

Why Do British Historians write so many biographies – and should anything be done about it

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I should start with a confession, which is that this talk is, for me, a form of exorcism. You see, I've just finished writing a biography, and was the final stages – those weeks filled with footnote-checking and revisions, when the whole project seems misbegotten, and only the determination to get it off one's desk for good and always keeps one working – when Malcolm Smuts asked me to give this talk. I could, then, have spoken about my subject, Eleanor Rathbone, or about one of the half-dozen or so political crusades with which she was associated, for Rathbone was, after all, political crusader par excellence – steamrolling her way from Oxford to Liverpool to Parliament, and from social work and women's suffrage into the causes of anti-appeasement, refugee work and Indian constitutional reform. But because of the particular phase I was in, I was just too mired in overwork and self-pity to do that; the only interesting question I could really think of at the time was, "why did I ever decide to write a biography, and am I ever going to be free of it?" Obviously, this was NOT a question on which I could give a talk, since it was of interest only to me, but when I reflected on my situation for a moment, it did seem that there were some more general questions to be asked. For if I had decided to write Rathbone's life mostly for contingent and specific reasons, I did take comfort from the fact that, for a British historian, this wasn't really such an outlandish choice. It might even be one (dire warnings from members of my department notwithstanding) my career would survive.

For British historians do – excessively, unrestrainedly, unabashedly and perhaps beyond the bounds of decency – write biography. Biography isn't just the preserve of distinguished popular writers like Claire Tomalin, Victoria Glendinning or Richard Holmes; it isn't just the pastime of displaced semi-retired politicians like Roy Jenkins; instead, it is a genre in which a great many British historians work. John Clive, R.K. Webb, Steven Koss, Noel Annan, David Cannadine, Bernard Wasserstein, Jose Harris, Peter Clarke, Philip Williamson, Michael Bentley, Patricia Hollis, Andrew Roberts, Alistaire Horne and a host of others have all written biographies; Ben Pimlott, Peter Stansky, Fred Leventhal and Peter Marsh are repeat offenders; Martin Gilbert has spent almost all of his life writing Churchill's life; Skidelsky two decades of his on the life of Keynes. Colin Matthew spent years on the Gladstone diaries before taking over the editorship of the New DNB – a collaborative charge that has turned almost all of us into biographers; Brian Harrison still labors at that enterprise as his successor. When we contemplate this list of names, it seems fair to ask the first of my questions, “why do British historians write so many biographies” – and, when one thinks of all the time and effort involved, as well as of the fact that most general readers probably encounter British history and historians through biography, to wonder whether this is really such a good thing. Hence my second question, which is only partially whimsical – what if anything should be done about it?

Why do British historians write so many biographies? Surely part of the answer has to do with the role biography plays in the culture, the ways in which the genre is woven into the pattern of British intellectual and emotional life. Let me cite my own subjects as examples. In 1895, when Eleanor Rathbone's father, the merchant and philanthropist William Rathbone found

himself sitting for a week by the bedside of his favorite son as the young man died, painfully, of blood poisoning, he tried to cultivate stoicism by reading Leslie Stephen's life of Fitzjames Stephen; in 1901, as William himself lay in bed dying, Eleanor tried to comfort and sustain him by reading aloud Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* and Alfred Dale's life of his father, the great Unitarian preacher Robert Dale. Two years later, when William was dead and Eleanor herself struggling with feelings of emptiness and hopelessness, she rallied her spirits by writing – what else – his biography; four decades later, after Eleanor's own death, her companion Elizabeth Macadam would recall their long and happy years together as she sorted Rathbone's papers and selected those she wanted Mary Stocks to use in composing an official life.

Biography, in other words, was intimately bound up with death and with its mastering, with the effort to cultivate character and virtue in the face of travail and loss. We knew this already, of course: in his lovely biography of Leslie Stephen, Noel Annan shows us how biography became, almost, a religious form: once faith had failed, Stephen turned to humanity – and to biography – to outline and measure the lineaments of the moral life. And yet, when we survey this quintessentially Victorian landscape – Gladstone writing the life of his daughter, Eleanor Rathbone the life of her father, Leslie Stephen beavering away at the founding of the DNB – we must ask the question that they would not quite have asked. How specific, how particular, were these responses? Surely not all grieving fathers in 1895 consoled themselves with the *Life of Fitzjames Stephen*; probably not all grieving daughters assuaged their feelings by composing their parent's Life. These are acts of assertion and not of self-denial: they stake the claim to belong, to place one's life within a circle of cultural meaning and shared references

of which reader, writer and subject are all a part. William Rathbone read biographies, in other words, because he was someone to whom the script of liberal subjectivity came naturally, who had no trouble conceiving of his life as an exercise in the cultivation of character, as a “progress” marked at each station by moral choice.

But seen in this light, biography appears, of course, as anything but a “popular” genre. It is, instead, particular and exclusive. The conditions of its possibility are social and political. Britons’ affection for biography relied both on the particularities of Britain’s place in the world and then on the particularities of the place of what we might call the biography-reading class within Britain itself. Those social conditions usually go entirely unrecognized but are not unimportant. Biography could hold pride of place as a moral and historical genre in Britain because Britain was prosperous, politically stable and domestically at peace – a peace profound enough, and taken for granted enough, to allow its educated elites – its biography writing and reading elites – to be able to see the circumstances of their lives as the result of their own endeavours, the consequence of moral choices all their own. Britain’s world economic position presented propertied men with opportunities for achievement while limiting the possibilities of loss; its history of constitutionalism accompanied by restricted political access offered them an arena for civic endeavour in which they could act to measurable and predictable effect. These men suffered losses and griefs, certainly – the death of children, the loss of faith – but they did not see their country devastated, their patrimony destroyed, and their families blighted by pestilence and famine, fire and sword. At a time men in so many other countries and territories saw their assumptions about a seemly and predictable order utterly overturned, the script for

honorable self-hood utterly transformed, Victorian men lived in a world of contained risk and reliable order – a world in which they were called to act, and could be certain that their acts would matter. Small wonder, then, that biography became their favored genre, a form into which they could imagine fitting their own aspirations and lives.

Of course, that the genre was beloved by and comprehensible to a Victorian political and intellectual elite doesn't quite explain its continued hold today – or then, perhaps in a sense it does. For as anyone working in Victorian intellectual history knows, intellectual authority in Britain has been remarkably continuous: until the sixties at least, that commonality of values between political and intellectual elites held. The demise of the liberal party and the rise of academic disciplines notwithstanding, British historians continued to try to write for the educated public (if not quite the people), and to collapse the barrier between academic analysis and (in a sense) moral instruction. Biography remains the form that does that best, and Britain's incorporated academic intelligentsia continues to write biography – indeed, the more incorporated they are, it seems the more biography they write. All biographers need to inhabit their subjects, of course, but in Britain that inhabiting sometimes seems fearfully literal, eerily close, with biographer and subject tramping the same college grounds and parliamentary chambers (formerly the Commons, now usually the Lords)—even if few go so far as to copy Lord Skidelsky and buy their subject's house.

Does this portrait of cozy community-formation, of a form that helps to sustain the self-image and ideals of a liberal elite, give you pause? It does me. For, as should now be obvious,

biography is not the form that rescues the poor stockinger from the enormous condescension of posterity; it is not the form through which Shakespeare's sister receives her due. Let me read out the subjects of that rather random, easily expandable list of historian-biographers I gave at the start (a list that included only two women). Those subjects are intellectuals (Macaulay, Leslie Stephen, G.M. Trevelyan, H.N. Brailsford and John Maynard Keynes), social reformers (Seebohm Rowntree and Sir William Beveridge) and politicians (Gladstone, Joseph Chamberlain, Salisbury (twice), Asquith, Baldwin, Halifax, Churchill, Hugh Dalton, Macmillan and Stafford Cripps). Women are not entirely absent – there are three, one intellectual (Harriet Martineau), one politician (Jennie Lee) and the Queen – and thanks to Fred Leventhal there are two working-class trade unionists, George Howell and Arthur Henderson. If one's authors are far from Oxford or Cambridge, there might even be a few subversives or outsiders—Peter Stansky's George Orwell, or now the Sassoons, or Bernard Wasserstein's Trebitsch Lincoln—a biography written in tandem with, and probably as relief from, Wasserstein's life of that relentlessly high-minded Liberal Herbert Samuel. But this is not, in aggregate, history's rainbow coalition. It is a canon, comprised of those whose lives can be described in terms of individuality and achievement, who can be made to conform to a mold. If we have a history—and still more a popular history—written largely in the form of biography, that does reinforce a view of history as a record of the achievements of great men.

What can be done about this? Let me address this question particularly from the standpoint of women's history. When Gerda Lerner laid out the stages of development for women's history many years ago—in those dark ages before there was a “gender history” and

simply recovering the lives of women seemed a good and sufficient charge, she thought of biography as a first if rather unsophisticated stage. We should not forget those admirable, striving women on whom our own emancipation depended, Lerner implied—and some of the early works of women’s history—Lerner’s own Grimke Sisters of South Carolina, Olive Banks’ Biographical Dictionary of British Feminists, or such collective projects as Notable American Women can be seen as answers to that call. A first answer to the question of “what is to be done,” could be, then (and to a degree has been) to expand the canon – to try to expand both the range of subjects deemed worthy of biography and the range of writers likely to take up the biographer’s task. Colin Matthew, the late editor of the New Dictionary of National Biography, creditably, was entirely committed to this approach, bringing out a DNB volume entitled “Missing Persons” containing a disproportionate number of women, and assiduously trying to uncover more and yet more worthy and undeservedly forgotten women subjects. He and his collaborators also went about pressing a less canonical and incorporated group of historians into service. Ten years ago, already, I accepted a commission to write the lives of a few of these worthy women – Helen Reynard, pioneer businesswoman, mainstay of the domestic economics movement and Warden of King’s College for Women; Edith Picton-Turberville, suffragist, religious reformer, missionary to India, and briefly Labour woman MP; Elizabeth Macadam, social worker and one of the founders of the field of industrial welfare. It is true that the New DNB will not look quite like the old.

And yet, this “expand the canon” strategy clearly has its limits—and not only because, in a male-dominated world, there will necessarily be fewer “notable women” than notable men to

chronicle. True, women might be under-represented as appropriate “subjects” for biography, but women historians have been slow to write the lives of even those subjects there are. This is in part because women’s history was born of social history, and shared a similar commitment to rescue the poor seamstress—and not the noted philanthropist—from the enormous condescension of posterity, but it is also because biography—as I have argued—is just not a democratic or inclusive form. The effort to expand the canon bumps up constantly against the problem of lack of information about the worthy but obscure, against the problem of the transparent unreliability and “interestedness” of what information there is, and against the problems involved in ordering any of it into the required form. The more obscure the subject, the worse those problems become – as I discovered when I agreed to write the DNB entry for Kitty Wilkinson, founder of the first municipal washhouse.

This was an instructive assignment, which is why I want to mention it here. Kitty Wilkinson is memorialized in a couple of short Victorian accounts, and in a stained glass window dedicated to municipal woman reformers in Liverpool cathedral. Those Victorian accounts told me that Kitty Wilkinson was born in Londonderry in 1786, came to Liverpool with a mother or stepmother as a child, was apprenticed at a cotton mill, and then married a sailor, with whom she had two children. The sailor appears to have died, and then followed a period of struggling but virtuous widowhood (she supported her children and deranged mother by working as a nailmaker, it seems), and then of remarriage and gradual involvement as an agent for a lady philanthropist. Then came her moment of triumph during the cholera epidemic of 1832, when she turned her own home into a washhouse to clean infected bedding. That experiment became

the foundation for a system of municipal washhouses, which Wilkinson ran to widening public acclaim until her death.

An exemplary tale, you might say, and clearly, so thought those educated Unitarian scribblers who first wrote it down. The problem was that, when I started trying to check those accounts, I couldn't verify anything. I couldn't find Kitty Wilkinson's birth or marriage records, and although the mill was identified as either Low Mill in Lancashire or Quarry Bank at Style, both under the management of the (Unitarian) Samuel Greg, I couldn't find her name in whatever mill registers had been preserved. I couldn't even find an agreed spelling for her maiden or her first husband's name. The only people in her story I could pin down were those Unitarian merchants and their philanthropic wives—who owned the mill she apprenticed in, owned the warehouses that employed her second husband, ran the charitable efforts for whom she became an almoner, discovered and supported her washhouse, and wrote up—initially as little moral tracts for the poor—the story of her life. I could verify who they were easily enough – that clan of Lightbodies, Rathbones, and Gregs that I had started to think of as the ever-present benevolents, Liverpool's Unitarian Mafia. They were admirable no doubt, and their motives in writing Kitty Wilkinson's life were as impeccable as Colin Matthew's: she had done a commendable thing, and they wanted to make sure it was remembered. But they also wanted to make sure that readers appreciated Wilkinson's poverty, that they realized—as one of the biographies insisted—that even the poor and obscure could lead morally exemplary lives. Whose story was this anyway? Between the unverifiable facts and the hectoring Unitarians, Kitty Wilkinson started to disappear. “They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented,”

Marx famously wrote of France's subjected and atomized peasants. Kitty Wilkinson perhaps could have represented herself well enough, but once the Rathbones got their hands on her story, she hardly stood a chance.

Inclusion is all very well, then, but how does one write biography when the form has the subject by the throat? On the one hand, I could repeat the claims of the little moral tales, but I had no way of knowing whether they weren't entirely made up. On the other, I could simply give up, and consign Kitty Wilkinson to the ranks of the not merely unknown but unknowable. But I wasn't really happy with either of these things—and settled, unheroically but I still think appropriately, on compromise. This little New DNB entry—all of three paragraphs—does provide what information there is on Wilkinson's life: she was probably born here, probably went there, most likely did x or y, I wrote. And yet, it is also, in its last paragraph, a small meditation on the unacknowledged biases and limitations of the form. “Although a figure of real importance in the development of Liverpool's municipal services,” I wrote, “Kitty Wilkinson never controlled the terms on which her life and work came into the public eye. Even during her life, Wilkinson's story was retailed by those local social reformers (and notably members of the unitarian Rathbone, Greg and Lightbody families) concerned to chastise the indifferent rich and demonstrate that a spirit of self-sacrifice and civic concern could flourish even among the poor.... Because these early biographers were so concerned to tell a morally-uplifting tale, however, Wilkinson's own motivations and personality remain elusive. The sole surviving photograph, much reprinted, shows a heavy-set woman much worn by work, with a prominent brow and a clear and unsmiling countenance. Kitty Wilkinson died in Liverpool on November 11, 1860, at

the age of 73.”

In this case, then, an effort to expand the canon of biography shaded into expose or critique – into what might be seen as a second possible response to the genre’s exclusiveness and bias, a second answer to the question “what is to be done”. This is a response we can see as a kind of anti-biography – a determination to make the constraints of the genre explicit, to hold up to the light the way it casts the exceptional as representative, and normalizes privilege as “choice.” There are a growing number of works that are not about individual subjects but the conditions of subjectivity, not about the individual moral life but the cultural construction of moral choice, that are not so much biographies as interrogations of the very assumptions—the assumption of a choosing subject, the assumption of a coherent knowable life—on which biography is based. And these are works, not coincidentally, written largely by women. If you’ve followed my argument thus far, this will make perfect sense. If biography is a gendered genre for reasons I hope I’ve made clear, it makes sense women scholars and historians would work to expose that bias, would try less to include women in the biographical canon than to show how the very conventions of that canon either exclude or deform them.

Some of the most illuminating work recently written on British lives falls into this category. Think, for example, of Deborah Nord’s early pathbreaking study of the Autobiography of Beatrice Webb – a book that is not a biography of Webb, but rather a study of the ways in which Webb rewrote her own life to fit into the model of the aspiring social reformer. Or of Carolyn Steedman’s life of Margaret Macmillan—a book equally attentive to the ways in which

the subject of the biography sought to control the terms of her own representation. Nor has anyone written more insightfully than Steedman about the ways in which particular narratives of selfhood become possible and valorized. In Landscape for a Good Woman, her luminous meditation on the lives of her mother and father, we come to understand how inadequately the script for a working-class “good woman” could feed her mother’s desires, how narrow was her range of choice, how utterly the kinds of self-assertion allowed the biography-writing classes was denied her.

Or take Kali Israel’s recent important book, Names and Stories, a book that, as Israel says, “is not a biography or a ‘life’ of Emilia Dilke but an examination of the stories and texts that constitute her”. Indeed, Israel’s book is not only not a biography but is, as Israel herself puts it, a “refusal” of biography—a principled rejection of the genre itself. “I share widely held suspicions about how traditional biography tends to both assume and produce its subject—the individual in the title—as exceptional,” Israel writes in her introduction. “I am also critical of how the appeal of biography seems to reside in—indeed, to be motivated by—a logic of identification and a claim to knowledge.” “Biographical texts,” she writes, “become a refuge from postmodernity, a haven in an epistemologically unsettled world, offering a reassuring faith in the knowability of past subjective experience and the existence of unified, if mobile and adventurous, selves.” She did not want to write such a book. Instead, her book “takes seriously what scholars versed in the varieties of postmodernism claim to know: experience is constructed, meaning is not a hidden essence within texts but is produced by readers; surfaces, masquerades, metaphors and images make as well as reveal meanings; selves are made and remade and

unstable and discontinuous; culture matters deep down and immeasurably; we can talk neither to nor with the dead but only and imperfectly about them. Taking these knowledges seriously means the reader will not end the book able to contend that she ‘knows’ Emilia Dilke. Instead, she will know many stories about Emilia Dilke, she will know about the making and competition of stories, she will know that there is no knowledge that is not dependent on and enabled by partial and contingent readings of partial and contingent texts, by the historically variable limits of the sayable, tellable, writable, and thinkable.”

I agree with so many of Israel’s statements about biography’s limitations and characteristics – and yet, this second response—what one might call the “unmask the canon” response—also leaves me uncomfortable. Part of my unease comes from the fact that I am certain that biography as a genre will withstand such critiques – and, indeed, that the appeal of “anti-biography” will be felt most strongly the further away from canonical subjects and powerful academic institutions one goes. It would be an unfortunate and paradoxical outcome if, after this postmodern turn, biography remained a vital canonical form, but one abjured by historians of women in particular. But the main reason I feel a measure of ambivalence about the “unmask the canon” approach is that it seems to me untrue to that history of women’s endeavour that often goes by the name of “feminism” that I am committed to recapturing. For feminism has always been about inclusion as well as critique: it has always defended women’s claim to play a full part in public and private life, while also expounding a principled critique of the gendered assumptions that often underlie the structures women enter and in which they move. Certainly there are plenty of women who tried to live this dual charge: to seek inclusion into hitherto male

realms while also changing their very structure. And in treating such women, we need a form of biography that reflects their practice, a form poised between canonicity and critique. We need, in other words, to defend their claim to inclusion in a male genre, while at the same time working to make apparent the many tensions and conflicts they experienced as they sought to conform to its codes.

Working out such an approach was, of course, a particularly urgent matter for me, when I chose to write about the woman who perhaps best embodied that delicate balance between inclusion and critique. Architect of the Family Allowances Act, of the local government amendment to the 1918 Representation of the People Act, and of the women's clauses of the 1935 Government of India Act, and President of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship in that difficult decade after the vote was (at least in part) won, no-one did more than Eleanor Rathbone to try to bring women within the circle of political citizenship and economic rights—and, by doing so, to change the nature of those systems themselves. Yet she did this, it seemed, while following the path to political influence and voice – from Oxford to social work, from local government to Parliament – trod by so many eminent men before her. Mary Stocks, her first biographer, thus had no trouble placing Rathbone within what we might call the “DNB tradition” of biography, and presented her as the “seventh William Rathbone”, “seizing the flag of Lancashire liberalism” from her father's hands, to carry it “out and beyond”. Stocks' biography begins, as Eleanor's own biography of her father does, with a retelling of the story of the six William Rathbones – an opening that, in both cases, “produces” Eleanor effortlessly as her father's heir.

And yet, as I came to probe at it, this construction of Rathbone as (essentially) a notable man troubled me more and more. After all, Eleanor was not the seventh William Rathbone – her older half-brother was. Her father had, in fact, eight sons to look to when searching for an heir – and Eleanor had a mother too, and one whose ambitions for her daughter did not lie in the direction of spinsterhood and social reform. The fact that Eleanor’s life of her father never mentioned those brothers or that mother seemed, on reflection, less a protective gesture than an act of erasure; the fact that her personal papers at Liverpool contained almost nothing about her private life—and no mention at all of Elizabeth Macadam, the woman with whom she lived—could hardly be dismissed as an oversight. Those papers have been used by many scholars who have not quite realized what they are seeing – which is not the unsorted detritus of a busy MP’s life, but rather those papers chosen by Elizabeth Macadam for Mary Stocks’s use in writing the official life – while the personal correspondence between the two women was burnt. What Rathbone’s archive is, then, is Rathbone’s (and still more Macadam’s) script for Eleanor’s biography, part of her bid to control the terms on which her story would be told. In this case, then, the biographical subject produced the sources that would lead the historian to produce her as a fit subject for biography, an independent and self-actualized individual, fully deserving of inclusion in the canon of notable lives.

Of course, once I became aware of this posthumous manipulation – or, to put it differently, of Rathbone and Macadam’s so obvious investment in Rathbone’s status as a “notable person”, it became impossible for me to write the biography in these terms. I couldn’t just take dictation: instead, my subject’s very effort at dictation – her writing of her father’s life,

Macadam's burning of their joint correspondence – became part of my story. And yet I resisted making a full-fledged postmodern turn – resisted writing a book not about Rathbone but about the ingredients that went into her historical production as a fit biographical subject. One reason I resisted doing so was, in a sense, epistemological: I did believe it was possible to find out, not everything about my subject, but more than she had wanted me to know, and to present not simply rival stories but a more complete and dare I say truthful story than she would have allowed herself to tell. The task I set myself was not simply one of reading a known archive and known stories against the grain, but also of recovering what was left of the “counterarchive” – the record of Rathbone's conflicts with her mother, of her alliance with her half-sister, of her love for Macadam – those female relationships that, although unacknowledged, also made her life of achievement possible.

But the second and more serious reason why I resisted turning my book into “anti-biography” was out of a kind of loyalty to Rathbone – and by this I mean not loyalty to tell her version of the story, but a determination to recognize, and honour, her commitment to live a public life. After all, the reason no-one remarked on the oddness of Stocks' presentation of Eleanor as the “seventh William Rathbone,” the reason no-one was able to challenge her right to inclusion in the first—and not just the new—DNB, is that Rathbone gambled on inclusion and won: she did manage to elude her mother's grasp, outwit her brothers, seize her father's mantle, and embark on the kind of public life usually reserved for sons. An account that is only about her production and self-production as a notable subject would thus be disloyal to her in the deepest sense, for she sought independence and autonomy, position and voice, so that she could act, and

was willing to have those actions judged by the public and by posterity. She lived, against all odds, a consequential life: the life-chances of British women and children, the very survival-chances of many refugees, were transformed by her action. A method interested only in how she was produced by her world, and not in how she changed that world in turn, would be the most dismissive possible historical response.

With Rathbone, then, as with Kitty Wilkinson, I tried to craft a narrative poised between convention and critique, to produce an account that would defend Rathbone's claim to inclusion in that canon of "men who act" while also making clear the sometimes painful lengths to which she went to enter into that company. This is not an easy balance to sustain, but it is one I feel is appropriate to Rathbone – and, more broadly, to the feminist political and historical tradition of which she was a part (as I am, for that matter). This is a practice that, I hope, can expand the biographical canon but can also in some small measure transform it. I don't have excessive hopes on this score, for the genre of biography is, for all the reasons I've laid out, inherently conservative. But biography does have two enormous strengths – it has the capacity foster empathy and fellow-feeling, and it is premised on the belief that individual action is morally serious and matters – and in a cynical age, I don't think historians want to "refuse" these strengths.

Now, I've shared with you here some reflections on the genre of biography, and described my own biographical practice – a practice that appears, in this account, to have been the result of my mature reflections on the advantages and implications of rival methods. I came

to work in the way I work, I implied, because I sat down and read a bunch of works and thought through various approaches. But, as any biographer would guess, of course it wasn't like that at all. In fact, I groped my way to my ideas by trial and error; luck and pigheadedness played more of a role than coherent thought. So let me close by telling you a story from my research which can also stand as an alternative explanation for how I ended up choosing this particular stance—this stance poised between canonicity and critique. I call this story, “the not quite purloined letter,” and while I didn't—couldn't—include it in the book, I assure you that it is perfectly true.

So let me take you back ten or more years, to the point at which I began contemplating writing Rathbone's life. I hadn't yet developed my suspicions of her archive, but I did know the story of the burnt private letters, I was already mourning the thinness of the private record, and I had already concluded that I needed to run not only Rathbone but Macadam to ground. So, ever hopeful, I did what any historian would do – read wills, wrote to old addresses and long-dead acquaintances, begged any surviving relatives to see me. One particularly important one did so – BL Rathbone, Eleanor's favorite nephew and the executor of her (and, though I didn't know it at the time, of Elizabeth Macadam's) will. BL was over 80 when I showed up at Park Lodge, his villa bordering Sefton Park, now sitting in the midst of the run-down Liverpool area of Toxteth. He couldn't quite fathom my interest in Rathbone, but he was terribly terribly proud of her, and willingly told me stories about her convictions and her forgetfulness for an hour. Only when I brought up Macadam did he begin to get uncomfortable. “Oh, she was really just my aunt's housekeeper,” he insisted, transparently wanting to let the matter drop. I did, but six months later, I went to see him again. He told me the same stories, almost verbatim, but this time when I

asked about Macadam he was more revealing. She was a very formidable person, he said; well they both were, a pair of very formidable spinster ladies. She didn't get on well with my aunt—my other aunt—Eleanor's sister: you see, she didn't want anyone to just see her as a kind of hanger-on, as my aunt's housekeeper – not that anyone would think that, it would be stupid.

Each time I went to see BL Rathbone I asked him whether he had anything – papers, letters, photographs – from his aunt; each time he said no. But the third time, he invited me to lunch – and this time, when I asked him this question, he said “well, after Mary Stocks finished the biography, she gave me a little box of odd bits.” “I guess you can look at it.”

I followed him into his study – at this stage, I wasn't letting him out of my sight – and from his desk he drew out a cigar box, stuffed pell mell with random letters and notes. I sat down and started to go through it – and realized, finally, that here was the motherlode. It wasn't the “hidden archive” I had been searching for, that collection of Macadam's and Rathbone's letters; that was well and truly ashes. But it was a pile of crucial fragments, notes and letters Stocks had thought interesting enough to put aside for consultation and quotation while she wrote. And it included, remarkably, a single surviving letter from Rathbone to Macadam, preserved because Stocks quotes a small and insignificant bit of it. But it is what she didn't quote that mattered – for it was in this letter, written in 1918, that Eleanor told Elizabeth that if Elizabeth wanted to move to London, whatever the impact on Eleanor's life and career she would follow her, because Elizabeth meant everything to her.

Now I was faced with a problem – which wasn't only that BL Rathbone was hovering behind me holding a gin and tonic and I thought I was going to cry. It was also that I didn't know what – ethically, practically – to do. Only a few people (including me) can read Eleanor

Rathbone's hand, and this letter anyway was to "Dearest" from "E" – BL Rathbone, I am convinced, had no idea what it was. Should I tell him? If he knows what it is, will he destroy it? If he doesn't know, will it be lost? I'm a guest in this kind man's house: now am I going to deceive him?

Well, yes. Begging time, I copied the letter verbatim and then ate my excellent lunch, convincing BL to let me come back the next day to sort the materials. I brought a set of big manila envelopes, and put away the miscellaneous letters (from Churchill and Nehru, from old school friends and fellow MPs), and told BL Rathbone he MUST, really MUST, take them over to the Rathbone Papers at the University of Liverpool Library. Eleanor's letter to Elizabeth Macadam I put–along with one or two other things–in an envelope marked "Miscellaneous, but important."

Now, I went back to Liverpool for research many times, but I never saw BL Rathbone again. I couldn't: I felt guilty and compromised. I kept checking with the library, telling them that he had more materials, but he never brought them in.

There are two endings to this story.

Almost ten years later, last spring, as I finished writing, BL Rathbone died. I still feel bad that I didn't go to see him again. But I wrote to his daughter, now head of the Eleanor Rathbone trust, and told her the whole story. She and her brothers were sorting the house: this is what you're looking for, I said, it should be there. It won't be, she told me – he would never let those letters get to the library, he'll have thrown it all out. But a few days later I got a brief email: "we've found your envelopes." Those 20 envelopes, including "Miscellaneous, Important" with its single priceless page – on which I wrote one chapter – are now in the

Rathbone Papers, a coda in a very different register to the boxes of parliamentary speeches and correspondence that Macadam preserved.

There is a second ending, which is my biography. For this experience – and not really the labor of reading essays on biography or rival biographical accounts – solved my problems with the genre. I was going to tell the grand story – the story of the woman who wrote as an equal to Churchill and Nehru, who became, for a time, Britain’s most effective woman politician. But it was also going to be the story of how ruthlessly she and those who loved her – Elizabeth Macadam, her own sister – suppressed every bit of evidence that would help us to see her as anything BUT that public figure, the worthy woman politician, her father’s heir. I knew then where I would end up – writing Eleanor Rathbone squarely into the canon, while making clear the cost that entry levies on any woman who achieves it.