



Looking For Mary Webb Part One

Creating a Lost Diary

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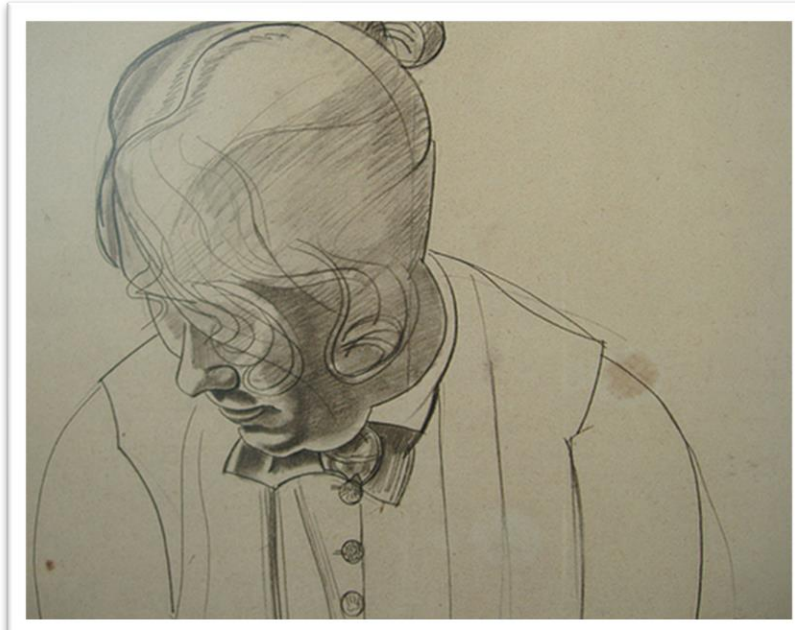


Figure 1 Sketch of Mary Webb By Wyndham Lewis (1919)

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ABSTRACT

This practice-led PhD in Creative Writing consists of an historical, biographical novel called *A Single Violet*, and a critical commentary, *Looking for Mary Webb*. The novel is infused with nature writing and written in the form of a diary.

The Shropshire writer Mary Webb (1881 -1927) published novels, essays and poems in the early twentieth century that explored folklore and the sacred qualities of nature. My novel sets out to create 'a living, breathing, fictional Mary Webb' through the imagined recreation of her diaries.

Although Webb did not receive the attention she strived for in her lifetime, she received posthumous success during the idealisation of rural England of the 1930s, and in the 1980s as Virago Press reintroduced her work to a new readership. Since then, Webb has gone largely forgotten and unstudied, and very few personal papers survive in the archives. Her husband explained that the papers were burned to heat the house when the couple were too poor to pay for fuel, adding 'they made a splendid fire'. Taking inspiration from the life and work of Webb, *A Single Violet* uses in-depth research and imagination to fill the deep lacuna in the record.

The critical commentary *Looking for Mary Webb* explores the challenges encountered in writing the diary, thereby contributing to the reflexive element of Creative Writing research. It examines the difficulties of researching Webb — the gaps in the record, the problems of tracing character through biographies, and the barriers to contemporary reception of her work. It examines challenges of writing in the diary form — how to identify the reader of a diary and write for them, whilst retaining the illusion of privacy, as well as how to write a piece which is authentic in its daily detail whilst still being engaging to the reader. The diaries of Virginia Woolf, Mary Butts, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Joe Orton and the critical work of Jennifer Sinor, Elizabeth Podnieks, and Judy Simons are used to identify how reading other writers' diaries helped to shape this fictional one. It considers the layering process used in writing the diary — how to balance factual evidence with fictional details, how to create a character the reader can empathise with, and how nature writing became the lens through which *A Single Violet* was written. This analysis references the work of Charles Palliser and Hilary Mantel, as well as Webb's own coterie of biographers including Dr. Gladys Mary Coles and Dorothy Wrenn. The process of finding Webb's writing voice is appraised alongside examination of the practicalities of writing nature in twenty-first century London.

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INTRODUCTION

Something watched there; something waited; on this side or on that, always a little above her, a little beyond. Was it there, where the quicken burned, or there where the yellow snapdragon crowded -- every small mouth half open, as if about to tell her the secret? Young and fugitive it seemed, as the baby thrush that hopped in callow dignity across her path, yet darkling and terrific as the core of a thunderstorm. When she turned quickly, it was gone, like the shy emmet, slipping under the layers of the leafy, ferny wood; it was fled like the night-wandering moth into the topmost, heavy platform of the pine, fused in fierce moonlight. So her going out into the green world had in it something of a religious rite. (Webb, 1937, p102)

The title of this chapter is 'Negotiating with the Dead,' and its hypothesis is that not just some, but all writing of the narrative kind, and perhaps all writing, is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and fascination with mortality — by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead. You may find the subject a little peculiar. It is a little peculiar. Writing itself is a little peculiar. (Atwood, 2002, p140)

'THEY MADE A SPLENDID FIRE': RAISING THE DEAD FROM THE LOSS OF THE PAST

The Times newspaper for Friday, February 12th, 1926, makes for fascinating reading. 'Disorderly Scenes at the Abbey Theatre' are reported during a performance of Sean O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* on page ten, while an advert for a cleaning powder promises to 'abolish this servitude' of Friday cleaning days. In the theatres, the performances include *The Blue Kitten* at the Gaiety and a performance of *Henry VIII* starring Sybil Thorndike at the Empire. Tucked away on the top right-hand corner of page eleven is 'Telegrams in Brief,' which includes the following:

It was decided yesterday by the Femina-Vie Heureuse Prize Committee, sitting in Paris, to award the prize for 1924-5 to Mrs. Mary Webb for her novel 'Precious Bane.'

One can only imagine what seeing these words meant to Mary Webb. Her dearest wish was for the reading public to embrace her work. Recording his memories of Webb in *The Colophon: A Quarterly for Bookmen* in the winter 1938 edition, fellow writer and friend, Caradoc Evans recalls:

She knew her greatness and was discontented her work did not bring her riches and applause.
 'Shropshire,' I said, 'must be proud of you.'
 'I've just come back from there,' she said, 'and I didn't meet a single person who had ever heard of my books.'
 Go in and out of the Shropshire places where she moved and you will stir no fire when you say her name. (p.66)

Author Edwin Pugh remembers Webb's longing for renown in a gentler way. In his July 1928 tribute to her, published on the front page of *The Bookman* (to which she had contributed so many reviews) Pugh wrote:

Throughout Mary Webb's brief career, she received hardly one whole-hearted word of adequate appreciation — except from me. And mine was not adequate. Still, I did my best, five or six years ago, to acclaim her genius in a long article in *The Bookman*. I sent her a proof of that article for her approval and revision, and she went half-crazy over it. 'That anyone should write about me — me! — like that!' She cried brokenly. 'It doesn't seem real. I feel I must have dreamt it.' I warned her that my eulogium would probably be of little service to

her. She did not believe that. She thought her name was now made, and that henceforth she would bask in the limelight for the remainder of her days.' (P.194)

Sadly, Webb's longed-for acclaim came posthumously, five months too late. Webb had died of pernicious anaemia and Graves' disease at the age of forty-six — on October 8, 1927 — leaving her sixth book unfinished. Her death went largely unreported in the London press, until Conservative Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin used the occasion of his keynote address at the 128th Literary Fund Dinner on April 25, 1928 to state unequivocally that *Precious Bane* was 'one of the best books of its kind I have ever read' and to castigate the press for the undeserved oblivion into which Webb's work had fallen. Baldwin referenced conversations he had with distinguished fellow authors Sir James Matthew Barrie and John Buchan (Lord Tweedsmuir). Each had known Mary Webb personally, and both told the Prime Minister that she was "one of the best living writers, but no one buys her books."

Continuing with Pugh's *Bookman* necrology:

It was not until the Prime Minister, in a public speech, spoke in praise of her genius, that the critics great and small, and even some big literary mandarins, took heart of grace in the shadow of the Prime Minister's cloak, and at last raised their voices in a muddled chorus of belated laudation. (p. 194)

As the publisher of *Precious Bane*, Jonathan Cape was aware of the Prime Minister's admiration for Webb's novel. Baldwin had written to Webb on January 14, 1927 using 10 Downing Street stationery. In his letter, Baldwin writes:

I hope you will not think it an impertinence on my part if I tell you with what keen delight I have read *Precious Bane*... I think it is a really first class piece of work and I have not enjoyed a book so much for years... I thank you a thousand times for it.

Hearing in advance of Baldwin's plans to praise Webb at the Literary Fund dinner, Cape quickly arranged with Webb's three prior publishers — Constable, J.M. Dent and Hutchison — to purchase the copyrights to her other novels and began preparations to rush out a Collected Edition of Mary Webb's works. Cape's seven-volume series included Webb's five previously published novels, the text of her last unfinished novel along with ten short stories, and a selection of Webb's poetry together with a reprinting of her nature essays. Cape arranged for introductions to each volume to be written by famous men of the day who had personally known Mary Webb — G.K. Chesterton (*The Golden Arrow*), John Buchan (*Gone to Earth*), H.R.L. Sheppard (*The House in Dormer Forest*), Robert Lynd (*Seven for a Secret*), Stanley Baldwin (*Precious Bane*), Martin Armstrong (*Armour Wherein He Trusted and Some Stories*) and Walter de la Mare (*Poems and the Spring of Joy*). In his introduction to the 1929 illustrated edition of *Precious Bane*, Prime Minister Baldwin wrote that the book's beauty lay in 'its fusion of the elements of nature and man' and that, 'one who reads some passage in Whitehall has almost the physical sense of being in the Shropshire cornfields' (Webb, 1930, pp 10-11). Each volume of the seven-volume Collected Edition became a best-seller, with volumes of the collected series being reprinted up to fifteen times between 1928 and 1939 (each volume was reissued as demanded by popular taste). Cape introduced an illustrated edition in 1929, with drawings by Rowland Hilder and Norman Hepple, which was reprinted up to fifteen times through 1942. Literary biographies of Mary Webb were written and published. The Florin Books edition of Webb's Collected Works was printed in 1932 and reprinted up to thirteen times through 1941. The 'Sarn Edition of the Works of Mary Webb' was issued in 1937

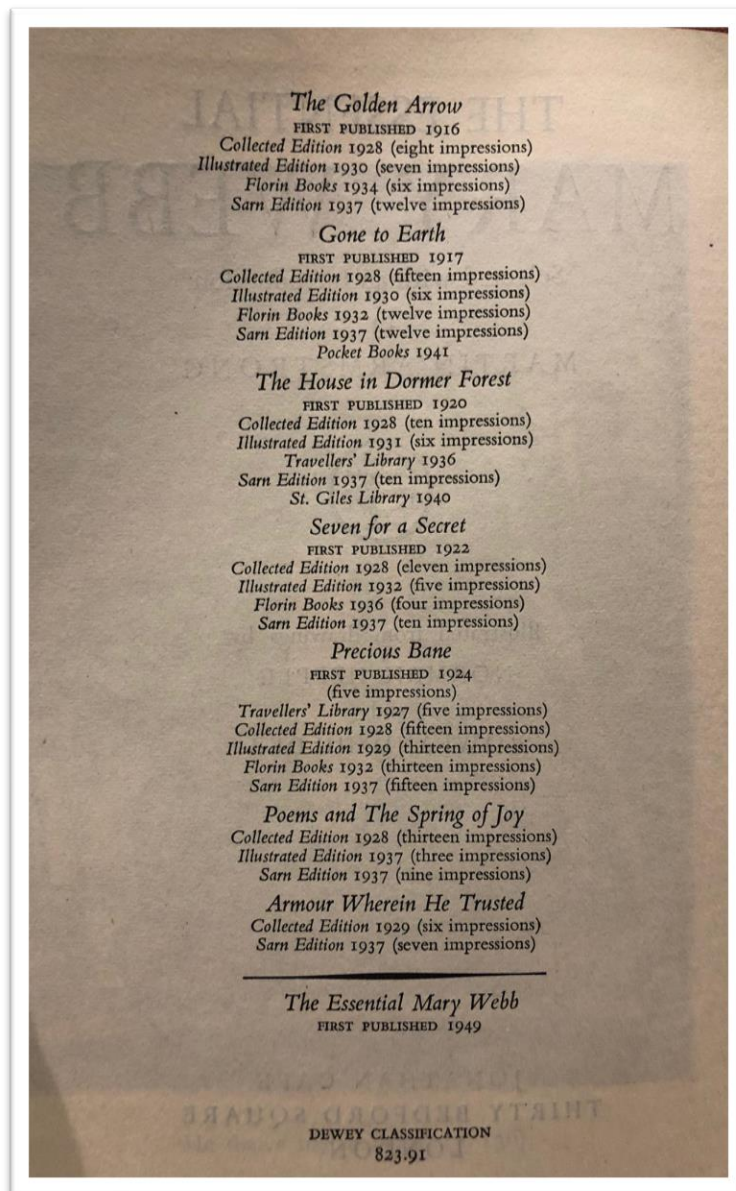


Figure 2 The verso of the 1949 *Essential Mary Webb* listing the reprint history

and reprinted up to fifteen times through 1948. A Mary Webb Anthology, edited by Henry Webb with illustrations by Hilder and Hepple was issued in 1939, just before Henry's fatal hiking incident. *Fifty-One Poems, Hitherto Unpublished in Book Form* with wood engravings by Joan Hassall was published by Cape in 1946. Martin Armstrong edited the 1949 publication of *The Essential Mary Webb*, also illustrated by Hilder and Hepple.

Yet it was not just Baldwin's support that led to this surge in popularity with readers. It also coincided with a wider cultural phenomenon which Cape was able to capitalise on. Webb's novels were translated into fifteen languages during a surge of interest in the countryside, which reached a peak in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. Writers who wrote novels involving rural settings — like Thomas Hardy, Mary Webb, Sylvia Townsend Warner and D.H. Lawrence — became immensely popular at this time. Sillars, when writing about the illustrated editions of Webb's books which appeared in this period, dates this 'reinvention of the countryside' to as early as

the 1860s ‘when the Victorians began their love affair with Chivalric myths, folklore, and mock medievalism’ but this was an ‘interest in the country as a place for recreation which burgeon[ed] from the beginning of the century in more popular culture’. Hutton concurs, and goes further to say that this was a response to urbanisation which was condemned as physically and mentally unhealthy’ while the countryside ‘became credited with all the virtues which were the obverse of those vices’ (Hutton, 2019, p121). Hutton also notes the way in which the working people of the countryside became credited with having,

a superior wisdom, founded on generations of living in close contact with nature and inheriting a cumulative hidden knowledge. This organic, immemorial lore, which by the Twentieth century had accumulated the numinously vague label of “the Old Ways” (2019, p121).

While not an organised ‘movement’, this revival of all things ‘countryside’ romanticised the English landscape as well as the people who lived there. One key aspect according to Sillars, was ‘a desire to return to an ideal

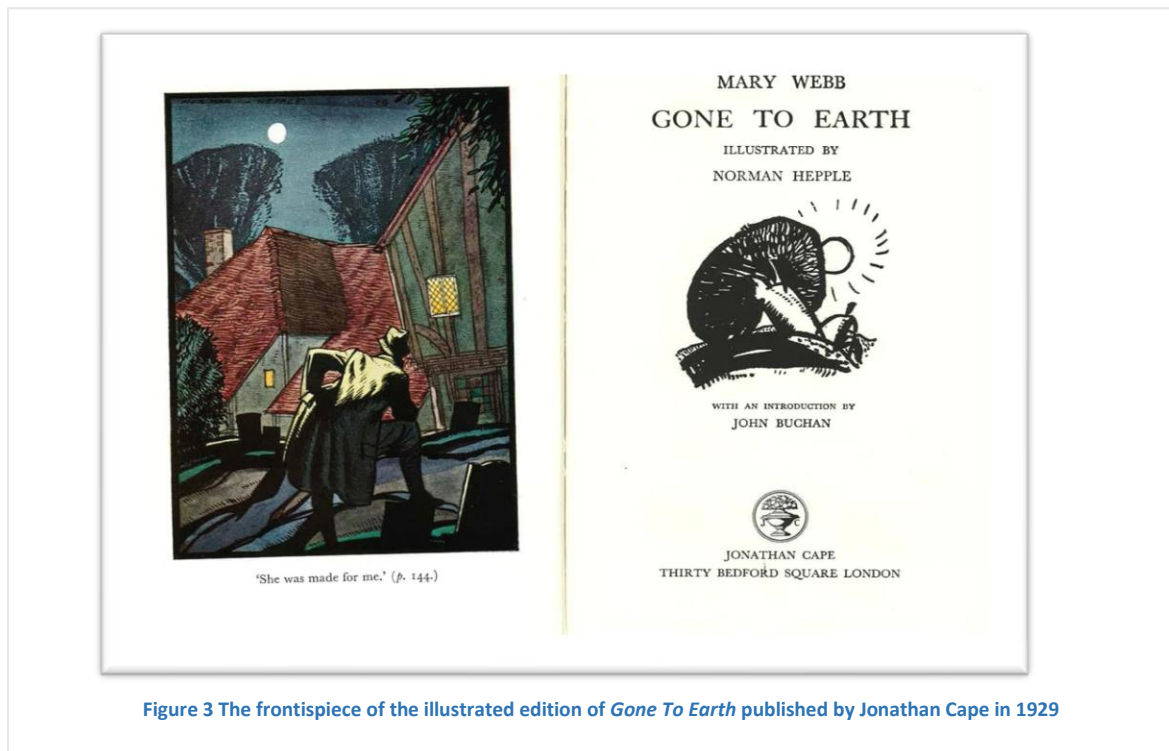


Figure 3 The frontispiece of the illustrated edition of *Gone To Earth* published by Jonathan Cape in 1929

Englishness rooted in village life’ (1995, p97). Posters suggesting that riders spend their ‘holiday’ time in the country or on the coast were featured in railway stations. Leisure activities that involved travel through the back roads of Britain (a newer phenomenon in the 20th century) were celebrated. Michelin and Shell Guides, immensely popular at this time, encouraged the growing number of urban car owners to visit rural landscapes.

(Lewis, 1987, p62.) In *Romantic Moderns*, Antonia White writes,

By the late 1930s it looked to many observers as if a whole concerted project of national self-discovery was underway. Artists who had previously felt compelled to disguise themselves as avant-garde Frenchmen were now to be found on English beaches sheltering their watercolours from the drizzle. When war threatened, and when finally it came, the imaginative claiming of England took on more urgency. (White, 2010, p11)

For the estate of Mary Webb (and for Henry Webb and Jonathan Cape) this interest was very lucrative. Yet since her heyday, Webb's work has passed out of fashion again and she has largely been forgotten. During my search for Mary Webb, she remained an elusive, haunting and fragmented figure.

* * * *

The search began when I discovered a Virago paperback edition of *Precious Bane* in a second-hand bookshop in 1988, when I was fifteen years old. Because I have reread this volume at least annually since, its margin edges have softened and curled, and the pages are badly dog-eared and covered with annotations and underlinings. My love affair with fictional characters was in full swing during my teenage years and has stayed with me. I was enraptured by the story of Prue Sarn and Kester Woodseaves, in the same way that Elizabeth Bennett and Fitzwilliam Darcy, Jane Eyre and Mr Rochester, and Kathy and Heathcliff long ago ensnared me.

Returning to education several years ago to study modernist literature, my MA supervisor commented that I wrote about fictional characters as if they were real people, which only left me wondering what was wrong with that? During that foray into modernism, I struggled to place Webb among her contemporaries. Her absence from the canon was conspicuous. I wanted to redress some of that balance in my PhD, and to capture something of Webb's lost voice. My intent was to create a fictional work in which the diaries of Mary Webb are discovered.

Writing the fictional diary of a historical flesh-and-blood woman brought me a set of challenges. Little remains of Webb's thoughts — apart from her novels, her poems, a couple of dozen letters, and a collection of literary reviews and nature essays. I wondered how it was possible for a writer to leave so little of her personal self behind in written form.

Some half-dozen biographical studies of Webb have been published. Three were written in the 1930s, in the direct aftermath of Mary Webb's sudden fame. Additional histories were published a generation later, as new scholars discovered Webb's writings: a biography by Salopian teacher Dorothy Wrenn in 1964; a scholarly feminist interpretation by Michèle Barale in 1986; and two biographies by Gladys Mary Coles — the first published in 1978, and then a condensed critical study published in 1990.

Coles suggests a possible reason for Webb's meagre lexical footprint. Webb's married life was almost more turbulent than her fiction. Her husband, the teacher and writer Henry Bertram Law Webb, is a figure somewhat akin to Ted Hughes. Henry took over the management of his first wife's literary estate after her death and was able to retire from teaching within a year on the royalties he earned. Henry had begun a relationship with his second wife, Kathleen Wilson — a former pupil who was twenty-three years younger than himself — while Mary was still alive, which caused great tension in their later years together. Yet Henry, who was closely involved in Mary's early biographies, sought to project an image of a successful and supportive first marriage. Mary's younger brother, Douglas Meredith, reacted strongly against the biographer Thomas Moul's intimation of a happy marriage: 'The latter part of her married life was not happy, and I am sorry you thought it — found it — necessary to say the opposite.' Henry agreed to share details of Mary's life with biographer Hilda Addison only on condition that nothing would be written that might upset his new young wife. (Coles, 1990, p151).

Coles alleges that Henry and Mary had been in such dire financial straits that Mary's papers were burned for fuel. (1990, p313). Citing an article in the *News Chronicle* of 28 April 1938, she quotes Henry as telling Mayfair bookseller Elkin Matthews — to whom he sold the books in Mary's small library — that 'All the other manuscripts were burnt. They took up too much room in the tiny cottage, and besides, they made a splendid fire which lasted a long time'.

However, it is possible for a kind of 'folklore' to evolve around such stories— most families can recount tales that are told and retold, which make their way into the spoken history of that family, even while the 'truth' of them may be questionable. As McGeough writes, 'family storytelling is a complex process that creates and disrupts understandings.' Each retelling brings with it a bit more embellishment — a detail here, a tweak there — until the oft-told tale bears little resemblance to the original event. McGeough puts this down to the fragmentary approach to family storytelling, as this,

allows individuals to piece together unique understandings of collective identity. A family may operate as though its members share mutual understandings even when this is not the case, completely unaware that they have different versions of stories. Other times, differences are neglected in order to maintain cohesion among family members, and even when versions of stories are "corrected," the influence of the original story remains. (McGeough, 2012, p25.)

Sifting through these 'truths' to create a realistic but fictional retelling then adds a further layer to the tale. Writing this scene in the fictional diary enabled me to posit there may have been something more nefarious at play. The following is my original draft diary extract:

13th October 1924, Hampstead

The Grove is somewhat bleak at present. I have limited the number of hours I spend in the house due to the need to heat the place, so instead I go out and wander the streets and over the Heath, keeping myself occupied as much as possible, returning just in time to light a small fire to welcome Henry home from school. So far this week we have burned our way through letters and manuscripts a plenty, since we have no other fuel. I felt a pang as we did so, but Henry tried to cheer me with, 'Never mind, Mary. They do get a good fire up!' And I realised it was the most cheerful I had seen him in a while. And at least we can be warm then.

My supervisors immediately pointed out an incongruity in the tale, since burning paper alone, even in large quantities, is unlikely to heat a house. This planted a seed of doubt in my mind regarding the accepted version of events as told by Henry. Perhaps he was instead attempting to obscure why he might have purposefully attenuated his first wife's written inner life? While I have sometimes speculated that Henry Webb's explanation had much to do with his need to carefully craft the public image of his and Mary's early private life, it is also possible that Webb herself might have destroyed some of the material. I live in a small rented space in London and can empathise with the Webbs' possible need to keep their material possessions and papers to a minimum. Additionally, would Henry have destroyed items that (after Webb's posthumous fame) held material value? We will never know the 'real' story, as we have no objective first-hand accounts and no physical evidence to guide us. On the second edit, I added the following detail to make the piece more realistic:

So far this week we have burned our way through as much firewood as I could gather on the Heath without eliciting too many stares. The firewood has been started off nicely with letters and manuscripts a plenty, since we have no other paper to make fire-starters with.

I discovered when creating Mary Webb's 'lost' diaries that it is possible to surmise conclusions when writing bio-fiction that might otherwise be missed in non-fictional 'pure' biography, because the level of 'reality' required to keep a reader in flow with a fictional narrative requires a deeper immersion into character and context than that required by non-fiction. Hilary Mantel discussed the immersive research required to create historical fiction during her Reith Lecture series broadcast on Radio 4:

Research is not a separate phase from writing. There is no point where the writer can say, 'I know enough.' Writing a novel is not like building a wall. Your preparatory stage is about digging deep, understanding context, and evolving a total world picture. The activity is immersive. The novelist is after a type of knowledge that goes beyond the academic. She is entering into a dramatic process with her characters, and until she plunges into a particular scene, she hardly knows what she needs to know.
(Mantel, 2017, p3)

Historical, biographical fiction arguably requires an even deeper research dive than a purely academic thesis, because a successful novelist must bring the story and character(s) to life for the reader. Imagined sensory and emotional detail must be layered atop historical fact to carry the reader through the narrative and for believability. When I was writing *A Single Violet*, this detailed fictional element became my major challenge.

At the beginning of my PhD in 2016, I set out with the bold assertion that I wanted to fashion 'a living, breathing, fictional Mary Webb.' I wanted to reintroduce this fascinating, complex and intelligent woman — now largely forgotten — to a new generation of readers. The process of fictionalising a series of Mary Webb diaries was far more complex than I had anticipated. However, this daunting project — requiring my immersion into Mary Webb's life and times — has produced many unexpected insights.

In her essay, 'Negotiating with the Dead', Atwood likens the writer's journey into a story to a descent into the underworld and urges caution in becoming trapped in a place where one cannot live. 'All writers learn from the dead,' writes Atwood.

As long as you continue to write, you continue to explore the work of writers who have preceded you; you also feel judged and held to account by them. But you don't learn only from writers — you learn from ancestors in all their forms. Because the dead control the past, they control the stories, and also certain kinds of truth. (2002, p159)

My journey with Webb has often felt like a dialogue with the dead, and I often find myself wondering what advice Webb would give me if we could talk across the hundred-year gap that lies between us. I am not the first to wonder. When reflecting on her work-in-progress about the life and death of Amy Dudley, Dr Catherine Padmore writes:

Writing this dead woman is an attempt to raise her up and let her speak, all the while knowing this is an impossible task. It requires the dangerous assumption of empathy between bodies dislocated in time and place, and it risks inserting my voice into the space where Amy's used to be.
(2017, p1)

Like Padmore, I had set forth to revitalise a dead woman, displaced more than a century in time from me. I aspired to create a piece of historical, biographical fiction that would be authentic in tone, while holding fast to the scant details that we know of Mary Webb's life. When particulars have been lost, burned, misinterpreted or simply forgotten, how does a writer recreate that life whilst being as true as one can to her story? Can an author simply fabricate to fill in gaps?

Because this critical commentary is intended to sit alongside the novel and interrogate my process of writing it, I will reflect on early drafts to examine problems that I encountered. Halfway through the process, there were three clearly identifiable conundrums which have become the chapters of this thesis. These were,

1. How to find the story and recreate a deleted past when the record no longer exists.
2. How to write a fictional diary which appears like a 'real' one, when real diaries can be dull, and difficult to follow.
3. The practicalities of how to write in a way that sounds (or reads) like Webb whilst engaging a modern reader.

As I should have expected with any creative endeavour, these problems have transformed and morphed over time, staying still just long enough for me to capture them on paper.

In the first chapter I will explore Webb herself — what drew me to her and the problems that come from researching a once-famous but now largely neglected writer. As mentioned previously, Webb's own life is marked by biographical and archival lacunae. My challenge is to weave a speculative diary around the facts that we do know, at the same time creating an engaging narrative. I have developed a 'layering' process in my writing, in which I gradually accumulate details. The first layer comes from the temporal framework, built by comparing biographies of Mary Webb side-by-side to draw a concatenating line. Unfortunately, each biographer's portrayal of Webb varies wildly. Dorothy Wrenn (1964) relies heavily on Henry's self-protective representation of a happy marriage and portrays Webb as an emotionally manipulative and self-obsessed character. Michele Barale (1986) views Webb as a non-feminist woman of inconsistencies. Gladys Mary Coles (1978) maintains a more obviously empathetic and glowing admiration of Webb. If I were to create a decoction of Mary Webb from these different perspectives — as I attempted in my first draft — with all her contradictions and emotional high-drama, then the reader might quickly disengage from the character and struggle to maintain empathy. Was Mary Webb an emotionally turbulent older woman who latched on to a younger, naïve husband, or a woman out of time with her age, living at odds in a world that didn't understand or value her sensitivity? Clearly, I had to handle Webb's biographical details with care, to ensure that Webb's character did not appear heartless, unsympathetic to the needs of those around her, or wholly disagreeable. Yet, in creating this new way of examining Mary Webb's life and work, I didn't want to paper over the cracks, because it is in these vulnerabilities and flaws that we find the richest material, and ultimately, the most beauty. For example, Shakespeare always writes a character flaw into his tragic heroes — for Macbeth, it is his ambition, for Hamlet, it is the procrastination born of the complex web of grief arising as a result of the loss of his father — while Thomas Hardy presents his heroines, like Tess and

Eustacia Vye, as being goddess-like, whilst also flawed.¹ While the reader is aware of these flaws, it does not prevent them from empathising with the characters.

Once I had immersed myself sufficiently in the story of Webb's life to be able to reclaim her spectre from the underworld, my challenge became how to foster empathy in the reader for this complex narrator and how to fully incorporate the bare bone facts of Webb's life, whilst simultaneously allowing myself to creatively fill the spaces in between using my imagination. I needed to evoke Webb without recreating the elements that might alienate a twentieth century reader and had wrought so much earlier criticism. Webb is somewhat of an enigma — an extraordinarily intelligent and well-educated woman, viewed by many as the creator of rustic old-fashioned tales, yet in these tales she tackles subjects such as woman's sexuality (Webb, 1979, p.172, p.179, and Webb, 1937, p159, p200), rape (Webb, 1979, p.192), abortion (Webb, 1937, p226), and pre-marital sex (Webb, 1937, p164, and Webb, 2012, p115 and Webb, 1978, p216). Webb steadfastly refused to follow some of the turn-of-last-century norms of her times. She was vehemently opposed to blood sports (Coles, 1979, p30) and was a lifelong vegetarian (Coles, 1979, p51).

Placing Mary Webb amongst her Modernist peers is problematic. Webb is most frequently characterised as a 'romantic.' Michelle Barale (1986) comments that she is 'a distinctly non-feminist author' as ultimately, 'her heroines' most womanly act is [sic] submission to her lover' (p2). The first line of Webb's Wikipedia entry states that she was an 'English Romantic novelist' (2017). I am not suggesting that we use Wikipedia as a credible source; however, this is invariably how curious readers may first encounter her.

There are of course two very different interpretations of the term 'romantic novelist'. There is the capital 'R' "Romantic Novelist," following the school of the Romantic Poets, such as Wordsworth, Coleridge and Keats. Then there is the small 'r' 'romantic novelist,' the creator of love stories. Although Webb does write stories about women finding love, I would like to challenge the small 'r' label of 'romantic novelist.' Judy Simons concludes that many female writers, operating in a male dominated field, 'adopted certain tactics and topics,' such as writing romantically, 'that helped to insulate them as a sex of their effrontery at daring to publish at all'. Simons further comments that 'Poems and novels by women could safely take love as their theme without being thought to poach on the male preserves of power politics or trenchant social criticism,' (1990: p.189). Joanna Russ concludes that even if women don't write romantic fiction, their novels inevitably end up being classified as such once the gender of the author becomes known. Russ cites that case of *Wuthering Heights*, which was reviewed as 'a representation of cruelty, brutality, violence and wickedness' until the female identity of Ellis Bell was revealed. Then, writes Russ, *Wuthering Heights* became a romance novel:

A woman cannot write about evil like a coarse Yorkshire boatman; therefore she did not; therefore the novel must be a love story and a self-consistent monster'. This view of

¹ I did a YouTube talk on the topic of Imperfect Literary Goddesses in 2017 for the Pagan Federation Disabilities Team's Online Beltane Festival, in 2017 which looked at this concept in more depth. <https://youtu.be/zPnYmzGgEg>

Wuthering Heights must perform find Heathcliff's sadism and the story of the second generation (Cathy Linton and Hareton Earnshaw) embarrassing; the 1939 film with Merle Oberon and the handsome young Laurence Olivier agreed... they lit Olivier beautifully, deleted his cruelty, and drastically compressed the last half of the novel. TV Guide for the week of July 24, 1978, went even further, calling the film 'Emily Brontë's haunting tale of the tragic romance between a materialistic girl... and a proud stable boy... a masterpiece'. (1984, p43).

While Webb may fail the Bechdel Test² by our contemporary standards, I prefer simply to see her as writing within the accepted bounds of female literature of her time. Webb can also be described as a late



Figure 4 The Bechdel Test, taken from *Dykes to Watch Out For* by Alison Bechdel

flowering of the Romantic period, as can D.H. Lawrence, with whom Webb shares much in common.³ Mary Webb displays all the hallmarks of the Romantic Poets, such as a love of nature, elements of Pantheism, and a preoccupation with the workings of the human mind. Placing her in the Romantic period may be more accurate than attempting to adapt her to fit existing definitions of modernism (unless those definitions are changed to include rural modernisms).

² *The Bechdel Test* (see figure 4) is named after the American author, Alison Bechdel (2008), who in 1986 proposed a way of measuring gender inequality. Inspired by Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Bechdel posed the question of whether a creative piece of work (film, fiction or other) can feature women who do not make a reference to men. The Bechdel Test first appeared in her comic strip, *Dykes to Watch Out For*. In order to pass the test, the creative work must satisfy all three of the following requirements:

- a. The book or film must have at least two women in it,
- b. Who talk to each other
- c. About something besides a man. It is important to remember that the Bechdel Test is now thirty years old, and not without its own flaws. *Sex and the City* would pass Bechdel's test, since it includes four women who talk to each other about fashion as well as about men.

³ Like Webb, Lawrence also preferred to sit in nature to write. He was a poet, in addition to writing short stories and novels, and suffered from ill-health. I explore their similarities further in *Nature Mystics*, my 2016 monograph.

As it happens, Webb's own life story needs little embellishment in the way of drama. The most distressing details included in the fictional diary are based on fact — as far as one can ever ascertain 'truth'. However, the nuances and subtleties of her life are notably absent in the biographical studies. Where histories have been deleted, forgotten, or censored, the writer must use her creative imagination to recreate the inner life of the biography. It is here, I believe, that my acting background came to the fore as, in the same way that an actor must find their character; I needed to 'find Webb's voice'. While the biographies might tell us facts of what Mary Webb did, how she felt about things is speculative. As Hilary Mantel has written,

My chief concern is with the interior drama of my characters' lives. From history, I know what they do, but I can't with any certainty know what they think or feel. In any novel, once it's finished, you can't separate fact from fiction — it's like trying to return mayonnaise to oil and egg yolk. (Mantel, 2017, p5)

In the second chapter, I will explore the challenges and limitations that emerge from the diary format itself. As an inveterate diarist myself — I have kept a journal from the age of eleven to the present day — I needed to be able to distinguish between a private diary, with a readership of one, and a diary that is written with presumption of possible later revelation. *A Single Violet* is a liminal project. While it is an historical, biographical novel, this genre sits somewhere between life-writing and historical fiction and contains elements of both. In addition, I needed to incorporate the focus of nature writing, and the diary form. This meant I had to write for the reader with the necessary outward focus, whilst still retaining the inward focus required for an 'authentic' diary. I researched other people's 'real' diaries as I wrote, attempting to layer in what I was learning as I went, in order to grow the narrative by accretion. My earliest draft diary 'entries' evidenced some critical flaws. In my thirst for authenticity, I had not recognised that 'real' diaries require extensive work to make them suitable for readers. They must be de-privatised to turn their inward focus outward enough to include the reader. In their unedited form, private journals often contain too much of that inner landscape which, without explanation, can make them nonsensical to an outsider. While the diurnal details of the writer's life evince an authentic diary, their repetition can be dull. To investigate real diaries (as opposed to critical writing about them), I reread my own diaries, along with the diary of 'Isobel,' which was rescued from a house clearance in Guernsey by a relative. I then turned my attention to The Great Diary Project — a unique archive of authentic diaries. I examined three of these unedited journals⁴, comparing them to my own in order to identify the positive and negative traits. Then, I turned to the more 'polished' diaries that have been made available to the reading public — those of Virginia Woolf, Mary Butts, Sylvia Townsend Warner, and Anne Frank. Each of these went through a robust process of editing (sometimes several times) before publication. While the result *might* be different from what the authors wrote (depending upon the writer's intentions) they do provide a glimpse into the writers' lives. After researching these real-life examples, I returned to my personal diary, in its 'raw' unedited form, and began

⁴ I examined three diaries at The Great Diary Project:

- A. The diary of Jane Hoyake (GDP 306)
- B. Three volumes of *The Ladies Yearbook* completed by an anonymous woman (GDP 298)
- C. The nature diaries of a woman in Cornwall in the 1980s (GDP 436)

to edit it heavily for the purposes of this analysis. I also read what others have written about the process of keeping a diary, the purpose they serve and who writes them, thereby uncovering layer upon layer of meaning that can be gleaned from what I had previously supposed was the 'simple' process of keeping a private diary. Finally, I turned to fictional diaries. The diary as a literary device is intriguing, compelling, and used by many writers to create an alluring insight into the personal world of a character. What draws writers to use this contrivance? Diaries appear frequently in fiction — from C.S. Lewis to Sue Townsend to Mary Webb herself. In chapter two, then, I will also consider what functions the fictional diary — a very different beast than the private diary — can serve.

At this point, it is worth making a note of terminology. I sit with Susan Sontag on lexis — my own diary is a notebook that is part introspective confessional and part a record of events. Sometimes, it even contains 'to do' or shopping lists. My diary is a multi-functional space that can serve many purposes. It functions, as Sontag's did, as 'the workshop of the writer's soul' (Maunsell, 2011, p4), as a space where I experiment (often unwittingly) with writing devices before I commit them to an external readership. According to Maunsell (2011, p4), Sontag did not distinguish between 'diary', 'journal', and 'notebook.' I think of my own as my 'diary.' While I use 'diary' and 'journal' interchangeably in this commentary, I am referring to that uniquely private space, which sometimes becomes de-privatised and made public. I also concur with Shiwiy, who writes that,

Journal writing is not only a process of self-recording, self-exploration, and self-expression, although it is all of these. It is also a channel of self-creation. We create ourselves in the very process of writing about ourselves and our lives. (Shiwiy, 1994, p234.)

Most of the personal diaries I studied were written by women, and although this was not a deliberate choice, it was more helpful to me in establishing how Mary Webb might have used a diary had she written one. I will, however, establish that diaries can be a gendered place, as noted by Elizabeth Podnieks (2000, p45). I will examine how the diary has been a woman's space through history and a refuge from the censor for many writers. Among Webb's contemporaries, including such as Butts, Woolf and Townsend Warner, personal journals become a unique space for women to explore topics that might be taboo elsewhere, particularly in the period that Webb and Woolf were writing. Diaries can serve the same purpose for male writers too, especially when, like Joe Orton, they come from a minority group in a time of oppression.

Since I was writing a fictional diary-as-novel, it is also necessary to clarify the nature of the project as it has evolved, and the naming of the project itself. While the completed novel has a new name, *A Single Violet*, the early drafts of the book went through several different incarnations. In its original form, it was intended to be a bifurcated narrative that followed the story of a female character named Anna, who discovered Webb's diary. Later, I replaced Anna with Kes, a young man staying at Webb's former home while he recovered from addiction. I dropped this narrative stream in the latter stages of this project, when it became evident that *A Single Violet* had taken on a life of its own — Mary Webb was not willing to share the page with Kes. However, this commentary will continue to examine the challenges presented by a bifurcated narrative, since early drafts helped me to shape the novel that *A Single Violet* has become.

In Chapter Three, I will examine the layering process that I used to gradually find Webb's voice and character. The biographies supplied a skeleton. I needed to furnish skin and bone, intelligence and imagination to create a living, breathing character and to present my reader with a believable first-person narration. When the archival material was sparse, I looked to Webb's novels for allusions of further details about her life. Prior to enrolling in the Creative Writing programme at Middlesex University, I had spent two years researching Webb at another university, carrying out close readings of her work and those textual analyses proved invaluable. Reading and rereading each section of her fiction in detail not only allowed me to find Mary Webb's voice and take on something of her language patterns, I also discovered that Webb had left autobiographical clues — she had embedded fragments of her own life story in her novels. Bruce Crawford has written that 'her more astute critics also correctly perceived her position as essentially autobiographical' (Crawford, 2014, p26). When I was an actor, we referred to the revelation of internal processes, whether inadvertently or not, as 'emotional leakage.' Her characters often live through significant events that Webb herself had experienced. For example, the decision to leave Shropshire — a separation which was to haunt Webb for the rest of her brief life — appears in her third novel, *The House in Dormer Forest*. She recreated her late father in the character of John Arden in her first novel, *The Golden Arrow*, and — after experiencing the dread of all three of her younger brothers fighting in the trenches in France — recorded the torment of waiting for a loved one who was away at war in her short story, *The Chinese Lion*. Webb left a trail of clues in the autobiographical echoes that were apparent in her own work. While I was drawn to Kester and Prue's relationship as a teenager, I was not the first person to be captured by this fictional character. Through my explorations of Webb's life, I came to believe that Mary too was in love with Kester, trying to capture on paper what she had lost in her own marriage. Kester Woodseaves is, in part, Mary's idealised rendering of Henry Webb who, by the time of *Precious Bane's* writing, had drawn away from her emotionally. *Precious Bane* is dedicated to Webb's husband, the inscription reading 'To My Dear HBLW', but there is a wistful sense of the loss of him that weaves in and out of the narrative. Of course, at fifteen, I had no sense of who Mary or Henry Webb were, or how dramatic their own lives were. Returning to education in my late thirties, I studied Mary Webb's life and marriage, and realised just how tragic their tale was. I agree with Bruce Crawford's assessment: each of Webb's stories contains a kernel of her life experience, tucked inside the pages of the book.

Very early on, I was struck by how much material a real diary can furnish a researcher in examining the life and work of a writer. With a more canonical figure like Virginia Woolf, there is ample output for a student to sift through, with published letters and diaries, as well as Woolf's generous supply of fiction and non-fiction. Even with Woolf's stream of consciousness essays, like her 1927 *Street Haunting: A London Adventure* offers a glimpse into her inner life, as Woolf leads the reader around the busy streets of London. While Webb's sometimes over-elaborate writing style may not suit modern readers (which I will look at in Chapter One), she still attracts pockets of current devotees. The Mary Webb Society was founded in 1972 and currently has approximately 120 members. However, most of Webb's books are now out of print. There are only a small number of works available about her in the UK. I found ten or so books altogether that referred to Webb or included a chapter about her in the stacks at Senate House and in the British Library. Primary source material on Mary Webb is thin. An archive at the Shropshire Library holds some resources, including a type-written manuscript of remembrances

about Webb and her family by her nephew. The Shropshire archive also had some original typescript documents from people who remembered Webb, but no original manuscripts by Webb herself. I knew there were pockets of material in Texas, a little in New England, but, unable to get to either location, my saving grace was the online archive hosted by Stanford University which gave some brief glimpses into Webb's life — letters to her future mother-in-law, which stopped abruptly when her engagement to Henry Webb was announced; business correspondence to the editors of some of the journals whom she wrote for later in her life; as well as letters from Henry pertaining to the management of Mary's estate following her death. Then, late in my research, a chance email to the Stanford archivist opened a portal.

Upon writing to ask permission to reproduce one of the letters, my email was passed to the current owners of the physical archive, Bruce and Mary Crawford. There are more volumes in the Crawfords' Mary Webb archive than are available in the UK at Senate House, the British Library and the Shropshire Archives combined. What is hosted online at Stanford is just the beginning. This repository is the most extensive Webb collection in the world and is the result of the Crawfords' thirty-year project to collect Webb. It is the first time since Webb's death that much of the material has been brought back together. The items, which include first editions, letters and literary journals, were collected by Bruce and Mary Crawford over a period of thirty years. Their collection also holds work by Dickens, Austen, the Brontës, and Thackeray but Mary Webb is Mary Crawford's passion. Highlights of the Crawford collection were exhibited in 2010 at the Grolier Club in New York and at Stanford University (two years before I began my research). Having access to the Crawford archive has enabled me to access and study significant amounts of material that were not taken into consideration in previous studies of Webb, such as her short stories and the reviewing work she carried out for St. John Adcock at *The Bookman* from 1923 until her death in 1927. This material was surprising and enlightening. It enabled me to piece together some of the finer details of Webb's life — who she interacted with, who she read, and what she thought of other writers. I came to different assessments about accepted events in Webb's life. For example, all of Webb's earlier biographers report she tore her final unfinished manuscript for *Armour Wherein She Trusted* in a fit of frustration, then threw it on the fire at her home in Hampstead. I was able to physically examine this manuscript — the first two pages of her notebook are torn (and neatly repaired) but the singe marks from the fire are minimal. That fire must have been unlit or dying at the time.

With access to Webb's review work, poems and short stories, it became clear she was a working writer, interacting with London literary life. This also shows in her writing. Webb's novels are frequently criticised for being full of 'purple prose'⁵ and emotional outpourings, a quality famously parodied by Stella Gibbons in *Cold Comfort Farm*. However, the short stories show a much more measured and modernist Webb.

⁵ Research on 'Mary Webb purple prose' brings up a number of entries, such as blogs, or book reviews on sites like Amazon. For example: <http://resolutereader.blogspot.com/2012/09/stella-gibbons-cold-comfort-farm.html> [Accessed 27/10/20]. A more scholarly example is Davie, Rosalind, (2018) *The Other Side of Silence: The Life and Work of Mary Webb* PhD thesis,

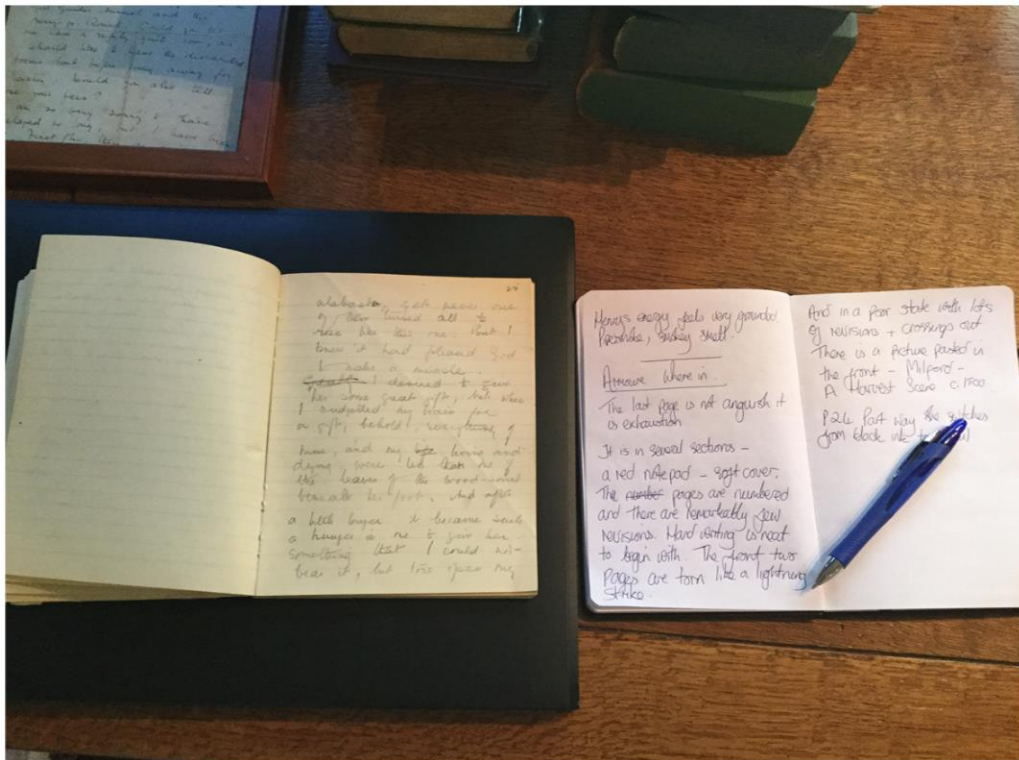


Figure 5 My own notebook alongside one of Webb's – the manuscript for *Armour Wherein He Trusted* which is held in the Crawford archive

Like Thomas Hardy, Webb thought of herself first and foremost as a poet (Crawford, 2009, p168). Coles notes that Webb was writing poetry from the age of six. (2005, p12). Poetry required Webb to be measured and precise in her placement of words. The manuscript for *The Chinese Lion*, one of the few original handwritten manuscripts remaining, has at the top of the front page the words 'about 3000', indicating that word count was important to Webb at this point in her career. Webb's wit is evident throughout her short fiction, a quality which is less noticeable in her novels. There would be value in future scholarship on Webb's oeuvre of short fiction, although this remains beyond the realm of my current study.

In looking for Webb's personal voice, I encountered my next challenge. How to find Webb's writing style, without atavistically defaulting to my own. I thought perhaps if I tried to emulate Webb's own creative methods, it might assist me in finding the right tone. This, however, would be challenging whilst living in twenty-first century London. The earliest draft of my bifurcated novel showed little differentiation in style between the Webb

The University of Gloucestershire, p46. Davie discusses the purpleness of the prose, and while she does not refute this claim, she finds value in its ability to move the reader.

narrative and the contemporary voice of Anna or Kes — both focussed on the details in nature and used similar vocabulary and tone. Later drafts were revised to create a purer version of Webb’s voice in the diary, with a voice more like mine (but masculine) in the contemporary storyline to wrap around the diary entries. To clarify these narrative streams, I decided to complete the diary in its entirety first. In this way, I could immerse myself more fully in Webb’s world and in her creative and spiritual practices. I experimented with her own methods of composition, the nature mysticism she employed whilst composing her own novels, to ascertain how these practices might work for me. Like me, Webb spent long periods of time away from her own ‘sacred landscape’ and immersed in the bustle of an urban existence. However, she was able to write full time without the need for a ‘day job,’ largely because of her small annual annuity and Henry’s teaching work.

If I were to describe the creative process of writing the fictional diary in a simple paragraph, it would be this: I first needed to construct a factual framework of the pertinent events in Webb’s life. It was then important to imbricate Webb’s expressive patterns into the journal entries, which are identifiable in her work. There was then a further layer of nature writing to interleave throughout, for which I turned to several sources.

In Chapter Three, I will examine what Laura Marks (2004) refers to as the ‘haptic visuality’ of the diary (the ability to touch using what the eyes see) and its natural details and the accretive effect that I had to employ to develop the narrative. I used a bricolage of lexical tools which helped me to create a visual representation of the turning of the seasons. Firstly, through reading nature writing, both from Webb’s own time, and my own — Robert MacFarlane, Nan Shephard, and my other cast of ‘Nature Mystics’⁶ including Sylvia Townsend Warner, Thomas Hardy, and D.H. Lawrence. This gave me an entry to finding Webb’s voice, but I wanted to expand on Marks’ ‘haptic visuality’, engaging all five of the senses in the journal. To create this stratum of natural imagery, I kept another kind of diary for a full calendar year — one where I recorded my own minute observations of nature each week as I walked through the green spaces of my home borough. The final layer was then to insert more of the details of Webb’s literary life. She interacted with some of the significant figures of literary London — Rebecca West, Walter de la Mare, Martin Armstrong, Jonathan Cape, St. John Adcock, Edwin Pugh and Caradoc Evans — and they thought and wrote highly of her abilities as a writer. Chapter Three, then, examines the construction of those layers. It also interrogates how the novel changed from its inception through its emergence into its current form.

Like Lawrence, Mary Webb suffered from ill health for most of her life and she could be emotionally challenging for those around her. Living with perplexing health conditions is not wholly alien to me. I spent my childhood in and out of hospital with severe atopic tendencies — asthma, eczema and strong allergies to the very

⁶ During the period of my research, I also published a study of writers inspired by nature and their influence on the emergence of Modern Paganism in the latter part of the twentieth century. While this was not an academic piece and was pitched by the publisher as ‘an intelligent read’, I included Webb in the book, and this helped me to place her among her peers in my own mind. I also included chapters on Sylvia Townsend-Warner, Mary Butts, D.H Lawrence and Thomas Hardy, among others. This was published by Moon Books in 2016 under the title, *Nature Mystics: The Literary Gateway to Modern Paganism*.

nature I adored. These left me feeling generally ill, irritable and ‘difficult’ for many of my formative years. Later in adulthood, I was diagnosed with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. While my illnesses are less severe than Webb’s diagnosis of Grave’s Disease, there are symptoms in common, such as nervousness, irritability, mood swings, persistent fatigue, heat sensitivity, muscle weakness, itchiness, and digestive problems⁷. I feel well placed to write Webb’s story from within a body and a mind that does not always co-operate with my wishes. Sometimes my body lacks breath; sometimes we share all the symptoms above. I sometimes suffer from bouts of aphasia that ‘steal my words,’ leaving me blank-minded and groping for simple, familiar terms from within a mind fog. Webb’s bouts of illness in the diary were inspired by my own experiences, recorded sporadically in my own diary and neatly dropped into hers. Other more severe bouts of her illness were written speculatively, imaginatively.

Did Webb keep a diary of her own? There is no evidence to say she didn’t. Most of her personal papers did not survive. There is also no evidence to say that she *did* keep a diary — no references to it in the few letters that did survive. But she does use the idea of a hidden private diary in her most successful and last completed novel, *Precious Bane*. For its lonely writer, Prudence Sarn, the private journal provides solace, comfort, and a place to confide her secrets. The idea that Webb may have based this on her own experiences is an intriguing one. I like to think that she still may have kept a secret diary, as it creates an alluring story. Since, her husband and her publisher significantly created and ‘edited’ the ‘brand’ of Mary Webb following her death in 1927 — as I will later contend — it is entirely possible that such a treasure would not have survived Henry Webb’s purging.

I have attempted to create the diary of a woman writer who lived a century ago. Much of my work was written whilst commuting to work on the Northern Line of the London Underground. I cannot hope to channel⁸ Mary Webb herself but, by employing an in-depth level of empathy, I hope to have created a reasonable echo of her. The descriptions of Webb’s experiences portrayed in the diary have all been passed through my filters on the world. Without apology, I feel this is essential in bringing Webb’s fascinating history to a modern readership.

A Single Violet then, is the story of Mary Webb’s secret diary, lost for decades. This critical commentary, *Looking for Mary Webb*, is an in-depth examination of the process I went through in order to write that fictional diary.

⁷ <https://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Thyroid-over-active/Pages/Symptoms.aspx> (Accessed 30 October 2017)

⁸ In this context, when I use the term ‘channelling’, I mean in the sense of mediumship and the idea of channelling spirits.

CHAPTER ONE: LOOKING FOR MARY WEBB: THE MISSING STORY

Presences

There is a presence on the lonely hill,

Lovely and chill:

There is an emanation in the wood,

Half understood.

They come upon me like an evening cloud,

Stranger than moon-rise, whiter than a shroud.

(Webb, 2010, p13)

In time I understood one thing: that you don't become a writer to become a spinner of entertaining lies: you become a writer so you can tell the truth. I start to practice my trade at the point where the satisfactions of the official story break down.

(Mantel, 2017, 'Day is for the Living', p6)

'SHE WAS 32 YEARS OLD, HER HUSBAND WAS 26' — TRYING TO TRACE CHARACTER FROM BIOGRAPHIES

In her 1964 biography of Mary Webb, *Goodbye to Morning*, Dorothy Wrenn describes the summer wedding of Mary Meredith and Henry Webb. She writes,

The wedding was arranged for the 12th of June, and when Kenneth [Mary's brother who was living in Canada] reached [the family home] Maesbrook in May, he found the whole place at sixes and sevens, with both Mary and [her mother] Alice ill in bed.

Alice's illness was largely the result of mental fatigue and temper. Mary really was being most trying about the wedding arrangements. She told her mother that she had invited seventy guests, but refused to say who they were or when they would be arriving. She took no interest whatever in her own dress, which Alice finally decreed should be of white muslin, with pale blue ribbons, a tribute more to her own sense of fitness than to her daughter's sallow skin. (p.48)

Wrenn was President of the Mary Webb Society before Gladys Mary Coles, which suggests that she was an admirer of Webb's. Yet, the subtext in Wrenn's description of the run-up to Mary and Henry's wedding is clear: Mary was behaving badly, in Wrenn's words being 'most trying,' and acting unreasonably.

Wrenn later reveals the cause of her mother's consternation:

To the relief of the Meredith family, the 12th June dawned dry and sunny. It was not until after breakfast that she informed her family that... she had gone up to Millington's hospital, the local alms-house, with invitations for all the inmates, whom she was in the habit of visiting each week with fruit and sweets. (p.49)

Webb had eschewed the expected practice of inviting guests to her wedding who were of her own social class, and instead invited people whom she wanted at her own wedding — the residents of the local Poor House whom she had come to know in fulfilling the late Victorian practice of visiting the poor. Webb's most recent biographer, Gladys Mary Coles, suggests that earlier biographies failed to tell the real story about Mary and Henry's courtship and marriage because Henry insisted that they must not write anything that would upset his new wife, Kathleen. Yet Henry's resolve on the biography's presenting a harmonious picture of the Webb's life together can't be what motivated Wrenn to write her deeply unflattering portrayal of Mary Webb. Henry had died twenty-five years before the 1964 biography by Wrenn was written, in a fall from a mountain peak in

Scotland in August 1939, an incident which later biographer Coles speculates was his second suicide attempt that year.

What is Wrenn's assessment of Henry? Here we start to see Wrenn's evaluation of Mary and Henry's relationship. 'The bridegroom faced it all with amused tolerance,' Wrenn writes. She continues:

He was overjoyed at the happiness which, for the time, transformed the woman for whom he had felt such profound pity. What he did not understand was the danger of becoming the central point of another human being's world, especially the world of one so intense as Mary. She was radiant as they emerged from the church into the brilliant sunshine. She was thirty-two years old; her husband was twenty-six. (p.39)

One does need to read between the lines to see that Wrenn does not find Mary to be a particularly engaging or attractive character. She chooses to spend her time with people below her station in life and is unconcerned with the effect her aberrant behaviour will have on those around her. Wrenn's Mary is an eccentric and selfish woman. Henry, meanwhile, is a man who is marrying out of pity, not love, a man naively unaware of his danger, who tolerates Mary's unconventional behaviour. Is it because he is dominated by this woman who is so much older than him? In an era when women were expected to be younger than their husbands, Wrenn's remark about their difference in age cannot go unnoticed.

Gladys Mary Coles' 1978 biography, *The Flower of Light* presents Mary in a much more charitable light. Coles writes of the wedding:

June 12 was bright and dry. A marquee had been set up on the lawn of the upper garden at Maesbrook where the wedding breakfast was to take place. The workhouse guests were brought from Berrington in a large trap, Mary having made a special arrangement for their transport... Mary herself was a vision of radiant simplicity. Her white muslin dress was adorned only by a sash of specially chosen, symbolic blue. (pp. 107-108)

Coles leaves out any suggestion that Henry might be stepping into a situation that he cannot manage. Instead, the Webb's wedding is a 'joyful day' (p.109) and their relationship was a mutual meeting of minds. Further, according to Coles,

Henry was compelled by her sad-sweet intensity, her unusual personality — at once shy yet eager, timid yet spontaneous, dreamy yet precise, fragile yet with boundless mental energy, and at times, physical energy beyond her strength. Here was a woman with a mind as stimulating to him as any he had met at Cambridge. (1978, p.99).

Writing about the wedding in my fictional diary, particularly regarding Mary's choice of wedding guests, required some careful balancing of her rebelliousness with kindness towards her mother. Below is my earliest diary draft relating to Mary Webb's choice of wedding guests:

June 14th

After breakfast I gathered everyone in Father's study, to tell them my big surprise. At first Mother said nothing, then she broke in two and looked like she had burst an internal organ, and started weeping loudly. Kenneth tried hard to comfort her, while Olive ran to get some brandy from the kitchen for the shock, and Muriel held her hand and patted her arm. I became engrossed in the flower arrangements. After a time, she simmered down, and I heard her say, the hospital inmates? How could she do this to me, Kenneth? At this point Kenneth gently reminded her that she was the mother of the bride, and it wouldn't do to

arrive with puffy eyes and a red face. It seems that whatever I do lately, Mother frequently retires to her room, citing her nerves as being the reason, but I know it is my doing. On this day of all days, I wanted things to be done my way. I am sure even if the Sandringham girls or Mrs Ponsonby-Smythe, or even the whole county were present, there would always be something I would do to make Mother rush from the room sobbing. Perhaps now that it will simply be Mother, Muriel and Olive, she might have an easier time, although I am sure it won't be long before Muriel marries as well.

Upon rereading, I felt that this section betrayed a critical fault line running through the diary — my rendering of Mary was not at all likeable and the responses of my readers at that time were very negative towards the character, as they found her cruel. The readers quickly lost empathy for the narrator as she appeared callous and uncaring. A narrator doesn't have to be personable in order to carry the reader along. Charles Palliser amply demonstrated in his 2013 novel *Rustication* that an unpleasant character can write a diary that pulls the reader into the narrative and keeps them reading. However, in private correspondence with me, Palliser explains:

As you have realised, it's a huge risk to have a central character whom the reader is likely to take against. I don't think I resolved that entirely in RUSTICATION since a number of people told me they disliked Richard so much they stopped reading... I think that as long as the reader can see why your narrator is unlikable, sympathy is possible. Things like illness, addiction, being the victim of abuse can go a long way to make the reader suspend an adverse judgement. (2017)

While I wanted to portray Webb's eccentricities, I did not want the reader to find Webb to be wholly disagreeable. My intent for the novel was not to recreate either Wrenn's or Coles' version of Mary, but to land somewhere in between the two. I hoped to create a lively, engaging, and imperfect narrator, but one who was at the same time compelling and with whom the reader could empathise. I decided to strike more of a balance portraying Webb as kind but tired of being bullied. This required the insertion of entries that re-emphasised Alice's overall dissatisfaction with her daughter and a rewrite of the entry relating to the wedding guests (pp.39-42). The redrafted entry is much longer; however, it softened Mary somewhat, and made her less off-putting.

'PURPLE PROSE': THE WRITER NOBODY WOULD CLAIM, AND UNCOVERING WEBB'S LITERARY LIFE

On starting my first research on Webb, I attended a conference on the Middlebrow. My MA supervisor had suggested that if Webb wasn't a modernist, then perhaps she would find a place amongst the writers of this emerging field of study, which looked at writers not deemed experimental or innovative enough to be what David James terms 'high modernist', which he notes was previously seen 'as the sole source from which everything inventive flows' (James, 2011, p44), but were considered (in academic circles) to be worthy of study. This included writers such as Agatha Christie and J.B. Priestley amongst the literary line-up. In her letter 'To the

Editor of *The New Statesman*⁹ (Woolf, 1942, pp139-148), Woolf gives her cutting definitions of ‘the battle of the brows’ (Woolf, 1942, p140). The highbrow, according to Woolf, is the person ‘of thoroughbred intelligence who rides his mind at a gallop across country in search of an idea’ (p140) whilst the lowbrow is the person ‘of thoroughbred vitality who rides his body in pursuit of a living at a gallop across life’ (p141). While highbrows and lowbrows admire and honour each other in Woolf’s model of the world, the middlebrow are neither one thing nor another (p142) and are those who curry ‘favour with both sides equally’. (p143).

I duly went along to the conference, hopeful that I might find a home for Webb, however, I was in for early disappointment. At the first coffee break when asked to explain my research, I saw raised eyebrows. By lunchtime, I got my first smirk. By afternoon tea, I was gleefully told that Webb was full of ‘purple prose,’ (an accusation often levelled at Webb in reviews of Stella Gibbons’ *Cold Comfort Farm*)¹⁰. I wished I had kept tight-lipped, when the first person I met at coffee the next morning exclaimed in surprise saying, ‘Oh *you’re* the one studying Mary Webb!’ He drew attention to Webb’s opening of *Gone to Earth* as a clear example of her ‘purple prose’ and was able to quote the opening to me word for word. This was not to be the end of my humiliation. During a later talk about the development of a new database, one visiting professor announced to the room, ‘Apologies to the person studying Mary Webb, but we won’t be including her in our database. Or if we do, it will be a very short entry.’ As Andrew Radford has written, ‘it appears that current critical opinion judges Webb’s *Gone to Earth* as valueless.’ (2017, p139) and I would extend this further to suggest it includes her entire oeuvre.

Current critical opinion also extends to the press. Writing ‘How Mary Webb and DH Lawrence helped build *Cold Comfort Farm*’ in *The Guardian* in 2013, Sam Jordison¹¹ argues that Webb’s work is unreadable. He says,

her novels were laden with pathetic fallacies, heightened rural dolour and appalling, patronising attempts at regional accents. Worse still, she was championed by Stanley Baldwin, a Conservative Prime Minister – then as now the last thing you would want associated with any serious literary endeavour.

Jordison too cites that opening to *Gone To Earth*, printing it alongside sections of Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers* and *Lady Chatterley* and extracts of *Cold Comfort Farm*, and invites the reader to guess ‘which of the following bits of writing were written in all sincerity – and which are spoofs?’ Needless to say, current critical opinion did not put me off my mission to promote Mary Webb’s writings. I must acknowledge, however, that even I did not do Webb

⁹Woolf writes that the ‘Highbrow’ are ‘the man or woman of thoroughbred intelligence who rides his mind at a gallop across the country in pursuit of an idea’ (p140) whilst the ‘Lowbrow’ are ‘a man or woman of thoroughbred vitality who rides his body in pursuit of a living at a gallop across life’ (p141). While lowbrows and highbrows apparently ‘need and honour’ each other a ‘Middlebrow’, however, is the source of much derision on the part of Woolf. The ‘middlebrow’ (of which she cites the BBC as an example, are ‘the go-betweens; they are the busy-bodies who run from one to the other with their tittle tattle and make all the mischief’. (p142). (Woolf, 1942, pp139-148).

¹⁰ For example, <http://www.powell-pressburger.org/Reviews/MaryWebb/GTE.html> and <https://resolutereader.blogspot.com/2012/09/stella-gibbons-cold-comfort-farm.html> (both accessed 11th September 2020).

¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2013/dec/10/mary-webb-dh-lawrence-cold-comfort-farm> (Accessed 11th November 2020)

any favours in my earlier drafts of the diary. Webb's writing can appear over-expansive to a modern reader, a style which Davie denotes as 'heightened floriferous writing', and 'grandiloquent' (2018, p46). There are times in her novels where she gets carried away with the narrative descriptions, particularly when she uses long lists of adjectives that (as she might say) 'gush like springs.' If we look at that opening paragraph of *Gone to Earth* — the aforementioned example spotlighted over Middlebrow coffee and quoted in *the Guardian*— it isn't hard to see why Webb isn't to the taste of all readers. Webb writes:

Small feckless clouds were hurried across the vast untroubled sky — shepherdless, futile, imponderable — and were torn to fragments on the fangs of the mountains, so ending their ephemeral adventures with nothing of their fugitive existence left but a few tears.

It was cold in the Callow — a spinney of silver birches and larches that topped a round hill. A purple mist hinted of buds in the tree-tops, and a fainter purple haunted the vistas between the silver and brown boles.

Only the crudeness of youth was here as yet, and not its triumph — only the sharp calyx-point, the pricking tip of the bud, like spears, and not the paten of the leaf, the chalice of the flower. (Webb, 1979, p3).

Modern publishers look for incisive openings that will grab readers and transfix them. The wordiness of Webb's opening can be alienating. She uses nineteen adjectives in a paragraph of 117 words, adding six or seven metaphors or similes to the passage for good measure.

Webb also tends to be an intrusive narrator, often inserting her own voice. For example, when describing *The House in Dormer Forest*, Webb writes:

All these things you could see in clear weather; but when it was misty — and mist lingered here as of inalienable right — the house was obliterated. It vanished like a pebble in a well, with all its cabined and shuttered wraths and woes, all its thunderous 'thou shalt nots.' At such times it did not seem that any law ruled in the valley except the law of the white owls and the hasty water and the mazy bat-dances. Only those who slept there night by night could tell you that the house was overspread with a spider's-web of rules, legends and customs so complex as to render the individual soul almost helpless. It is the mass-ego that constructs dogmas and laws; for while the individual soul is, if free at all, self-poised, the mass-mind is always uncertain, driven by vague, wandering aims; conscious, in a dim fashion, of its own weakness, it builds round itself a grotesque structure in the everlastingness of which it implicitly believes. When each unit of humanity merges itself in the mass, it loses its bearings and must rely on externals. The whole effort of evolution is to the development of individual souls who will dare to be free of the architecture of crowd-morality. For when man is herded, he remembers the savage.

(Webb, 1987, p2)

It is possible to see the hallmarks of Webb's writing style and personality in this short paragraph. The passage is filled with evocative nature imagery into which Webb steps to overlay her opinion of crowd-morality. The crowd was a favourite topic of modernist writers. Baudelaire describes the crowd as being 'the domain of the genius', 'just as the air is the bird's, and water that of the fish.' He continues:

Thus the lover of universal life moves into the crowd as though into an enormous reservoir of electricity. He, the lover of life, may also be compared to a mirror as vast as this crowd; to a kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness, which with every one of his movements presents a pattern of life, in all its multiplicity, and the flowing grace of all the elements that go to compose life.

(Baudelaire, 1998, p.105)

In *The Silences of the Moon*, Henry Webb's treatise on why man should abandon religion and instead worship the moon, Henry notes:

We are to take our lessons not from super-civilisation, but from the fields; not from Baudelaire, but from the saga and the *chanson de geste* [the old French song of heroic deeds]. Men talk of the noble stream of progress and forget that a stream is noblest at its source; at many a stage in history we must return to the primal springs of inspiration which lie on the horizon of thought. (Henry Webb, 1911, pp.31-32)

Although this quote is from Henry's book, *The Silences of the Moon* was a point of bonding for Mary and Henry during their courtship. My role as a novelist (and not a biographer) permits me to assume that they would have both read and discussed Baudelaire. It is even possible that Mary's narrative comments in *Dormer Forest* were in direct response to Henry.

It is possible to see why Webb has been overlooked as a modernist, when she appears to bear the hallmarks of the anti-modernist, and the antithesis of everything apparently modern. There is no doubt that Webb liked to stir that particular pot in person as well as on paper, when she attended literary functions, as recalled by Caradoc Evans in *The Fury Never Leaves Us* (1985, p125). Earlier drafts of my novel had me presenting Webb as a solitary figure until the material in the Crawford's archive revealed a far more sociable side of Webb that I had not encountered before. We know from the biographies and from the memoirs of friends such as Edwin Pugh and others that Webb threw herself whole-heartedly into the literary life when living in Hampstead¹² — socialising at the P.E.N. club, attending Walter de la Mare's Sunday gatherings at Anerley and regularly writing reviews. Webb was actively submitting work to St. John Adcock, editor of *The Bookman*, sometimes submitting an article every month, as there is a steady stream of work published between 1923 and her death in 1927. These *Bookman* articles included reviews of novels, poetry, and critical essays on literary figures she admired. For instance, in the February 1927 edition, she had a three-page article on Jane Austen published, while in June 1925, Morton Luce (a close friend of the Webbs) was her subject of choice.

Caradoc Evans' reminiscence of attending literary events with Webb inspired my diary entry for February 1924, when Mary attends a function with him in Bloomsbury. My character of Mary writes:

The spit-venoms do so love to peer over their glasses and down their long noses at us and say mean things rather too loudly than they need to.
So, as we go in, Caradoc will say something like, 'O, how I do love your dress,' he continues with a flourish. 'Is it from Paris?'
'O no, dear,' I reply rather more loudly than I need to. 'Isn't it pretty? It took me three whole days to make.'

¹² For example, alongside Caradoc Evans, Edwin Pugh wrote his remembrances that were published in *The Bookman* in 1928 following Webb's death, and David Randall and Ellery Sedgewick both recalled Webb in their own biographies (1969 and 1946 respectively).

Reading the complete collection of *The Bookman* articles in the Crawford archive, I began to piece together why Webb may have engendered the venom from the Bloomsbury Set that Evans had recalled. Her first review for St. John Adcock was entitled 'Three Pleasant Books', one of which was *Grey Wethers* by Vita Sackville West. 'There is a touch of real greatness in this book, in spite of faults in the technique,' Webb writes. 'The character of Daisy is not quite in focus; the queerness of the Lovel household is over stressed; the country people express themselves too well.' (p.164) Webb knew her queer households and country folk very well — as Bruce Crawford writes in his 'A Critical Assessment, published concurrently with the 2010 exhibition, *Mary Webb: Neglected Genius*,

In portraying English rustics as working poor, Webb, unlike many other contemporary novelists, went out of her way to draw characters as complicated individuals, and not as brutes without imagination, sympathy or depth. (2014, p.23)

Bruce Crawford goes on to comment that,

Webb wrote even further. She wrote about rural England as an environment where people, nature, folklore, language, and morality were inseparable. Her contemporary critics realized (some more accurately than others) that her work stood apart because there was a genuine artistic principle in her view of the interdependence of man and his environment. Her more astute critics also correctly perceived her position as essentially autobiographical. (2014, p.23-24)

Webb may have had a keen eye for character among the lower classes. However, it is reasonable to assume that Webb's first literary review would not have gone down well with Vita Sackville-West and could well have germinated the dislike by the Bloomsbury set, experienced by Webb at literary functions.

I threw myself into Webb's exuberantly emotional writing style. The earlier drafts of the diary had my supervisors howling with frustration at the 'over-Webbishness' of my narrative style. I had always intended to counteract the effusive style of the diary with Kester's contemporary voice stepping in to comment about changing readership tastes and the wish for more restraint. However, when I got access to Webb's short stories in the Crawford archive, published during the same period in London when she was attending literary functions and honing her craft, I realised that these pieces manifested a different voice — gone is the over-exuberance. When having to conform to strict word limits, Webb shows a far more measured style.

Critics have stated that Webb thought of herself first and foremost as a poet. In her foreword to 'A Selection of Poems' in *Neglected Genius*, Mary Crawford writes:

Caradoc Evans, in a short essay he wrote for the Colophon (Winter 1938) said that Mary Webb told him: 'You have no idea how hard I work over a poem... but stories — well, they just come to me and I write them without thinking and often I'm surprised at what I've written, so strange it reads.'

Mary Crawford continues, that Webb 'thought of herself, in large part, as a poet.' (Crawford, 2009, p.168) Coles asserts that Webb wrote her novels in a rush of inspiration, describing Webb's process of writing her first novel as:

For Mary, 'the mysterious and magical process of creation' took over on a wet summer morning in 1915 when she felt compelled to begin writing her novel [*The Golden Arrow*] and

was then swept along inspirationally at the rate of some 6,000 words a day, her first draft being completed in three weeks. (Coles, 1979: p.139)

Martin Armstrong worked with Webb when he was the editor of *The Spectator*. In his introduction to the 1951 Cape anthology, *The Essential Mary Webb*, Armstrong wrote:

To say that she wrote them at great speed is true, but misleading, for by the time she put pencil to paper much of the work was already done. When she found a theme, she brooded over it, lived in it, for a long time and, in the later stages of development talked about it volubly. Whether or not she made notes, I don't know. But it was not until it had crystallised in her mind that she began to put it down, and then she set to work furiously, reeling off a surprising number of pages in a single day's work... Down everything went, pell mell, and though she sometimes spoke of revision, I don't believe the revision ever amounted to much. (Webb, 1951, p.9)

Coles shares that Henry even bought a special pen that released ink more quickly than standard pens to accommodate the speed of his wife's writing (1978, p.141).

Webb's style is more measured in her short stories and critical work. I believe that Webb spent a similar amount of time revising her short fiction and critical work as she did on her poems, and this more refined and measured Webb was born out of that editorial process. I wondered if Webb would have produced a more 'polished' and less emotionally animated style had she worked with a decent editor.

Either way, reading the short fiction and reviews later in my research presented me with a different writing style for Webb. I feel able to substitute a more measured voice for diary entries that cover the later years, which serves as a counterbalance to the more exuberant prose of the early diary entries. Thanks to a letter in the Crawford archive, I was able to date Webb's short fiction and review work to a precise period. On 29th June 1924 (unusually for Webb she gives the exact date, as most of her correspondence gives only partial dates or no date at all), realising that they needed more money to run the two households in London and Shropshire, Webb wrote a letter to St. John Adcock, as follows:

This is a begging letter. (1) Would you in your kindness allow me to review a book sent to me by Mr Maty (Palmer) called 'Old Days in Country Places'. He asked me to review it. May I? (2) If your idea of having more poetry materialises, and if 'the burden is intolerable', and you want a helper, might I be that helper? (3) May I send some lyrics for your competition page, or am I disqualified by not being an amateur? Either or all of these will be a most ecstatically received benefit, for we've no money at all just now and the tenant of our cottage isn't able to pay his rent at present as they have got a new baby — So I must write begging letters. Apologies.

While Adcock didn't hire her as his assistant, he did publish her first review and the reviews she sent him thereafter. This letter also gave me a glimpse of Webb's day-to-day life. I had not been aware that the Webbs had a tenant at Spring Cottage — an important detail which was not included in my early drafts but inserted later. It is fitting that the Webbs as landlords would allow their tenant to live rent free because of the arrival of a new baby. However, I doubt that Mary would have repeated the experience, as having a tenant in Shropshire would have prevented her from being able to visit her beloved Lyth Hill whenever she needed to.

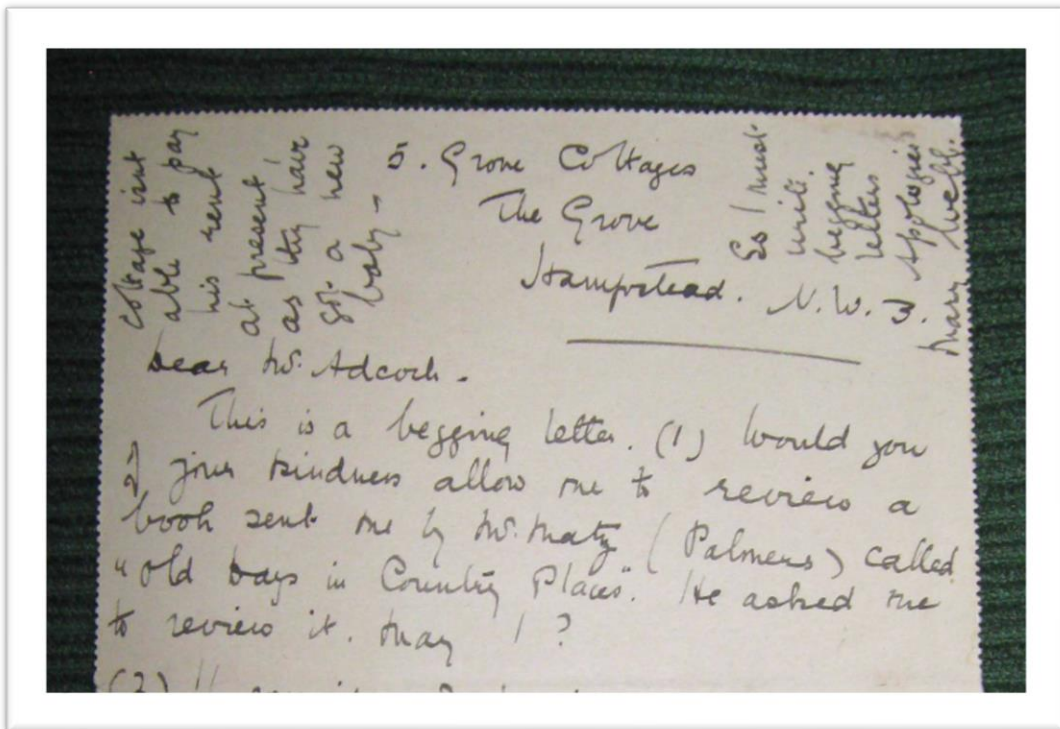


Figure 6 Webb's 'begging letter' to St. John Adcock

'SADDLE YOUR DREAMS BEFORE YOU RIDE 'EM': WHEN WRITING PLANS GO AWRY

Several years ago, a colleague at work gave me a literary calendar in a Secret Santa draw. The calendar offered a literary source for each day of the year, a well-chosen gift. Amongst the quotes were the usual lines taken from Jane Austen or Dickens. More unusually, the quote for July 16th was 'Saddle your dreams before you ride 'em' from *Precious Bane*. When Prue visits Mr Beguildy, the cunning man known locally as the Wizard of Plash, to ask him to teach her to read, she has a head full of ideas about what she will be able to do once she is literate.

'Mister Beguildy!' I called out, 'I want you to learn me to read and write and sum, and all you know. I'm to pay in work. Gideon and me's going to get rich, and buy a place in Lullingford, and have maids and men, and flowered gowns for me, and china --'

Beguildy looked at me over the rim of a great measure of mead. 'Saddle your dreams afore you ride 'em, my wench,' he said.

'How mean you, Mister Beguildy?'

'The answer's under your mob-cap,' says he. 'If I be to learn ye, there's to be no argling, no questions and no answers. I say the saying, but you mun find the meaning. Now you come back to me a week to-day and tell me what I meant, and then for a bit of a treat I'll show you the bottle with the old Squire in it, old Camperdine, great-grandad to this un, him as came again so bad every Harvest Home, and sang a roaring bawdy song somewhere up in the chancel, only none could see un, so none could catch un.'

'Saving you.'

Beguildy smiled. He'd got a very slow stealing smile, that came like a ripple on the water, and stayed a long while.

'Ah. Saving me. I caught un proper.'
(Webb, 1924, p.26)

Beguildy advises Prue 'not count her chickens before they hatched' when she is embarking on learning to read and write. I pinned the quote from July 16th on my notice board at work for the next few years. If only I had kept that nugget of wisdom in mind when I was planning my thesis.

My intention in writing *A Single Violet* was to develop an historical, biographical novel which would bring readers to Mary Webb's fiction by learning the gripping, harrowing story of her life, her illness, and her tragic relationship with her husband and her early death. My previous novels¹³ were never pre-planned. Instead, I would 'fly by the seat of my pants' through the process, then realise once I'd finished that the work was deeply flawed and unpublishable. Unlike me, Webb thought through her plots before she ever put pen to paper. I recognized that I needed to approach the process differently — I had to learn a new method of writing. Writing *A Single Violet* was more complex than anything I had attempted before and would require me to draw on all my creative tools.

When I first began writing the novel in 2015, I envisioned constructing a bifurcated narrative — a contemporary storyline woven around the newly-discovered diary. By the time I came to my registration in November of that year, I had a working title for the novel, *Looking for Mary Webb*, which struck me as a description of what I was doing. I had also created an outline for the critical piece, in which I intended to examine Webb's deep connection to her Shropshire landscape and how her writing style differed from my own.

Just past registration, I encountered my first major challenge. By writing the two storylines together, my narrative voices blended together and were not distinct enough. The diary was not 'Webbish' enough and felt too modern (with a small 'm') while the contemporary narrative felt too old fashioned. I needed to dissociate the two strands and concentrate my efforts on each one independently. Thankfully, good plans are flexible. I chose to tackle the more challenging section first and began to write the diary independently. My sense was that if I could first take on this more complex strand, then I could more fully immerse myself in Webb and more effectively find her voice. I would return to the contemporary storyline later.

By the time I reached my transfer viva in late 2017, I had a full version of Webb's diary in draft. Post transfer, it was time for me to write the contemporary interleaving strand of *Kes* — named after Kester Woodseaves, the love-inspired weaver of *Precious Bane* — the supposed finder of the diaries. Following a spell in rehab, he returns to his aunt's house on Lyth Hill and finds Mary Webb's diaries in a trunk hidden at the back of a wardrobe.

¹³ *The Lychway* (2004), *Somewhere She is There* (2006), *The Softness of Water* (2009).

However, Kes struggled for space to tell his own story. I hadn't foreseen that the voice of Mary Webb might take over the novel completely. The first draft of the diary alone was sixty thousand words, just twenty thousand words shy of my overall intended length. It turned out that neither Mary Webb nor Kes were prepared to share the page. A further rethink was required.

Kes had to be set aside, hopefully to be picked up later and written into his own novel. However, there were certain functions that he was intended to perform in the overall structure of the novel that needed to be worked in some other way. By removing Kes from the narrative, I risked losing the palimpsestic quality of the novel, along with Kes's ability to comment on Webb's writing style in her diary. I had to devise another way to add editorial comment, being careful not over-channel the voices of Webb's detractors. Although I had not intended to answer the question of where Webb should sit amongst her contemporaries, I couldn't effectively write her story while looking down my nose at Mary Webb and that meant I had to know where I would place her oeuvre.

On my research journey I have discovered other readers who, like me, fell in love with *Precious Bane*, and others who dismiss it as 'purple prose' influenced perhaps by Stella Gibbon's parody of fiction like that of Webb, Hardy and Lawrence in *Cold Comfort Farm*. Stella Gibbons has been credited by some, such as Bill Peschel in his blog, as killing the 'Loam and Lovechild' genre that Webb, Hardy and Lawrence were writing in — a pejorative term in itself that I take issue with — although Gibbons herself later denied that she was singling out Webb in particular (Coles, 1979, p326). Whatever the truth of it, the association still lingers on. Even those that love Webb have commented to me on how challenging they found it to penetrate the style of *Precious Bane* the first time they read it. Somehow, through it all, the key has always been for me to keep pushing through the challenges in order to find the character at the heart of this story, and the right voice with which to tell her story, both of which are essential in a diary. What has become clear to me is how inextricably connected character and voice are when creating my narrator of Webb's story. In the next chapter I will look at the diary form, and the challenges and gifts this form brings to the narrator.

CHAPTER TWO: LOOKING FOR A DIURNAL FORM

In her diary of 1855, Jane Carlyle remembered Charles Buller saying of the Duchess de Praslin's murder, 'what could a poor fellow do with a wife who kept a journal but murder her?' Given the compelling power of the journal and the intimate nature of women's attraction to it, the violence of such a male reaction is not perhaps altogether surprising. (Simons, 1990, p.18)

What attracted me to the form of a diary was also what turned out to be a major difficulty: The fact that the writer of a diary doesn't know what is happening apart from what he or she experiences or is told. That creates the potential for irony of many kinds.

Like a first-person narrator writing in the present tense, a diarist also has no idea of what will happen. That, again, makes the character more engaging, I think. My readers must have thought: "Poor sap. Can't he see either what his sister is getting up to or what is going to happen if he doesn't wake up?"

Eventually I realised that inserting the anonymous letters allowed me to give the reader some clues that Richard could not be aware of but still kept the narrow focus that I wanted. It was, however, the trickiest and slowest novel I've written because of the awkwardness of using that very limited point of view.

I'm convinced that the most powerful literary experience is the one that the reader is stimulated into imagining for himself/herself. For some readers *Rustication* seems to have worked in that way but it does require more "input" from the reader than most are prepared to supply.

(Palliser, 2017, Personal Communication, 30th May)

'LOST AND FORGOTTEN PLACES': REDISCOVERING DIARIES

The idea of a hidden or lost diary being rediscovered is certainly not a new one, either in real life or in fiction. In Webb's own novel, *Precious Bane*, she includes the plot device of a hidden diary, as Prudence Sarn keeps her own notebook hidden at the top of the house where no one else will find it. In the novel, Webb writes:

There was a great wooden bolt on the door, and I was used to fasten it, though there was no need, for the attic was such a lost-and-forgotten place nobody ever came there except the travelling weaver, and Gideon in apple harvest, and me. Nobody would ever think of looking for me there and it was parlour and church both to me... I found an old locker, given up to the mice, and scrubbed it, and put a fastening on it, and kept my ink and quills there, and my book, and the bible, which Mother said I could have, since neither she nor Gideon could read it. (Webb, 2002: pp. 59-60).

The mention of the diary serves three functions in this paragraph. Firstly, it sets Prue apart from her mother and her brother as she is educated. As the rest of Prue's family is illiterate, she has the freedom to write what she wants to, secure in the knowledge that even if it is found, her mother (and more importantly) her controlling brother, can't read it. Secondly, it establishes the attic as 'safe space' for Prue — somewhere she can go to be herself in the pages of her notebook. Thirdly, it introduces the idea that 'the weaver' is the only person who steps into this most intimate of spaces, and allows the reader to be aware that when Kester Woodseaves (the new weaver) is introduced to the story, he alone will be given access to the attic. Attics, diaries, and 'lost and forgotten places' are a running theme throughout this chapter.

Other novels, too, use the device of a hidden or lost diary as a means of rediscovering the voices of the past — Jamie Fuller's novel *The Diary of Emily Dickinson* (1996) imagines the writer's diary being discovered and stolen during a house renovation in 1915, and only revealed in 1980 when the diary's thief, now in old age, suffers a crisis of conscience. More well-known, A.S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990) uses a diary and the interleaved

letters found within it as a device that triggers a literary treasure hunt, leading its protagonist on a mission to discover the truth about the mysterious (and fictional) woman writer, Christabel La Motte. The device of a diary (hidden or discovered) offers the reader an intriguing and alluring possibility — the potential of a woman’s voice, echoing down through the years, real and uncensored. In the absence of the technology to film, record or photograph, the diary gives us her words expressing her own world view, from right inside her head, and apparently without filters. As Elleke Boehmer has written in *The Creative Writing Handbook* (2017), the immediacy of this first-person narrative format can ‘reinforce the sense of naturalness’ to a piece — it enables the writer to forge an ‘immediate and available channel’ between their own experience (either real or imaginary), while the reader experiences the ‘I’ narrative as ‘relaxed, as well as truthful, real, reliable’ (p.154). However, I would argue that this ‘truthful’ and ‘reliable’ aspect can be illusory. Charles Palliser’s work plays with this perceived sense of reliability in the ‘I’ narrative. In *Rustication*, the narrator is by no means reliable or entirely truthful, even if the reader is never quite sure. As Palliser also points out (in the quote at the top of this chapter) the downside of writing fiction in the diary form is that it also limits the information the writer can provide the reader with, and this can make the writing process extremely complex. As I have found in writing *A Single Violet*, just how much information can be shared is a delicate balance throughout the creation of the novel.

It is not just in fiction that the rediscovered diary can become an alluring discovery. In real life too, there have been cases of writer’s diaries being released into the hands of a researcher and sparking a renaissance in that writer’s work. Natalie Blondel was given access to Mary Butts’ diary, kept private by her daughter for many years, until she felt able to allow it into the public domain, thereby empowering Blondel to write a new biography (2002: p.xiii). Then there are the tales of diaries being discovered in refuse points. In 2016 the biographer Alexander Masters published an article in the Guardian relating the story of his discovery of one hundred and forty-eight volumes of a diary in a skip, and his quest to discover who the author was¹⁴. To his surprise, at the end of the literary bread-crumbs trail he discovered that the writer was still very much alive, and he was able to return the lost diaries to her.

When I began researching Mary Webb in earnest in 2009, I conjectured that the gaps in the record may have been partly responsible for Webb’s continuing obscurity. Would the presence of a diary have made her a more ‘attractive prospect’ to a researcher? I began to imagine what might have happened had someone discovered her lost diary and I looked at other contemporaries of Webb who did leave behind a journal. The position of the fictional diary and of the private one have both been central to this work. In this chapter, therefore, I explore both real life diaries and fictional ones — who writes diaries, and what purpose they have, and what markers they have in common. While the rules of research might dictate that I separate fact from

¹⁴ Masters, Alexander. ‘Diary of a Somebody: Could I Solve the Mystery of 148 Lost Notebooks?’ <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/30/diary-somebody-148-lost-notebooks-life-discarded-alexander-masters>> (Accessed 1st September, 2016)

fiction, in my own life and in my creative practice I find the borders clouding. Diaries can become both fact and fiction through the natural distortion that comes with writing something down from a single viewpoint. In the preface to *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture*, Bill Nichols observes: 'Inevitably, the distinction between fact and fiction blurs when claims about reality get cast as narratives.' He continues,

We hunger for news from the world around us but desire it in the form of narratives, stories that make meaning, however tenuous, dramatic, compelling or paranoid they might be. What kind of world do we inhabit, with what risks and what prospects? Tales we label fiction offer imaginative answers; those we label nonfiction suggest possibly authentic ones. (Nichols, 1994, p.ix)

Diaries are a liminal space that crosses several different boundaries, thereby becoming multi-functioning. They can subvert the censor, and act as a 'workshopping' space for the writer (when it is a writer's diary). I was seeking to create an authentic-feeling diary with markers the reader would recognise, as my project is still an act of fiction, even if it teeters on the border between life-writing and pure fiction. I will begin with an examination of my own diaries, before moving on to more examples of 'real' diaries. From there, I move onto the diary as a gendered form — how it has become a very feminine space in a wider field that is still very much dominated by who holds the balance of power, and binary assumptions of what is classed as 'literary' (or not). Throughout, I will also pause to think about the reader in each case — who reads the diary, and how is it rendered 'readable' to the external reader looking in? Also, what are the pitfalls in attempting to recreate this form in fiction?

'MENTAL CHATTER': MY OWN DIARIES, AGED ELEVEN YEARS TO THE PRESENT DAY

Poring over my own diaries in 2016, I stumbled upon the following entry:

I always love starting a new book. It is always so fresh, and so clean, so full of potential — maybe this year will be the one where I get to where I want to be. But it is also a slam-dunk-Stargate-esque slide into the middle of whatever angst I am living with at that moment. All this mental chatter from the past currently resides in the loft in granddad's trunk. That would make a good plot line — the girl who finds her late mother's diaries in the loft. I vaguely wanted to write the next one [novel] in journal form. Aha!¹⁵

As early as 2006, then, I was contemplating the idea of writing a novel in diary form. I had just completed my second, *Somewhere She is There* — a cathartic epistolary exploration of a young woman's relationship with her late mother through the letters they write to each other beyond the grave. Having explored a narrative through letters, I was already thinking about writing my next big project, and how I might like to write a diary-as-novel. I began with my own diary as a roadmap. Kept sporadically, my diary has been crucial in my development, both as a writer and as a functioning adult. Hidden away in a trunk in my flat, the diary is written for what Judy Simons calls 'an audience of one' (1990: p.10). The diary serves several functions for me — as the

¹⁵ My own diary, 18th August 2006

diary writer, it is at once a record of some key periods of development in my life, so it becomes a place of rumination, self-examination, or assessment of my environment or life experiences. Sometimes it contains shopping lists, to do lists, notes from meetings, or simple things I wish to remember. It also becomes a paper memory-box, with exhibition, theatre or cinema tickets tucked away in the back. As the reader of the diary, it also serves as a 'stopping off point', a way of evaluating those periods of growth, but also as a source for my writing — new writing projects often spring from ideas I have explored in the diary.



Figure 7 My own diary - approximately fifty-two notebooks (and growing)

In preparation for this critical commentary, I set myself a challenge. Previously I have only ever dipped in and out of my diary, gleaning what I needed and then moving swiftly on. During the Christmas of 2016, finding myself at home alone, without the company of any of my loved ones, I took my diaries out of the trunk, arranged the notebooks in chronological order (all fifty-two of them) and read them from beginning to end, giving myself a whistle-stop tour of my life from age eleven to forty-three. This project coincided with two things — one was a period of personal crisis, and the

second was a desire to explore first-hand who I was when I wrote those diaries, and who I was when I read them. However, I realised very quickly that this approach was too introspective to allow an external audience in to the 'story'. The events recorded were meaningful to me as I was there when they happened, but to anyone else they might be baffling or boring.

Growing up in the wilds of Dartmoor, it was perhaps inevitable that I would become an introspective adult. The highest point of Dartmoor is a magical place to explore nature in its full, untrammelled strength, but it is not a place to encounter a varied or diverse society. The age gap between my older siblings and myself was significant enough to make me an unsuitable playmate, so my childhood was spent roaming the hills with my dog, or immersing myself in books, or pouring my adolescent woes into my diary. Diaries and time in nature have, then, been a recurring feature throughout my life.

Diaries, both real and fictional, were also present in my choice of reading material (It was reading about a fictional diary in a novel that had inspired me to keep a diary of my own). As a child I read *Z for Zachariah* (O'Brien, 2007), and learned how disturbing a tale can be when told in the first person, since it allows the reader to place themselves in the role of the diary writer as they read. Also, Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl* (2007), which allows the reader to imaginatively befriend Anne, as they step into the shoes of Anne's imagined friend, Kitty. Then *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13 ¾* (Townsend, 2002) which uses the 'every boy' device of

Adrian, with its unrelenting humour. As a child, I loved the way in which the first-person narration enabled me to climb into the story as I was reading. I was also captured by the way in which a diary could be a useful plot



Figure 8 Bellever Tor on Dartmoor, near where I grew up (my 'sacred landscape')

device, to give a glimpse inside a particular character's perspective. Eustace's diary in *The Voyage of the Dawntrader* (Lewis, 1998) is one example where the diary entries are deliberately mismatched with the rest of the narrative, to demonstrate Eustace's isolation from the other

children. In adolescence, my fondness for the diary form continued as I steadily made my way through those that were written this way: *Dracula* (Stoker, 2004) *The Yellow Wallpaper* (Perkins Gilman, 2012), *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Loos, 1992) and *These is My Words* (Turner, 1999). Again, the attraction for me was the internal view of the story, which allowed my imagination to become part of the narrative. They also give the story salaciousness — the reader can feel as though they are eavesdropping, listening in to a series of private thoughts they should not be aware of. Then in adulthood, I began to notice and be drawn to novels that feature a diary in their plot, which again gives a window into another human existence: *Cloud Atlas* (Mitchell, 2014), *The Chamber of Secrets* (Rowling, 1999), *Mort* (Pratchett, 2012) and *Precious Bane* (Webb, 1978). When the boundaries blur between the diurnal format and the epistolary novel, particularly in those that are monologic, then the list becomes longer. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1983) where Celie begins by writing letters to God, and then to her absent sister Nettie, was an added favourite.

The first-person narrative can present the writer with a series of limitations, as Charles Palliser pointed out to me in his correspondence, such as how to introduce a perspective the narrator couldn't possibly have, and different writers seek different solutions to this. In *The Color Purple*, Walker switches the focus of Celie's letter writing from God to her sister, Nettie, and then later introduced the concept of the return letters that Nettie writes back from Africa, allowing Celie a view of a world she couldn't possibly know about herself. By his own analysis, Palliser introduces a series of anonymous letters into his narrative, ensuring that Richard (the protagonist) has his attention drawn to various plot devices.

While my own reading tastes have always leaned more towards fiction, my favoured form of non-fiction is also diary shaped. I liked to try to understand the lives of the people behind the names: Joe Orton (1989), Kenneth Williams (1989), Virginia Woolf (2008), Sylvia Townsend Warner (1994), and Mary Butts (2002). If I discovered a published diary for one of my favourite authors, it was like discovering buried treasure — they allowed me to see what they thought, and to learn about their own life stories. They also gave me a glimpse into their own writer's world, and how or why some of my favourite books were brought into being. When I began to write *Looking For Mary Webb* in 2015, I set out to bring that idea I had first written about doing in 2006 in my own private journals to life — writing a novel with a diary embedded within it. The device of layering a story within a story was one I had enjoyed in some of my other 'desert island' books — Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* (1998), Mary Wollstonecraft-Shelley's *Frankenstein* (2003), Henry James' *Turn of the Screw* (2008) — not quite palimpsest, but more like a peeling back of an onion, layer by layer. It was also to twist and turn throughout the creative process and force me to keep reimagining and reassessing what it would become.

'ANNE CAME OVER FOR LUNCH': ISOBEL, AND THE GREAT DIARY PROJECT

When I began thinking of an imaginary diary written by Mary Webb, these thoughts coincided with an introduction to a real live 'lost and found' diary in my family, and the two ideas dissolved into one. In the 1990s, my step-uncle stumbled upon two volumes of a diary in a skip in Guernsey. They were dated 1926 and 1934 and contained scant information about their author, not even a name in the flyleaf. There were more in the skip in

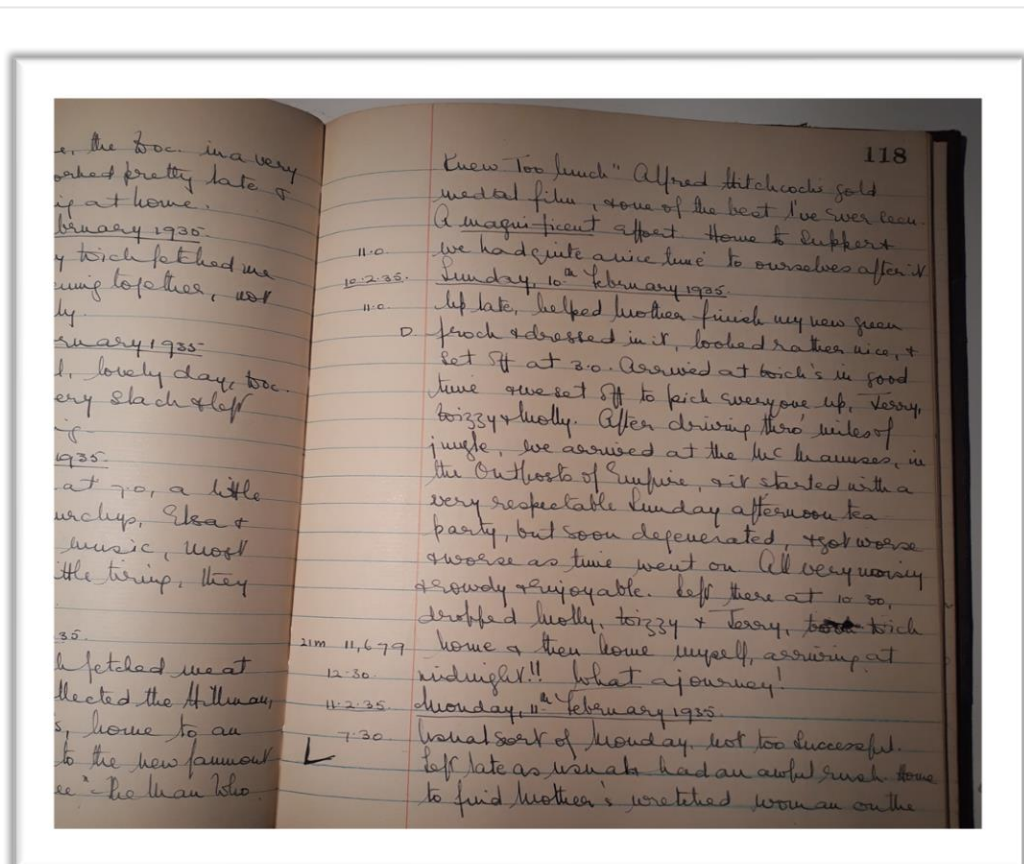


Figure 9 Isobel's diary

which he found them, but he reports that he chose two at random. The diary was written by an unknown Londoner. We know nothing about her full name, or even her extended life story, beyond two isolated years of her life. By carefully decoding the cursive script of the diaries, we have been able to ascertain that the author was a young unmarried woman, still living at home with her parents in Streatham in South London, and somewhere along the journey she mentions her name 'Isobel' in passing. There is a strong contrast between the two volumes — in 1926, Isobel is full of optimism and youthful enthusiasm, recording what books she is reading each week and the day-to-day details of her life and whom she has socialised with. In 1934, Isobel is still living at home, but she has developed a somewhat more jaded approach to life. She no longer records her reading habits, and instead talks about the cinema and music halls, and driving out on excursions with her beau, and disagreements with her parents. In the intervening years something had changed Isobel's viewpoint completely, but we have no idea what that event was, and we can only speculate. Since her diaries were found in Guernsey, we assume that she moved there, but how Isobel went from Streatham to Guernsey is the source of family curiosity, yet without a family name for Isobel, or a date of birth, it would be difficult to trace the facts of her life. She remains a figure that is intriguing, slipping between the layers of history and speculation, and family story telling.

In seeking to understand what makes diaries such an intriguing read, and how the writer delivers that to the reader, my early drafts led me to realise the form itself is immensely complex — writing a fictional diary is not the same as writing a real one — although both versions necessitate a first person narrator with a unique standpoint who may look backwards through history but not forwards. When comparing the diarist with the auto biographer, for instance, Elizabeth Podnieks (2000) writes of this viewpoint that,

the diarist does not write from a specific standpoint because he writes in a continuum of time. The diary is spontaneous, fragmentary, and immediate, whereas the autobiography is consciously patterned in the way novels are... the only difference between the diary and the autobiography is that the latter's narration is retrospectively orientated. (p.30)

This viewpoint of the narrator was to be crucial to the way in which I wrote my fictional diary. However, attempting to recreate a fully authentic diary without retrospective orientation caused me to encounter some problems. My viewpoint needed to be altered slightly. While the idea of Isobel's diaries is intriguing, reading them can be frustrating — de-coding the cursive script is one problem, but not knowing who the people are that she refers to only by name is another. This is not a piece of fiction with the cast of characters neatly laid out, nor is it a carefully edited real diary with explanatory footnotes woven in by the editor. I set out on my own literary quest, to explore the format in greater detail, and to de-code diaries.

Since Isobel's diary was hard for me to access (as it is in Guernsey), I visited the Great Diary Project, an archive of more than nine thousand unpublished diaries that is housed within the Bishopsgate Institute, in the City of London. There I was guided by the Director of the Collection, Dr. Polly North, to view three individual raw, unedited diaries, each of them written by a woman in quite unique circumstances (and all very different from Webb). First there was Jane Hoyake (GDP 306), a Dutch sculptor born in 1866 and living in Nazi occupied Holland, pining for Mr Percy Knight, the leader of the religious sect of which she was a member; her diaries are filled with crossings out, and notes made in the margin. In addition, each day entry is marked with the appropriate planetary glyph for the day of the week — whatever the sect was, they observed the pre-modern planetary

powers of the occult world. Secondly, I also viewed four volumes of *The Ladies' Yearbook* (GDP 298), from 1918 to 1921, a book produced by Charles Letts of London for married ladies to fill out and use as a reference. It contained useful tips such as how to clean your gas oven, how to improve a thin neck, and what food is in season each month. The owner of the diaries, a young mother living in London, filled the pages with her observations of her daughter, and details of what outings or household concerns she had that day. She had also meticulously completed the section at the back that was set aside for household accounts. The third diary I examined was the



Figure 10 The diary of Jane Hoyake, a Dutch Sculptor, preserved by The Great Diary Project.

nature notebook of a woman living in Cornwall in the 1980s (GDP 436). She notes what birds she has seen during her daily walks, what weather phenomenon, and what trees are in leaf or bud.

What struck me in each diary I read was that each one was as unique as its writer, and yet there were similarities in the themes the diarists chose to examine. Whether they were living in Nazi occupied Holland or London of the 1920s or 2010s, each woman expressed a level of vulnerability in the pages of those notebooks, each one yearned for something — a lost love, or a child, or the frailties of the human life. But alongside this, the diarists also recalled the daily details of their lives, ‘Anne came over for lunch’, or ‘Took H to the park’, or ‘walked

to Shortlanesend'. In each case, the diary could be at once a private confessional, or a daily record of the small details of life that would otherwise be forgotten. How else would we know now, that in 1921, 'Pork could be eaten again in September' (GDP298, p19), or that in 1990, 'Pebbles can go both ways through the cat door' (GDP436, p31). The intricacies of daily life can be enticing, and the diary could be the closest thing we have to a time machine. As I will explore further in Chapter Three, these details became essential in building the fictional world in *A Single Violet*.

'BORING, BARREN AND PLAIN': THE GENDERING OF DIARIES, AND WOMEN'S WRITING

Although diaries are not always thought of as a gendered form, there is a marked difference in the fate of men's diaries over women's diaries. In her study, *Daily Modernism: The Literary Diaries of Virginia Woolf, Antonia White, Elizabeth Smart and Anais Nin*, Elizabeth Podnieks refers to diaries as 'that profoundly female, and feminist genre' (p.46) and notes,

The vast majority of published journals were those of men. The thousands of unpublished women's diaries were in archives across the country — thousands more, I realised, were in attics like my own. (Podnieks, 2000: p.48)

Podniek's study concludes that women's diaries were far more likely to end up forgotten because their content rendered them more domesticated and therefore, in critics' eyes, less historically important than the diaries of their male counterparts (Podnieks, 2000: p.48). Women began writing diaries as a way of expressing themselves when the idea of a woman writing anything else was thought preposterous, according to Podnieks, but, she writes, people assume that items worth keeping are the ones that are deemed to have historical value, and this tends to be measured in masculine terms. (2000: p.48). As women write about 'daily events' of their household, they are often dismissed as being dull or unimportant, while their male counterparts, who often wrote about historical events and changes in politics or wider society, were preserved and held up as being historically insightful (Podnieks, 2000: p.48). What Podnieks doesn't dwell on or explore fully is the value there might be in exploring these daily domestic details. For a writer of historical, biographical fiction, it is just these minutiae that we need in order to create a believable world in fiction. (As I will explore further in Chapter Three).

Jennifer Sinor concurs with Podnieks on the differences between male and female diaries. In her article, 'Reading the Ordinary Diary' (2002) which looks at the diary of her great great great-aunt, Annie Ray, a homesteader from Dakota in the late Nineteenth Century, Sinor notes that it is a diary 'that very few would care to read' (p.123) since it is 'boring, repetitious, and very, very bare.' Sinor posits that diaries such as this one may well have ended their days in a skip or attic, since,

We do not know how to read what I call ordinary writing: writing like Annie's that is not literary, writing that seems boring, barren, and plain. My initial reading was heavily influenced by the study of nineteenth-century diaries, a tradition that regards diaries as literary texts. (p.123)

Moreover, concludes Sinor, she has participated in a literary tradition that 'prefers reading only those diaries that exhibit literary features'. She notes of the dailiness of diaries which she links to changes in technology and the measurement of time by clocks. According to Sinor, time is something that became measured and

understood differently — from a never-ending sense of ‘occasional time’, with the invention of the pendulum ‘measured time’ emerged. (2002: p.124). According to Sinor, diaries bring the rise of writing *in* the days rather than writing *of* the days once time becomes something that is diurnal — it happens on the day of the events and is less reflective. (Sinor, 2002: p.123).

While this may be true of some diaries, such as those of Sinor’s relative, Annie Ray, it does not reflect my own pattern, which must fit around the pressures of contemporary life, and therefore becomes occasional, and something I tend to write when I need to process a problem, or just when the mood takes me. Each diary, which I have always kept sporadically, tends to start with a note of optimism, with something of the ‘new beginning’ to them, and it is one that comes each time I choose a new notebook and start a new page. Diaries have a clear enough starting point, but they may not have an obvious end, unlike a novel, or they may have multiple endings as each notebook is filled and another begun. My diary will only end when I end, and then (if it is deemed interesting enough) it may well find a new lease of life in an archive like the Great Diary Project. If not, then it too may end up abandoned and forgotten, or destroyed.

For my diary of Mary Webb, this sense of dailiness could have put a critical spanner in the works. The effect I was planning was occasional, fragmentary; something the reader dips in and out of as the narrative progresses, and with an eye on fictional elements like plot and character. When modelled on Isobel’s journal or indeed my own, the diary was dull, jarring and weighed down with too many of the day-to-day details. For example, some earlier passages relating to the domestic details of the Webb’s home in Weston-Super-Mare became stilted when I got caught up in the minutiae of the stray cats that Mary Webb tended to adopt. If I were to write Mary Webb’s whole life as a quotidian work, it would be long winded, and most days’ entries would be unremarkable. This is partly because the period I wished to cover was quite long in daily terms and spanned three separate periods of two or three years each. As in most people’s lives, the drama doesn’t necessarily occur every day. For my fictional diary then, I decided not to be *too* authentic.

‘CLANDESTINE THOUGHTS’: THE PRETENCE OF PRIVACY AND DIARIES AS ACTS OF RESISTANCE

Judy Simons writes that diaries are, for women, an act of resistance. In her study of literary women’s diaries from Fanny Burney to Virginia Woolf, she writes,

In an age where silence was generally considered to be a female virtue, and modesty, a characteristic young girls were encouraged to develop, it was to their journals that women turned, when other channels of communication were closed to them. For some, even the act of writing a diary was considered to be subversive, with its emphasis on self-aggrandisement and its invitation to articulate clandestine thoughts. (1990: p.3)

Simons notes that while the form was open to both male and female writers, the form was particularly useful to women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, since they became an ‘indirect means of resistance to codes of behaviour with which they were uncomfortable, allowing for a release of feelings and opinions which had no other vent.’ (Simons, 1990: p.4). As time moved on, however, Simons notes that the diary became something more than a private confessional, since women recognised its ability to also become a more public

expression. It was particularly useful to women writers who were confined by the limits of 'wishing to retain the approval of the reading public', which normally confined women's writing to the realm of romantic fiction, a genre which was deemed to be safe as it did not 'poach on the male preserves of power politics or trenchant social criticism'. Diaries gave those women a space for 'registering their independent views'. (Simons, 1990: p.189)

However, there might be one further complication for women diarists of the past, which has fed into the plot of *A Single Violet* — that being the will of the men who are around them. While some diaries may have been judged as dull and therefore not worth preserving, others were destroyed for more nefarious reasons. The survival of a woman's diary could easily be threatened by the whims and control of their husbands, particularly when there was a 'public image' at stake. Returning to Podnieks study, *Daily Modernism* (2000), she cites the case of Elizabeth Pepys, the wife of the well-known Samuel Pepys, who also kept a diary. While Pepys writes about events happening, such as the Great Fire of London, his wife's diaries were more likely to be relating household details, or information about their family life. Of course, we will never know for sure, because while Mr Pepys' diary was published and reprinted hundreds of times over, Mrs Pepys' diary was destroyed by her husband, but this was not due to its dull nature. When Pepys became enraged by something Elizabeth had written in her own diary about their marriage, he tore it up, so that no one else could read it, and then recorded the incident in his own diary, writing:

At last we pretty good friends, and my wife begun to speak again of the necessity of her keeping somebody to bear her company; for her familiarity with her other servants is it that spoils them all, and other company she hath none, which is too true, and called for Jane to reach her out of her trunk, giving her the keys to that purpose, a bundle of papers, and pulls out a paper, a copy of what, a pretty while since, she had wrote in a discontent to me, which I would not read, but burnt. She now read it, and it was so piquant, and wrote in English, and most of it true, of the retiredness of her life, and how unpleasant it was; that being wrote in English, and so in danger of being met with and read by others, I was vexed at it, and desired her and then commanded her to tear it. When she desired to be excused it, I forced it from her, and tore it, and withal took her other bundle of papers from her, and leapt out of the bed and in my shirt clapped them into the pocket of my breeches, that she might not get them from me, and having got on my stockings and breeches and gown, I pulled them out one by one and tore them all before her face, though it went against my heart to do it, she crying and desiring me not to do it, but such was my passion and trouble to see the letters of my love to her, and my Will wherein I had given her all I have in the world, when I went to sea with my Lord Sandwich, to be joynd with a paper of so much disgrace to me and dishonour, if it should have been found by anybody. Having torn them all, saving a bond of my uncle Robert's, which she hath long had in her hands, and our marriage license, and the first letter that ever I sent her when I was her servant, I took up the pieces and carried them into my chamber, and there, after many disputes with myself whether I should burn them or no, and having picked up, the pieces of the paper she read to-day, and of my Will which I tore, I burnt all the rest, and so went out to my office troubled in mind. (Friday 9 January 1662/63: 25%)

This, according to Podnieks, represents a triple violation on the part of Samuel Pepys — firstly, to be reading his wife's private diary, and secondly, to take it upon himself to destroy it, and then thirdly, to record the episode in his own diary which she, of course, could no longer do. (Podnieks, 2000: pp.48-49). By Pepys' own admission, his wife kept the diary to have someone to confide in, and yet, in Pepys' own mind, it represented 'much disgrace' and 'dishonour'. But Pepys is by no means alone in this literary vandalism. Thomas Hardy also

destroyed his first wife Emma's diary, following her death. In his introduction to Joe Orton's diary, the editor, John Lahr notes that Hardy,

'burned her [Emma's] diary testimony entitled "What I Think of My Husband", ghosted his biography and recast the barbarity of their relationship into fine poetry' (Lahr, 1986, p.21).

For a woman to successfully keep a diary and for it to survive, it is possible to surmise that they needed the permission of their spouse, or else a veil of secrecy, to protect the diary from prying eyes or those who might destroy it, or to satisfy their spousal censors with the material they included.

In the case of Mary Webb, while her earlier years of marriage to Henry Webb were happy, in the last years of her life when Henry developed his relationship with Kathleen, it would be easy to speculate that something sinister was at play in the burning of Mary's papers. Gladys Coles is very scathing of Henry's involvement (or lack thereof) in his wife's last months of life, and even goes so far as to suggest that the guilt of this may have weighed heavily on his mind, and been a contributing factor in his own mysterious death ten years later when he 'fell' from Scawfell, which Coles alleges was 'his second "fall" in recent months' (Coles, 1996: p.153). At times I have wondered if Henry purposefully attenuated his first wife's lexical imprint, however, the real story may be more complicated. As a literary woman, it could be entirely possible that Webb might keep a diary, since it was common for female writers of the time to do so, and it is entirely possible that such a diary may have met with an unfortunate end at some point, if her husband was not happy with the way their marriage was portrayed, or it may have come to an end with the Webbs' apparent habit of burning paper and manuscripts, unless, like Prue's, the diary had been entirely hidden or private. However, this 'private' nature of diary keeping is not as straightforward as it may seem, as I will explore in the next section.

As a novelist, and the writer of a diary, how 'private' can a writer's diary be when it is the potential source of many different details of the mind of an author? In the case of my own diary, the idea of someone else reading it would be mortifying. I belong to the Prudence Sarn school of diary keeping, as Webb (writing as Prue) notes, 'I went to the attic and wrote in my book. It was always my custom, if things grieved me or gladdened me, to write them down in full.' (Webb, 2002: p.86). Like Prue's book, my diaries rest in an old wooden trunk at home, and I would never permit anyone to read them. In contrast, published diaries often go through several layers of 'de-privatisation'. In order to be publication ready, Woolf's diaries were initially edited by Leonard Woolf, then by Quentin Bell prior to publication in the late seventies. They had gone through further revision, notes Bell, in order to appeal to 'a more general public, who may well include many who are unfamiliar with the other writings of the diarist'. (2008: p.vii).

There is another layer that should be considered, that of the writer herself and her intention at the time of writing. Simons notes that while Woolf's diaries may have had multiple functions, confessional was not one of them. As Simon's writes, 'From the beginning, she saw it as a purely professional enterprise, not an opportunity for psychological scrutiny.' (1990: p.170).

Podnieks also argues that writers like Woolf were clear about why they were writing the diary form. She proposes,

many women wrote their diaries by keeping up a pretence that they were private, while intending them to be published at a later date. In this way they could communicate to an audience thoughts and feelings that were too personal or controversial to be revealed through their fiction, but which they wanted, and needed, to convey. The private-diary-as-public-text proves the perfect vehicle by which women can deliver their own versions of themselves... Women's inscriptions of taboo experiences, coupled with their 'shaping' of stories within diaries intended for audiences, underscore my argument that women's diaries are subversive spaces. To appreciate this point further, we can return to Scott, who notes that in the wake of *The Well of Loneliness*, Woolf, West, and Barnes 'had become accomplished literary strategists'... they had coped with legal structures to work around the censor, whilst simultaneously putting into question his authority. They anticipated different audiences, providing texts that could be read more or less personally... Diarists too were often 'accomplished literary strategists'. (2000: p.7)

In other words, by writing publicly whilst keeping up the pretence of privacy, women were able to confound the censor, and subvert the form for their own purposes. In a time when 'literature' genres were strictly policed by the (male) academy and the publishing world, diaries offered a genre-less space. They were not just a place of private solace, they were also a freer form for women writers — literary, but not quite literary, and a space where the taboo subjects, such as sexuality, or difficult relationships that could not be discussed publicly, could be explored. This was a quality I needed to utilise.

For example, Webb's biographers all agree that her relationship with her own mother was intensely challenging (Coles, 1990: p.20; Wrenn, 1964: p.18; Barale, 1986: p.23). Coles notes that while Webb was extremely close to her father, who was her 'kindred spirit, her closest companion and mentor' (1990: p.20), she seems never to have had a warm or easy relationship with her mother' (1990: p.20). While Webb was ardently anti-blood sports her whole life and refused to ever eat meat, her mother, Alice, was a keen hunter, even being injured in a hunting accident that led to her confinement for five years, and 'remained more or less an invalid for the rest of her life, often an invalid in mental attitude as much as in physical condition' (Coles, 1978: pp.30-31). While I tried to represent this complex relationship, it had to be handled with some delicacy, as it affected the reader's view of the character of Webb, which I will explore further in the third chapter.

A frank exploration of sexuality was also missing from my early drafts of Mary Webb's diary, although it was evident in many other diaries, such as Orton's and Anne Frank's diary (once this material was replaced following the death of her father and first editor, Otto Frank, in the 'definitive' edition). The later edition contains passages where Anne frets about her own sexuality, which Otto Frank chose to omit, as 'in 1947, it was not customary to write openly about sex, and certainly not in books for young adults'. (Frank, 2007: p.1). A candid portrayal of sexuality was also visible in Mary Butts' diary, where she records her latest assignations, 'Sapphic' or otherwise (Blondel, 2002: 66%). Of course, the 'private' nature of diaries would free their authors from the constraints of more public literary forms. Butts fell foul of the censors in describing sexual encounters in her novels (Blondel, 2002: 72%), while Webb always made more oblique reference to them — her characters are clearly engaging in sex, both inside and outside of marriage, as her character Lily visits the cunning woman to try and prevent a pregnancy, but the conversation happens behind closed doors, and all that can be heard in the narrative is 'the muffled sound of their voices' (Webb, 1928, p.242). Blondel reminds the reader that it was only in 1915 that Lawrence's *The Rainbow* was banned under the 1857 Obscene Publications Act, and that Butts wrote in her diary that 'there will have to be a secret manuscript seeing that no one can write openly about these

things' (Blondel, 2002: 66%). Women writers, at least in the modernist age, according to Podnieks, were therefore having to work as 'literary strategists' to publish the work they wanted to publish, to express the thoughts and ideas that they wanted to, without the restrictions imposed on them in more 'literary' genres. Diaries then became a space between the public and private, a place of taboo, where women could be freed from some of the restrictions they faced in their everyday lives and in their fiction.

This act of subverting the censor also means the author is writing the 'private' as public, and so by implication this supposed private genre is being written to be read, as Kuhn Osius asserts all diaries are when he writes, 'the very act of naming an experience drags it into the public realm.' (1981: p.170). He asserts no diary is truly private, that by the very nature of being written, it is intended for a reader of some kind (even if that is the future self) but the key for the diarist is in finding the correct reader (1981: p.169). In the case of *A Single Violet*, I had to write with the *illusion* of expected privacy, as Palliser mentioned in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, the reader must be left enough clues to follow the story, even when the narrator cannot. This means there are, as Podnieks points out, some limitations when working within the boundaries of a diary as opposed to a novel or an autobiography:

There is no dispute that the autobiography and the novel are intentionally written for a public audience. Even the letter, no matter how confidential, has an external addressee. Of all the literary genres, the diary is the only one that, to be managed "authentically", must be written with no consideration of an audience beyond the writer herself. (Podnieks, 2000: p.17-18)

Inscribing the private-as-public then presents the author the challenge of stepping out from behind the private veil to address their readers who shouldn't really be there. The reader must be given enough detail to be able to follow a narrative, what Kuhn-Osius calls 'consequential materials' (1981: p.168) but in a form that doesn't acknowledge their presence. According to Kuhn-Osius,

Writing for himself, a diarist is under no obligation to describe. He may simply name things, people or events in the knowledge that he knows what he has referred to. (Kuhn-Osius, 1981: p.170)

Also, the writer,

must decide (be it consciously or unconsciously) how explicit he wants to be, how much he wants to name and how much he wants to describe, how much, in short, he wants his writing to be accessible to others (Kuhn-Osius, 1981: p.171)

My first attempts at including consequential materials were rather clumsy. Intending to use authentic diary features, like interruptions to the narrative, and missing sections of notebooks, I had begun the diary by beginning mid-flow, and intended to intersperse the contemporary storyline around the diary. While this enabled the contemporary character (at that time a woman called Anna) to comment on the journal, it was jarring and interrupted the flow. For example:

July 8th, Meole Brace

Mr W has passed away. When I heard the news, I went out into the garden and walked beneath the pines, and in the long grass. I thought about Mrs W and B and his sister, and how terrible they must be feeling now. I thought about how raw and brittle I was when

father died, and how long a time has passed since then. Two years has passed in a heartbeat, and yet I miss him more every day. The utter darkness of that first year was indescribable at the time, and it still defies language.

Anna felt an old familiar tide starting to rise. She blinked the feeling away, in order to read on.

This also highlighted a second problem, as consequent entries in the diary started to introduce characters, such as 'B' or 'Mr W'. At the early stage, I wanted to retain some secrecy as to who the diarist was, although this plot device became redundant later. The downside was that this method meant that the reader then struggled to know who was who, or to follow the storyline. It was clear I needed to find some way of introducing the consequential materials, and again, I looked to other diarists for inspiration about how they treated this aspect of public and private.

Returning to the diary of Anne Frank, it is possible to see how the purpose of a document can change. When Anne Frank began writing her diary, it was for her own eyes only. However, according to the testimony of Otto Frank, in 1944 in a British Radio broadcast, a Dutch minister in exile mentioned that after the war, he intended to gather as many eyewitness accounts as he could. Anne then went back over her diary and heavily edited it to make it more suitable for a wider readership. (Frank, 2007: p2). However, she also had to suspend the self-censor to do this. Anne wrote:

Writing in a diary is a really strange experience for someone like me. Not only because I have never written before, but also because it seems that later on, neither I nor anyone else will be interested in the musings of a thirteen-year-old. Oh well, it doesn't matter. I feel like writing, and I have an even greater need to get all kinds of things off my chest. 'Paper has more patience than people'... Now I am back to what prompted me to keep a diary in the first place. I don't have a friend... To enhance the image of this long-awaited friend in my imagination, I don't want to jot down the facts in this diary the way that most people would do, but I want the diary to be my friend, and I am going to call this friend Kitty. (Frank, 2007: p.8)

The teenage Anne Frank establishes in one easy paragraph what I had been struggling with in working on my fictional-private diary — she has established her own voice in the narrative of her life, and she has turned the focus outwards to the reader. However, a straight-forward imitation of this method of opening also added further complication as my draft opening seemed to be too steeped in artifice and was 'too explainy'.

25th March 1911, Maesbrook, Meole Brace.

Today is my thirtieth birthday, and this beautifully bound notebook was my present from Henry. It came with a note which I have pasted in here, and if you cannot read Henry's cursive scrawl, it says,

'Dear Gladys, wishing you many happy solar returns, in the hope that you might be inspired (as other literary ladies are) to write more regularly. The world would benefit from more of your thoughts. Perhaps you might start a diary with a view to one day publishing some of those thoughts? With fond wishes, Henry'.

So here we are, and at the grand old age of thirty, I am contemplating many things, and exploring a new way of living this life. Since Father died, so much of my life has changed beyond recognition. The first year after his death I was so enshrouded in my own grief and my illness that I could not look beyond the walls of my own misery. When I lost him, I also lost my dearest confidante. Mother and I have never been as close as I was with Father. I could tell him anything. Perhaps it is because she spent so many years shut in her room and away from the family after her riding accident? Minoni has always been so much more

than just a governess to us, and she and I and Father got so used to spending our days together — from running the household, to teaching the children and keeping them occupied and away from Mother.

I needed to look to more 'de-privatised' diaries in order to see how they might suggest ways of turning the focus of my fictional diary outward enough to draw the reader in, without breaking the narrative flow of the novel. I turned to the diaries of some of Webb's contemporaries for inspiration, and to see how other writers used the diary form to assist them in their literary work.

'WHAT PRIVATE WRITING REVEALS ABOUT MORE PUBLIC LITERARY OUTPUT': WRITER'S DIARIES AS SOURCES OF RESEARCH

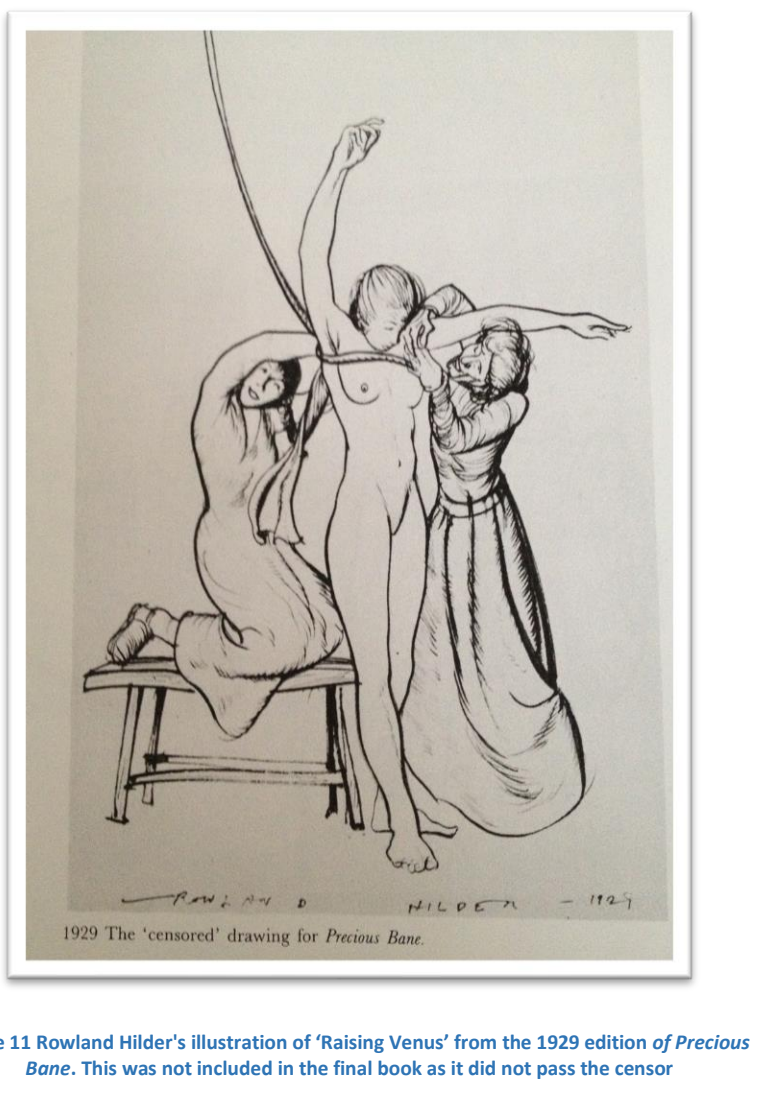


Figure 11 Rowland Hilder's illustration of 'Raising Venus' from the 1929 edition of *Precious Bane*. This was not included in the final book as it did not pass the censor

It is not just women who confound the censor by keeping a public / private diary. Other minority figures find voice in this medium and its ability to render the seemingly private very public indeed. Some writers begin writing a diary whilst having a different intention for the work in the long run. For example, Joe Orton kept a 'private' diary which was an extension of his 'public' persona. According to Lahr, 'to Orton, the value of a diary was its frankness' (p.13). Just as my own

private diary sometimes plays a role as confessional, other diarists like Orton have used this space as a place to record their private opinions, which can sometimes be frank to the point of bluntness. For instance, in one short excerpt taken from the first few pages of the diary, Orton refers to his neighbour as looking 'like a fucking hottentot' (p.37, before writing less than a page later,

On the way home, I met an ugly Scotsman who said he liked being fucked. He took me somewhere in his car and I fucked him up against the wall. The sleeve of my rainmac is covered in whitewash from the wall. It won't come off. I hate Christmas. (Orton, 1986, p.38)

Orton's frankness is jarring, even to the contemporary reader, thirty years after its original publication and fifty years after the events described, Orton still has the power to shock the reader. Orton wrote this diary

fully intending that others would one day read it — his aim when beginning the diary, according to Lahr, was for it to be published long after his death (p.13). Lahr concludes that Orton had a clear sense of what was offstage and onstage, and his ‘private’ diary was most definitely an interstitial space that sat between the two — giving the impression of being private, when it was, in fact, quite public. (Orton, 1986: p.21).

Many other examples of ‘private as public’ diaries also exist, but the three I chose to look at in more depth were those of Virginia Woolf, Mary Butts and Sylvia Townsend Warner. All three women produced diaries that have gone on, after their authors’ deaths, to provide some insight into the inner workings of their writers. Woolf, Townsend Warner and Butts, as direct contemporaries of Webb, offer an interesting comparison point for Webb as their careers show both differences and similarities to Webb’s. Woolf is one of the few women to be granted a place in the canon. A researcher would be hard pushed to read about modernism without encountering Woolf, while Townsend Warner is a writer who is more commonly known in scholarly circles. Webb and Butts, however, have both been relegated to the outskirts of obscurity. Publications such as Kolocotroni, Goldman and Taxidou’s anthology *Modernism* (1998) and Harris’ *Romantic Moderns* (2010) — both standard texts on modernism courses — make no mention of Webb or Butts. The only academic in recent years to mention both women was Andrew Radford in his 2007 academic work, *The Lost Girls: Demeter-Persephone and the Literary Imagination, 1850-1930*. Townsend Warner has been receiving a revival of late, and in my own conversations with other literary academics, I have found many have heard of Townsend Warner, while Webb’s name elicits a ‘who?’ When applying to speak at conferences, both inside and outside of academia, two papers I delivered in 2019 were accepted on the basis that I offered to speak about Townsend Warner as well as Webb.¹⁶ Townsend Warner and Webb also both have their own literary society, which does work in their favour in raising their profiles, while (so far) Butts does not.

On a surface level, Butts and Webb have much in common: both came from relatively wealthy backgrounds and were given a classical education. Both Natalie Blondel and Gladys Mary Coles (the principal biographers) also report a distinct presence of hiraeth in their subjects, and a longing to return to the homes of their childhood when they were away. (Blondel, 2002, 38%) and (Coles, 1979, p.114). They also both died in their late forties, Webb at forty-six (Coles, 1979, p.317) and Butts of peritonitis at forty-nine (Blondel, 2002, 20%). Both had a preoccupation with alternative methods of spirituality. While Webb was a nature mystic who found communion with the divine in nature and then mirrored this in her female characters¹⁷, Butts sought mystical

¹⁶ ‘Magickal Women’, held in Kensington in June 2019, and ‘Ambiguous Representations: Witches, Women, and Power in Literature and Critical Theory’ in April 2019 at the University of Tubingen.

¹⁷ For example, in *The House in Dormer Forest*, Amber Dark escapes to the Upper Wood when ‘the atmosphere of the house became too thunderous and Amber’s nerves were strained to breaking point,’ (Webb, 1937: p102). Webb writes a remarkable description of Amber’s journey to the woods which takes her through the levels of consciousness towards a mystical communion with the Divine, commenting that ‘there was for her literally something of wrestling, of the mood which says: “I will not let thee go until thou bless me,” in her communings with nature.’ (Webb, 1937: p103). Similarly, in *Precious Bane*, Prudence Sarn escapes to the mere or the attic to sit in amongst the apple barrels, where she keeps her secret diary and encounters the mystical when things get too much, writing that “‘Though the visitation came but seldom, the taste of it was in

experiences through her involvement with occultists such as Phillip Heseltine and Crowley (Blondel, 2002, 50%) and then wrote her female protagonists in that vein. According to Foy, 'the Butts heroine is at once healer, sacred priestess, earth goddess, lover and daimon/demon.' (2000, p.8).

Webb and Butts lack of renown might be attributable to the distance between their writing styles and contemporary taste, but it may also be related to the amount of material available to any potential researcher. Foy attributes this to the fact that Butts' estranged daughter, Camilla Bagg, held on to the archive material (manuscripts, letters and a diary) for many years and would not allow anyone access to them. Foy notes that Bagg had been pursued by several university archivists from the States who wished to add Butts' papers to their modernist archive, but Bagg had ultimately decided,

not to let these "great men" push her around' and 'because she wanted more time with them [the papers] herself to discover things about her mother she was denied as a child. (Foy, 2000: p.xiii).

It was only when Bagg was approached by a researcher (Nathalie Blondel — Butts' principal biographer) whom she liked and respected some twenty years later that she agreed to relinquish her hold on the papers. Foy concludes,

One can only speculate about what the reputation of Mary Butts would have been today had Camilla agreed to release the papers to Norman Holmes Person in the 1960s. (Foy, 2000, p.xiv).

This raises questions about what elements are required in a writer's oeuvre to successfully enter the canon. All four of our modernist writers have come to the attention of the academy in one form or another. Woolf is always taught on the syllabus of modernist courses, as well as many other English Literature courses, while Townsend Warner has been a more recent addition to the canon. Butts and Webb, on the other hand, are not. Townsend Warner has had her diaries published in recent years (edited by Claire Harman in 1994), and her novels are easily accessible, both in book format, and on Kindle (all published through Virago). Butts and Webb, however, have not yet made that crossing into popular literature (even though Webb was last published by Virago in 1978). When Butts was 'rediscovered', the presence of a diary gave her principal biographer material to work with. However, despite there being a major new biography and Butts' diary (edited by Natalie Blondel) is published, Butts' novels are still out of print (like Webb, but unlike Townsend Warner) and are difficult to come by. In my own quest to read her, I have had to access them in their original 1930s editions through the Senate House archive, and they are usually found in the stack, not on the shelves. Even today, only academic publishers issue her diaries. This is in stark contrast to Woolf (who is published by Penguin) and Townsend Warner (Virago) both of whom are widely accessible for a fraction of the cost of an academic book.

the attic all the while. I had but to creep in there, and hear the bees making their murmur, and smell the woody o'er sweet scent of kept apples, and hear the leaves rasping softly on the window frame, and watch the twisted grey twigs on the sky, and I'd remember it and forget all else." (Webb, 1978: p59).

While archive material (and a diary in particular) may not be the Holy Grail that keeps writers' reputations alive, the case of Woolf, Townsend Warner and Butts goes some way to demonstrating how it can help. All four women moved in literary circles and enjoyed some popularity in their own lifetimes (Webb published five novels, Butts published twelve, Townsend Warner published seven novels and nineteen volumes of short stories, and Woolf eight novels and three volumes of short stories) so literary output may also be a factor. Some of Butts' echoing reputation is more about her scandalous lifestyle than for her literary output. To begin with, her personal politics put her firmly into the right wing, unlike Townsend Warner, who was investigated by MI5 for her involvement with the Communist Party. Butts' involvement with Aleister Crowley also provides some allure — she studied under him as one of his 'scarlet women' and spent time at the Abbey of Thelema in Sicily (Foy, 2000). However, their relationship soured, and Crowley later used her as the inspiration behind his book, *Diary of a Drug Fiend* (Crowley, 1922).

Webb's most significant burst of fame came following her death in 1928 and Stanley Baldwin's subsequent speech at the Literary Fund dinner. The resulting book sales were significant enough for Henry Webb to retire on the earnings from her estate just twelve months later. Her lack of contemporary popularity might be due to publication, lack of opportunity, or just literary merit. Perhaps Woolf's oeuvre and life work was more ground-breaking, since her contribution to English Literature (through the Hogarth Press) and Feminism are still making waves today? Perhaps her style is more 'readable' to contemporary audiences. There might be any number of factors which make the 'magic ingredient'. It might be the Literary Society formed in the author's name, or it might be the diary.

Is it crucial for researchers to have access to a writer's private thoughts on paper? While examining the case of Mary Butts and Sylvia Townsend Warner, I could not help drawing comparisons. We know for sure that no diary written by Webb has ever been discovered. Like Foy, I cannot help wondering what might have happened to Webb's reputation if she had left more of a lexical footprint on the world, and that too, fed into my desire to recreate Webb's life in diary form. Reading the diaries of her contemporaries enabled me to add in a layer of 'modernism' and language to *A Single Violet* that I could not find elsewhere. In reading the diaries of Woolf, Townsend Warner and Butts, I also gained sight of the diurnal details of life at the turn of the Twentieth Century. As Polly North has noted,

Academics and critics have read diaries for many reasons: sometimes for their literary merit, but more often than not for the insights they afford the historian, biographer, or literary critic as they research an age or epoch; or, in the case of Woolf's diaries, for what her private writing reveals about her more public literary output. (2016, p.9)

It was those daily details that enabled me to add an additional layer of detail that enabled me to give a more authentic 'feel' to Webb's diary, something which would then (I intended) be balanced against the second narrative stream.

When writing a first-person narrative in the form of a diary, the role of the narrator in that process becomes key, as this character guides the reader through the story. As I was writing the story of a real woman, I felt duty-bound to ensure I was as historically accurate as I could be, but I also needed to ensure I gave the

reader enough of a pull towards my narrator to keep them reading. In the next chapter, I will examine the role of the character of Mary Webb in that process, how carefully she needed to be handled, and how I endeavoured to rewrite a woman who had been all but deleted from the record.

CHAPTER THREE: FINDING MARY WEBB: CREATING A LOST DIARY

To Mary
When the world grows old
And birds no longer sing
When sunlight's cold
And no bells ring;
When buds are small
And meadows never seen,
When the oaks fall
And the larches lean;
When children cry,
Cursing their hour of birth,
And devils' eye
The fading earth;
Then, even then,
Could you again be born,
The love of men —
The flowering thorn —
Would break in white
On this bewildered star
With the old delight,
The passionate war.
(Webb, Henry L, 1917, p1)

We need no great gifts — the most ignorant of us can draw deep breaths of inspiration from the soil. The way is through love of beauty and reality, and through absorbed preoccupation with those signs of divinity that are like faint, miraculous footprints across the world. We need no passports in the freemasonry of earth as we do in the company of men; the only indispensable gifts are a humble mind and a receptive heart. We must go softly if we desire the butterfly's confidence; we must walk humbly if we dare to ask for an interpretation of this dream of God.
(Webb, 1946, p. 2)

'CAN THESE BONES LIVE?': HOW TO RAISE A FORGOTTEN WOMAN FROM THE DEAD

When presenting the Radio 4 Reith lecture, 'Can These Bones live?' about the process of writing historical fiction, Hilary Mantel said:

I've never believed that fiction set in the past, or the future, is an inferior form of fiction. It demands the same attention to style and form as a story with a modern setting, and places a greater demand on the skills of placing information, and of managing complexity. Every page in a novel is a result of hundreds of tiny choices, both linguistic and imaginative, made word by word, syllable by syllable. The historical novel requires an extra set of choices — what sources to consult, what shape to cut from the big picture — what to do when the evidence is missing or ambiguous or plain contradictory.
(Mantel, 2017, p.2)

According to Mantel, historical fiction requires a level of intricacy of working that other forms of fiction do not require. How the writer chooses, edits and shapes those facts become key. Mantel continues:

Most of these choices are invisible to the reader. You must be able to justify your decisions to the well-informed. But you won't satisfy everybody. The historian will always wonder why you left certain things out, while the literary critic will wonder why you put them in. 'Because I could,' is not a good reason. You need to know ten times as much as you tell. (p.2)

My own experience of creating the diary of Mary Webb has borne out Mantel's guidance. I have frequently reflected that this novel had to be written as part of a wider research project, because of the depth of complexities involved in the research and the writing. Mantel goes on to question concepts of research. 'Is it sound? Is it necessary?' she queries, and continues, 'I think there is a misunderstanding about what research really is'. Research doesn't mean 'skimming facts out of pre-existing texts', says Mantel, as this means it has been filtered, distorted and edited by historians or biographers, and although that can help the writer begin to ascertain a shape, they need to discern whether or not the facts will shift under scrutiny. So, by Mantel's rationale, it should have been no surprise that I was struggling to create my fictional world view for Mary Webb in the early stages of my work when I was using the biographies as my guide, particularly when those biographies demonstrated such a wide range of attitudes to Webb and her personality. Mantel continues,

Facts are strong, but they are not stable. Soon you find your sources are riddled with contradiction, and that even when the facts are agreed, their meaning often isn't. At this stage, you will want to seek out the earliest evidence you can get. If your story tracks real events, you will spend a lot of time sifting versions, checking discrepancies, assessing the status of evidence: always asking, who is telling me this, and why does he want me to believe it? (p.3)

If Henry Webb and Jonathan Cape had such a huge hand in commissioning and shaping the biographies of Webb prior to the work of Gladys Mary Coles, is it any wonder the view was skewed? Cape, like Henry Webb, had a vested interest in protecting his income from Webb's estate¹⁸, and benefited from carefully crafting the image the public was given of her life. However, that has undoubtedly resulted in a distorted vision of Webb. In the early days of my research I grappled with the contradictions I was discovering, as I felt fettered by the lack of a clear line of sight. Discussions with faculty colleagues helped me to clear this philological mist, particularly when a playwright friend pointed out that these gaps in the record are just what the writer needs. Mantel concurs with him: 'The contradictions can be fertile,' she writes:

If you can locate the area of doubt, that's where you go to work. You may well consult original documents, and you will tramp over the ground, and visit the libraries, and allow your hand to hover over a document and imagine the hand that first wrote it. At this stage, you are doing much the same job as an academic colleague. If you solve a puzzle, if make a discovery, that's satisfying. We all want to chip in with a little contribution to the historical record. But your real job as a novelist, is not to be an inferior sort of historian, but to

¹⁸ When Cape married Kathleen Webb, she gifted him the copyrights to Webb's work.

recreate the texture of lived experience: to activate the senses, and to deepen the reader's engagement through feeling. (p.3)

An historian friend always advises me, 'return to the source material', but with the deep fissures in the archives on Webb, in the early years of my research, prior to meeting the Crawfords in 2018, this proved incredibly difficult. At that stage of my research, all I had was the Stanford online archive of Webb's letters, which I would pore over for hours on end, the biographies, and Webb's own trail of clues left behind in her fiction. When I held the only surviving Webb manuscript (the one for her final incomplete novel *Armour Wherein He Trusted*) in my hand I began to understand what my friend the historian meant. Not only could I imagine the hand that wrote it, I could also see the pencil marks, and the inspirational pictures pasted in. It reminded me of one of my own notebooks.

In this chapter, I will explore that journey I undertook to the underworld in order to bring back something of Webb's lost voice. Firstly, I will examine Webb's relationship with nature, and by extension my own. As I explored in my MA Thesis, Webb writes everything through pantheist senses — Salopian nature is the lens through which she explores everything. The doctors treating Webb for her Graves' disease had few options at their disposal, particularly since she refused to take any medication based on animal products, and so they prescribed quiet time in nature. This gave her some relief, and it also reinforced two qualities in her writing — first in her ability to capture the detail of nature (Walter de la Mare writes in his introduction to *The Spring of Joy* that 'she had senses almost microscopic in their delicacy' - 1930, p.15) and secondly her unique method of composition, which I will turn to in the next section. Webb's relationship with nature, then, became crucial in helping me to find a 'way in' to her character and her voice.

A Single Violet had to have this essential layer of natural detail overlaid onto the diary, which meant I had to learn to see through Webb's eyes, and explore Webb's conviction that nature is a healing force (I am largely allergic). Reading tastes change over time, and whilst a lover of Webb might be able to overlook some of her exuberant emotional out-pouring, for other readers it can seem impenetrable. What I didn't want to create was a diary that my readers would want to fling aside with frustration, so I had to develop methods of tempering this, such as reducing the number of adjectives and metaphors. I worked to hone and polish the voice of Webb, in order to make it as authentic as possible, whilst still retaining the sense of what a modern reader might encounter when reading Webb for the first time.

This leads on to my third section, where I examine a problem that I am certain Webb would have understood deeply — how to practice nature mysticism whilst living in one of the largest metropolises of the western world. I will then turn in more detail to my visit to the Crawford archive in California, and the original source of Webb's work — her own letters, notebooks, manuscript poems and journal articles. In the end, I had to travel five thousand miles to bring Webb back from the underworld, to use Atwood's metaphor, but this last section of the journey was probably the most valuable of all.

'THE FLOWERING THORN': CREATING A MORE AMIABLE CHARACTER

When the lack of primary source material became a challenge, I learned to rely on Webb's own literary voice. Reading and rereading each novel, poem and essay in detail allowed me to take on something of her language patterns — I wanted to identify what sensory system she favoured, what her values were and how she viewed the world. As mentioned in Chapter One, the novels also gave little hints at key moments of her life, as she translated scenes from her own life into fiction. When Webb's own words ran dry, I began in a general way by immersing myself in the 1920s, branching out to her contemporaries to ensure I could situate her amongst other writers who loved nature, to give me a sense of what the author David Mitchell has termed as 'bygone' — words and phrases that were rooted in the turn of the last century, to complement the layer of temporal details. (2010) For example, in *A Single Violet* I have used certain phrases I encountered in works of the time. For example, the word 'duffer' is distinctly rooted in the past, as are 'balderdash', 'ass', and 'bromide'. They are not completely absent from our vocabulary now, but they do carry a whiff of the old-fashioned if they are used. There were other differences I noticed. We don't sit sick people over a dish of creosote these days, and in Sylvia Townsend Warner's diaries, she talks of 'telephoning to' a person. Whereas we might say 'I telephoned Rebecca', the character of Webb therefore says, 'I telephoned to Rebecca'. Similarly, I added a layer of Shropshire dialect words, taken from the same source text that Webb used, Georgina Jackson's *Shropshire Word Book* of 1879. This meant 'dimmy', 'lief', 'clemmed', and 'daggle' are some of the words that made their way into *A Single Violet*, along with many others.

For the duration of the diary writing process, I went into total seclusion with Webb, and this included my reading matter. I learned early on in life that whatever I read leaks out into my writing unconsciously. My notebooks from childhood always give a clear view of what I was reading at the time, with stories about four children and a dog (whilst reading *The Famous Five*) to Americanised diary entries (whilst reading a particularly absorbing but trashy American teen fiction series). Sometimes when I write I avoid reading altogether to stem this leakage, but this time I decided to use it to my advantage — I set all contemporary fiction aside and read only novels from the turn of the twentieth century. When I ran out of Webb, I returned to some of my other favourite forgotten women, such as Sylvia Townsend Warner, Mary Butts, and Elizabeth von Arnim. The only deviation I allowed from this strict diet was the odd foray back into Thomas Hardy and D.H. Lawrence, similarly placed among my 'Nature Mystics' who were all contemporaries of Webb and inspired to write by time spent in nature or their home landscape.

I avoided the writings of contemporaries who did not similarly find inspiration in nature, because I discovered early on that Webb's voice always came with a suffusion of nature throughout, so while Woolf's diaries were helpful, her narrative worldview was too urban, as was Fitzgerald's. It was not just a shared passion for Kester Woodseaves that repeatedly drew me to *Precious Bane* and resulted in me forming a strong bond with this dead woman. It was our shared love of nature that led me to revisit her, seeing in her work echoes of my own life.

With the vacuities in the record, creating Webb's character has been a process of piecing together parts of the puzzle, whilst having to fill in the gaps with a measure of conjecture, a method of working that is only acceptable in a creative genre. Although I would argue that this is just what Webb's biographers did, the novel

form gives me permission to be less 'reliable'. Webb's most challenging relationships were not limited to her interactions with her mother, Alice, and Henry Webb. Some of her friendships could also be problematic, as Webb was not always an easy woman to interact with. When Webb published *Gone to Earth* in 1917, one of her earlier champions was Rebecca West, who described Webb as a genius. In her review, published in the *Times Literary Supplement* on August 30th, 1917. West wrote,

This year's discovery has been Mary Webb, author of *Gone to Earth*. She is a genius, and I shouldn't mind wagering that she is going to be the most distinguished writer of our generation.

West and Webb maintained a relationship by correspondence until 1921, when Webb moved to London and Webb began to visit West at her home. However, they soon ran into difficulty. West's own mother suffered from Graves' disease, and, according to Coles, who interviewed West while researching *The Flower of Light*, West found it challenging to be witnessing Webb's own self-neglect first-hand. Coles recounts that West would sometimes pretend she was out when Webb called round. (Coles, 1978, p.238)

West was not the only friend to have a troubled bond with Webb. Amongst the few surviving letters of Webb's, is one intriguing letter dated simply 'December 4th' to an apparent friend, Mrs C.A. Nicholson, who was a fellow writer in London. The summary in the Stanford electronic archive states:

Mary Webb. Autograph letter signed, December 4 [1926], to an unnamed addressee [C. A. Nicholson], four pages on one folded leaf. In this impassioned (indeed, remarkable) letter, Webb insists that she cannot be friends with Nicholson, as "the fact of your saying what you did to a complete stranger shows that we have nothing in common." Webb says of herself: "When I have succeeded in getting paid fairly by the British public for my work, I shall naturally have the best treatment I can get. But not till then. Also, it is less treatment that I want than ordinary good food and a suitable amount of rest and exercise. I have this week existed on bread & scrape & tea." Webb then complains that her late mother's executor is trying to defer payment of trust money owed to her because "he wants me to stop getting on as he & most of my relations hate my books. They are conventional & religious people." Webb writes in a postscript at a right angle in the letter's margin: "You'll think it strange that I have a telephone when I am poor, but it is my only help, if I didn't have it I couldn't go on." (Crawford, 2010)

The Nicholson letter is one that is frequently quoted by biographers, particularly when they wish to emphasise Webb's emotional capriciousness. The letter, written to Mrs. Nicholson shows signs of Webb's

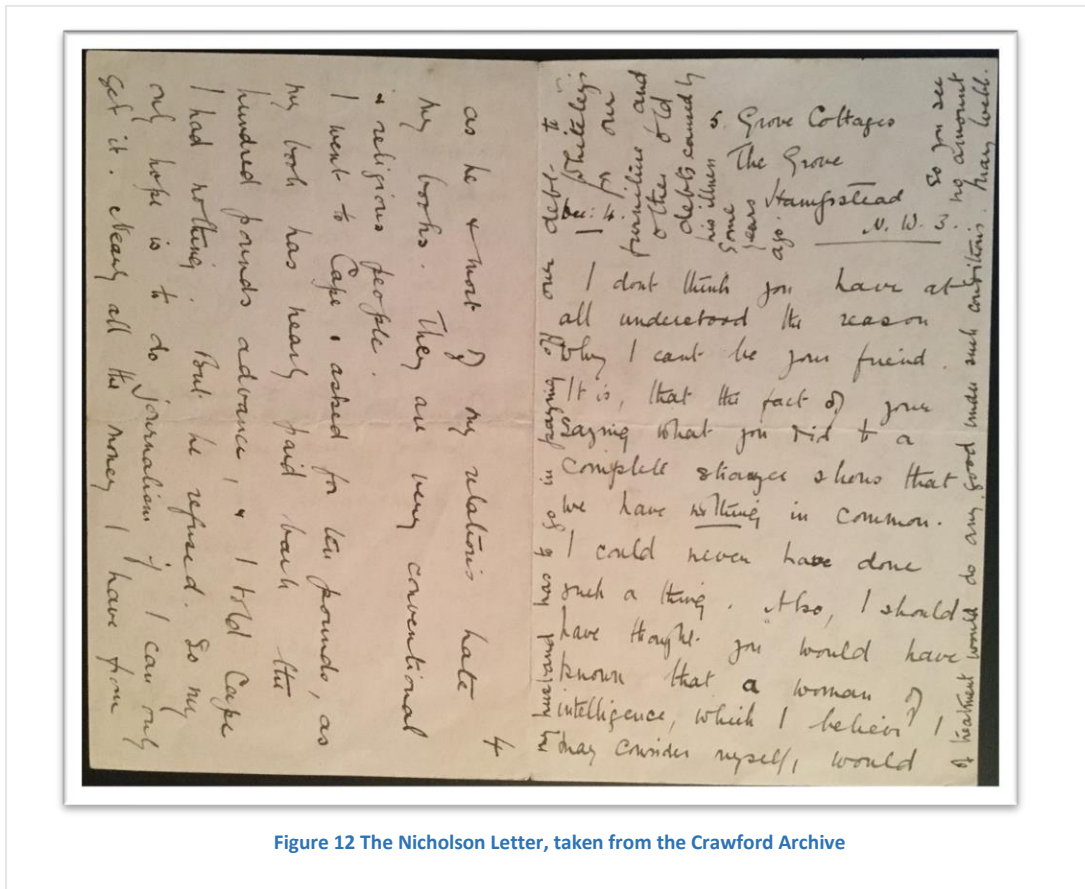


Figure 12 The Nicholson Letter, taken from the Crawford Archive

agitation — the cursive script gets harder and harder to read as the letter goes on, and as Webb begins to fill up the margins of the page, the words become more and more untidy. On first examination, it is easy to be side-tracked by Webb's comments about not being paid fairly by the British public, which makes her sound arrogant. However, by piecing together other evidence, it is the reference to Webb's illness that strikes me as significant. An examination of Webb's articles for *The Bookman* reveal a further detail to the relationship with Nicholson that seems to have been played out rather more publicly than this letter. In a review of Mrs C.A. Nicholson's collection of short stories, *The Dancer's Cat*, published in the December 1925 edition of *The Bookman*, Webb writes in a tone reminiscent of Oscar Wilde,

Mrs Nicholson shows a tendency to develop a 'disease complex', having one or two people sick in every book. This made the *Dawn Fulfilled* very painful. If one is well, it is not necessary to brood about sickness. If one is ill, it is suicidal to do so.' (p.179)

It appears, looking at both Nicholson and West's relationships with Webb, that she did not take kindly to expressions of concern about her health, or questions about how well she was 'looking after herself'. Even Webb's obituary in *The Times*, printed five months after her actual death, refers to this aspect of her personality, citing that,

Mrs. Webb is described as having been very highly strung, and it is even said that, being dissatisfied with her last book she threw the MS. Into the fire. (1928, p.21).

Did her health condition really affect her moods and emotions as much as that? I have inferred that it was her illness that made her so stormy. In a lecture on Graves' Disease published in the British Medical Journal in 1905, Hector Mackenzie notes that a diagnosis of Graves' invariably brought a prognosis of a 30% mortality rate, and that surgical treatment by way of thyroidectomy 'even in the hands of the most skilful surgeons is a dangerous one' that usually resulted in death within twenty-four hours. (1905: p.1082).

At this point of my research, I was reminded of a conversation I had with a family member about my maternal grandmother, who was described as similarly 'difficult'. My grandmother was Webb's contemporary, and, like Webb, suffered from an illness that was untreatable, being asthmatic (as I am). My grandmother's illness was so severe that my mother was sent away to live with an aunt for several years. In my own experiences of the illness, as a child, even with the Ventolin inhaler, I was left feeling wretched a lot of the time, which makes me wonder how my Grandmother (and Webb) must have felt in their own illnesses when experiencing a flare up. I wondered if that might be the cause of their apparently 'difficult' nature.

I researched Graves' disease a little further to understand it (and Webb) a little better, and I discovered details that went some way towards explaining why Webb may have been 'very highly strung'. Peter Silverton, writing about his wife's contemporary experiences with Graves' Disease, mentions that 'Graves' sufferers no longer know what is 'normal' for them,' since the over-active thyroid can leave them with severe mood swings, and periods of energy followed by periods of 'torpor'. Silverton continues,

It strikes to the heart of our understanding of our personalities, asking awkward questions about temperament. How much of the way we act and feel — or, more subtly but maybe more importantly, the way we feel we feel — is down to chemical levels in our endocrine system? (*The Observer*, 2001)

I believe there was more to Webb's mood swings than a personality fault. However, her lifestyle choices, as West and Nicholson tried to point out to her clearly didn't help relieve her illness. Her relationship with food was also problematic, bordering on what might be diagnosed as an eating disorder today, but I did not want to impose a modern interpretation as an explanation for her behaviour — it was important to see Webb through the lens of her own time. Webb was known to have a deep interest in mysticism — she wrote to her future mother-in-law about it in 1911, (which I included in the diary) and her personal library included works by Dame Julian of Norwich. Dame Julian was a Christian mystic who experienced visions whilst suffering a severe illness, and later became an ' anchoress', and she practiced asceticism — the practice of reaching enlightenment or self-actualisation by depriving the body of sensual comforts, and engaging in deep contemplation or prayer (Jantzen, 2011, p.3). Coles notes that Webb was reading *Revelations of Divine Love* by Dame Julian when the Webbs lived in Weston, as a way of widening her knowledge while she was cut off from her Salopian landscape. (1979, p.116). Davie notes that Webb also owned a copy of Evelyn Underhill's seminal monograph on *Mysticism* (2018, p.7), and Webb also referred to William James in her letters to her mother-in-law, so mysticism was clearly a topic of interest for her. I wonder if this influenced Webb's eating choices (particularly if altered consciousness was a way into the creative process for her). At home during her adolescence, she insisted on eating all her meals outdoors, she refused to eat any meat products, and various visitors to the house at Lyth Hill or Hampstead recount situations where she would lay on a sumptuous tea for them, whilst eating none of it herself. Susan Tweedsmuir,

wife of the writer John Buchan, recounts a visit that she and her husband made to Lyth Hill with their children while they were en-route to Scotland. Tweedsmuir writes,

Our chauffeur looked reproachfully at me as we bumped and crashed along a very bad road in our new car, but we arrived at the top of a hill and found two flat fields and a small ugly house enclosed in woods. It was one of those August days when all the countryside is wrapped in a kind of slumberous peace, and as we looked away from the house across the valley we saw Wenlock Edge soft and ochre-coloured on the near horizon. A tall man stood by Mary Webb awaiting us.

Her greeting was at once shy and enthusiastic, his shy and quietly welcoming. I remember only odd bits of that afternoon, but it stands out in my memory as a very happy one. I know that she had provided a good tea for us, to which the children did full justice, while she herself only ate bread and butter. 'Mary would live on bread and butter entirely,' her husband said, and I have often thought there are worse diets. (1954, p.112)

Although in the Nicholson letter, Webb puts her abstemious diet down to lack of money, I would speculate there is something deeper at work in Webb's psyche. Webb's problem was not so much that she did not *have* money — she was being paid respectable amounts in advances by her publishers, and she was also receiving regular work in the form of reviews at *The Bookman*, as well as other publications. The problem was that Webb could not *hold on* to money. She insisted on giving it away almost as soon as she received it, to anyone who she felt was a worthy cause. Her biographers cite numerous examples where she received sums of money, only to give them away soon after — for example, a charitable donation of £100 via Lady Cynthia Asquith, who published several of Webb's short stories in her popular anthologies, was promptly spent on a brand-new mackintosh for Henry, and a trip to the seaside for a consumptive boy and his family. (Coles, 1978, p.239). Whenever money came into play, Webb's relationships with her publishers inevitably suffered. Jonathan Cape took a hard line with Webb, having previously allowed her to borrow against the advance on *Precious Bane*, and he then refused her any further loans. In 1924, increasingly desperate at her prospects, Webb visited Cape's office in Bloomsbury Square. Cape himself was out, but when one of his staff also refused to give Webb any money, allegedly she slapped his face and left the office in tears. (Howard, 1971, p.99).

However, not everyone experienced the distressed Webb, and many of the people writing about Webb in warmer terms seem to have been her male friends. Some of those friendships saw through to her deeply warm and generous side. According to Mary Crawford's note accompanying the Nicholson letter,

In his memoir, *The Glory that was Grub Street* (1928), Arthur St. John Adcock, editor of the *Bookman* (for whom Webb wrote more than twenty-five reviews between 1923 and 1927), describes Webb: "Her manner fluctuated between shyness and a sort of hesitant self-confidence; she was very highly-strung, worried terribly about trifles, and so sensitive that she was often deeply wounded by wholly imaginary slights, and would come and complain to you of these with a childishly desperate seriousness at which it was at times impossible to refrain from laughing, and as soon as you began to laugh she would see the absurdity of her agitation over such a trifle and laugh at herself, and the trouble was over." This letter and Nicholson's remembrance of Mary Webb published in the *Evening Standard* of July 18, 1928 certainly support Adcock's opinion of Webb's high-strung temperament. (2010)

Similarly, Edwin Pugh paints a portrait of a very different Webb. Writing in *The Bookman* in July 1928, Pugh wrote:

She talked well, but not much. She seemed to prefer to listen. She was so modest, retiring, so unsure of herself that she seemed half afraid to express herself freely... except when she was alone with what she called a dear acquaintance, and then she would be at once gravely serious, almost impassioned, when she was not venting her inborn gifts of inimitable wit and humour. The pity was that, although her books are full of wise and witty sayings, she did not sufficiently exploit her humour. (p.194)

Pugh (known to Webb as Ned) spent extensive time in Webb's company in Hampstead (where they both lived) frequently taking tea with her and Henry or walking on the Heath. It is possible that with this benefit of a deeper friendship, he was able to see her at her best, not just witnessing the lows of her emotional states, but seeing her at the closest thing she had to 'normal' with her capricious thyroid, and in a setting with nature all around her, where she was most at home.

These descriptions add up to a woman who was clearly troubled and troublesome, intensely sensitive, probably difficult to deal with, but also loving, kind, intensely insightful. As Pugh suggests in the same *Bookman* article, her work also demonstrates a level of wit that even Dorothy Parker would appreciate, although without the searing edge associated with Parker. Edwin Pugh compared her percipience with that of Dickens, writing that,

Hers was the humour that springs from the creation of character. Her humour has kinship with the humour of Dickens, which trusts not in the clowning and buffoonery — excellent qualities in their way and time and place — but relies wholly for its effects on the observation and study of average human types. It is impossible to convey that humour, or do it faint justice, as it is impossible to convey Dickens's humour in quotation, however diffuse. The most one can do is to give one or two of her more whimsical utterances. Thus she writes of 'sheep that looked up in a contemplative ancient way like old ladies at concert with their knitting'; or 'moorhens with the worried air of overworked charwomen', of an elderly woman who, without something to employ her hands, was as 'restless as a sugarless canary' and so on. I would not spoil your enjoyment of her books by quoting more in this vein. (Pugh, 1928, p.194)

It's also interesting to note that in each of the examples that Pugh has cited, Webb employs nature imagery as her metaphorical object, reflecting mood, character and personality in the landscape of her works.

As with any human being, however tempting it may be to cast Webb as highly strung, or indeed Henry as the villain of Webb's story, there is far more depth to Webb's psyche than has been presented previously. Mary Webb could clearly be challenging — she was headstrong and independent, often taking the role of iconoclast, but if this rebelliousness was not handled carefully in my narrative, the resulting character could be interpreted as 'unlikeable' and alienating to the reader, so she had to be delicately balanced.

'VIE MEDICATRIX NATURAE': WEBB AND NATURE

Once I had moved beyond my infatuation with Kester Woodseaves, it was Webb's love of her Salopian landscape and the nature around her that tethered me to *Precious Bane* and Webb's other novels. In this critical commentary, I find myself referring to *Precious Bane* far more than to any of her other novels. This is not because I dismiss the other books, but because my relationship with *Precious Bane* has spanned a far longer period than her other novels. While I spent most of my teen years longing to leave Dartmoor and explore the world, once I left the moors, I spent most of my twenties looking wistfully back. When I needed to select a topic for my research, initially it was Webb's love of Salopia that drew me in. Her thoughts on nature and her native Shropshire resonated for me in my own thoughts about Dartmoor in its intensity and stirring of spiritual thoughts. For Webb, nature, and her relationship with it, was multifarious. For example, it is a healing force (hence the title, 'Vis Medicatrix Naturae' of one of her nature essays published in *The Spring of Joy*) as she herself experienced through her illness. This was a quality that would stay with her all through her life. Nature was the wellspring of her writing and it also brought something more to her fiction. In Webb's world, nature is all encompassing. It is healer, teacher, and lover, it is something that has agency, and is not just a setting for her novels, but is also an organising structure. However, it would be a mistake to assume that Webb's view of nature

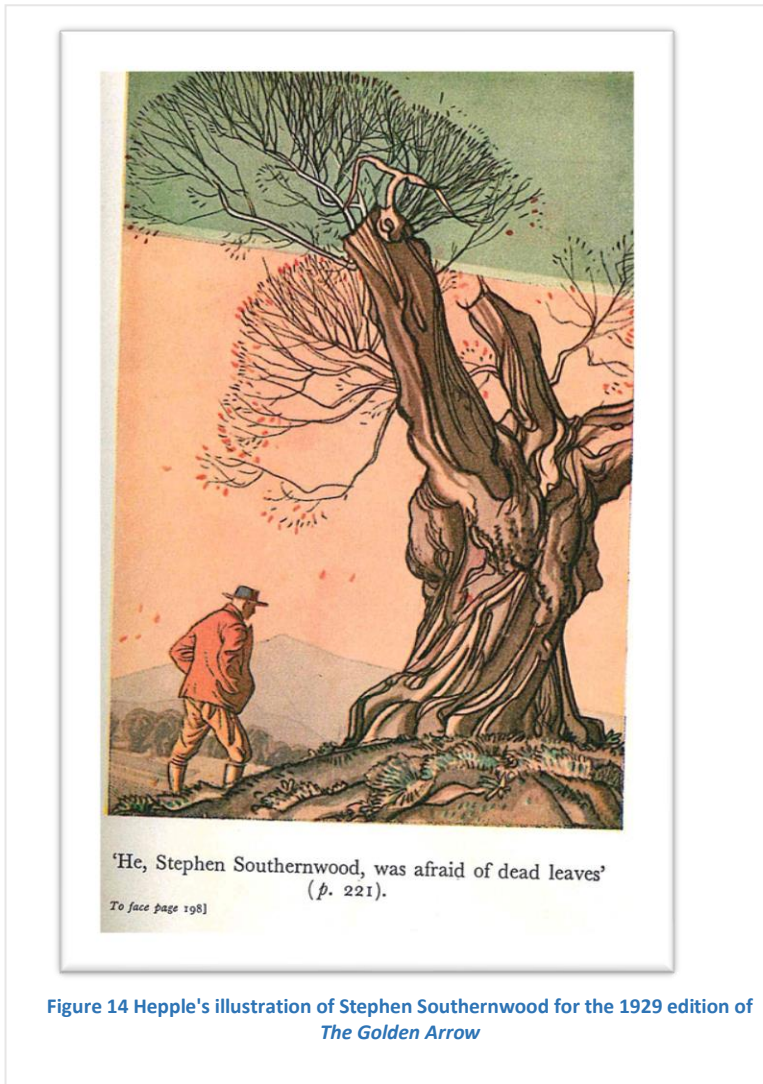


Figure 13 The view from Lyth Hill in Shropshire (Webb's 'Sacred Landscape')

is purely pastoral. Radford notes that Webb uses nature as a response to the dislocation of modernity, noting that

However much Webb's rapt nature writings extol the virtues of the 'unseen' and a mysticism that promises escape from the prison-house of conscious thought, *Gone to Earth* implies

that the irrational and instinctual, seemingly associated with the copious bucolic terrain, can become a source of domestic abuse, even martial viciousness and internecine strife. (2017, p.144)



Nature can also become the source of deep torment. For example, in *The Golden Arrow* (Webb, 1930) the Devil's Chair (a feature of the Shropshire landscape that looks rather like a Dartmoor Tor) is a recurring theme of menace throughout the novel, actively preying upon the mind of the protagonist, Stephen. Eventually, his haunting by this menacing rock formation and his fear of the natural world leads to Stephen's downfall. Webb describes Stephen's journey to work through the woods:

The woods that he went through on his way to work grew spectral, cold mist swirled there; dead leaves hung on the boughs like rows of weasels and magpies before a keeper's house. A cold presence moved among the sad perspectives of the larch and oak boles; sinister,

inimical to joy, the Dark Keeper went his rounds — strangling life, hanging the shrivelled corpse of beauty in the bleak air derisively. Stephen felt his presence; saw his snares laid for men; began to feel that all humanity was but a poor line of rotting leaves and blackening corpses before the hollow house of death. (Webb, 1937, p.127)

For Stephen, the woods are a fearful, hideous place, where the leaves hang like dead animals, and 'finger him like corpses'. In contrast, Amber Darke in *The House in Dormer Forest* an ineffable force is described as 'Young and fugitive it seemed, as the baby thrush that hopped in callow dignity across her path, yet darkling and terrific as the core of a thunderstorm' (Webb, 2012 p.103), yet for Stephen that force is the 'Dark Keeper' that lays traps for men, and strangles the life out of them. Amber's sense of this presence brings peace, while

Stephen's brings menace. Similarly, in *Precious Bane* (Webb, 1978) Sarn Mere¹⁹ is a place that has agency and punishes Gideon Sarn for his transgressions and leads to his eventual drowning. The mere creeps out from its banks to torment Gideon, and he is convinced he is being haunted by the ghost of his abandoned lover, Jancis, who kills herself and commits filicide when Sarn rejects her and their baby. Describing Gideon's haunting, Webb writes,

Then he leaned forrard and said she was coming up off the caus'y toërts the house. His face broke out in a sweat, as if he was feared out of his life... Over the mere a mist was rising in trails, and wisps, white as wool, thickening and gathering into clotted heaps towards the mid of the mere. Sometimes a wreath of mist would be drawn out like a scarf and other times it would stand up in the shape of a woman, but wavering upon the air. It seemed to me it might well be one of these ghosts of mist that Gideon had seen. For they rose and sank about the caus'y all the while, as the light airs on the water took them. At Sarn in August there were always heavy mists night and morning, and this was out of the common bad, because we'd had thunder-rain the night before, and a day of brooding heat after it. Bad, I say, because I never could abide mist, and we had such a deal of it, so that sometimes it blotted the farm and the woods and the church right out, as if the mere had turned to milk and risen up and drowned all. (Webb, 1924, p.127)

For Prue, by contrast, the mere is a place for dreaming and watching dragonflies emerge from their cocoons (Webb, 1924, p.121) and she is able to see that the mist is caused by the weather at that time of year, and yet for Gideon, immersed in his own tragedy, it becomes the haunting figure of Jancis, calling him to his own death in the mere.

For Webb, then, nature brings whatever the person brings *with* them — for the nature mystics like Prue and Amber it brings peace, freedom, and union with the divine presence — Prue finds it in her apple loft or by the mere, while Amber finds it in the Upper Woods — but for the men who bring their own torment, like Stephen Southernwood and Gideon Sarn, nature brings retribution. This was an element I worked into *A Single Violet*, by having Henry find the Little Wood, Webb's favourite spot on Lyth Hill, a disturbing place of shadows in the later stages of the diary — not only was Henry moving away from Mary at this point, he was also wearing the hallmarks of the man who brings his own agenda to nature, and was already moving away from the pantheistic ideals of his younger years. Coles has noted that when comparing Henry's *The Silences of the Moon* alongside *The Spring of Joy* (Mary's book of nature essays) it is possible to see that while Mary learned her love of nature through total absorption in it, Henry's regard was more of an intellectual exercise. (1979, p.101). The other quality worth noting about Mary Webb's relationship with the natural world, is that *nothing* is described in Mary Webb's work without a contextual layering of nature descriptions. Whether she is describing a place, a character or a circumstance, her words are suffused with nature, a quality I needed to bring to my own work in order to evoke Webb's voice.

¹⁹ A mere is a lake that is shallow in relation to its breadth.

Another characteristic of Webb's longer fiction is that four of the five completed novels are set within a little slice of Salopia, in some hazy and vague retrospective period of 'the past'²⁰, which is imbued with a divine force that animates the landscape, and overwhelms those who are too foolish, or too arrogant, or too self-obsessed to respect it. But this temporal haze is levelled at Webb by way of accusation by scholars who do not consider her modernist. Radford writes that Webb,

like her literary mentor Hardy, positions herself at a cultural crossroads, keenly responsive to the dislocating complexities of modernity, yet driven by a grave historical responsibility to remember and record dying rural traditions.
(2017, p.143)

The questions most often asked are why did Webb choose this bubble within which to set the novels, and why the First World War, such a catastrophic contemporary event both historically and personally for Webb (all three of her brothers enlisted and were sent to the trenches) never appear in any one of her novels? I would argue like Radford that while Webb doesn't *seem* to address the catastrophic historical events that were unfolding all around her, everything she wrote at this time (and after) was engendered by it. Coles notes that in both London and Chester Webb saw the broken soldiers who had returned from war (1990, p.69). In Hampstead she went so far as to give her last five pounds to an injured soldier who knocked on the door of their cottage at the Grove (details that I included in the diary). In Chester she had similarly seen the effects of returning soldiers, and her own brother lost part of his jaw when he was shot in the face in France. His death in 1935 was said (by his brother Kenneth²¹) to be due to complications from his wartime injury. (Hardy, 1967, p.1) Looking at *Gone To Earth*, the book Webb produced at the height of the conflict and published in 1917, Radford also writes that the novel 'cannot be dissociated from the "horrors of war" seeping into Webb's imagery' (2017, p.140). This is apparent in the large quantity of blood imagery throughout the novel and her chronological setting tends to land in the pre-war period (which I examined in my MA thesis). Critical assessments of Webb's work (other than Radford's) generally state that Webb did not write about the war, for example, Coles writes that in writing *Gone to Earth* (which is set in Webb's pre-war a-temporal bubble),

There is of course, no direct mention of the war in its pages. Mary Webb, first and foremost a literary artist, in translating pity into image, wrote about what she knew and understood best — rural Shropshire and its people. (1990, p.71)

Such assessments of Webb only allegorically writing about war tend to overlook Webb's short stories. Webb was all too aware of those awful events, having spent the time to write to all three of her brothers daily while they were on the frontline, and arguing with her mother as to how safe the boys were in the trenches. If Webb ever did decide to redress the balance, it is in her short fiction that the war creeps in more obviously, and the stories are less liable to land in Webb's Salopian temporal bubble — for instance, 'The Chinese Lion', which

²⁰ The setting of *Precious Bane* is contemporary to the Napoleonic Wars and the Corn Laws which places it around 1816, while *Armour Wherein He Trusted* is medieval, so today we would describe her as a historical novelist.

²¹ This was recorded in a typed transcript entitled 'Notes on the Meredith Family: Supplied by Mrs Margaret Hardy, from information given by Mr Kenneth Meredith, eldest brother of Mary Webb' (1967). This is held in the Shropshire Archive.

tells the story of a couple separated by the war, and 'The Sword', which narrates the character of the protagonist as being firmly influenced by his role as having 'VC, Cross and the whole caboodle. Youngest colonel in the regiment' (Webb, 2003, p.36). While these may not make up the bulk of Webb's oeuvre, they are there, nonetheless, and I made use of them by writing these details into Mary's diary entries that relate to her brothers being away.

Webb is more frequently classified by critics as a 'nature writer' (De La Mare, 1946: p.15; Wandor, 1978: p.9), which somehow causes her to sit outside of her own milieu, but it is a genre that is having a renaissance currently. On a recent trip to the Trafalgar Square branch of Waterstones to pick up the latest Robert Macfarlane title, I realised that there is now a section of books titled 'New Travel and Nature Writing', strategically placed just inside the front doors. With an array of titles published in the last few years that are hitting the bestseller lists (such as Amy Liptrot's *The Outrun*, and Helen Macdonald's *H is for Hawk*, as well as Macfarlane and Morris's *The Lost Words* and John Lewis-Stempel's titles, *The Running Hare: The Secret Life of Farmland*, and *The Secret Life of the Owl* as well as Melissa Harrison's work, both in fiction — *All Among the Barley* and her non-fiction titles.) These contemporary nature writers, too, find healing in nature — with Liptrot seeking a cure for alcoholism in Orkney, while Macdonald seeks solace for grief in the wingspan of her relationship with the hawk of the title. Nature writing is back on the map, and in a healing, restorative format that Webb herself would recognise.

'A SINGLE VIOLET': THE DIFFICULTIES OF BEING AN URBAN NATURE MYSTIC

In Webb's brand of nature writing, which is fiction, there is also something deeper at work — it's not simply the descriptions of the landscape that lead us to classify her as a nature writer — I have concluded that she herself was also a nature mystic. Bruce Crawford advises the reader to be cautious when using the term 'mystic' or 'mystical', as the words can be misconstrued. In his chapter in *Mary Webb: Neglected Genius*, he writes:

A good deal of difficulty comes from how the definitions of 'mystic' and 'mystical' have evolved: from relatively clear and concise definitions to very broad and subjective meanings, open to a wide variety of interpretations. (2014, p.24)

Crawford notes that while Samuel Johnson's dictionary definition of 1755 is a relatively clear definition (something which is sacredly obscure or secret) by the time we reach Webb's contemporary critics, they are more influenced by the William James definition, which is more of a description than a classification²² and it is worth holding this in mind. The terminology can be problematic. Webb herself had read and commented on

²² According to James, any experience must have four qualities in order to be considered 'mystical' – it must be ineffable, noetic, transient, and passive. (James, 2008, p.278).

William James' work on Mysticism in a letter to her future mother in law in 1911. I then expanded on this in a diary entry for July 5th, 1911:

I have been reading William James' book, 'Varieties of Religious Experience'. It is wonderful, I think, and I only wish Father were here to share in it with me. It goes so deeply into things. It is a great help in assisting me to understand things. I know I always feel closer to the unseen world in a meadow or a wood than in a church, and having read James I can understand why. He must have been a remarkably earnest and broad-minded man. His chapter on Mysticism is exceedingly engaging. He gathers mystics of every creed together and shows how much in sympathy they really are.

Altered consciousness in nature certainly *may* have been something that fed into Webb's method of composition. Webb went some way towards describing the process, although her description is suffused with metaphor, describing nature as a doorway that opens consciousness, allowing communion with a divine force, and one that inspired her to write. In a 1911 essay, written during her recovery from her first debilitating period of Graves' disease, Webb describes it thus:

One violet is as sweet as an acre of them. And it often happens — as if by a kindly law of compensation — that those who have only one violet find the way through its narrow, purple gate into the land of God, while many who walk over dewy carpets of them do not so much as know that there is a land or a way. (p.2)

Coles describes Webb's compositional technique as using meditation in nature to inspire what she calls 'long brooding' (Coles, 1979: p.139), which Martin Armstrong also notes in his introduction to *The Essential Mary Webb* (1951, p.9) having discussed the method with Webb herself. Webb would then (apparently) return to everyday waking life with a whole novel in her mind, which she would then have to write furiously onto paper, and, according to Coles, *The Golden Arrow* was penned in three weeks, a speed which most writers would be astounded by. Often writing all night, neighbours described finding Webb surrounded by disordered piles of paper each morning, which they would then have to help her to arrange into order. (Coles, 1990, Pp.70-71). I

wrote this into *A Single Violet* in a 1916 entry,

Sunday May 21st
Another blissfully quiet weekend at The Knills, Henry worked on his manuscript, which allowed me to sit in the garden beneath the Mountain Ash with my back to the bark, and drift away. It fuelled further outpourings during the night, and again, Mrs Morris found me this morning spent and worn, surrounded by pages and pages of story.

The crux of the discussion relating to whether Webb experienced altered states of consciousness while she

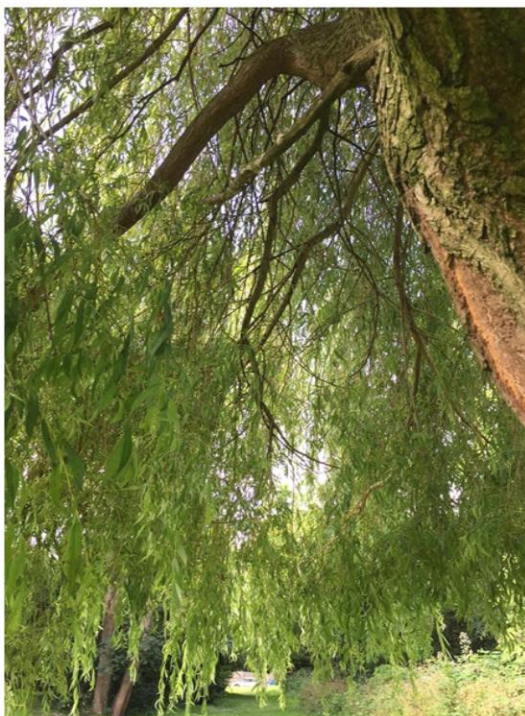


Figure 15 The willow tree on the Middlesex campus

was spending long periods in nature is, without a real diary or similarly reflective first-hand documentation, very hard to prove one way or the other. We know from Ned Pugh's obituary in *The Bookman* (1928, p.1) and the letter to her mother-in-law that Webb had explored writings about and by mystics, perhaps she identified with them, but was she altering consciousness as she ruminated on her novels? Perhaps she was just deep in thought and allowing her unconscious mind to work in the background, giving it the space and time to construct her stories. All I could do was follow the trail of clues left behind in Webb's letters, fiction and other writings. While I could describe my own method as 'long brooding' in nature, I don't frequently experience altered states of consciousness, and this deep contemplation usually happens during long walks. My own interpretation has always been to assume that Mary did enter different states, and for the purposes of *A Single Violet*, this is the image I have portrayed for my Webb — that she was a woman ahead of the New Age curve, practicing altered states of consciousness through meditation in nature, whilst also leaving enough space for the reader to make up their own mind. As with all unanswered questions, this is an alluring one. However, by making this decision early on in my own writing process, I then owed it to Webb to try, for the sake of fictional reality, to replicate these methods in some way, but this was not all that straightforward. I will now explore this in more depth.

Examining Webb's relationship with nature, it was clear that in order to find a compelling and authentic voice for the narrator of my fictional diary, I needed to immerse myself in nature, to attempt to draw on Webb's level of detail in order to attain something akin to her voice (and at least attempt to try to alter my own consciousness whilst doing so). However, I had one big impediment. While I grew up in an intensely rural setting and I rely on time in nature to reflect and form plans for what I will write each week, my own writing methods are very different from Webb's. I write on the London underground during my daily commute, which couldn't be further from a Shropshire cornfield, or the Little Wood on Lyth Hill. Early on in my research, I attempted to experiment with meditation in nature during a research-intensive week at Middlesex University, where I set out to replicate Webb's methods. By placing myself under a willow tree on the campus, I hoped to sit for long periods as Webb had, and see what came to me, but while London has green spaces, it lacks solitude, and I elicited too much attention from dog walkers and passing students to allow my consciousness to drift away like Webb's may have done. Similarly, the physical discomfort did nothing for my consciousness other than to distract me — within twenty minutes my muscles were cramping and jolting me out of my reverie. It was clear that in a city setting, however green the place was (I no longer had access to my favourite 'spot' on Dartmoor) either I lacked the discipline or aesthetic tendencies that Webb possessed, or the place lacked the seclusion that was necessary for this method to work. Instead of trying to be more like Webb, I realised I needed to go back to the source of Webb's inspiration and to find my own way. This meant immersing myself in nature in other ways, as well as examining other writer's nature writing. Using walking as a form of 'moving meditation', I began to go out early in the morning and to keep another kind of diary, one in which I noted what was blooming in the gardens, or the hedgerows or the woodland around me. These nature descriptions allowed me to connect my own writing to Webb's and allowed me to also use nature as my organising structure for the diary. One of the accreted layers to the diary, then, was to ensure that descriptions of what was in bloom (or 'blow') was liberally written into the diary entries, so, like Webb, everything that I described was done in the context of nature. This journal took me a full calendar year to produce, but it enabled me to go through the fictional diary and ensure that the plants and

flowers I was describing were authentically in season at the correct times. This went a long way in eliciting a more ‘Webbish’ voice for my narrator. It also helped me to step outside of tried and tested descriptions of nature and come to each observation with fresh eyes.

One of the biggest challenges for a nature lover living in a more urban setting is in finding those areas where nature thrives. We may see the city ‘Edgelands’ described by Symmons Roberts and Farley in their monograph (2012) — those abandoned strips of land that sit astride the railway tracks giving urban foxes a safe place to snooze in the sunshine, or former industrial sites that have been left to seed. But there are also the other spaces — the parks, the gated gardens, all of which tend to be neatly clipped and tended. Even in the neatest parks, nature creeps in, whether it is the migratory birds that are visiting on their way to their summer or winter retreats, or trees that line almost every street in London. And there are degrees of wildness — even Dartmoor, the wild and woolly landscape of my childhood, was tended by human hands, with the annual swaling to burn away the undergrowth, or the non-indigenous pine forests that were planted in the 1920s by the budding Forestry Commission. Writing as Mary Webb taught me to recognise that cultured landscapes can be just as spellbinding as supposedly untrammelled ones, if the source of the absorption is nature. In London I was able to go walking and wild swimming on Hampstead Heath, retracing Webb’s own footsteps from her cottage on the Grove, and over the Heath to Henry’s school at Golders Green. I was also lucky enough to be allowed by the groundsmen working in that school to go in and visit the outdoor amphitheatre that Henry built while teaching there, and to lean up against the glass and look into the classrooms that he taught in, to stand on the balcony overlooking the school grounds where I imagine he stood and smoked his pipe.

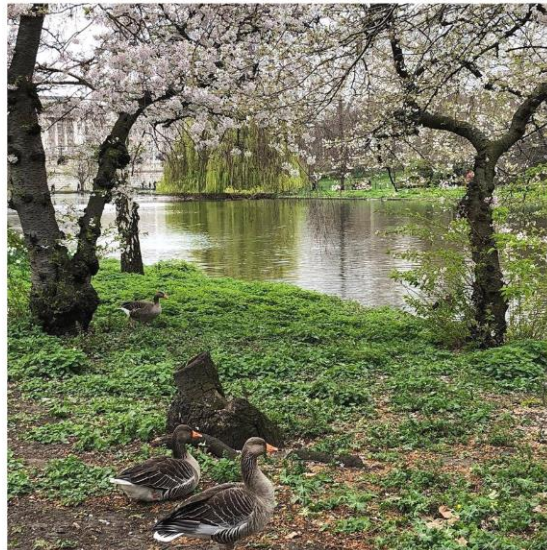


Figure 16 The lake at St. James' Park

There is a story that can be traced through the physical memories of a place, even in the *imagined* memories of a place. In the Arabic language the word that is used to describe this is ‘baraka’ — in its Quranic context it translates as a ‘blessing’ or ‘a holy and beneficial force impregnating, radiating, which transmits itself to anything that it touches and to anything it surrounds’ (Von Denffer 1976, p.169), while in the folklore tradition (that pre-dates Islam or Christianity) the definition is broader:

Anything filled with abundance and prosperity contains *baraka* inherently, and if something grows in number, volume, or prosperity, it also contains *baraka*. Thus, in their way of

thinking, *baraka* signifies animistic power, rather than power from God. *Baraka* is thought to convey something tangible that can be gained by physical association. (Goerling, 2010, p.2)

I understand this as referring to the energetic qualities of something, in the sense that objects can hold the energy of a person that loved and used it. In this way, a ring that my mother owned and loved and wore still holds traces of her 'baraka', and the places where Mary Webb walked, absorbed in the details of the trees on Hampstead Heath, or the bench where she sat beneath an old oak tree on the top of Lyth Hill could still hold something of her essence, waiting there for me to tap into it. Is this mysticism? Possibly. It could just be imagination, but the stories woven by place and objects, the provenance held by those items, can give us an alluring glimpse into the past, and by walking those same paths, I was able to place myself inside the character of Mary, describing a walk through the Hampstead Heath extension at twilight after the opening of the outdoor theatre, or sitting beneath the oak trees in the Little Wood, looking out at the view of the Shropshire Hills. Working in a creative medium, as opposed to a literary critical one, has enabled me to harness those wisps of inspiration, because, in the creative space, it does not matter to the story if the scientific basis for 'baraka' is never proven, or if Mary Webb never really used altered consciousness as part of her creative process. All that really matters is finding ways into an authentic voice for the narrator of my fictional diary that evokes the voice of Mary Webb.

'BURNT OFFERINGS': THE VALUE OF ORIGINAL MATERIALS AND PRIVATE COLLECTIONS

As I explored in Chapter One, seeking Webb's character through her biographies proved problematic for me, and their accuracy was questioned when I compared them side by side. Since both Henry Webb and Jonathan Cape (the publisher) inherited the copyright to Mary Webb's work, and both had varying degrees of involvement in the inception of the biographies, not all of them delved into Webb's life with the depth that Coles did. As the biographical pendulum swings from Mary being 'very highly strung' to Henry being a villain, finding the story of Mary Webb began to feel a lot like divination. One academic problem with older generations of biographies is that they weren't required to cite sources, so it is not always possible to locate these stories, but in order to find an engaging but realistic narrative arc, it is necessary to stop vacillating wildly, and pause somewhere in the middle. While they gave me a rough temporal framework — a scaffold of 'headline events' on which to hang my story — placing myself imaginatively into Webb's character has allowed me to discover a number of accepted 'truths' that I would question in the biographies. They may make for a good tale, but I don't believe Webb's life requires embellishment. Her own words speak for themselves, once they are unearthed.

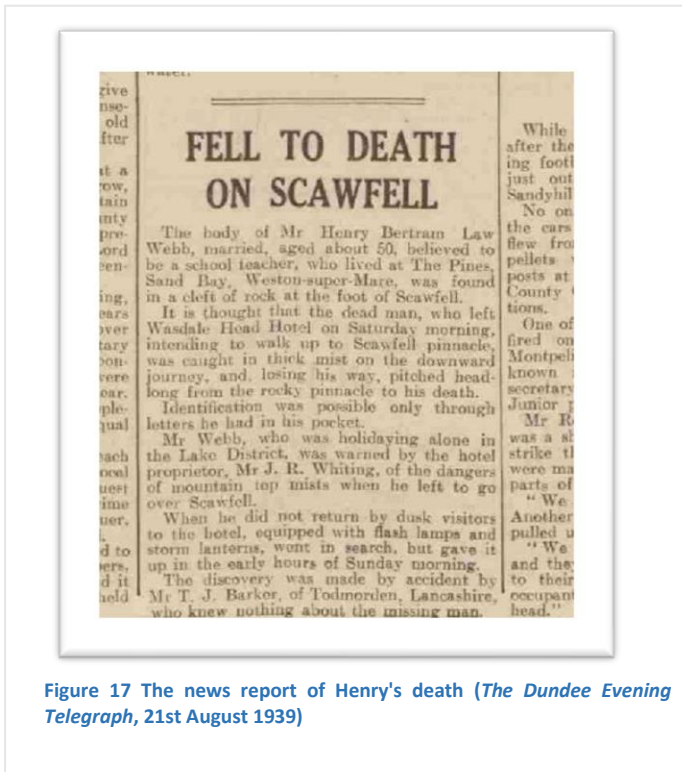


Figure 17 The news report of Henry's death (*The Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 21st August 1939)

For example, the biographies all relate events that happened at Hampstead during the writing of Webb's final unfinished novel, *Armour Wherein He Trusted*. Webb struggled with this novel more than any other, and I suspect this is because her style of writing was evolving, and she was finding new ways of working, just as I have done with this novel. By now she was producing regular reviews and short stories to build up her literary reputation, and her work was showing signs of a more measured, edited style. According to all the biographers, at this period (1926-27) Webb was unwell, distressed at the amount of time Henry was spending with his pupil Kathleen, and struggling with writer's block. In a fit of

frustration, she tore the manuscript, threw it in the fire, and immediately telephoned St. John Adcock, her friend and editor of *The Bookman*, in a distressed state. In her 1990 biography, *Mary Webb*, Coles recounts:

Overwrought, she attempted to tear up the manuscript, but was too weak; instead she threw it into the fire, then rushed from the room. Telephoning St. John Adcock, Mary told him she had just 'destroyed all she had done of her new novel'; he heard 'the subdued, broken sound of her crying at the end of the line'. Adcock calmed her and she returned to the room to find that Henry had retrieved the scorched papers from the fire. (p.146)

An examination of the actual manuscript of *Armour Wherein He Trusted* in the Crawford Archive does indeed show where Webb tore the first few pages. They have been repaired soon after with thick tape, however, the manuscript shows minor evidence of actual burning. The photograph in figure nineteen shows the most fire damaged area of the artefact, and this is not extensive. While several pages show small singe marks on the top right-hand corner, if Webb did throw the manuscript on the fire, it was not actively burning at the time, and may have only contained embers.

Henry's accounts of events that took place are also questionable, leading me, at times, to wonder if some of his memories had been embellished to protect the public image of their life together. Visiting the Crawford archive enabled me to see remarkable evidence in the objects themselves — Henry's own first edition copy of Webb's first novel; *The Golden Arrow* shows that someone (possibly Henry) has damaged the book. Webb's personal dedication to Henry has been ripped out with force. The book has then been authenticated by Henry to guarantee its provenance and sold to a dealer. As Mary and Bruce Crawford have pointed out to me (in conversation), while the idea of Henry purposefully attenuating his first wife's papers is an alluring story, we also must consider the collector's view of the events. When Henry sold everything he had to the highest bidder, why then would he destroy papers that would have had commercial value?

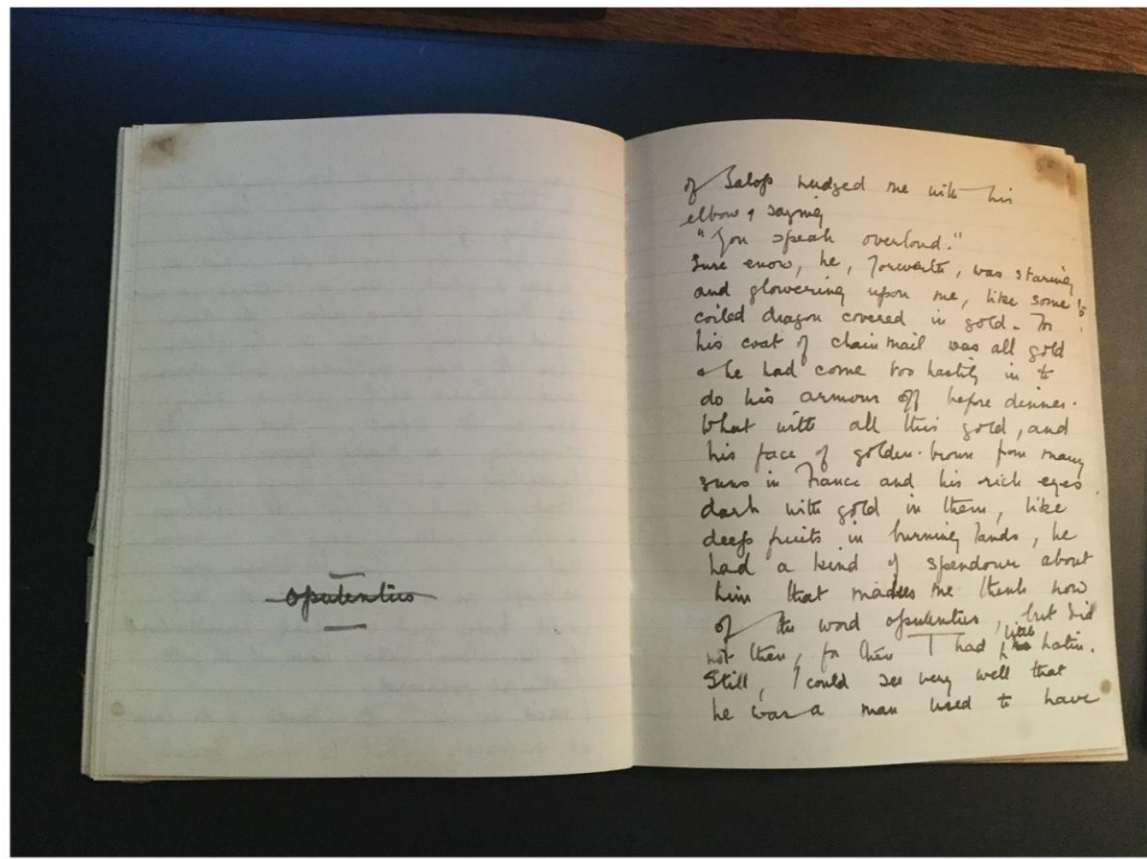


Figure 18 The Original Handwritten MS of *Armour Wherein He Trusted*, Webb's final (and incomplete) novel which she was purported to have thrown on the fire in a fit of frustration

Another valuable tool was to trace other people's memories of Webb — to some she was seemingly insignificant, to others she was an eccentric footnote, but once in a while, I would steal a glance at Webb across a crowded page, which would shed some light on her character — her friends' recollections that were published after her death or chance encounters that were written down amongst other memories. Once I had access to the Crawfords' collection in California, the trail to Mary Webb opened and became much easier to follow. While the Crawfords have the same materials I had found in the UK, their collection goes much further — it doesn't just include works relating to Webb, but also accounts relating to the provenance of the collection. Each one of these accounts gave a glimpse into Webb's life — accounts by the dealers who bought material from Henry. While each one alone may only be a fragment, together they create a kaleidoscope of memories that have contributed to the final layer of polish I needed for the novel.

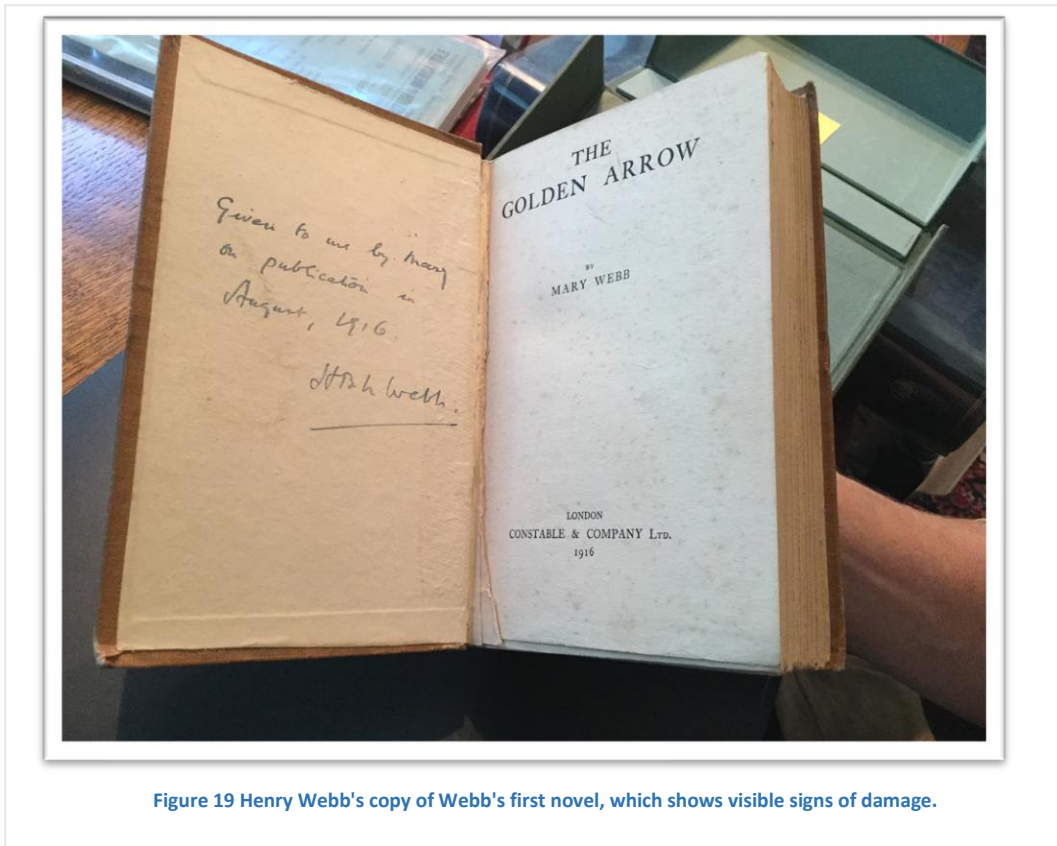


Figure 19 Henry Webb's copy of Webb's first novel, which shows visible signs of damage.

An account published by David Randall, the dealer from the firm that originally bought the Webb papers, sheds a sad light on the process Henry went through of selling what was left following Webb's early death in 1927. Randall, writing in 1962 about his career in rare books, remembers that a close colleague, Greville Worthington, had an appointment with Henry at the Grove in Hampstead to discuss purchasing Mary Webb's remaining papers. Worthington had told Randall that,

Mr Webb began examining closets, drawers and the like where such of Mary's letters, manuscripts and books which had survived were stored. The more he examined them, the sadder he became: he literally wept over a copy of *The Golden Arrow*, her first novel, dedicated 'To a Noble Lover H.L.W,' and well he should have. Her last novel, *Precious Bane*, at the start no more successful than its predecessors, was also dedicated to him, though his copy was not inscribed, as she gave it to him personally. Inserted in it, however, was Baldwin's glowing letter to her on first reading the book, dated 'Downing Street, Jan 14, 1927,' well preceding his speech at a dinner of the Royal Literary Fund which struck the effective note of appreciation that led to the great demand for her work that followed. As he perused these, [Henry] Webb became more and more loath to part with them, and quite understandably so. Worthington had about given up hope of obtaining them when the second Mrs Webb, who had been off somewhere, appeared just at the end of teatime. When she heard that the ragged and tattered remnants of books and papers were worth the modest sum offered for them, she commanded her husband to accept Worthington's offer and 'get that trash out of here before the fool changes his mind.' (Randall, 1062, p.172)

The Golden Arrow that Randall refers to is the torn copy that is now in the Crawford archive, along with Henry's copy of *Precious Bane*, still complete with the letter from Stanley Baldwin tucked into its covers. While the material in the collection was exhibited both in the Grolier Club (in New York) and at Stanford University in 2010, and elements of it have been hosted online by Stanford, seeing the objects in person has been a rare

privilege. Being able to immerse myself in this primary source material shed new light on Webb for me, both in terms of her story and her character, and enabled me to add a final layer of 'Webbish polish' that I would not have had without it. It's not that the biographies were 'bad', they just did not contain enough of the details that would help me to recreate that fictional 'reality' that Mantel speaks of, one that is deep enough to maintain the reader's attention.

Returning to Mantel for guidance, I needed to learn to lift my 'eyes from the page' to discover the detail that would enable me and the reader to immerse ourselves in the imagined details of Webb's life. As Mantel stated,

At first you are a stranger in your chosen era. But a time comes when you can walk around in a room and touch the objects. When you not only know what your characters wore, but you can feel their clothes on your back: that rasp of homespun wool: that whisper of linen and weight of brocade: the way your riding coat settles when you mount your horse: the sway and chink of the items at your girdle or belt, the scissors and keys and rosary beads. You listen: what sound do your feet make, on this floor of beaten earth? Or on these terracotta tiles? How do your boots feel as you pull your feet out of the mud? How old are your boots? What colour is the mud? When you can answer these questions, you are ready to begin.
(Mantel, 2017, p.4)

By developing this accretion of layers, I was finally able to answer the questions that Mantel was posing and find my Mary Webb.

CONCLUSION

As with all writers, the background and context affect the interpretation of what [Dame] Julian wrote. Unless we have some awareness of the context in which she wrote, it is easy to abstract some juicy devotional passages from her book, or make pronouncements about the nature of her mysticism, without a proper understanding of what she herself meant. Besides, we are curious.
(Jantzen, 2011, p4)

The Mystic, whatever received opinion may say, is always practical. He arrives at his ideas more quickly than others, reaching the centre while they grope in a circle. And to grasp the essential is to be triumphantly practical. The world never credits the mystic with quick sight in mundane things, forgetting that, for his long gazing into infinity, better sight is necessary than for grasping obvious and clumsy facts. The mystic understands sex better than the sensualist. He can analyse malice, greed, hypocrisy, better than those who swim obscurely in their own black passions. A saint and not a devil can best unravel the psychology of evil.
(Webb, as quoted in Pugh, 1928, p1)

'GAZING INTO INFINITY': FINDING MARY WEBB

In his tribute to Mary Webb, featured on the front page of the July 1928 edition of *The Bookman*, Edwin Pugh wrote,

It might almost be said of Mary Webb that she did not belong in this world. She was practical enough in everyday affairs. She had, I should say, what is termed a good head for business... Yet there was something unearthly, phantasmal about her. As my wife once said: 'Mary seems to float like a ghost through the air.' She was of course — and acknowledged that she was — a mystic, as all true poets must be.

Pugh certainly seems to have believed Webb to have been a mystic. Pugh then went on to say,

It was perhaps Mary Webb's habit of long gazing into infinity which lent her that air of being a creature blent of mystery and dream. She could divine your inner self, read your secret thoughts, and yet hardly visualise you at all in your outward aspect. Thus she always regarded and spoke of me as a tall man, though I am very much the reverse.
(Pugh, 1928, p.1)

After several years of looking for Mary Webb and only finding the faintest traces of her, it was really through the observations of her friends, gathered in at the Crawford archive, that I at last began to divine who she was.

In the beginning I set out with three informal objectives in mind for the project. Firstly, I wanted to create that living, breathing fictional Mary Webb (as previously stated in my introduction). Secondly, I wanted to prove her literary worth to the sceptics and bring her work (and mine) to a new readership. Thirdly I was adamant I wanted to learn how to write a better novel than my previous works. In this conclusion, I want to assess how far I have succeeded in those aims. However, the three objectives have merged into one another and become imbricated in that journey, as they tend to in real life. For example, while I was trying to create a living, breathing Mary Webb, I also stepped into the arena of proving Webb's literary worth.

At the point in which I studied for my undergraduate degree, in the early nineties, literary study methods at my university were still leaning towards the formalist 'New Criticism', which by then of course was not new. The student should find everything they needed within the text itself, and the details of the author's life that may have led them to create that work, were not as important as the text itself. Looking back, I wasn't told

much about the authors themselves, and I didn't question this. I immersed myself in the fictional worlds, without knowing much about the lives that fashioned those creations, how they had been inspired to do so, or what their methods of composition were. By the time I reached my post-graduate studies in 2010, the current had changed direction, and biographical elements were more commonly discussed. When I started to research and write *Nature Mystics* in 2013, it felt like an indulgence, but a necessary one. How else was I to place Webb amongst her peers without knowing something of their lives, their personalities — what motivated them, what made them want to write? How was I to know my own methods without studying theirs? And of course, I started with Webb.

Looking for Mary Webb has been a natural extension of that work, a logical conclusion, although a much deeper dive into the mere to find the lost village below. In the beginning I was driven by my need to be able to place Webb somewhere, determined to prove to those sceptics at the conference that she had literary merit beyond the accusations of purple prose, hoping to prove she deserves to sit alongside her modernist peers. During the course of my study, I have heard from at least two other PhD candidates who were writing a thesis on Webb, and Webb has also been given the spotlight by scholars such as Andrew Radford. This indicates that the academic world is beginning to give Webb more focus, albeit in a small way. Each time I speak at a conference or publish a paper on the work I have carried out, it helps to bring her back to the attention of a wider audience, and not just in the UK, but overseas as well.

A Single Violet, my fictionalised diary, is my attempt to waken interest in Mary Webb to a wider reading audience. If I face the academic and literary worlds and am congruent about where I place her and why, eventually others may follow. The irony is that at the end of this journey, I have realised the only person I really needed to prove Webb's literary worth to was me, but also that literary and academic attention goes in cycles. Just as it did previously, Webb's work (and mine) may rise and fall with the passing of time.

For example, as lovely as Pugh's description was of Webb and the popularity that she had throughout the years of the countryside revival, these things only happened *after* Baldwin's speech at the Literary Fund Dinner (*The Times*, April 27th, 1928). Had Baldwin not directed the gaze of the public towards Webb, she might never have come to the attention of anyone, fated, like her friend C.A. Nicholson, to be a footnote in someone else's story. Have I brought her work (and mine) to a new readership? Only time will tell, and it will largely depend on the publishing fate of *A Single Violet*. While I regularly give talks about Webb and the work I have been doing, and I drop her name and her writing into virtually every workshop I teach, that is just one small corner of the planet. There are, however, more people in the pagan community who are now exploring Webb than there were five years ago. And what of that living breathing, fictional Mary Webb? Did I bring her to life?

Using the biographies as the main source of information proved to be too problematic. Biography, it seems, as well as fiction, has different trends that emerge over time. While Webb's biographies may have been written in the thirties, forties, and even as late as the seventies without references to source material, it made it harder to assess their accuracy, which in academic writing at least is essential. I am also reminded that biography brings a second person into the relationship, which more recent writers acknowledge as part of their process. Janet Malcolm, for instance, writing her study of Sylvia Plath, *The Silent Woman* (2012) writes consciously of her own presence in the narrative. All the biographers who paved the way for me to complete this project were

present in their own work and revealed their own biases, even when they were not consciously aware of them at the time. While they all helped me to lay a foundation, I wanted to encounter Webb in the first-person, and not through an intermediary.

Learning more about Webb and her life has been as much a process of peeling back the layers as adding them, getting a sense of what might have driven her on, and following those instincts — the quiet voice that tells me she was an anchoress living in the modern world, or driven by her body's responses to its illness. On a journey that has taken nine years to reach this conclusion, I feel as if I am finally getting to the heart of the woman who has been my daily companion, if only in my imagination. I don't doubt, however, that she would have been a complex person to interact with in person. At her very worst, she was 'hypersensitive' (Addison, 1931, p.15), 'possessive' (Wrenn, 1964, p.79) while financially 'she gave passionately, recklessly' (Coles, 1990, p.99), emotionally she was 'ravaged by fears and doubts' (ibid. p.130) and she was 'obstinate' (Addison, 1934, p.11). As someone who frequently had the 'difficult' label tied around my neck as a child and who proudly comes from a line of 'difficult' women, I feel a sense of injustice at any woman being described as 'very highly strung' (*The Times*, April 28th, 1928) without wondering *why*. At best Webb was utterly selfless and anxious to help others' (Addison, 1931, p.11), 'fastidiously careful of people's needs' (Addison, 1931, p.13), 'she had a very sweet nature' (Coles, 1979, p.33) and was 'brimming with wit' (Pugh, 1928, p.1). *Precious Bane* remains one of my 'desert island' books, and each time I pick it up, I feel that same sense of warmth and comfort that I am going to meet Mary Webb as well as Kester and Prue within its pages. I do feel I have brought that fictional Mary Webb to life, in my head and in *A Single Violet*. She feels like a rounded character, and not a two-dimensional facsimile. How much relation my Mary Webb bears to her real predecessor I will probably never know, not having discussed it with anyone who knew her in life. Perhaps it is for the readers to decide.

There have also been other surprises along the way. At one point in the journey, I felt I had succeeded in forging a stronger connection to Henry than I had to Mary. Reading his work, and being particularly taken by the strength of his opinions in *The Silences of the Moon*; walking around the grounds of his school and standing where I imagined he stood and smoked his pipe; spending time in his outdoor theatre and seeing how valued it is in the school even today — all these things helped me to build a picture of his best parts. I wanted to avoid presenting him as a straight villain. While we may judge his behaviour towards the end of Webb's life as appalling, he was not evil, they did love each other in the early part of their marriage, and we mustn't underestimate the influence Henry had on Mary as a developing writer. I couldn't find Mary Webb without finding Henry also, and I don't think it was my place to judge him wholly. It is for the reader to decide what impression they take away.

Some of the 'facts' of the combined story of Henry and Mary remain a mystery. Whether or not Webb's archive was destroyed deliberately or not, and why, remains unanswered. If I had placed Henry in the role of villain, it would be fairly simple to sketch a portrait of him sitting in his cork-lined study, burning the letters and documents that show him or his mother in a bad light, but, as Mary Crawford has pointed out to me, in the wake of Webb's death and her posthumous success, those items held commercial value, so it's hard to believe he would have destroyed *everything* unless he did so in the immediate aftermath of Webb's death, before the

commercial value of such material became apparent. I believe there was a combination of forces at work — perhaps the Webbs did burn the manuscripts, not realising their potential value in the coming years, and perhaps Henry did destroy some of the letters where evidence was less than flattering. There must have been some correspondence between Webb and her mother-in-law when the engagement was announced, as they were actively writing to one another at that time, but if there was, it has not survived. Also, there is the matter of the letter I mentioned in the novel, written to Mary Webb in 1927 by Mr. Wicksteed, Henry's Headmaster, urging her to separate from Henry so that he could make a new life with Kathleen (Coles, 1979, p.301). Coles says that Webb refers to the letter in correspondence with St. John Adcock (a primary source I have not seen), but one can only speculate what happened to that artefact, when no records hint at its whereabouts.

Setting out, I had imagined that a thesis needed to be objective and impersonal, however, all of the research questions have highlighted atavistic aspects of my own personality and values as much as Mary Webb's — my lifelong bond with journal writing, my desire to explore the lives of women who have been lost and forgotten in history, and my fascination with nature as a source and driver of creative work. The research into diaries led me to reassess their value as a form outside of 'literary' genres — their use as a tool with which to evade the censor, particularly when employed by writers of oppressed communities, writing journals with the full knowledge and intention that (one day at least) they may stand testament to their own resistance. The diary, it seems, is not the private innerspace I believed it to be when I set out on my own journal-writing experience at the age of eleven years old — it can be deeply revealing, personal and very public, but by standing outside of conventional literary forms, it can, by the same token also be a disposable thing. When judged as boring and arbitrary, particularly when it includes the daily aspects of women's lives, it becomes a throwaway item, at risk of being lost in a skip or a trunk in a loft space (Masters, 2016, *The Guardian*) burned or destroyed by its discoverer, not deemed worthy of protection. Thankfully now, at least, the project spearheaded by Irving Finkel and Polly North at the Bishopsgate Institute seeks to preserve and curate ordinary diaries that have been discovered and kept.

The writing of a fictional diary, however, cannot replicate the 'real thing' in a completely authentic way, nor should it — early drafts of *A Single Violet* were boring, and full of daily details. Instead, the writer of the fictional diary must look for consequential details that are needed to guide the reader through the narrative arc of the work (Kuhn-Ossius 1981: p.168) — signposting the plot, the characters, and where the story might be leading without giving the game away — a real diary does not have the retrospective viewpoint of a third person narrative (Podnieks, 2000, p30) and neither should a fictional one. In the early diary entries, for instance, I needed to set the reader up with enough information about Webb's family members without being too 'telling' in the narrative, and without revealing too much. A fictional diary, at least, needs to combine enough of the markers of the real thing, without forgetting its ultimate purpose — to tell a story by way of a first-person narrative, without the benefit of a retrospective viewpoint (Palliser, 2017, Personal Communication, 30th May). That meant each diary entry had to be complete, each one leading to the next, until the story became like a necklace of beads strung together.

Writing this book has necessitated using a different way of organising the writing process — I am now a converted planner. This book necessitated a robust design from the beginning, one that remained flexible to the changes that inevitably emerged with a creative project, for example, in the case of Kes and Anna, which storylines to keep and which to discard. I also wanted to make sure I wrote as closely to the historical facts as I could. No doubt there will be elements to the novel that purists may feel are there as a result of fictional license otherwise it would not be a novel — I am clear the character of Caradoc Evans comes straight from my imagination, being formed on a dear friend who came from the Welsh valleys. Similarly, the personalities of Webb's siblings are pieced together with scant historical facts, held together with imagination.

With the research for *Looking for Mary Webb*, I only really found Mary Webb when I was able to visit the Crawfords and pore over the original letters and notebooks. This was, for me, transformative as the archive marks the first time since Webb's death that these materials have been gathered in one place. I met both Mary and Henry in person that week, and if 'baraka' is indeed held by inanimate objects, then working first-hand with these materials enabled me to bridge the lacuna and add a further layer of Webbish polish to *A Single Violet*. Webb, like most human beings, was a complex woman of many facets, and I needed to do her justice. While most of Webb's papers may not have survived, those that did give a tantalising glimpse into what her literary estate *could* have been, and what her literary life was like in London. Despite the tragedy that would follow, she was working consistently as a writer, and being paid for it, a feat that is still challenging to achieve now. There is an irony in the fact that her estate was inherited by the three people who were most careless of her in life when she was at her most vulnerable. Perhaps there is another novel waiting in the after-story, one that couldn't be told in the first-person introspection of the fictional diary.

In this commentary, I have explored the ways in which Webb has disappeared over time. I also explored the ways in which biographical writing is not a foundation that is strong enough to build a first-person narrator on. As Mantel has observed, 'Novel writing is not like building a wall' (2017, p.3). My living, breathing, fictional Mary Webb needed more to shore her up than just a simple timeline of events. From there I explored her own perceived place in the canon; however, when writing a novel for a 21st century reader, I have had to tackle the issue of 'purple prose' head on, so as not to replicate the problem. *A Single Violet* has been a project which seems to sit in the interstitial spaces, just outside the boundaries of most literary labels — biography but fiction, nature-writing but fiction, a diary but a novel, a real woman but a fictionalised version of her. When asked what I am writing when I am in the outside world, I have struggled to do project justice with a one-line answer. 'I am writing the fictional diary of a real dead woman,' I would often respond, and then realised that trying to make it sound 'normal' wasn't working all that well for me. I was clear that had I been writing this project without the guiding principles of a well-formed supervisory team it would have floundered very early on.

It is not only Webb's story, but also her character that had to emerge gradually over time, which I have examined in Chapter Three. Her voice in my head has been a quiet one, almost ineffable, and I have often had to rely on the people around her to show me glimpses of her in passing, a bricolage of her personality — the walks with Caradoc Evans in Victoria Gardens, the strolls with Edwin Pugh on the Heath. In her own writing, too, there have been compelling insights where Mary Webb reveals herself as having worn the masque of her own characters, and were there to be decoded — Prue Sarn watching dragonflies emerging at the mere (Webb, 1924, p.121), Amber Darke leaving Shropshire with Michael (Webb, 2012, p.110), Hazel Woodus reflecting on the wildness of Foxy, and the unfairness of the world for judging a soul by its inability to break away from its own natural tendencies (Webb, 1979, p.47). While Webb may be judged as overly florid by contemporary standards of writing, she could also be measured and concise when she needed to be — in her poetry and her short fiction, where she undoubtedly edited herself more carefully. There is a restraint not visible elsewhere. Had she survived that last illness, her later fiction could have been radically different from her first novel, and, with a return to contemporary nature writing, Webb's conviction that there is healing to be found in nature was ahead of its time, even for those, like me, that dwell in urban spaces. In 1911, Webb wrote,

No accident of environment or circumstance need cut us off from Nature. Her spirit stirs the flowers in a town window-box, looks up from the eyes of a dog, sounds in the chirp of grimy city sparrows. From an observation hive in a London flat the bee passes out with the same dumb and unfathomable instinct that drove her from her home on Hybla of old.
(Webb, 1917, p.2)

This is a concept that has been part of my city life for the last decade and what led me to finding Mary Webb and her nature-filled lexis — the belief that, even in one of the biggest metropolises in the world, a writer can still find inspiration in the single violet that grows in one of the city parks, or by observing the population of greylag geese that live out their lives in St. James' Park, or by watching the plane trees processing through their yearly cycle of new growth, summer strength, autumn colour and winter grace.



Figure 20 Webb dressed as Madeleine in *Nicholas Nickleby* for the Dickens Fellowship Christmas Party, 1924

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