

Part One

As an undergraduate in my second year of a joint honours degree in History and English, I had spent time researching in a local museum, going through material which my subject's family had left in their care at the end of the nineteen sixties. Since then there had been many changes of staff, many volunteers, nobody was quite sure what was there any more. It was therefore of great joy and excitement to me when I unwrapped a bundle to reveal a diary she had kept over a period of ten years from 1899-1909.

I couldn't believe it. My subject had seemed cold and lifeless, yet within these pages she became a real human being. She talked about how she formed her business, the influence from the Arts and Craft Movement, Ruskin, whom she knew, and then in the final entry, her views on the Anti-Suffrage League after attending one of their meetings. I was excited and totally overawed. This document, which also declared that it was the basis for an autobiography (though nothing was ever published) merited more time than I could give it in an undergraduate dissertation.

My second year supervisor from the English department, Jo Smith, shared my enthusiasm and encouraged me to think, in the future, of transcribing the diary "You must publish", she said.

In my third year I moved into social history and was supervised for my final year dissertations by William Jones. He too was enthusiastic about my work and confirmed Jo's views that I should carry on with my research. I gained a good 2i in

Part Two

Part Four

Second postgraduate year. Turned down, again, for funding. But that old maxim "I've started so I'll finish" is ringing in my ears. Beginning to think about how quickly I can finish. Only part-time, but William says I've done as much work as any full-time postgraduate. Is this the right attitude? I borrow money to pay my fees.

Earlier in the year William and another history professor had recommended me for teaching in department of Continuing Education. I put a course together which is accepted and advertised. Throughout the summer I attend teaching workshops etc., but enrolment numbers look doubtful raising questions about whether the course will run. Then, a day before the course is due to start, I am told it can run with reduced numbers, if I am willing. I am willing: I need the money. I had already turned down any teaching in the History department because of the possibility of this workload. Two days later my younger daughter is diagnosed as having glandular fever.

Part Five

I have three children and I'm a single parent. This opportunity has come late for me, but not too late, I hope. I am still exhilarated at having this opportunity but it's getting tougher to justify financially. I should be getting a job, but what jobs are there? I still

Part Six

My second year. I have been invited to teach on a course for ten weeks - creating it as I go along. I am tutor for nine students of varying age which helps pay my fees. Their levels of interest and knowledge dictate that a large part of the two hour session is tutor-led. This means an approximately hour-long lecture followed by (hopefully) a period of discussion. The students' commitment to any suggested reading is limited by full-time jobs, degrees of interest and a notion of sitting back and being entertained. Preparation for these sessions takes up a major part of my week - in fact the three days before the two hour session. As I only get paid for the two hour contact-time this is hardly remunerative employment!

Part Seven

William acknowledges my need for renewed direction and also a need to pull together all the theoretical reading and research in a more focused way incorporating my empirical research. He suggests preparing a historiographical review, a chapter outline, a bibliography and getting ready to upgrade. I feel flattered and flabbergasted - only just into my second year and only registered part time. Am I ready for this? He thinks I am. Right, I take up the challenge. The next question is: who will be on my upgrading panel and the problem of dealing with the interdisciplinary nature of my research?

William as the tutor for postgraduates would be there wearing his two hats but in a chairing capacity. Otherwise the choice is limited. The Professor of Women's History has to be an obvious choice but she is based in the Social Sciences Faculty and specialises in Twentieth Century Oral History. She hasn't seen my work before. I suggest that my other choice should be a social historian in the Department who I know has done some work on diaries. I have met both of these people before under less formal circumstances - don't know if that is a good thing or not!

Over the next few weeks I'm writing like mad - leaving work for William to read through. He remains positive but admits again that while he finds it interesting, quite a lot is "not his field" following this with "we'll see what the others think" - does this begin to have an ominous tone to it?

Part Eight

As I had been warned, no sooner had we all gathered together then I was asked to go and wait in Philip's (the other history lecturer) office while views on my work were discussed. I waited, speculating on what this was similar to - job interview, hospital appointment, dental extraction, and I waited. Twenty minutes went by before Philip came to fetch me.

Much of what followed in the next hour and a half has now disappeared into the folds of distant memory. So much to register (a tape recorder might have been a good idea). But I do remember the initial compliments - standards of intellectual endeavour, handling of material, ability to deal with abstract concepts etc. - I was waiting for the "but" and it came!

Philip began. He admitted that he didn't know much about the theoretical side, but as he returned my draft chapter outline I saw that he had totally reorganised my outline to accommodate his vision of what I should-

Part Nine

I met a friend afterwards. How did it go? "Well I don't have to go through a panel again but they want me to write some more." "Well that's good news then", she said. Is it?

I wasn't happy with the piece I eventually turned in. I knew I wasn't ready but more to the point I felt too mentally tired to do it full justice.

I received Philip's reply first - again he had meticulously examined my manuscript. His conclusion that it was all right with him if it was all right with Sarah was hardly the endorsement I had been looking for. Meanwhile Sarah proved more elusive. Exams loomed, as did her planned trip to the States. My application for funding which I had delayed to the last minute had to be submitted with the rather ambiguous statement that I had been through an upgrading panel which had been encouraging and supportive but which omitted to mention less than conclusive.

It was a couple of weeks after this when I had all but given up asking and chasing William (who continued to be positive and reassuring as to the outcome) and had resigned myself to a fate of limbo that Sarah returned my work with a copy of her covering note to William and Philip.

"... my response to Joan's draft chapter is positive. I think asking her to do it as part of the upgrading process was a worthwhile exercise. It clarified for me that there is a thesis ..."

Relief is too strong a word to use. I'm still not sure why it was so prolonged - does the fact that my upgrade was not related to any British Academy or ESRC funding have any bearing? I have friends in different departments who went into a room and less than an hour later came out as if it was an un-contested rite of passage. Sure they were questioned and challenged but in the sense that this was work in progress. Some departments don't have panels at all. Definitions of what an upgrade should involve seem to vary. Should all departments issue their own guidelines? Many of the people who now conduct them have never been through such a process themselves. All I know is that I would not like to have to go through that again - fortunately I don't have to.

Epilogue

