

Pulling Out the Most Colourful Threads: Revealing and Weaving Positionality into Collaborative Life Writing

Abstract: This article uses a collaboration between an academic historian and a family historian as a case study for the importance of acknowledging the role of authorial subjectivity within biographical life writing. In particular, it considers the different lenses – from feminist to familial – that can be used to view the rags-to-riches tale of Sydney fortune-teller Mary Scales (1863-1928). By foregrounding our own positionality towards the subject matter our hope is not to avoid subjectivity, but rather expose its influence in shaping our readings of the historical sources through which Mary's life can be (partially) known.

Keywords: subjectivity; feminist biography; family history.

Introduction

There has been an increasing recognition in life writing of the 'porous boundaries between the biographer and their subject, and therefore also between the genres of autobiography and biography' (Styler 2017, 171). As much as they may strive for objectivity, biographers bring a particular position – influenced by their own preoccupations, agendas, and the lens of their culture, time and values – to their selection and analysis of sources, and to how they sequence and shape the various events of a life into a meaningful and coherent narrative. Even the biographer's choice of subject is reflective of this positioning, meaning that biographies inevitably disclose something of the character of their authors as well as their subjects.

Women's life writing, often undertaken by female authors operating from a feminist agenda or at least a desire to recover the marginalised stories of women's lives, may in particular encourage an impulse towards self-identification with the female subject for both

authors and readers (Beer 2012). Studies of the ‘biographer-personae’ have thus emerged that analyse the biographical writings of feminist authors like Josephine Butler, Elizabeth Gaskell and Julia Kristeva in order to understand how they used their biographies of other famous women to define their own lives and identities (Styler 2017; Helms 1995; Haase 2019).

Catherine Nash has made similar observations about the process of family historians, noting that genealogy is ‘often a practice of self-definition and self-making, of choosing which apparently determining ancestries matter most’ (2008, 17). As Jeremy Popkin notes, authors are likely to experience an even more personal and emotional identification with subjects when writing about family members, ‘even when the individuals whose lives are being reconstructed are relatives whom the memoir-writer never knew’ (2015, 128). Family history is an empowering process of self-discovery that gives voice both to the lost ancestor and their contemporary descendant (de Groot 2009). Family history has also been described as a form of ‘identity-work’ in which the researcher’s sense of self is more firmly anchored through ‘ancestral connection and cultural belonging’ (Bottero 2015).

Life writing, family history and feminist approaches have also long had a mutually enriching relationship (Jolly 2015). During the explosion of life writing in the 1980s, theorists such as Carolyn Steedman and Carolyn Heilbrun identified biography as a genre uniquely powerful for not only capturing the voices of marginalised women, but the full narrative of their daily experiences, particularly of the familial realm (Ferres 2019). Despite this, as Tanya Evans has argued (2011), until recently family historians have been viewed dismissively by professional and academic historians, their approaches and analyses deemed narrow, sentimentalised and subjective. Such criticisms, while raising valid issues worth addressing, also create a false dichotomy in which the professional or academic historian is constructed as wholly objective in the perspective they bring to their subjects.

This article reflects on the ongoing collaboration between the authors – one a family historian, the other an academic – in writing the biography of Mary Scales (1863-1928), an Australian woman from an impoverished background whose story of eventual financial success through fortune-telling and property investment is extremely revealing of the economic and social realities confronting nineteenth-century women. Our collaborative process has encouraged us to reflect deeply on how our own subjectivity guides each of us to read Mary's life in particular ways. The article below therefore begins by explaining our own orientations to the story and how we arrived at it. Such statements articulating a researcher's worldview and their positionality towards their research subject are becoming increasingly common across various disciplines, particularly the humanities and social sciences (Holmes 2020). We have taken a less formal and more narrative-driven approach to this, to demonstrate how such texts need not be dry statements of the author's socio-political identities and leanings, but can instead draw the reader into the biographical narrative by offering events from their own life that have shaped their perspective of the biographical subject. After establishing ourselves as characters in the story in this fashion, we move onto examining Mary, critiquing the sources available on her life and offering a synopsis of what they reveal. In the final section, we consider the influence of two positions – the family historian and the academic historian – in writing collaboratively on Mary's life, as well as the multiple narratives or readings that are possible of Mary's story depending on the orientation of authors or readers to the material.

The academic historian

I don't remember the first time I visited a psychic, but I know that I must have been quite young, maybe eight or nine years old. I had a strong interest in the supernatural from an early age. My mother (who raised me on her own) always encouraged me to pursue anything that

interested me. I had no shortage of books on ghosts, past lives, clairvoyance and other strange phenomena growing up. She was quite interested in the mystical and spiritual side of life herself, so our crowded bookshelves also held tomes on astrology, Buddhism and natural healing. I know Mum had definitely taken me to visit a psychic by the time I was in fifth grade, because I have a distinct memory of telling a friend about this, and that we used aromatherapy. My friend promptly started telling all my classmates that my mother and I were witches. I wasn't that bothered by this. I thought being a witch sounded pretty cool. Witches, after all, were women who had the power to make stuff happen.

By the time I was an adolescent, Mum and I probably had our fortunes told about once a year. We would visit New Age stores where a tarot card reader was set up in the corner, or markets where a psychic had a stall, and make a spur-of-the-moment decision to try to peer into the future. While we would always speculate about the predictions and whether they would come true, it was mostly just a fun way to pass the time. I remember very little about the specifics of the different futures described for myself over the years. I can recall one instance where a woman very accurately read details about what was going on in my adolescent life at the time – including the recent passing of my semi-estranged father – which really impressed me with the belief that maybe she did have a gift. Unfortunately, I did not keep any record of what else she said so I don't know whether any of her predictions have transpired in the twenty years since then.

Today, I am still obsessed by spirits, albeit of the more metaphorical kind. As a historian I daily chase ghosts of the past through the traces they have left in historical records. My favourite part of working with these archives is when I come upon the story of an individual that is so rich in detail that it feels like part of them has been forever captured in the impressions they have left on these sources. As if they tantalisingly hover about the pages, just out of sight of being able to be fully known. Such vibrant histories can linger with

me for years, like memories of old friends that I will periodically revisit in my mind or feel compelled to share anecdotes about with others. Mary Scales is one such presence.

I came across Mary's story around the time I finished my PhD. My thesis on women of the criminal underworld was under examination and I had been told to avoid obsessing about it by refraining from doing any more work on that particular topic. I decided to investigate some interesting records I had come across during my research in the Queensland State Archives, but that I had set aside as being outside the scope of my thesis focus. The records in question were a series of police correspondence from 1917 entitled 'Palmists, fortune tellers, clairvoyants, etc'. The correspondence contained directives from the Prime Minister's office requesting that police forces across Australia crack down on fortune-telling, which was allegedly proving detrimental to the home front's wartime morale. The missives then went into detail about how Brisbane police had employed female agents to gather evidence against suspected fortune-tellers in order to prosecute them.

I was intrigued and started to investigate the history of fortune-telling across Australia, specifically its status as a criminal offence and the sporadic prosecutions undertaken against those practising it. This eventually led me to Mary Scales, Australia's most renowned medium of the early twentieth century, when both public interest in and police prosecutions of fortune-telling were at their height. Mary's tale was exceptionally bizarre, yet illustrative of many of the important themes that had become apparent in my research, particularly how fortune-telling intersected with the gender politics of the day. My side-project research on the topic had already yielded two journal articles, but Mary's story was so fascinating I decided to write one final short article just on her.

I set the whole subject aside as I began my postdoctoral research, although the memory of Mary lingered with me. Then one day her great-great granddaughter emailed me.

Since talking to her, and learning even more about Mary and her family, I haven't been able to shake the feeling that Mary wants her story told.

The family historian

I grew up knowing little about my family history. I knew nothing of my paternal side and on my maternal side – only snippets of stories here and there – interesting, but not substantial. We had no worshipping and giving thanks to our ancestors – like my friends from Māori and Chinese cultures. They had beautiful rituals and stories, handed down from generation to generation. They asked their ancestors for guidance and luck, and they had a deep sense of who they were from knowing where they had come from.

I had grown up poor in a single parent family in an affluent area. Situation after situation reinforced my 'otherness' in my community – from my eccentric mother and gypsy lifestyle, to our poverty and fragmented family. We tended to live in the now, with no past and little idea about the future, and I grew up believing that this was all there was. From this space grew a feeling of an invisible and impenetrable wall between "us" and "them". The ones that *have*: well-connected families with wealth and history. Then there was us – the ones that *did not*.

The women around me did not work. They had worked before marriage, and maybe briefly after – but at the time of my formative years I had no female role model of what it would be like to be a professional woman who had made her own fortune. I chose to go to university and aimed for a career in education. This was unusual, as I was the first of my generation to go, and to my knowledge the first woman to ever graduate with a degree. Even then people asked, "so you don't want a family?". This angered me. I did not dream to "marry well", I wanted a career, I wanted to make my own money and I wanted a family too.

I wanted to be reliant on no one, as I had seen what a terrible state this dream had left my mother and our family in.

Then one day my brother told me he had heard that we had a famous long-lost family ancestor who was ‘apparently a very successful psychic’ called Mary Scales. Intrigued, I started to research. With a few clicks of a button a whole new and incredible exciting side to my family emerged as I found hundreds of articles bearing her name; Australian and international newspaper articles, court case documents, and references in current Australian law journals.

Like breadcrumbs, each new article I uncovered lured me into a romantic story of how an illiterate laundress born into poverty in Tasmania would one day enchant the nation and become a very wealthy woman. A famous clairvoyant, Mary would fall into dramatic psychic trances in which she foretold the future. She apparently predicted everything from the Boer war in 1899 to the winners of the Australia’s most famous horse race Melbourne Cup. Mary also held a passion for justice and through highly-publicised court appearances in both criminal and civil trials, and her eccentric antics captured the imaginations of the media worldwide.

Along with her husband, Mary also developed a penchant for property, acquiring properties all over Sydney. They successfully broke through the invisible and impenetrable wall of extreme poverty to become a very wealthy family. Suddenly that impenetrable wall I had always felt started to melt away as I connected to a family member who was also eccentric, had also started as the ‘other’, and then went on to have both a family and a successful career – something she forged for our family nearly 100 years before my time.

However, my most shocking discovery was still to come. As I started to share my discoveries with my grandmother and great aunties, I would learn this incredible woman was not just a long-lost ancestor - but was in fact my great, great grandmother. Despite only a few

generations between Mary and myself, and despite Mary being heralded by many newspapers upon her death as ‘the most remarkable person in the state’s legal history’, I had never heard about her. The secrecy both bewildered me and made it even more excited to find out more.

Soon I came to realise that the family’s silence told the story as much as the stories themselves. Their silence reflected the values, the culture and prejudices that many viewed Mary through. The same prejudices that I was judged against a century later. Such prejudice is further revealed in the newspaper articles about her – where she is sometimes admired, but mostly ridiculed. Many parts of Mary – her contentious profession, her role as female breadwinner, her boldness to fight through intimidating legal structures as an illiterate woman of little “rank” – caused her extraordinary life to be wrapped up in a blanket of shame and forgotten not just from the consciousness of my family, but the history of Sydney. In contrast, men who had achieved less in Federation Australia have entire books and buildings dedicated to them.

I then felt a strong desire to reclaim this history not just for myself, not just for my family, not just for women, but because without her story there is a skewed remembering of our collective history. A skewed remembering of what is possible. And I know it is from this lens that I have focused on ‘Mary the fighter for equity’ more than any of the other riveting tales that surround her life. Luckily along the way I would find an academic paper on Mary that would lead me to an academic historian with the same desire to reclaim this story – albeit from a slightly different lens – my co-author of this extraordinary story.

The biographical subject

Since at least the 1990s it has been recognised that biography – as with other species of history – is influenced by the subjectivity of the author’s selection of sources and their analytical lens in reading these materials (Styler 2017, 172). Transparency is therefore

needed about the sources underpinning life writings, including discussion of the degree to which the biographical subject can be truly known from such records. Ken Plummer in his monograph *Documents of Life* observed that while the world may be ‘crammed full of personal documents’, these were themselves inevitably subjective views of the lives whose events they recorded:

What matters, therefore, in life history research is the facilitation of as full a subjective view as possible, not the naive delusion that one has trapped the bedrock of truth. Given that most social science seeks to tap the ‘objective’, the life history reveals, like nothing else can, the subjective realm (Plummer 1983, 14).

Often life writing in fact involves an exploration of multiple subjectivities, not just of the author and biographical subject, but of all those who produced records that lend insight into the biographical subject’s life. This is often particularly the case when the lives of women are being explored, especially working-class women with limited literacy, as their ‘documents of life’ tend to be authored not by them, but by others. Mary’s story is one example of a life that must be largely viewed through the eyes of others.

It can be a challenging process to excavate the voices and personalities of biographical subjects from sources where their words and experiences have been mediated by the subjective views of those doing the recording. Readers are said to want a sense of ‘completeness’ when it comes to the treatment of the character of a biographical subject; a neat answer to the question ‘what were they really like’ (Beer 2012, 360-361). Yet the answer to this question is often a complex or even contradictory one, especially given that different sources by different observers may have been privy to different aspects of the subject’s identity, or simply read these in different ways. Readings of Mary’s character – sometimes

even basic facts of her life – vary across sources, reinforcing the ultimately incomplete picture that these records can offer of the woman herself, and that we can therefore capture in our biography.

The richest account that we have of Mary's life is a legal document; a submission to the Privy Council in England appealing an earlier legal decision by the Australian courts in which Mary challenged the settlements of her husband's will. As historian Carolyn Strange comments, legal evidence tends to reveal 'troubled and trouble-making women' that do not appear elsewhere in historical records, memories and writings (2010, 144). The Privy Council submission – a document consisting of some 328 pages of typescript – is even richer than most legal records. Mary's main contention in challenging the will was that her husband George's property holdings were substantially the product of her own earnings that he invested on her behalf and therefore should not have been held in his name or willed away from her at his death. To legally adjudicate this claim lengthy interrogations were conducted of Mary, her family members, friends, business acquaintances and others about Mary's 37-year marriage to George and her life more generally. The view of Mary that this document offers varies across the 24 witnesses interviewed in the case and must be read carefully in light of the witnesses' different agendas, as well as the influence of the prevailing attitudes in Federation Australia. To some, including her own children and stepchildren, Mary Scales seems to fit perfectly the appellation of 'troubled and trouble-making' women that Strange describes being most readily discoverable in legal records. For those who had attended Mary's séance circles, she appeared in the guise of a valued friend, even a spiritual leader. Among those who occupy the outer edges of the case, estimations of Mary oscillate between delightful eccentric and scheming con-artist.

Mary's own 67-page testimony reveals a dramatic and larger-than-life figure, full of paradoxes. Whilst she displays the confidence to initially represent herself without defence

counsel and describe her incredible business dealings with great vision and frankness – there are other times when the tactics of the prosecution lawyers bring Mary undone and confused. However, as her testimony – like the others – must be considered a subjective presentation of reality aiming to achieve a particular end within the court trial, with intentional or unintentional falsifications as a result (Zemon Davis 1987), it cannot be said to reveal a complete or transparent view of Mary's character either. In fact, it was both the eccentricity of her life events, and her portrayal of them, that caused Justice Owen, the trial judge in the Equity court hearing (before the matter was elevated to the Privy Council), to feel a 'good deal of anxiety' in his deliberation over her case (Owen in Privy Council 1926, 204). Ultimately, it was these inconsistencies in Mary's evidence and the extraordinary nature of her stories that led Justice Owens to conclude that her evidence could 'not be believed'. He dismissed her case which she then had to pursue to a higher jurisdiction.

There are numerous other sources depicting facets of Mary's life, but these tend to be even further removed from the subject herself. These include hundreds of newspaper articles about Mary's court appearances, not only during the case of George's will, but in relation to several earlier prosecutions of her for practising fortune-telling. While Mary's own words about her spiritual gifts and the business she built around them are occasionally caught as snippets from courtroom testimony in these articles, in general these are overshadowed by rhetoric from the journalists themselves belittling and poking fun at fortune-telling and its practitioners. In addition to the sensationalism to which crime reporting has historically been subject in an effort to sell papers (Foyster 2007), the likely background of the journalists is also significant. Early twentieth-century journalism in Australia was largely the province of an educated male cultural elite, whose response to claims of supernatural gifts by a working-class woman like Mary in the forward-thinking and scientifically-minded Federation Period was unsurprisingly one of derision (Piper 2014).

Transcripts do not survive of the hearings where Mary was charged with fortune-telling, as such cases mostly took place in the lower courts where only the offence, verdict and sentence were recorded with few particulars. Other archival holdings include business and property records that speak mostly to the immense wealth that this working-class couple amassed in their lifetime. While such transactional accounts are limited in what they reveal about Mary's nature, they are suggestive of a woman of tremendous determination and acumen.

Finally, there are family memories, although these suffer even more than usual from the gaps and silences to be expected in familial recollections. Those relatives surviving today remember very little of Mary personally, being only small children when she was alive. The family stories passed down are scant second-hand reminiscences of the generation before them (Mary's children and stepchildren). There are many reasons for this apparent code of silence. Mary's children and stepchildren may have felt anger because details of the family's private, and sometimes shameful, lives were printed in news around the world. They too would have been influenced by dominant portrayals of her profession by the media and authorities – as would their employers, potential partners, and friends. Then there was the fact that Mary was a female breadwinner, and hence held an unusual decision-making power for a woman, thereby upsetting the traditional gender status quos of her time. Mary stoked this family fire further through the unusual terms of her own will, which continued to create gendered tensions for generations to come by only providing for her female descendants.

The life that emerges from these shadowy sources is as frustratingly mysterious as it is intriguingly poignant. Where events are corroborated by multiple witnesses or sources we state them as fact; otherwise, we have attempted to make clear where things are speculative or in dispute. Mary Ann Foley was born in Hobart, Tasmania on 28 April 1863, the first child of Irishman Daniel and his wife Ann. Contradictions between sources start even here with the

marriage certificate giving Daniel's birth year as 1830, making him 33 to Ann's 22, while his death certificate gives his birth year as 1824, increasing their age difference from 11 to 15 years. The couple, who did not marry until 1869 after three out of their eventual 11 children had been born, were from humble circumstances. Daniel's occupation on Mary's birth certificate was given as boatman, although in other records he is described as a labourer; Ann's mother signed the certificate with an X, indicating that she was likely illiterate. Mary herself would only learn to read and write in old age while living in England for 6 months waiting for her Privy Council hearing to contest George's will. As the eldest of a large impoverished family, Mary's childhood may have been burdened with responsibilities that left little time for her schooling. In 1882 the 19-year old Mary herself had a baby that died at birth, the records indicating 'father unknown'. Mary would later claim during the will contestation that this baby had been George's and that they had married in secret some time before its conception, after which George had travelled back to England before returning to the colonies to marry her again (this time publicly). The evidence suggests this was a fiction Mary later invented to avoid the stigma of single motherhood. According to Tasmanian shipping records it appears that Englishman George Scales arrived in Tasmania for the first time in January 1883, accompanied by his wife Evarilda and their three young children. Events such as the birth of Mary's first child are thus both revealing and obscuring, suggestive of a woman who faced difficult circumstances in her youth and sought to distance herself from these as she matured, but with the exact facts of the episode, let alone Mary's emotional reactions to it, remaining shrouded in mystery.

George's first wife Evarilda gave birth to a fourth child soon after arriving in Tasmania, on 1 March 1883. Within two weeks Evarilda died from typhoid fever – leaving 26-year-old George a single father of four children, including a newborn. The unfortunate death of Mary's baby had left her with one gift – a form of income as a wet nurse. It is

possibly that it is through this connection they met, and when George's infant son died at four weeks old of bronchitis – they also shared a common grief of losing a newborn. Just a couple of months later George and Mary travelled to Sydney, where they married on 2 June 1883. After going back to Tasmania to live for a time in Mary's crowded parents' home, Mary and George relocated to Sydney. Initially, the family's financial prospects looked good. George was a stonemason and Sydney was in a frenetic building period when work was abundant. Mary opened a grocery store in Sydney's Annandale in 1886, but it closed within the year. The couple moved into a tin shed on land in Canterbury, an outer suburb of Sydney, where George slowly started to construct a house for them (a process that appears to have taken about 10 years to complete). Mary started to take in laundry, and further added to the family income by rag-and-bone collecting and selling honey door-to-door in the evenings. Her work increasingly became the family's mainstay due to an injury inhibiting George's ability to work, and the economic depression of the early 1890s lessening the work available. George was also reputedly a gambler, leading to Mary secreting money from her work in hidden places around their property to ensure the family had a safety net.

The family's fortunes started to rise around 1894, when Mary won a contract to wash the hammocks from the naval ships while they were in port in Sydney. By 1897, Mary had accumulated the funds to open a shop known as the Parisian Toilet Company in the Sydney Arcade, a fashionable retail precinct in the central business district. While the store reputedly sold beauty aids and cosmetics, its main income appears to have been generated by Mary's clairvoyance and faith healing. By 1903 – at which point Mary and George had four children (one son and three daughters) together in addition George's three from his first marriage – George appears to have left off stonemasonry, instead working in the shop taking bookings and money for Mary's services. This was the year that Mary was first charged and convicted of telling fortunes for money, then a minor offence usually punished by fine. Mary would

face similar charges in 1907, 1909 and 1911. The small fines Mary faced on these occasions were not enough to deter her from the business, the success of which resulted in funds that let George and Mary make a series of property investments around Sydney. George's literacy meant he took the lead as primary speculator, however according to Mary's later claims in court all the purchases were funded from the profits of her work as a clairvoyant, and he consulted her on all purchases. Sometimes the land was purchased in George's name, sometimes in Mary's.

When George died in 1920, she therefore felt his decision not to leave all the properties to her free and clear was unfair. George's will stated she would only receive a life interest, and this would be passed upon her death to their children. In the protracted legal battle, the prosecution sought to prove Mary 'gifted' this money to her husband, hence he could dispose of the properties he bought with Mary's money as he saw fit. Bolstered by Mary's eccentricities in the court proceedings, this argument was initially successful. Upon losing her appeal to Australia's Supreme Court, Mary pursued the matter all the way through to the Privy Council in England on appeal in 1925. Its judgement was not handed down until 1926, when Mary finally received a partial victory by being awarded £4000 in recognition that her earnings had been used by George to make his initial property speculations. Whilst Mary died on the eve before she was awarded the money in 1928, the fortune she herself was able to leave meant she appears to have come close to achieving her ambition 'to die the richest woman in Sydney' (*The Sun*, 9 August 1922, 7). She also achieved another ambition of protecting the rights of (some of) her children and grandchildren – the terms of her will meant that her daughters, and their daughters, would be guaranteed an education and opportunities that she was never afforded (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 August 1922, 5).

Multiple narratives and positionality

The basic details of Mary's life, as well as they can be known, thus present her story as a classic rags-to-riches tale. Digging underneath these events, however, reveal further layers to Mary's story that can lend themselves to other interpretive angles. Whether a family historian, or an academic historian, the angles that strike us as most prominent and important are inevitably influenced by our own positionality; we may see dozens of different threads to the story but are likely to spend the most time pulling out those that to us are most brightly coloured.

As women, the authors of this article are both sensitised to the gendered angles of Mary's story. Some of these will be evident from the above outline. The stigma Mary faced as a single mother and her efforts to support her family financially during a period when employment options for women were limited readily lends itself as a case study for the social and economic challenges that Australian women confronted historically (some of which persist today). There are also other events not included in the above rags-to-riches narrative that become more central to Mary's life when viewing it as the story of a woman versus the patriarchy. One of these is an alleged sexual assault upon Mary in 1883 by a fellow boarder at the lodging-house where she was residing in Sydney the night before her marriage to George. There was little corroborative evidence in the case, and the alleged assailant was acquitted at trial without the jury even leaving the jury-box to confer in private. There is no direct evidence of how Mary reacted to this event then or in later years, but one can speculate it had a significant effect on her own understanding of female vulnerability. While recollecting her family's history during her deposition in the case over George's will, she several times dated events by stating that they occurred either before or after the Mount Rennie case, an infamous gang rape that took place in Sydney in 1886. While the case was well-known among residents of the Australian colonies at the time, Mary's use of it as a

marker for events in her own life more than 25 years later suggests that it deeply embedded in her consciousness. The event likely called to mind her own assault trial, as must have a subsequent court hearing in 1902 involving an indecent assault against one of Mary's clients. Mary was called as a witness, not because she had seen the assault, but because the defence attempted to use the victim's attendance at Mary's séance circles to depict her as a flighty and unstable character.

Another incident in which Mary appears as a side character – but which becomes important when viewing her life through a feminist lens – likewise saw Mary as a witness in a criminal case. This one occurred in 1897, shortly after she established her business as a clairvoyant in the Sydney Arcade. Mary was consulted professionally by the parents of a 20-year-old pregnant single woman from regional New South Wales; she advised them to place their daughter in the care of a nurse in Sydney whose private hospital provided abortions to women in need. When the young woman died from complications arising out of the induced miscarriage, Mary was called as a witness in the case against the nurse. Mary's role in these events was not an unusual one; fortune-tellers often acted as a conduit to abortionists for women seeking advice on how to avert the terrifying future that an unmarried pregnancy would bring (Finch & Stratton 1988). While the outcome in this case was tragic, one wonders if Mary was motivated by more than just pecuniary gain when confronted by women in such circumstances, which must have reminded her of the dangers and uncertainty she herself had earlier faced as an unwed mother.

Mary's life is thus replete with the type of events that would form the substance of later campaigns for gender equality and women's rights. She herself lived through the era of first-wave feminism, although it is impossible to know her thoughts on the struggles of her contemporaries for female suffrage, divorce law reforms and other feminist issues. However, the dispositions Mary made in her will, which placed her fortune in trust to provide for the

education, health and clothing needs of her female descendants only, suggests an awareness of women's less privileged position in society and a desire to protect the women in her own family from this. This denouement could provide a satisfying conclusion to a story of female empowerment that Mary's life could be written as. It would be a mistake though to figure her simply as a feminist heroine; not only do we not know if Mary herself would have embraced such an identity, but such a portrayal runs the risk of lacking complexity and critique. As Sybil Oldfield (2001, 949) writes, 'How a feminist woman biographer may be sympathetic towards, but not uncritical of, her (woman) subject – and how to respect that subject's right to some remnant of privacy in an age that demands to know "all" – are still contested areas.'

Weaving the threads – Finding common ground between narratives

The difficulty of satisfying the reader's desire to know all is not only problematised by issues such as lack of source material, but by authorial sensitivity to the subject's right to discreet handling of some elements of their lives, something that family historians are likely to be particularly conscious towards. This challenge was experienced in the collaboration between the authors both in the writing of Mary's biography, and even in the writing of this article. On one hand, the academic historian, as influenced by her training, wants to include all details of the life of Mary and those closely connected to her that are revealed by the records. However, the family historian, who has connections to those living who still hold members of Mary's children's generation dear, wants to omit certain details out of respect for the privacy of the living.

In one example the family history felt uncomfortable about the academic historian's inclusion of the story about Mary's connection to abortions. Initially the family historian did not want this thread emphasised as it felt contentious and could offend some of her living family. Each time these edges of disagreement were found throughout the research and

writing process, the differing positions were worked through most successfully through regular conversations.

Whilst at times uncomfortable, it is was these discussions that allowed us to work towards finding a common ground between respecting the rights of our subjects and revealing the facts as they are known. In this example, after some discussion, the family historian held a new appreciation for what this thread of the story told about the lives of women in that time, and the academic historian rewrote the section to connect it with the boarder themes. Hence whilst it often took compromise from both parties, at times our differing positions led a richer understanding and storytelling. This tends to reaffirm previous findings that the role of the family historian is often one of both truth seeker and secret keeper (de Groot and Stallard 2020).

Readers' own positionalities will also influence their understandings of the substance of the subject's life. With any complex biographical subject there is likely to be at least one facet of their identity that is subject to multiple, even divisive, interpretations based on the views of the audience. In Mary's case the most contentious point of divergence will probably be the means by which she made her fortune. Readers' perspectives on Mary are likely to vary in accordance with their views on fortune-telling. Sceptical readers may view her at best as self-deluded and at worst as a charlatan. More open-minded readers may wonder if she possessed genuine psychic talents. Others, while divided on the legitimacy of divination, may nevertheless see her in a sympathetic light as employing the best means at her disposal to support her family.

These alternative readings echo the varied opinions surrounding fortune-telling during Mary's lifetime as well, which would likewise lend themselves to different renderings of her narrative. For instance, shifting the narrative focus to Mary's fortune-telling career and the encounters with the law that resulted from this could place her tale within the genre of

criminal biography, a form that dates to at least the fifteenth century when ballads of legendary outlaw figures like Robin Hood started appearing in written literature (Mascuch 2001). Even within this genre though, different established narrative frameworks exist to produce or reinforce different interpretations. Some criminal biographies figure their subjects as an ‘Other’ whose existence threatens the social norms of the majority; many media commentators during Mary’s lifetime certainly othered fortune-tellers (most of whom were already ‘othered’ in Australian society as women or members of cultural minorities), villainising them as frauds who connivingly preyed on their clients’ weaknesses for money (Piper 2014a). Some species of criminal biography though seek not to villainise or other their subjects, but rather promote them as outlaw heroes or victims of oppressive laws. Mary’s narrative could be written in such terms; in 1907 she even figured as an agent of resistance to State oppression when she successfully challenged the legitimacy of the fortune-telling laws all the way to the High Court (Piper 2014b). (An ultimately short-lived victory as a new statute against the practice was introduced in New South Wales the following year.)

Yet it may be erroneous to consider her story in terms of criminal biography at all. Although legally it was an offence, many of Mary’s contemporaries did not see fortune-telling as a crime (Piper 2015). For some, including it seems Mary herself, divination and seances were a form of spiritual practice; they saw those prosecuted for engaging in such activities as victims of religious persecution. For others, fortune-telling simply represented a popular pastime or amusement. The services of local fortune-tellers were readily available in Australian cities at local markets or even dedicated shopfronts, with these businesses advertising openly in the daily papers. Police only sporadically prosecuted fortune-tellers, and when they did the courts were usually sympathetic to defendants, most of whom were women, often widows or deserted wives using the trade to support their families. The evidence of the types of questions asked during divination sessions also suggest they were a

chance for customers to discuss concerns that they were having in their lives at the time, perhaps acting as a form of therapeutic counselling in a time before such services were readily available.

The authors' own impressions of Mary are of someone who genuinely believed she possessed psychic powers, as evidenced by her frequent offers to demonstrate them during the various court cases in which she was involved. At the same time, even if one subscribes to the belief that psychic phenomena in general are a real possibility, it is impossible to know for sure whether Mary's gifts were genuine. As her biographers, we have decided to write her story from a stance of neutrality on the question. While this may frustrate some readers in their desire to know what the subject was 'really like' – an impulse that can result in typologising subjects into simplistic categories like heroine or villain – we believe it is most appropriate to allow readers to evaluate this part of Mary's story on their own terms. We also believe that while Mary's involvement in fortune-telling adds a glamour and sensationalism to her story that make it uniquely compelling; once this is placed in the context of her wider life it becomes apparent that this aspect is only one of many remarkable features in her narrative.

Moreover, as with most biographical subjects, this is not just Mary's story. Other characters passed through and shaped her life, some of whom potentially even warrant their own biographies. Part of the success behind Mary's clairvoyancy business stemmed from the patronage she received from the leaders of Sydney society. Her clientele reputedly included such members of the elite as Lady Carrington, wife of the New South Wales Governor, and Mark Foy, wealthy department-storeowner who reputedly consulted Mary on business decisions. There were also those more nearly connected to Mary: husband George, stepchildren Ernest, Winifred and Leonard, and children Ellen Evarilda (died in infancy), Daniel, Venus, Elsie and Mary Galatea. We also see Mary's biography as a family history,

not only because one of the authors is her descendant, but because Mary's family situation is vital to understanding her motivations and the course her life took.

Biography is not only a way to explore the history of a particular family, but the history of family in general. While Mary's family life gives insight into her as an individual, it also provides a window into important dynamics at work during this period within Australian families more generally. Mary's role as breadwinner within the family, while unusual for a woman in this period, was not unique, with many working-class women required to contribute to or even maintain the household finances through the same type of economy of makeshifts that Mary initially deployed (caring for others' children, doing their laundry, selling home produce). What was unusual was the degree of financial success that Mary achieved. Most women were constrained to roles that paid minimum wage, limiting their ability to amass wealth. Given accepted gender roles of the period, however, one wonders what the consequences of her eventual financial success were for her marital relationship. On the one hand, George frequently praised Mary's moneymaking abilities to others, informing various acquaintances that all he had in life he owed to her. On the other, it is also clear that he was far from an ideal husband, not just gambling but having affairs with other women.

There were other tensions in the family as well. While blended families were common in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries due in part to the lack of childcare options available to single fathers, this did not mean such families were harmonious. Mary's relationship with her stepchildren, while not openly hostile, appears to have been somewhat fraught. The children of George's first marriage grew up during the family's impoverished period, working in Mary's laundry business with his daughter Winifred responsible for maintaining the household and children, while Mary laboured at her various occupations. Mary's own children, born later, grew up in a more stable and ultimately prosperous

household. By their adolescent years, when their older siblings had moved out and were engaged in working-class professions, the family had moved from the shed in Canterbury to a terrace house in Darlinghurst with a second home on the northern beaches for weekends away. Yet their relationships with their mother were far from conflict-free. Mary appears to have feared that a life of privilege was endangering her children's future, especially the girls; she exhorted with them to spend more time learning useful skills and tried to encourage them to be self-sufficient. She also disliked Mary Galatea's suitor and later husband, whom she believed was hoping to cash in on the family's fortune and accused of stealing things from the house. All these acrimonious relations would be hashed out during the hearing of George's will. In this rags to riches tale the wealth thus did not signal a happy conclusion or even an ending at all; rather, it sets the scene for another type of life writing, the 'crisis in the family' genre that has risen to popularity since the late twentieth century (Sanders 2001).

Our reading of Mary's story in this light is enhanced by one of us being her descendant, a positionality that offers unique insights into the ripple effects that the events of Mary's life had on those that came after her. This more long-term perspective of the story of Mary Scales lends itself to the style of a gothic family drama. The question of inheritance forms a core of dramatic tension at the centre of Mary's tale; however, bequests can come in many forms, and Mary's legacies to her family were not merely financial. Her descendants inherited a tradition of secrecy about an incredibly important chapter of the family's history – events that defined who they are today. The process of familial rediscovery of the history behind these secrets reflect similar patterns of revelations experienced by many family historians, particularly in Australia, driven by the growth of online genealogical research platforms and the popularity of television programming centred on unravelling family histories. Rosamund Dalziel suggests that Australians have gradually moved from a habit of carefully 'forgetting' or concealing family secrets, whether the stigma of convict origins or other traditionally

‘shameful’ events like illegitimacy, to instead making it a point of pride to be able to know the ‘full’ story of one’s familial past in all its colour (1999, 111). Moreover, perhaps due to the legacies of its postcolonial past, a ‘unique focus on inheritance, generations, and kinships’ has been detected in Australian life writing (Barnwell 2017). Australian family histories are thus often a means of dealing with the secrets of the past and the return of the repressed, and thus, despite being non-fiction, often fit the conventions of the growing literary genre of the postcolonial gothic. According to Julie Azzam, two defining traits of the postcolonial gothic are a sense of ‘pastness’ within the present, and the presence of transgressive women ‘who threaten to expose the dark underbelly of their own historical and political contexts’ (2008, v), features that certainly speak to Mary’s story.

There are numerous other lenses that could be brought to Mary’s story that would influence the way that it is told. In the hands of different authors, the narrative might primarily become one about class and Mary’s experiences of social mobility, or the city of Sydney and how the family’s fortunes and movements reflected changes in the urban capital itself, or of the nation and how Mary’s story reflects Australia’s political, economic, social and cultural developments during this period. Indeed, we also want to use her biography to explore these elements. Yet our overlapping positionalities tends to draw us towards feminist interpretations of her life as the ones that call most strongly to both of us, albeit in different ways or for different reasons. For the academic historian with a background in legal history, the battles Mary fought successfully against gendered oppressions in both criminal and civil courts are the most compelling features of her story. For the family historian it is the counterintuitive threads of silence and success – too often lost in the family history of exceptional women, that are the most colourful. Remarkably, it was Mary’s extraordinary confidence to be her eccentric self, to embrace her “otherness”, in a place and time that told women to be other than themselves, that both led to her incredible success and also to her

story being lost until now. Ultimately though, there is enough commonalities in our readings of Mary's life to shape a cohesive narrative together – and in fact, it maybe our diverse perspectives have led to a richer and more respectful telling.

Conclusion

This is important for both family and academic historians to keep in mind – the multiple stories that can be told about someone's life. It is also important to recognise our own positionality in our reading of her story as primarily that of a family and legal drama, and as a feminist allegory of the oppressions that women have endured and the agency they have exerted in the face of these. While we are writing a work of non-fiction, the choices we make still result in the crafting of a narrative to fit particular story patterns. For this reason, in writing Mary's biography we plan to introduce ourselves as characters within the story from the outset, as we did here, in an effort to acknowledge our own positionality and be able to reflect throughout on the process of historical discovery of sources and the choices we have made in interpreting them.

Dr Alana Piper is a Lecturer and Research Fellow at the Australian Centre for Public history at the University of Technology Sydney. Her research interests draw together the social and cultural history of crime with criminological, legal and digital humanities approaches. She has authored over 40 academic publications, and is currently an investigator on the ARC Discovery project 'Sex and the Australian Military, 1914-2020' (2021-2023).

Contact email: alana.piper@uts.edu.au

Affiliation: University of Technology Sydney

References

- Azzam, Julie Hakim. 2008. *The Alien Within: Postcolonial Gothic and the Politics of Home*. PhD thesis, University of Pittsburgh.
- Barnwell, Ashley. 2017. "Locating an Intergenerational Self in Postcolonial Family Histories." *Life Writing* 14 (4):485-493.
- Beer, Anna. 2012. "Johnny and Bess: Life Writing and Gender." *Life Writing* 9 (4):359-375.
- Bottero, Wendy. 2015. "Practising family history: 'identity' as a category of social practice." *The British Journal of Sociology* 66 (3):534-556.
- Dalziell, Rosamund. *Shameful Autobiographies: Shame in Contemporary Australian Autobiographies and Culture*. Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1999.
- de Groot, Jerome. 2009. *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- De Groot, Jerome and Matthew Stallard. 2020. "'Things are Coming Out that Are Questionable, We Never Knew About': DNA and the New Family History," *Journal of Family History* 45 (3): 274-94.
- Evans, Tanya. Spring 2011. "Secrets and Lies: the Radical Potential of Family History." *History Workshop Journal* 71 (1):49-73.
- Ferres, Kay. 2019. "Women with a Theory: Feminism and Biography." In *A Companion to Literary Biography*, edited by Richard Bradford, 159-174. Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley Blackwell.
- Finch, Lyn, and Jon Stratton. 1988. "The Australian working class and the practice of abortion 1880-1939." *Journal of Australian Studies* 12 (23): 45-64.
- Foyster, Elizabeth. 2007. "Newspaper reporting on crime and justice." *Continuity and Change* 2 (1): 9-12.

- Haase, Jenny. 2019. "Writing Oneself as Another—Writing Another as Oneself: Julia Kristeva and Teresa of Ávila." In *Inscribed Identities: Life Writing as Self-Realization*, edited by Joan Ramon Resina, 141-156. New York: Routledge.
- Helms, Gabriele. "The Coincidence of Biography and Autobiography: Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*." *Biography* 18.4 (1995): 339–359.
- Holmes, Andrew Gary Darwin. 2020. "Researcher Positionality - A Consideration of Its Influence and Place in Qualitative Research - A New Researcher Guide." *International Journal of Education* 8 (4):1-10.
- Jolly, Margaretta. 2015. "Voices in Movement: Feminist Family Stories in Oral History and Sound Art." *Life Writing* 12 (2):139-159.
- Mascuch, Michael. 2001. "Criminal Biography." In *Encyclopedia of life writing, autobiographical and biographical forms*, edited by Margaretta Jolly, 238-240. London: Fitzroy Dearborn.
- Nash, Catherine. 2008. *Of Irish Descent: Origin Stories, Genealogy, & the Politics of Belonging*. New York: Syracuse UP.
- Oldfield, Sybil. 2001. "Women's Biographies." In *Encyclopedia of life writing, autobiographical and biographical forms*, edited by Margaretta Jolly, 948-950. London: Fitzroy Dearborn.
- Popkin, Jeremy D. 2015. "Family Memoir and Self-Discovery." *Life Writing* 12 (2):127-138.
- Piper, Alana. 2014a. "'A Menace and an Evil': Fortune-telling in Australia, 1900-1918." *History Australia* 11 (3):53-73.
- Piper, Alana. 2014b. "The Scales of Justice." *Criminal Law Journal* 38 (6): 384-386.
- Piper, Alana. 2015. "Women's Work: The Professionalisation and Policing of Fortune-Telling in Australia." *Labour History* (108):37-52.

- Plummer, Ken. 1983. *Documents of Life: An Introduction to the Problems and Literature of a Humanistic Method*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Privy Council. 1926. Privy Council Appeal No.16 of 1925 Mary Scales v David Lindesay Aitken and another. Privy Council Cases with Judgements. UKPC 31 (23 April 1926). The British Library.
- Sanders, Valerie. 2001. "Family relations and Life Writing." In *Encyclopedia of Life Writing, Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*, edited by Margareta Jolly, 320-322. London: Fitzroy Dearborn.
- Strange, Carolyn. 2010. "A Case for Legal Records in Women's and Gender History." *Journal of Women's History* 22 (2):144-148.
- Styler, Rebecca. 2017. "Josephine Butler's Serial Auto/Biography: Writing the Changing Self through the Lives of Others." *Life Writing* 14 (2):171-184.
- Zemon Davis, Natalie. 1987. *Fiction in the archives: pardon tales and their tellers in sixteenth-century France*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.