributions to the narrative included feminist approaches to subjectivity and women, or the lack of them, in historical narratives. The narrative would explore history as discursive rather than something fixed and factual. It would draw on Foucault's ideas about discourse as power. The work was a discourse analysis in that it was to confront conventional narratives of Australian history by constructing a discourse of the female, *othered*, voice. The aim was a contribution to the de-normalising of male-centred discourses of history, particularly the Australian historical narrative of nation we are all so familiar with. It was to be not so much a counter-narrative to the privileging of the masculinist story, as an addition to it making the public record more inclusive.

While the novel was to interrogate the absence of woman in historical narratives of the nineteenth century, it was also to consider factors operating for women who did make it into the public record. The role of the relatively few women who were recorded and given a place in the social narrative can be problematic in terms of their subjectivity within the dominant discourse. It might be argued that the female who became visible in a patriarchal narrative of history and who remains known for her role as a public figure has been carried forward in that historical narrative because she's been acceptable to the patriarchy, because she has supported the ideals expected of women by society. Women like Florence Nightingale establishing nursing as a worthy profession in England and Caroline Chisholm supporting immigrants, particularly single women, arriving in Australia, are examples of historically-acceptable roles for women. They were the nurturers, the social tidy-up-ers, who knew their place and made things easier for the men who ran the country. Even so, Lucy Osburn, whom Henry Parkes recruited from Florence Nightingale in 1868, along with five other nurses, to run the Sydney Infirmary, suffered at the hands of the existing male medical staff led by Dr Alfred Roberts (Teale 1978: 217). With Henry as her mentor though, Lucy prevailed. Women who entered the public domain at this time walked a difficult path between doing what they thought right or best and, in order to do it, needing to appease, or appeal to, a patriarchy that was wary of women entering the public domain.

Other women like Sister Elizabeth Kenny who challenged the beliefs of the Australian medical fraternity without a male mentor, found themselves officially discredited. At best they were victims of a form of social amnesia as they slipped out of the processes of cultural reproduction and public consciousness after their deaths. At worst they were *othered* in the manner described by Foucault in his analyses of discourses and power. Regardless of the validity of their beliefs or practices, women with a public profile who did not pay deference to the patriarchy suffered the fate Foucault describes as a process of devaluing the individual through

assaults on the now *aberrant* individual's credibility, identity and place in society (Foucault 1994).

How does the record portray these high-profile women? my novel was to ask. And what made a woman worthy of historical inclusion? The answer for the nineteenth-century woman revolved around duty, selfless devotion to others, and care not to be too openly critical of the dominant social order. Obviously things have changed for women since then but I think enough resonances remain in our own time to give the subject contemporary relevance. I have only to watch the media treatment of women in politics in my lifetime to see and understand something of the nineteenth-century control of women operating at many levels.

Despite my use of fiction, I was approaching the novel from the academic end of the writing scale. This was before I hit the obstacle that almost had me reaching for Joe Orton's wheelchair. However, I discovered, in what became a progressive waltz around my project, that the resulting change in genre partners does not seem to have been the disaster I thought it could be.

Before the near-wheelchair experience there had already been a shift in the original project. The first idea incorporated Henry Parkes' three wives, but there were dilemmas in it. Which wife would I focus on? What was the story to be built around these nearly invisible women? How would my story coalesce with what does remain extant of their lives? Was the paucity of information going to be a hindrance or a help? Did the determined domesticity of the women undermine my feminist objectives? And what about the descendants? The Parkes' family was very generous in giving me information, for what that they obviously considered was going to be a biographical novel endorsing Henry and his wives. I felt an obligation to honour the family. I was very aware that feelings could be hurt if my fictional construction of the women didn't gel with the family's view of them. Out of politeness I was heading for, and resisting, hagiography. This was a long way from the mystery I'd planned for one or all of the wives in the vein of Umberto Eco's *The Island of the Day Before* (Eco 1996). Like Eco's sailor I found myself shipwrecked, drifting from wife to wife in search of salvation. Solutions were only ever extemporaneous as certainty in any course of action evaporated. They receded before me like the visible but unreachable land lying tantalisingly close but an impossible swim away for Eco's increasingly desperate sailor.

However, I maintained a grip on that frail spar called research. I negotiated the unpredictable currents of libraries and archives for the *idea*. Why did I stick with the nineteenth century? you might well ask, as I asked myself. One answer is that the construction of the nineteenth-century woman holds a fascination for me. This is a site where the journey towards women's rights is enacted in a highly public way (through the burgeoning suffragette movement, the struggle for the right to education and the right to earn a professional living, etc). The idealised nineteenth-century notional woman urged by the patriarchal ringmaster into the confines of the domestic sphere becomes more vigorously contested than previously. The ideal takes a flesh and blood form as woman emerges determined to perform in the public arena in her own right - or as much of it as she can manage.

This fight for women's rights was one of the problems for me in the Parkes' wives who were strong and interesting but determinedly domestic and anti-activist. They upheld the nineteenth-century notion of separate

spheres, the domestic sphere for women and the public sphere for men. This model of separate spheres, as Summers writes, created an 'existential straitjacket' for women (Summers 1982: 32); so writing about women who valorised their confinement to the domestic life was a problem. My ability to use them as role model for women nagged at me. However, in researching the lives of Parkes and his wives I came across Lucy Osburn, the woman Henry had arranged with Florence Nightingale to reform nursing at the Sydney Infirmary. I was immediately struck by her potential for the subject of a book. She had a public profile, was determined and faced adversity with courage. Another plus was that she is not widely-known in Australia. Like so many women before and after her she had slipped from the historical narratives of all but a few diligent medical historians and the records of nursing kept by hospitals. I wondered if this could be the woman I'd been searching for.

On her arrival in Australia Lucy immediately came up against a male medical establishment determined to control all aspects of medicine and threatened by any encroachment on the control of nursing, such as it was. Lucy arrived at a vermin-ridden establishment that would have stretched even Charles Dickens' imagination. She was harassed by the hospital administration as well as the medical staff, pilloried in some newspapers (although lauded in others) for her association with Parkes and England, suffered under the religious hysteria of Evangelism in Sydney at the time, had difficulties with her sexy and otherwise unruly English nurses, and finally endured a crushing repudiation by Florence Nightingale herself. Another bonus was the happy ending of sorts as the NSW Charities Commission held in 1873 into the running of the Sydney Infirmary condemned the hospital administration and praised Lucy's establishment of nursing despite the 'intolerable conditions' (Griffith cited in Godden 2001: 283). Lucy was vindicated by the enquiry. It also revealed the respect and even affection her Australian-trained nurses had for her. Here was an exciting story, I thought, and a ready-made one. It had the drama of a woman overcoming professional and personal adversity. Sexual tensions, both hetero and homo, and the excitement of shenanigans on and off the wards existed in the new nursing sorority along with widespread nineteenth-century prurience about the body and anxiety about the sexuality of the nurses. And then there was Lucy's poignant striving for love and approval from Nightingale. Another point of interest for me was the positioning of Lucy in the historical record. She appeared in only a few books, which meant she has not been overly written-about, but there was plenty of her correspondence with Nightingale to explore and the very comprehensive report prepared by the Royal Commission gave lots of detailed background information. Lucy also has an excellent, thorough, and more importantly, very generous historian writing a biography of her at the moment. Yes, I thought, this could be the woman of my scholarly dreams. If at any point my spirits were high, this had to be it.

I began to look with interest at the nexus with Florence Nightingale who had come to my attention through Lucy, and at paradoxes for women in Nightingale's development of nursing as a profession. As the first acceptable profession for a nineteenth-century woman, nursing enabled women on the one hand but also suppressed them on the other. Nightingale promoted the ideal nurse as the ideal woman, the handmaiden, in order to have her nurses accepted by the medical profession. As the historian, Judith Godden, puts it:

Ideally the Nightingale nurse was a Protestant who trained in her twenties. She combined strong middle-class moral

ideas of personal purity with the capacity for hard physical work expected of working-class women. Gender and class together were vital to nursing leadership... Nightingale and her colleagues had a clear idea of the outcome they desired: that their nurses would live up to the popular image of the near-perfect Nightingale nurse. (Godden 2001: 278)

This iconic image of woman actually undermined women's progress towards self-realisation because, useful as the perfect woman/perfect nurse strategy was at the time, it was also detrimental to the development of women as human beings. Nightingale's construction of the nurse as a mythic creature of purity and selfless devotion had enormous impact on the Nightingale Fund's evaluation of Lucy's efforts in Australia. In my research I was becoming aware that a deconstruction of the notion of good nurse as a sexually pure, protestant, middle-class woman was becoming central to my conception of the novel. I was aware that the nursing dichotomy of ideal woman equals perfect nurse set against sexual, outspoken, natural woman equals bad nurse reflected a social construction of woman that is still to be resisted. At this point I had the core around which to build a novel.

As I have mentioned in relation to contemporary resonances with nineteenth-century control of women, I think exploration of the subjectivity of women in medicine in the past makes for an interesting study in gender-affected power structures within patriarchy then and today. (A statistical analysis of the distribution of women through current university hierarchies speaks for itself.) In her Introduction to *Purity and Pollution: Gender, Embodiment and Victorian Medicine*, Alison Bashford compares the titles of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century articles about nursing, such as 'Discipline and Etiquette', 'Hospital Discipline and Ethics' with Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. She describes nurses being 'trained in behaviours, relationships, modes of surveillance of the patients and each other, as much as they were trained in elementary anatomy and physiology (Bashford 1998: 44). In relating nursing to religion Bashford says: 'Nurses were modern versions of Christian "healers", whose femininity, and overall subordination to medicine posed only usefulness, not threat, to a secularising culture' (Bashford 1998: 61). I was well on the way to critiquing this culture of female subordination of self to duty and organisational expectations which I believe remains a large aspect of the woman's subjectivity in contemporary society. Lucy the renegade, hurling herself at the Chief Surgeon and the all-male hospital committee, made a fascinating break from the conventional woman of the nineteenth century.

This was all very fine until a difficulty of wheelchair proportions arose when I turned up to do research at the Florence Nightingale Museum at Sydney Hospital. With its detailed nursing register, the Museum is a rich source of information about Osburn and her nurses. I had arrived with high hopes! It was startling then, having been questioned by the curator (after telephone and written correspondence with her) as to what I'd do with the information. As I was unable to give a definitive answer until I'd seen what the Museum held I was refused access to the Museum's records. I was writing fiction, rather than biography, and the curator decided she had a duty to protect the reputation of Lucy and her nurses. The purity of their memory, and also that of their descendants, was endangered by my freedom to invent, she told me. For an academic it was staggering to be refused access to archival material held in a museum. It was one of those moments when a project appears not just to falter but to disintegrate on the spot.

I retreated to the Hospital's café to contemplate the shards of my project. Over lunch I was told: 'You've come up against nursing's protection of its image, and it's worldwide. It's the Nightingale legacy' (2003, personal communication).

This was illuminating. I realised I'd naively entered a territory which was not only claimed but highly self-protective and unimpressed by any notion of historical deconstruction. I'd entered a hall of icons and the lack of appreciation for a postmodern, ficto-biographical playfulness in relation to history and truth was all too evident. Feminism through fiction held no sway here. History can be a tough field. But, as Inga Clendinnen said in her speech at the New South Wales Premier's History Awards,

It is the historian's job to unscramble what happened from what the myth-makers were up to, not to play at myth-making, too. We have to resist engagement in the concoction of large inspiring narratives, because they so easily seduce in fantasy or ideology. (Clendinnen 2003: 11)

To see the history I was engaged with being protected to maintain the large, inspiring Nightingale narrative was a sobering, but not baffling, experience. I had stumbled into a culture of discipline where the licence of a creative writer positions her or him as an undisciplined and potentially undisciplinable outsider.

As a fiction writer, I was a wild card and I understood the curator's position in not wanting to threaten the private funding of her museum or upset the Sydney Hospital administration should I write something unacceptable. I was struck, though, by the message sent to me by the Director of Nursing when I questioned the curator's decision. She said it would be *unprofitable* for her to speak with me about this matter at this time. When Nightingale no longer wanted to correspond with Lucy Osburn she sent a message via her cousin who wrote, "Miss Nightingale...desires me to say that she feels it quite *unprofitable* for her to make any...reply to your enquiries..." (Carter cited in Godden 2001: 286). The similarity of this language is striking. I felt I was caught in an enactment of Foucault's theory of discourse as power much as Lucy had been. Nightingale put a stop to Lucy's epistolary narrative with her. In both instances a medical/nursing discourse has determined to control the way in which its history, its story, is written, and to this end has no compunction about monitoring who has information, who writes the story. I had become entangled in the complexity of history-shaping, and it highlighted for me the way historical narratives are fictionalised in a much broader sense in the interests of acceptability.

Advice from the Australian Society of Authors (ASA) has confirmed that as a private organisation, the Museum has the right to veto research of its holdings. Ali Smith, the ASA membership secretary, passed on some very sensible ASA advice:

[O]ur contract advisor thinks you have a good chance of gaining access to the material you're after with a bit of negotiation...

You might want to think carefully about how you are likely to use the research, and what you will and won't do with the material that you collect - the kind of thing you'd have to

plan out if you were needing to gain ethics clearance to interview living people.

Perhaps explaining that you'd like access to the register in order to get a sense of the atmosphere of the everyday working life of nurses at that time for a work of historical fiction, then discussing and negotiating on the limits you're suggesting for how you will and won't use the material with the curator?

You could offer to let them see the manuscript before it's published, if necessary. (Australian Society of Authors 2003: email correspondence)

While this is useful advice for future undertakings, for reasons that will become clear I do not feel it would make my project any more acceptable to the Hospital at this stage. As I had already done some, but not enough, preparation along these lines before arriving at the Museum, I do not feel the decision not to allow me access to material held there would be altered. I also do not want to offer my manuscript for scrutiny before publication, with the interference that could invite.

I realised I was going to be working from a compromised position if I worried about toeing the line with an acceptable historical novel about Osburn. While I obviously could proceed along these lines I was becoming an uneasy ficto-historian. Contemplating the difficulties, I could see why A.S. Byatt chose to fictionalise all of her history and biography in *Possession: A Romance*, as did Eco in *The Island of the Day Before*. The narrative that looks like history, even if it contains elements of fiction, is likely to be more closely scrutinised and criticised by historians than a narrative that declares its fictionality. While my aim wasn't to avoid debate, I didn't want to engage in a territorial contest about ownership of history.

I circled my original idea pondering the elasticity of fiction and the nature of narratology. What in a text can be changed without changing the central ideas, the ideological perspectives and positioning of the text - the deeper story? Retreating from the taut pedantry of the acolytes of Nightingalism, I pursued the idea that flagrant fiction, even when it incorporates history, is more likely to be read for the story and forgiven its historical transgressions.

I decided to write a crime novel.

It seems to me that the genre signals its fictionality and can be dismissed as such by those of the nursing profession who don't like what I had written. I had the option of continuing to write the planned fictional biography, but to do so I felt I would be burdened by the sense of entering a fiercely-protected terrain that could become contentious if I did not produce an acceptable work. In terms of publicity, this could work in the favour of a novel's sales but it could also produce disputes around historical accuracy and expectations I felt I would rather not engage with. In this instance I feel that if successfully-written as a crime story the novel will stand alone without the need for approval from those who ride the perimeter fences of nursing history.

As I thought it through I realised a more-fictionalised narrative could still incorporate a critique of the Nightingale myth and give an account of Lucy Osburn's efforts at the Sydney Infirmary as part of the plot. The feminist

ideology, the basic story of Lucy's struggle to establish nursing professionally at the Infirmary, and the critique of the Nightingale myth, remain unchanged in this new genre. The crimes in the novel relate to the protection of Nightingale's myth of the perfect nurse as the ideal woman, and I have the freedom of the fiction writer to move wherever I wish with the plot. It is possible that the contentiousness I sought to avoid by my choice of crime as the genre for the novel will create even more outrage than if I had written the originally-planned ficto-biography; but now, two-thirds of the way through the project, I find I have gained the freedom I desired in plot and narrative but almost certainly at the cost of seriousness in the treatment of the subject matter and the way it may be received. It remains to be seen how successfully I have combined the weight and drama of history with the conventions of crime to convey the personality of a remarkable woman at a significant stage in the continuum of Australia's narrative.

I do wonder about the novel that might have been had I continued with the original idea of writing a fictional history/biography, and there remains with me an uneasy sense of having allowed myself to be silenced as women were in the past. At this stage, with the distance I have from the experience of being denied access to the Nightingale Museum, I think I could write my original novel (without the material being held there), but at the time the idea was intolerable. The question arises, should writers stand their ground on principle and work with the problems? I think there are times when this is certainly the right thing to do but it is probably equally useful to be selective about when to let go and when to persevere. Writers rely on their creativity, so they do need to protect and nurture this wonderful but amorphous quality, and to that end discretion can be the better part of valour. It's no good standing up for beliefs or for a position, then finding you don't have anything to say because creativity has taken flight. I don't have answers to this except to suggest looking at as many aspects of the situation as possible when radical changes to an idea are being considered.

Consultation with the Australian Society of Authors about an issue is invaluable, as is discussion with other writers. I think it would be useful for the ASA to establish an online forum where members are able to share experiences, problems and possible solutions with other writers. (Apparently the ASA has just such a forum planned for the future.) Also, workshops run by writers' centres and writers' festivals on the processes and legality of access to information in public and private archives and holdings (as well as their locations) would surely be of interest to many researchers. These could include information about privacy and copyright as they often overlap with issues about the use of researched material.

As my project now stands, in the novel's genre shifting I take comfort from structuralism's belief in the transportability of story and Vladimir Propp's assertion that:

The subject of a tale may serve as an argument for a ballet, that of a novel may be carried over to the stage or to the screen, a movie may be told to those who have not seen it...through them it is a story one follows; and it may be the same story. (Propp cited in Rimmon-Kenan 1985: 7)

What I am doing is writing much the same story at the other end of the fact/fiction spectrum. From this point of increased fictionality I am the genre proselyte who walks this new path and can only trust the journey

into crime fiction has taken with it some essential story elements from the ficto/bio/history. Hopefully I'll engage the reader and avoid at least some of the lacerations that can occasion wheelchairs and bandages.

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Notes and Debate

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