

Lindsay Simpson

Lying Truths: Diaries as Historical Documents and the Craft of Fiction

Abstract:

According to Michel Foucault, it is possible ‘to make fiction work within truth, to induce truth-effects within a fictional discourse, and in some way to make the discourse of truth arouse, “fabricate” something which does not as yet exist, thus “fiction” something’ (Morris & Patton 1979: 74). Drawing on Foucault’s observations, my paper sets out to give an individual perspective on the positioning of the writer as a participant/observer by employing three nineteenth century diaries as a basis for creating characters in my own novel, *The Curer of Souls*. Specifically, it will consider how primary sources such as real diaries can be used to reconfigure the archives and restore buried discourses. The diarists’ words invoke a primal telling which involves the voice in an original singing of the world. Adopting the diarists’ written words, viewpoints, idiosyncrasies and modes of speech within an historical context helps the writer recreate the cultural fabric of characters’ lives. Diaries are scrapbooks of the self that conjure up character and fuel the imagination of the writer but how reliable are they as a representation of the past? Can fictional tools be used to map the silence of the diarists ‘to make fiction work within truth’? The paper explores ways in which the writer negotiates the diary as a source for characterisation.

Keywords:

historical novel – diaries – fictional history – fact/fiction – primary sources

Biographical note:

Lindsay Simpson is the author and co-author of six works of nonfiction including the bestseller *Brothers In Arms* about the Milperra bikie massacre co-authored with Sandra Harvey. *The Curer of Souls*, her first novel, was published by Random House last September. She is the Head of Journalism at James Cook University in Townsville and was the founding member of the Journalism & Media Studies program at the University of Tasmania. She spent 12 years working for *The Sydney Morning Herald* as an investigative journalist.

The Curer of Souls owes its origins to the discovery of three nineteenth-century diaries that traverse the same time period and place: 1830-40s in Van Diemen's Land, an island jail in the far-flung realms of the British colonial empire. In seeking to reconnect with the past, the novel draws upon these diaries as well as other primary sources, such as colonial correspondence, inquest papers, court transcripts and newspaper accounts. The abundance of available factual material was a key motivation to write the book as it was originally commissioned as nonfiction. This form was later abandoned due to the silences, both organic and contrived, from within the primary sources. My past work as both writer and journalist was within the discourse of nonfiction, but in this case, my pact with the reader was to produce a work of fiction and in so doing, as Michel Foucault suggests, 'induce truth effects within a fictional discourse' (Morris & Patton 1979: 74). As *The Curer of Souls* was also the subject of my doctorate degree my candidacy required an exegesis to provide an analysis of my own work. Thus writing the book and completing my dissertation involved a journey where I was both participant and observer: a reader, writer and researcher negotiating the challenges of writing the past by using fictional tools to reconfigure the archives.

Foucault describes history as 'the most cluttered area of our memory; but it is equally the depths from which all beings emerge into their precarious, glittering existence' (Foucault 1994: 219). It was this glittering existence that I sought to reconstitute from the words of the diarists who had committed the act of recording their life, or segments of it, to paper. Part of the appeal of the diaries was their status as private documents recording public history. All three diarists documented the desire for their writing to remain private (Heard 1981 xiv; Lempriere 1834-1849 Franklin 1803-1872) but due to the diarists' public status their writing survived. Only one of the diaries was published, the Commandant, Charles O'Hara Booth (Heard 1981). A mixture of fact and fiction, using voices excluded from the official master narratives, can produce a more complex reading of the past as private individual accounts of events can avoid and challenge ideological distortions thrown up from official accounts (Hassam 1993: 62). The unique rhetorical modes of the diarists provided me with three vastly different perspectives of life in the colony: Lady Jane Franklin, wife of the governor of the colony; Thomas James Lempriere, a storekeeper at all three penal settlements in Van Diemen's Land in the 1820-30s and Commandant Charles O'Hara Booth, the longest serving commandant at the Port Arthur penal settlement. The diarists were peripheral figures who documented their lives on an almost daily basis and whose voices were largely absent from traditional historical texts. Lady Franklin is marginalised within the imperial discourse of the day because of her gender even though, out of all of the diarists, she has more social status. Both the storekeeper and commandant were marginalised figures within the social milieu of the colonial world.

In addition to the diaries, I drew upon other primary source material seeking to create a sense of place and particulars from events. The hanging episode in the novel is drawn from a newspaper account of an actual hanging in Hobart Town (*The Colonial Times* 1826); the murder of Thomas Boardman is based on the 1842 inquest papers (Archives Office 1842); the account of the Franklands' journey

across Van Diemen's Land to Transylvania is based on the daily journals from the playwright, David Burn who accompanied the Franklins in March 1842 (Mackness 1977); and the accounts of cannibalism involving the convict Alexander Pierce, who escaped from Macquarie Harbour on the colony's west coast and ate five of his companions, are also based on primary sources (Mackness 1977). Various accounts of events and actual extracts from the three diarists were used throughout the novel to flesh out their fictional counterparts: Louis Lempriere, Lady Jane Frankland and Charles O'Mara Hawkins. Diary excerpts include the witnessing of the dismembering of a shark on board *The Fairlie*, an account from Lady Franklin's diary during her voyage out to Van Diemen's Land (Franklin 1836-1843); her climb to the summit of Mount Wellington; and her visit with her husband, Sir John Franklin, to Port Arthur. This included accounts of food consumed, the weather and her first visit to the penal settlement as well as her impressions of the convicts and her views of Point Puer, the boys' prison on the promontory next to Port Arthur (Franklin 1836-1843). Daily entries from Thomas Lempriere's diary include the detailed records he kept of his Museum of natural history at the Port Arthur penal settlement; his domestic accounts, including reading the family bible to his children and details of his 47th birthday; his meteorological recording and his accounts of the various portraits he painted as an amateur painter, as well as detailed descriptions of his coat of arms (Lempriere 1836-1849). Charles O'Hara Booth's diary entries are also appropriated as a basis for some of the descriptions in the novel, including Booth's description of his collection of 'trophies'; escape vessels used by the Point Puer boys in usually aborted escape attempts; his account of his unique way of communicating the absence of convicts by using semaphore; and the way he puzzled over the design and development of his human railway drawn by convicts. His harrowing account of being lost in the bush near the settlement in the novel is also taken from his diary entries (Heard 1981: 225).

Drawing upon photographs and visits to the actual locations also helped recreate a sense of place (Stone 1978; Sprod 1977), but it was the diaries that became a crucial tool in guiding my imagination and provided an opportunity to write myself into the cultural fabric of the characters' lives by adopting the diarists' written words, viewpoints, idiosyncrasies and modes of speech within an historical context. Robert Fothergill compares the diary to a series of photographs that compose a portrait (Fothergill 1974: 51). It was crucial to the creative process in creating that portrait to absorb the diarists' experiences and to see the world as they would see it and, in so doing, to vicariously position myself as a participant/observer so that the writing and the research became part of the same process. Van Manen states:

Since to *know* the world is profoundly to *be* in the world in a certain way, the act of researching-questioning-theorising is the intentional act of attaching ourselves to the world, to become more fully part of it, or better, to *become* the world. (1990: 5)

In this way the writer acts as a scientist, ascertaining the lived experiences of protagonists to explicate a more complex understanding of meaning of identity, place and landscape (Van Manen 1990: 6). In using the diaries, I sought what Merleau-Ponty describes as 'a primal telling to involve the voice in an original singing of the world' (1973, cited Van Manen 1990: 13). By reading and writing

from their diaries, I sought, therefore, to find out what ‘a certain phenomenon meant and how it was experienced’ (Van Manen 1990: 29).

My fictional characters’ pasts mimicked the pasts of their real counterparts and they occupied a similar public space. Apart from the daily diaries he kept, Thomas Lempriere was the author of *The Penal Settlements of Van Diemen’s Land*, having served time at all three penal settlements at the time: Maria Island (1826), Macquarie Harbour (1827) and Port Arthur (1833-48). He was born in Hamburg, Germany, into a family from the Channel Islands and, like his fictional construct, was descended from judges and jurats, wealthy inhabitants of the Channel Islands. He immigrated with his parents to Van Diemen’s Land in 1822. He defined himself as a dilettante, his interests encompassing meteorology, painting and natural history. His meteorological records are today housed in the archives of the Royal Society, London, and his tidal records are used today for a comparative study with modern-day readings at the Port Arthur Historic Site to monitor the rate of sea level rise over the past 160 years (Pugh & Hunter 2002). In 1837, long before the concept of global warming, Lempriere made his own rudimentary tidal gauge using a benchmark in the form of a broad arrow carved into a stone on the Isle of the Dead, the cemetery for the Port Arthur penal settlement. The benchmark is thought to be one of the oldest in the world and was the first in the Southern Hemisphere (Goldie 2003).

Charles O’Hara Booth, who provides the basis for the fictional O’Mara Hawkins, also played a role in the making of public history. He oversaw the development of the settlement between 1833 and 1844 during the period of its greatest development. He was born in Basingstoke, in August 1800, into a family of distinguished military men (Heard 1981: 4). Three weeks after the Battle of Waterloo, he went to Calcutta to join the army. After a stint in the West Indies with the 21st Regiment, he took over as commandant, in February 1833, at the Tasman Peninsula, an area thirty miles long and fifteen miles wide, which included the fledgling penal settlement of Port Arthur. At that time, there were 475 convicts. By 1835, this number had almost doubled (1981: 16). Lady Franklin observed that using Booth’s semaphore, ‘in clear weather three could communicate in one minute, and in a quarter of an hour a long message could be transmitted by them all’ (1981: 24-25). She also noted that experts in London considered Booth’s invention ‘a clear and ingenious adaptation of the Semaphoric Telegraph’ (1981: 24-25).

The character of Lady Frankland is drawn mainly from Lady Jane Franklin’s Van Diemen’s Land diaries and correspondence, which form part of the collection of 168 journals she filled in her lifetime before her death in 1875 (Woodward 1951: 5). Her diaries and correspondence map the private sphere of day-to-day domesticities as well as the public discourse of natural history and the public world of government, particularly political intrigue involving her husband’s role as governor. Ann Moyal dubs her Australia’s first patroness of science (Moyal 1986: 86). Lady Franklin wrote extensively about the findings of the Royal Society of Van Diemen’s Land, the first scientific society outside of Britain. She was actively involved, while the study of meteorology was still in its infancy, in the establishment of the Rossbank Magnetic Observatory in Hobart Town in 1840, which ‘furnished climatic

and meteorological data and linked Australia's magnetic records with those of stations overseas' (117). She built a Grecian temple as a cultural museum that she named *Ancanthe* to exhibit a collection of the colony's natural history.

Increasingly, with each draft, the diaries became subservient to form. I strove to preserve that imprint of a momentary state of awareness which Robert Fothergill likens to a photograph (1974: 51). In seeking a flow of consciousness from real and imagined characters, my aim was to render a flow of consciousness that was mimetic of a life lived a century and a half ago. Through fictionalising the diarists' words, I sought to create a hybrid that did not entirely compromise authenticity. The diaries represented a bridge between the past and the present that heightened and fired my imagination. Saturating myself in them in much the same way as actors drench themselves in characters, I practised mannerisms, speech and viewpoints until I felt I *was* that person. This technique is described as literary ventriloquism (Byatt 2000: 45). The diarists' words helped invoke feelings and emotions across time, class and gender, and contained an implicit invitation through their mode of personal address to add to the fabric of their lives. Byatt commented that during the creation of *Possession*, writing 'Victorian words in Victorian contexts, in a Victorian order, and in Victorian relations of one word to the next was the only way I could think of to show one could hear the Victorian dead' (2000: 46-47). The diaries presented an opportunity to use their nineteenth-century language as a prism to recover the 'the living, fragile, pulsating history' described by Foucault (1972: 11) which he believed was all too often abandoned in formal history. Some of the entries collapsed time, recording commonalities of experience that transcended the temporal restraints of history, illustrating that, in spite of the globalised society in which we now live, the human condition has remained unchanged. The storekeeper, Thomas Lempriere's entry on 21 June 1834 encapsulates this:

Fine morning, a little drizzling rain in the afternoon – busy in the stores. This evening saw a beautiful eclipse of the moon. It lasted till about 10 minutes past 9. Did not see the beginning. The moon's face being all covered except in small proportions when I went to bed. (Lempriere: 1834-1849)

Each diary has a different rhetorical mode. Thomas Lempriere's diaries resemble *journaux intimes*. Writing about the self came into its own in the nineteenth century even though it appeared as a late literary form in the seventeenth century (Ong 1982: 102). Lempriere's words are more like the confessional, recording his disappointments and his regular entries, full of personal observations, often containing self-remonstrances conjuring up a warm, fallible man:

20 May: Mr Turner preached here and at Point Puer on Sunday and the Military barracks yesterday. His sermons are good, but he does not know how to modulate his voice which, however, is powerful – on Sunday evening he thundered till my head ached, nevertheless I hope I benefitted from the sermon. (Lempriere 1834-1849)

Jane Franklin's discursive presence is quasi-male, occupying that space between the masculine and the feminine, in common with other nineteenth century women travellers, such as Isabella Bird, Gertrude Bell, Victoria Sackville-West and Harriet

Martineau, who, like her, were wealthy and childless. Travelling allowed them to occupy spaces outside of the domestic, a no-man's land where the patriarch was not specifically in control. Lady Franklin's diaries and letters are full of identifiable structures that are recognised as masculine, for example, engaging in discourses about specimens and conversing over dinner about Wheatstone's electric telegraph and Harris's lightning conductor. Her diaries lack personal reflection and instead are packed with measurements, comments, notes and eyewitness accounts. Her journal is used as a record of her daily life, closer to what Foucault describes as the ancient Greek tradition of *hypomnemata*, a notebook or a material support from memory (Dreyfus & Rabinow 1983: 245). Her words bear the hallmark of imperial narratives, representing the tourist gaze from the leisure class. In this excerpt from an excursion to Port Davey and Macquarie Harbour in 1838, she maps the public sphere:

This excursion, or at least a visit to Port Davey was first suggested to me by hearing Captn King say he wanted to go thither in search of Huon Pine – To this was added another motive that of laying down S. W. Cape whose precise position is disputed by different navigators. In combination with M^r Gould I determined, if possible, not only to go to Port Davey but to visit Macquarie harbour on the Western coast, where a penal settlement was made & after some years abandoned in the time of Col. Arthur. (Franklin 1836-1843)

Conversely, her diary entries are sprinkled with gendered references and frequent mentions of menus and domestic details:

I was busy for three hours this morning in Margaret's confectionery room, learning ... the act of making sponge cakes, Naples or finger biscuits and drops, cheese-cakes, tartlets and puffs. With a white muslin apron on, prepared for me by Margaret, I practised some of the manual acts of her profession half-smothered by smoke, however, by the oven of this ill-constructed room. (Franklin 1803-1872)

The diaries of O'Hara Booth, soldier and penal administrator, mix episodes of reflection with a pompous humour. His tone is ironic and there are many puns with spasmodic evidence of introspection. His diaries were useful for capturing the military voice, although I sought to avoid the stereotype of a flash man. It was not difficult to imagine a man who named the convicts 'villains', or his 'lions' and used them as beasts of labour to propel one of the first trains in Australia. Diary entries such as, 'Put on my annihilating countenance ... raised my stentorian voice and made them quake' aided my imagination (Heard 1981: 158). Nor was it hard to imagine the solitary eccentric inventor who sat late into the night scribbling in notebooks designing an invention from this remote outpost that would rival the telegram. His diaries emulated military precision. He would write on the recto side of the page and when he reached the end of the volume, reverse and continue from back to front on the verso side (1981: xii). He was fond of French phrases and wrote in a telegraphic style like a voice barking orders that included a liberal sprinkling of swear words. The tone of his diaries betrays a certain bluster, perhaps emanating from the isolation of his post, offering 'an attempt to mimic masculine efficiency' (Hassam 1993: 133). Many of his sentences are abbreviated, written in telegraphic

punches, reminiscent of a ship's log – despite the sexual puns – with partial rather than complete sentences punctuated by dashes and a sprinkling of capital letters:

7 January 1827:

Ew: as usual growling for his Breakfast – Tea & Chocolate condemned – Brandy recommended as best restorative to weak Stomach's – fine weather – Church parade – Roderick played Parson – A severe squall between Dick & Ben – Gales subsides. (Heard 1981: 116)

The occasions when he reflects on the personal are rare. In this entry, he is referring to a former sweetheart who died in England during his absence:

29 May 1836: 'Oh *que je suis Miserable* – The Charlotte Cutter in – brought intelligence of our worthy Governor being relieved – Doubts arise!!! – Received a letter from my worthy friend Peddie of the Melancholy and unexpected demise of the 'Dearest Phoebe' – Alas! How vain is it for us to plan out schemes of future Happiness – she has fled (Her Blessed Spirit) to realms of eternal Bliss – Amiable – Virtuous – everything that could be desire – Would that I were with her. (198)

In spite, however, of such rich original material, there were several obstacles to making fiction work within truth. Novelists, unlike historians, are free to interpret the actual practices of consciousness that occur in individuals. To ascertain and accurately portray these practices of consciousness, however, is challenging. To begin with, all three diaries had been tampered with. In the case of Lady Franklin's papers, considerable textual changes were made after her death. Pages were torn out, sometimes up to a hundred at a time. Willingham Franklin Rawnsley, a relative of Franklin, donated some of the large Franklin collection to the Royal Society of Tasmania and he published a brief edition of her papers in 1923 (Russell 2002), but many of the papers he sent to the Royal Society were not complete and some were not even originals. They were copied, often inaccurately, by Sophy Cracroft, Sir John Franklin's niece and Lady Franklin's erstwhile companion, who intended to write a commemorative biography of her aunt (Russell 2002: 3).¹ These copies were then corrected and edited. It is unclear how many of Lady Franklin's diaries are missing as her papers are now scattered across the globe. There are copies in the Archives Office of Tasmania and the Royal Society of Tasmania collection. The remains of the originals are housed at the Scott Polar Research Institute at Cambridge.

Lempriere's papers suffered a similar fate. CSIRO oceanographer, Dr Bruce Hammond, who interviewed Lempriere's descendants while researching his contribution to sea level research, wrote that much of his papers were burned late last century by one of the family, 'who did not want others to pry into them' (Goldie 2003). Many volumes were reportedly burnt as private papers by his widow. Other volumes and miscellaneous papers were plundered from the government stores after Lempriere left for England in 1850.

In part, the creation of O'Mara Hawkins as a fictional representation of Booth arose out of the mystery surrounding his diary entries. Shortly before his marriage to Lizzie, several lines in his diary were crossed out, written over and then covered with an ink wash (Heard 1981: xiii). In spite of infrared and ultraviolet treatment

they have never been deciphered. Up until 13 July 1836, Booth's diary was written in bound copies. After this date the originals were apparently written on loose sheets (xii). Ronald W Giblin, who worked at the Agent-General at the Tasmanian Government Office in London, copied Booth's diary after receiving the original and the loose sheets from a relative. Dora Heard who edited Booth's diary believed that the omissions related to personal opinions. However, she was unable to decipher errors that were committed in the copying of the loose sheets by Giblin, as the originals were lost. It was in Giblin's copy that the offending lines were obliterated. The first three words, tantalisingly, appeared to be 'the lovely Lizzie' (xiii).

Apart from the manufactured silences, there were more organic silences. Diaries, like many primary sources, provide only one side of a story. The more I read from the diaries, the harder it was to navigate through the silences, both the obvious and more intangible. Was the diarist consciously or subconsciously misrepresenting events, thus undermining the diary's reliability as a source? Diaries encourage duplicity. Interviews and diaries, even though they claim a place in the historian's box of verifiable tools as primary sources, can be unreliable and the perfectly honest person, whether speaker or writer, has yet to exist (Dobbs 1974: 9). While a diary gives the impression of being intimate, of revealing one's innermost thoughts and secrets, and while 'the reader has the impression of being allowed to glimpse a secret world, he or she is in fact allowed nothing of the sort' (1974: 7).

Sometimes there were differing accounts from the diarists about the same event. In 1843, shortly after Sir John Franklin was recalled to England, according to Charles O'Hara Booth, Lady Franklin burst into tears at a public gathering and was inconsolable (Heard 1981). Lady Franklin, however, blamed 'some particles of soap (honeypaste) which must have been clinging about them' for her apparent demise:

I was painfully blinded by my tears. Nothing could exceed the ridiculous nature of my position. It would have been vain to explain – I should only have been convicted of subterfuge, so I wept on immoderately trying to adapt my words so as to account for any tears while poor Captain Booth apologised for having so distressed me. (Franklin 1836-1843)

In another episode, Booth described Lady Franklin's journey on the convict railway:

His Ex: Lady Franklin Miss Cracroft & Capt; King in one Carriage and Elliott the maid & self in second – went right through at a posting rate. Ladies a little frightened. (Heard 1981: 228)

Lady Franklin's description betrays no such alarm. Instead she 'coolly noted the railway's statistics'. (Weidenhofer 1990: 38).

An historian might leave ambiguity rather than map silences, but a novelist is permitted to reshape the lived experiences of actual characters. Fictional constructs can reclaim buried discourses, especially if these constructs are based on primary sources such as diaries which can act as scrapbooks of the self (Fothergill 1974: 52). In this way, fiction can illuminate darker aspects of the past that have been

neglected by traditional historians. As Lytton Strachey, the author of the influential work, *Eminent Victorians*, stated in a book review for *The Spectator*:

The function of art in history is something much more profound than mere decoration ... Uninterpreted truth is as useless as burned gold; and art is the great interpreter. It alone can unify a vast multitude of facts into a significant whole, clarifying, accentuating, suppressing and lighting up the dark places with the torch of the imagination. More than that, it can throw over the historian's materials the glamour of a personal revelation ... every history worthy of the name is, in its own way, as personal as poetry, and its value ultimately depends upon the force and the quality of the character behind it. (2002 xxviii)

There is no doubt that diaries can offer personal revelations to illuminate the precarious glittering existence of past lives. If every history is, in its own way as personal as poetry, surely the legacy of words from an individual, however duplicitous, must provide revelation worthy of note. The historian is restricted to dealing with the documents often hampered by the cluttered area of memory, and must, especially in the case of diaries, leave ambiguity rather than clarity. Any assertions of claiming truth, however, whether from the historian or the novelist in attempting to draw on accounts of actual events, should avoid any claims to provide an unequivocal telling of the past as no such account exists. Diaries have their own contradictions and inadequacies as primary sources but they remain a valuable voice, a bridge between the past and the present and a precious resource for the novelist in reconfiguring the archives. Whether they create a trustworthy experience, however, can easily be challenged.

Endnotes

1. In a despatch from Rawnsley (Sophy Cracroft's cousin) dated 11 January 1924, Sophy selected original correspondence for publication and, owing to illegibility wrote them out clearly and destroyed the originals. Woodward comments that Rawnsley suffered from mental blindness in preserving Lady Franklin's words.

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