

Family Puzzles: Pictures of My Mother's Life, Pieces of Myself

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My mother, Edith, was born in England in 1906 and died in Australia in 1994. The stories she told of her large working-class family were so much a part of my early life that turn-of-the-century Manchester, England, often seemed more real to me than 1950s Sydney, Australia, where I grew up. By the time I reached adolescence, her childhood, womanhood, and motherhood had been etched so deeply into my identity I believed I knew her as well as I knew myself. Now, as I gather together fragments of her life for a memoir, I am discovering how much my mother left unsaid and as I work through these gaps in my knowledge, the missing pieces in the puzzle of my mother's life continue to challenge the picture I once held of her.

Interweaving family history with reflections on research and writing, this personal essay considers the misunderstandings, myths, and mysteries that so often underlie family relationships. Referring to photographs and a number of old documents discovered after my mother's death, I reflect on how the untold stories provided me with additional insights into the everyday mores of an era and raised further questions about my relationship with the person who was my mother.

Family Puzzles

My mother, Edith, was born in England in 1906 and died in Australia in 1994. Several years prior to her death, I recorded some of her stories; however, I did not collate the information until 2006 when I began composing a memoir of three generations of my family as part of my PhD thesis in Writing. My interest in writing about family was stimulated by my growing awareness of how women's choices, and their capacity to choose, have changed over the twentieth century; these are transformations that are unambiguous when comparing Edith's life with mine, and mine with those of my daughter Diana, who was born in 1974. With each generation, the women in my family had greater opportunities, more choices in their families and the world around them. This article, however, focuses mainly on my mother's life, the choices that changed its direction, and how the gaps in her stories were gradually revealed to me. I am a writer, not a historian, but as with any auto/biographical project, entering the historical domain is inevitable, for as Liz Stanley has observed:

The "writing of a life" is the writing of a history, an account of the past by a particular kind of historian known as an auto/biographer. The epistemological issues raised in doing so are those that arise in

any historical research and writing process, and they concern the interpretive role of the historian, the fragmentary and incomplete nature of available sources, and the role of writing in the creation of, not a slice of the past, but rather an account of what this might have been.¹

My account of “what life might have been” for Edith was to be based mainly on her stories;² stories that were so much a part of my early life that turn-of-the-century Manchester, England, often seemed more real to me than the Sydney of the 1950s Australia in which I grew up. This was due in large part to my mother’s gift for detailed recollection. After listening to her memories, it was as if I relived her childhood panic when she became lost; tasted her first ice-cream; felt the texture of her father’s waistcoat; smelled the smoky embers of the coal-fired stove; and heard the “knocker-upper” tapping on the window to wake her father for work. As a child, these tales held me spellbound and although I lost interest when I reached adolescence, by then my mother’s childhood, womanhood, and motherhood had been etched into my identity as if they were my own.

As a child, it never occurred to me that those vivid images might be altered or enhanced by my mother’s imagination, but when I began to write and to correlate what she had told me with the historical narrative, I wondered about the reliability of her stories. Could a four-year-old girl really remember the death of King Edward VII and the coronation of his successor? I began to understand what David McCooey meant when he pointed out that “[t]he distinction between family history and myth as it is remembered and as it is known in adulthood is a difficulty in writing about one’s family.”³ Yet family history is not an inflexible grand narrative, nor am I claiming that my memoir, “Disobedient Daughters,” is history. In the sense that philosopher and historian R.G. Collingwood describes historical events as having an outside, or “what actually happened,” and an inside that reflects “the thoughts of historical agents,”⁴ my account is a subjective, inside look at three twentieth-century women: my mother Edith, my daughter Diana, and myself, providing views of how we perceived our lives in the context of our historical (as well as our present) time and place.

The narrative that emerged from listening to my mother’s stories, from our joint lived experiences, and from my reflection on them many years later

¹ Liz Stanley, *The Auto/biographical I* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 101-102.

² Unless otherwise noted, Edith’s experiences, as discussed in this article, are based on my recollections.

³ David McCooey, *Artful Histories: Modern Australian Autobiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 33.

⁴ R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), 215. Quoted in Jennifer Jensen Wallach, “Building a Bridge of Words: The Literary Autobiography as Historical Source Material,” *Biography* 29, 3 (Summer 2006), 447.

is indelibly linked to the personal and the social-historical context surrounding it. In many ways the two are inseparable; as Carolyn Steedman points out, “[h]istory as a methodology, is concerned with the reconstruction, interpretation, and use of the past, so it may be as well that it has something to say about that past that occupies all of us, whether we are historians or not – the personal past of each individual childhood.”⁵ Life writing, I would argue, is also about reconstruction and interpretation. While its focus may be narrower, most usually on the life of a single individual, I believe it has something worthwhile to add to our understanding of the past.

Like oral histories, life narratives add a personal dimension to history that is absent in more traditional accounts. In her book, *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women 1890-1940*, Elizabeth Roberts interviews women whose experiences mirror my mother's in working-class Manchester, England, at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁶ Reading these accounts, I found that my mother's stories were supported by those of the participants in the study. Like Edith's, theirs were difficult lives, steeped in poverty and restricted by tradition, yet as Roberts points out, the women “did not undervalue their contribution to society [...] and gained much satisfaction from their achievements.”⁷ My mother, I think, felt the same way, and for me this confirmed a growing realisation that the essence of a personal story is the meaning given to the life it remembers, not its accuracy. Alessandro Portelli maintains that “memory is not just a mirror of what has happened, it is one of the things that happens [...]”⁸ I did not understand that when I first recorded Edith's childhood memories. I did not realise that how she remembered and retold her stories was a way for her to try to make sense of her life. I also think that there was more to it than that. Now I can see how her stories interconnect to form a larger life narrative, and I suspect that her repetition and her focus on childhood was a way of suppressing what came later. Perhaps unconsciously she thought that if she buried the unwanted stories beneath a mountain of words, they would remain hidden. In the end, she exhumed one of those shards herself and gave it to me, a partial thing, riven with questions, yet a treasure all the same. Biomythography, some might call it, a blending of reality and possibility, evidence and imagination, substance and theory; but for me it is simply Edith's story. Let me tell you a little about how I wrote it.

Listening to the tape recording of my mother's stories, my thoughts wander and I miss a word. Sharra what? I do not remember hearing that before. I press rewind, hearing “... and Dad would take me on the sharrabang to Boggart Hole Clough.” It is a strange word, foreign sounding, and my

⁵ Carolyn Steedman, *Past Tenses: Essays on Writing, Autobiography and History* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1992), 193.

⁶ Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women 1890-1940* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publisher Limited, 1984).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁸ Alexander Stille, “Prospecting for Truth Amid the Distortions of Oral History,” *New York Times*, 10 March 2000, (np).

mother sounds odd too – not at all as I remember. Once I barely noticed her Lancashire accent but hearing it now, fifteen years after she died, it is clear that six decades in Australia moderated but did not defeat her idiosyncratic vowels. It is disconcerting that the ghost in the machine seems more real than the woman I recall.⁹

But that ghost is still telling the same old stories. Stories which were such an integral part of my childhood that even the odd phrase *Boggart Hole Clough* immediately conjures images of folded hills and dappled woods and a tea house where the unknown man who was my grandfather bought an iced cake for the child who would become my mother. How can I know all this and not know “sharrabang”? It is surely not the first time my mother mentioned the word. I think back, follow a string of memories, become lost in a maze of stories, but “sharrabang” remains obscure. I cannot imagine what it is beyond the context that points to some sort of transport.

To search for an answer, I Google the term and after some creative spelling I discover *charabanc* – a French word for a sort of sightseeing coach. There is even a photograph. I study the sepia image closely, searching for words to describe the unfamiliar vehicle, attempting to picture it among the horse-drawn carriages with which it would have shared the early twentieth century roads.



Image 1. *Charabanc*¹⁰

Trying to imagine my mother as a toddler amongst the sombre day-trippers in their suits and hats, I print the image and place it alongside an old postcard of Boggart Hole Clough that I had found in her box of mementoes. This is also a sepia photograph, but the drab colour cannot hide the lushness of the woodlands or the charm of the cosy refreshment rooms. For a working-

⁹ Edith Foden, interview by author, Evans Head, NSW, Australia, 27 May 1986.

¹⁰ Photograph of *charabanc* courtesy of Sudbury Museum Trust, United Kingdom.

class child living in public housing overshadowed by Manchester's factories and cotton mills, the *charabanc* must have seemed like a royal carriage and Boggart Hole Clough a magical kingdom. Considering all of the stories she told of it, why had she never shown me this photograph? She may have forgotten its existence, though the place itself lingered in her memories for the rest of her life. The tape recording, made half a century after she last saw the clough, captures the enchantment in her voice as she speaks of "bluebell woods, fields of daffodils, swans and strutting peacocks [...]." What is this quirk of transferred memory that allows me to share her nostalgia? Again, I search the internet, half-afraid the place has faded into the mists of time or died with my mother's stories of it. My fears are groundless; Boggart Hole Clough exists still, as it has done since 1890.¹¹ The name comes from the old belief that a boggart,¹² or mischievous spirit, haunts the area and I am pleased to discover that the legend Edith told me, of Morgan le Fey and the boggart, is in cyberspace for anyone to read. Feeling as if I am on the trail of something, I begin to consider the bigger picture of my mother's life and times.



Image 2. Refreshment Rooms, Boggart Hole Clough, Manchester¹³

In many ways, Edith's story provides a portrait of the twentieth century. In her eighty-eight years, she saw Halley's Comet twice, survived two

¹¹ Manchester Parks and Gardens, <http://www.manchester2002-uk.com/daytrips/parks-gardens.html>, last accessed on 15 September 2009. See also Peter Gurney, "The Politics of Public Space in Manchester 1896-1919," *Manchester Region History Review* 11 (1997), 12-23, <http://www.mchr.mmu.ac.uk/pubs/mrhr.htm>, last accessed on 2 October 2009.

¹² The mythical boggart is a creature mainly of Lancashire and Yorkshire, and is thought to be responsible for poltergeist activity. See Mysterious Britain Gazetteer, <http://www.mysteriousbritain.co.uk/index.html>, last accessed on 28 May 2009.

¹³ Photograph of Refreshment Rooms, Boggart Hole Clough, Manchester, England, from the private collection of Edith Foden, now in the possession of Lainie Jones.

World Wars and the Great Depression, lived through the reigns of four British monarchs: Edward VII, George V, George VI, and Elizabeth II; and the abdication of Edward VIII. She was almost six when the *Titanic* sank, and going on nine when the Germans torpedoed the *Lusitania*. In 1920, she was working in a Manchester cotton mill, and by 1930 she had migrated to Australia as a domestic servant. Marrying during World War II, she became a mother at thirty seven. Edith's stories were both nostalgic and romantic; as a child I thought my own life was dull compared to hers. However, her life was difficult in a way that mine was not, so let us go back to the beginning and consider her world and how it shaped the woman she became.

Edith Foden was born on 2 August 1906 in Manchester, a city her family had called home for four generations. Hers was a working-class world just emerging from the shadows of Victorian England with its poor wages, long working days, and child labour. Fifty years earlier it may well have been Edith's fate to die, as many children did, caught up in the heavy machinery of the mills. Living conditions for the working-class were dismal; houses were crowded and unsanitary, health provisions non-existent, and life expectancy short. The city was shrouded with a permanent pall of smoke and diseases such as tuberculosis were endemic.¹⁴



Image 3. Edith, circa 1912¹⁵

¹⁴ Manchester in Modern Times, <http://www.manchester2002-uk.com/history/modern/20thcent-1.html>, last accessed on 29 September 2009. See also Tim Gausden, "Manchester Early Dwellings Research Group," *Manchester Region History Review* 2, 1 (Spring/Summer 1988), 37-41, <http://www.mcrh.mmu.ac.uk/pubs/mrhr.htm>, last accessed on 2 October 2009, and Roberts, *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women 1890-1940*.

¹⁵ Photograph of Edith in 1912 from the private collection of Edith Foden, now in the possession of Lainie Jones.

By the time Edith was born, these circumstances were changing. Improved housing, clean water, sewerage, gas, and electricity were making huge differences to the lives of families. The opulent Victoria Baths, opened the year Edith was born and featuring in many of her stories, were symbolic of this modernisation. Described by newspapers of the time as a “water palace,” the huge building with its three swimming pools, stained glass windows and mosaic floors, must have seemed like the ultimate in luxury to working-class Mancunians like my grandparents.¹⁶ Victoria Baths opened to grand celebrations but Edith’s arrival that same year was marked only by a birth certificate, a tattered paper I still have over one-hundred years later. I also have one snapshot of her as a baby with her parents and two older brothers. If not for her stories, these would be my only connection to her early years.



Image 4. Isaiah and Ann Foden with their children Harry, George and Edith, circa 1906¹⁷

Yet despite Edith’s longevity, the span of her experiences and the delight she took in speaking about them, when I began my project I wondered if I would have enough material to complete it. The story of the *charabanc* was recorded in the mid-eighties, part of four tapes comprising memories of her childhood, the period of my mother’s life that she most loved recounting. However, as I will explain, the fact that we never recorded any stories beyond those years was entirely my fault. I simply did not know what I was doing.

¹⁶ See Manchester in Modern Times, <http://www.manchester2002-uk.com/history/modern/20thcent-1.html>, last accessed on 28 September 2009.

¹⁷ Photograph of the Foden family in 1906 from the private collection of Edith Foden, now in the possession of Lainie Jones.

Although I did not have an interest in family history when I was younger, my father's death in 1983 made me aware of the fact that I had questions that would never be answered and that many of his stories and songs had died with him. Unwilling to allow that to happen to Edith's stories, I asked her if she would be interested in making some recordings. Loving nothing better than talking about herself, she was, of course, delighted. But what began with such enthusiasm for both of us was doomed from the start. I should have known that the tension between my mother's need to recall the past and my need to draw her into the present would defeat us as it always had. When I switched off the recorder after an hour or so I was keen to discuss her recent experiences, her grandchildren, or even share with her a little of my own life. It was impossible; no matter how hard I tried to bring her back to the present, the old stories kept coming until the afternoon closed in and I had to leave. Still, we recorded four tapes of stories before I decided that I had had enough and ran away from the relentless monologue I had unleashed. Even so, six hours of recording could have taken us a long way, but my inexperience in narrative research constrained the process. I conducted several interviews over a period of time. My questions were designed to lead my mother systematically through the years, thus curtailing her habit of wandering randomly from one story to another. The result of this over-controlled pace was that when I pulled the plug we had not even reached her adolescence. "We'll get back to it later," I promised. "When I have more time." My mother would have been in her late seventies then – how much time did I think I had?

I now wish that I had not been so impatient. Not only because I would have had more material, but also because the lack of consistent information has had unexpected emotional repercussions. For as I looked further afield to piece together Edith's life, the unexpected rifts I found prompted questions that became a form of soul-searching for me. Were we more alike than I realised? How had the gaps and silences in my mother's life affected my way of being in the world? Do the events that shape a mother's life trickle down to her daughter? To her granddaughter?

I should not have been surprised when my daughter showed me the letters from her grandmother. Diana is like Edith in ways that I do not share. It is as if their gregarious nature has skipped a generation, leaving me introverted and reflective in opposition to their talkative, extroverted personalities. On the other hand, Diana loves shopping and embraces consumerism, whereas I am austere, a bit miserly – in this, at least, I am like my mother. At one stage of our sometimes stormy relationship, Diana chose to live with her grandmother during her final year of high school, finding her company more congenial (and more easily managed) than mine; but that is part of a far larger narrative, too labyrinthine for this article. Suffice to say, that despite the sixty-seven years between my mother and my daughter, their relationship was strong. They had corresponded regularly while Diana was away at university and although the letters mostly repeated stories I knew, the connections my mother made with Diana's history studies in those letters demonstrated an awareness that

intrigued me, offering insights into the puzzle I was trying to piece together and reminding me that people interact differently with different people. In fact, my daughter had never viewed her grandmother through the same unsympathetic mirror that I held up to her. “I loved getting Nan’s letters,” Diana said. “I could never understand why you resented her so much – always grumbling about how much of your time she wasted, and how she talked and never listened. You were so angry.” I denied this of course, then, ironically, made excuses for the behaviour that I had just denied. Later, alone with my thoughts, I was belatedly ashamed. Engrossed in my own concerns, I had no time for my mother’s.

Oral historian Stacey Zembrzycki writes that “when people leave major details out of their narratives, they drop hints and leave markers which can be pieced together if one is aware of those major details.”¹⁸ Edith had indeed left some of those markers, but I was unaware of their existence until I began clearing her bookshelves after she died. It was a simple task and I expected no surprises. I had given her many of the books over the years and they mostly included works by popular novelists: Dick Francis, James Herriot, Catherine Cookson, and Wilbur Smith. Where then, did these three small incongruities come from? There was a volume of Buddhist verse titled *The Light of Asia*, another text titled *Psychology for Everyman (and Woman)*, and yet another called *In Tune with the Infinite*. The last has an inscription beautifully handwritten on the flyleaf: “With every good wish for Xmas and the Coming Year, Stan.” And inside the Buddhist verse the inscription reads: “To Edith, with every good wish, Stan.” Who was Stan, I wondered? I could not recall my mother mentioning his name yet as I trawled my memories an image emerged from some obscure corner of my subconscious: St Mary’s Cathedral in Sydney; a man sitting in a pew sketching the crucifix above the altar; sunlight streaming through stained glass windows; and Edith watching admiringly as his pencil captured the radiance on the cross.

This picture was so clear in my mind that I knew it must have come from one of her stories. But in all that light, why was Stan such a shadow? Some elusive memory told me that he was that artist. It also seemed evident that there must have been some kind of relationship between him and my mother, because those are not books you give a mere acquaintance. “We need to understand ourselves,” begins the psychology book, which also has Stan’s mark on it, though not his name. They are the type of books I like to read myself yet it never occurred to me that my mother might have had similar leanings. Did Stan recognise in Edith a spiritual yearning to which I was blind? Much later, while flipping through her old autograph book, I found a page that caught my eye because of its originality. Different from the usual autographs, I thought idly. Certainly different from my father’s awkward but

¹⁸ Stacey Zembrzycki, “Memory, Identity, and the Challenge of Community Among Ukrainians in the Sudbury Region, 1901-1939” Ph.D. Dissertation, Carleton University, Ottawa, 2007, 16.

endearing: "Edith now, Edith forever. Foden now, but not forever." But as I began to turn the page I noticed the stylised initials: **E** at the top left, and **S** at the bottom right. Edith and Stan. It had to be – even the quotation itself had the same mystic overtones as the books. My mother, forever linked with Stan in a little leather-bound book. Why did she never mention this man? All I have is a name, a distinctive entry in an autograph book, a tenuous image in a church, and three books that do not fit with what I know of Edith's reading tastes. In oral history, some stories are told while others remain silent. This understanding took on more significance for me as I researched the nature of choice and agency for my thesis. There is agency in silence.

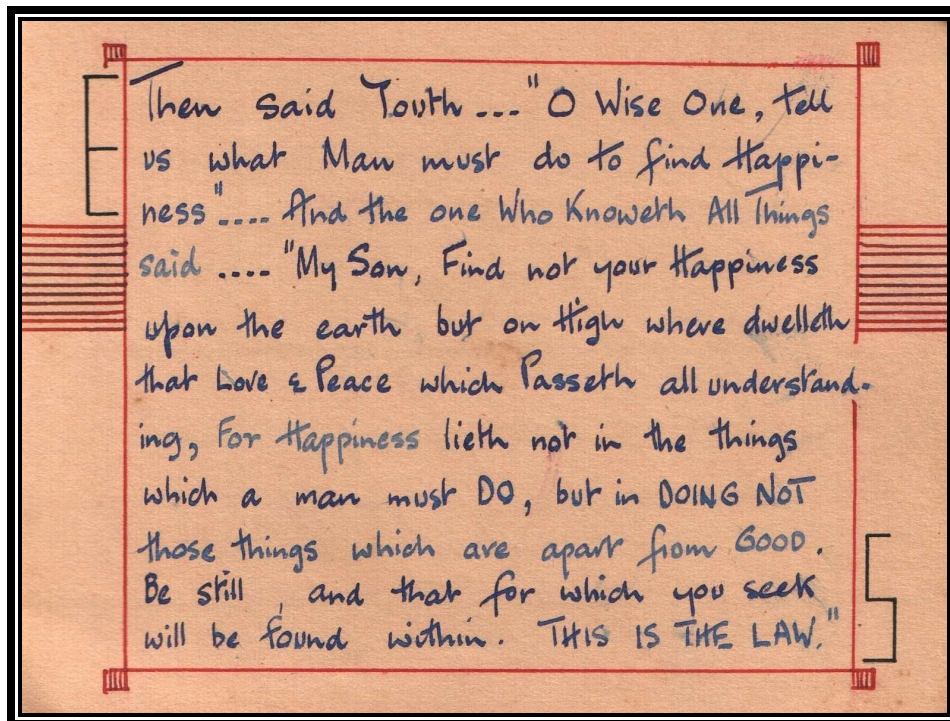


Image 5. A Page from Edith's Autograph Book¹⁹

But Stan was not my mother's only secret. Because it changed so much between us, I began my memoir with Edith's revelation of a secret she had kept for seventy years. Here is an extract:
I can't remember exactly what we were talking about that day. Perhaps my mother was telling me again how she came to immigrate to Australia. I might have been thinking about what to cook my family for dinner that night. Almost certainly I was wondering how soon I could get away – that's how it was with

¹⁹ Edith's Autograph Book, from the private collection of Edith Foden, now in the possession of Lainie Jones.

us then. Whatever I was thinking, there was nothing to prepare me for those three words.

“I was raped,” she said.

I can still feel the way my skin prickled, the sudden sting of tears which took me by surprise – I am not a person who cries easily.

She was watching me closely. “No point crying,” she said. “It was seventy years ago.”

But time had slipped. The past had been jerked into the present. I knew that what she was about to tell me would change our relationship.

“But all these years you’ve never said anything ...”

“I was too ashamed.”

I hugged her. Awkwardly. We have never been a hugging family. “Ashamed? It wasn’t your fault.”

“It was in a way ... Or that’s what they said.”

“Who said?”

“Him. Mam and Dad too, though it was the gossip that worried them. He was married, see. Mam said I’d led him on – shamed the family. I never told her he raped me.” My mother shrugged her bony shoulders. “I never told anyone till now.”²⁰

Edith told me this secret in 1994, not long before she died. Indeed, I think she needed to tell me about it so she *could* die; it may have been her way of finally letting go, or perhaps I am being fanciful. Almost fifteen years later, as I try to articulate what her revelation meant to me, I realise that the moment is coloured by the present: I am not the same person who heard her confession. I see things differently and know the world in a different way; the passing of years cannot help but change our perceptions. I could say that it was the first time I saw my mother as a woman, a sister traveller on a path beset with perils; certainly, for the short time we had left, our prickly relationship softened. Edith spoke less and I listened more, and somehow we found a meeting place where the past could be comfortable in the present. But underlying the personal gains we made then are understandings that did not occur to me until recently. These seem crucial when I consider the impact of time and place and society on my mother’s choices.

I want to suggest that cultural patterns a hundred years ago were denser than they are now and harder to unravel; people were content to follow established ways of doing things, change occurred at a slower pace, young people seldom questioned their elders. I think my mother’s life was so woven into the designs of her foremothers that only a violent act could have ripped

²⁰ Lainie Jones, “Disobedient Daughters” Ph.D. Dissertation, Southern Cross University, NSW, Australia, 2009.

those patterns apart. I believe that the brutality that ruptured her body also ruptured the relentless orbit of her life, hurling her into a new trajectory that spun her to the far side of the world where she met my father and conceived me.

Yet I do not mean to give unwarranted power to an event that may well have had a different outcome. For it was not the attack on Edith that ripped those old patterns asunder, but the courageous choices she made afterwards. Had she chosen otherwise – obeyed her father, submitted to her mother’s demands, and behaved as society expected – I would not have a story to tell.

On the other hand, the telling itself is problematic. Why am I so ready to expose an experience that Edith found so shameful she kept it hidden for most of her life? No matter how I present it, it feels like a betrayal. Even so, while the ethical dimensions give me reason to hesitate, I believe that by setting her story within the boundaries of a narrative that honours the choices she made, I can give my mother a voice to say now what she could not openly say then. I am not sure whether this is sufficient justification, but in trying to make meaning of my mother’s life I cannot omit that pivotal experience. For me, that is where the story begins. When my mother told me about the moment that changed her life in 1926, the story echoed through the decades to change our relationship in 1994. This is important. For although Edith was my mother, my mother and Edith were not the same person.

Edith was a child of Edwardian England. My mother did not come into being until I was born in wartime Australia. Edith was the young heroine of the stories I grew up with; dark tales some of them, of servitude and responsibilities too heavy for small shoulders, and lighter ones of enchanted places and long-lost traditions. She was the brave young woman seeking adventure who journeyed alone to a distant land and made her own way in the world. I know Edith as well as I know the characters from other tales I heard during my childhood and youth.

But I do not know my mother. Who was the real Edith? The protagonist of her stories seemed almost mythical, the one I called my mother so commonplace she was all but invisible; so much a presence in my life that I never really looked at her. What I had to do, I realised, was go back to the beginning and incorporate the storybook Edith into my mother’s shape until I could perceive the person who gave me life. To do this, I knew that I would need to consider each new piece of information in the light of old stories. Perhaps then I might be able to see how the adolescent was formed by the girl’s experiences; how the woman became the mother.

Writing my mother’s story has raised all sorts of questions, not only about her but also about me. As I continue to discover gaps in the life of the woman who shaped so many of my childhood understandings, I begin to notice similar patterns of evasion in my own recounting of experiences. My daughter, fishing through my life for her own history and heritage, complains that I am the most private person she knows. Although I recognise the truth of her grievance, I usually brush it aside. Uncovering Edith’s secrets have,

however, made my own silences more difficult to justify. How can we understand ourselves as daughters, wives, and mothers, if we do not know our female lineage? As memoirist Maureen Murdoch writes: “If we never learn our mothers’ memories and their stories, we are helpless to make the future – for ourselves and our daughters. In the silencing of our mothers’ lives and our own, we lose identity.”²¹ Looking in a mirror I see the ghost of Edith’s face in my own. Who is this person who inhabits my body? How did I become who I am?

These questions seem simple on the surface but in fact are both profound and challenging, and, I would suggest, they are at the heart of many oral history studies and personal narratives, even though they might be approached from different angles. As Steedman says, we are all, in one way or another, “a repository for other people’s history [...]”²² We all know the theories – that our parents, our childhood experiences, our emotional reactions – write the scripts we enact; that the times in which we live and the dominant institutions of class, culture, and society inscribe our very beings. This is part of the psychological and historical context that we are trying to understand when we explore individual and collective stories of life experiences. When I apply the concepts to myself, however, it is hard to acknowledge such limitations. I want to believe that I have played a major role in shaping my life – my choices, my goals, and my determination. Am I deceiving myself? Perhaps. And as I write I have barely begun to question the ways in which the historical and cultural gaps and silences shape us. How much of Edith’s life and my own, I wonder, can be attributed to the unspoken? How do her secrets and mine impact my daughter?

My mother told me that after she was raped, she was blamed and all but imprisoned by her parents. Making the first truly free choice of her life, she escaped and walked from Manchester to Portsmouth. Looking up this route in an atlas, I found the exact distance hard to establish with modern motorways crisscrossing the old roads she would have trudged in 1926, but it is unmistakably over half the length of England. Astounded, I asked Edith: “How long did it take?” She shrugged. “It’s hard to remember; I lost track of the days. Two or three weeks? Maybe more.”

Only when it was too late to ask, did I begin to sense that part of this story remained untold. I knew Edith had lived in a hostel at Portsea for over two years and wondered if it was, in fact, a home for unmarried mothers. Did Edith have a baby? Do I have a half-sister or brother somewhere in England? But surely, having told me so much, she would have told me that? Or is giving up a child for adoption more shameful, more painful, than being raped? Was it too *unspeakable*, even after seventy years?

²¹ Maureen Murdoch, *Unreliable Truth: On Memoir and Memory* (New York: Seal Press, 2003), 33.

²² Steedman, *Past Tenses*, 23.

A Bible I found among her treasures added to the mystery. It is a little New Testament with a photograph of some girls dressed in a 1920s style pasted inside the front cover. Around the photograph is a hand-written message: “We are a group of friends who love you, and who have pledged ourselves to pray for you every day.”

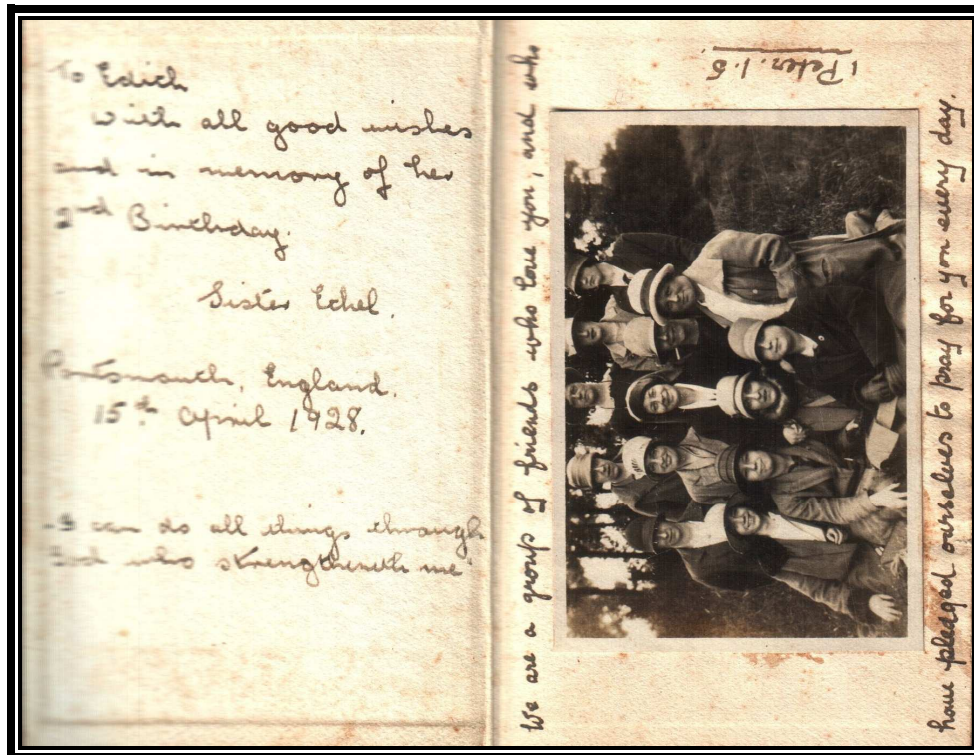


Image 6. The Front Pages of Edith's Bible²³

Did Edith need their prayers? Were they praying for past transgressions or concerned about future ones? The page opposite, dated 15 April 1928, has a Biblical quotation and a dedication: “To Edith, with all good wishes and in memory of her 2nd Birthday.” This seems bizarre; by then Edith was twenty one. I was baffled until I came across a little printed card, with the same date, tucked in the bottom of a drawer. On it is the sort of confession someone might read out at a church ritual:

²³ Edith's Bible with Photograph and Inscription Inside, from the private collection of Edith Foden, now in the possession of Lainie Jones.

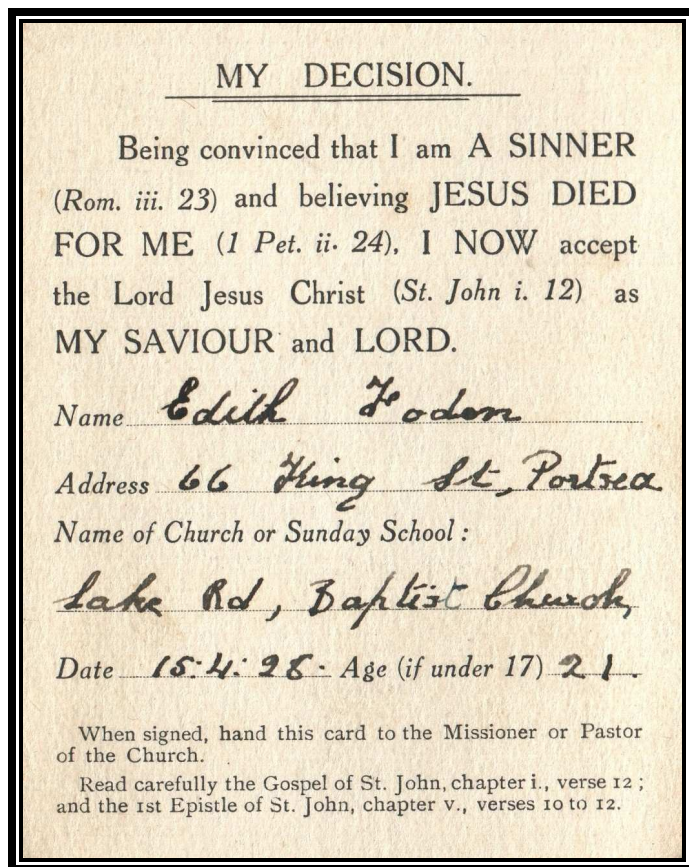


Image 7. Religious Declaration²⁴

Making assumptions is not good practice when writing about a life or recording a history, but I imagine that the birthday reference is connected to Christian notions of being “born again.” Yet my mother – the Edith I knew – was never particularly religious. Were the girls in the photograph fellow “sinners” at the home? Was the hostel run by the Baptist Church noted on the card? All I can do is keep looking for evidence.

My mother had told me many times that she came to Australia to work as a domestic servant. Following this lead, I accessed information posted online by the Australian Government and discovered documents which indicated that not only was the migration of girls destined for domestic service common before WWII, but also that those young women were frequently sponsored by various churches which set up hostels to accommodate and train them before they left.²⁵ Having searched without success for records of the

²⁴ Religious Declaration found after Edith’s death, from the private collection of Edith Foden, now in the possession of Lainie Jones.

²⁵ National Archives of Australia, Prime Minister’s Department, “Immigration: Training of Women. Domestic Duties” [68 pages, 1927–30] A461, I349/1/6

hostel in Portsea, I decided that, despite all my speculation, that was probably all there was to this story. I had to accept that I would never know the whole truth.

But I had given up too easily. When an assessment of this article was returned to me, one of the reviewers wrote:

It is very improbable that the Portsea hostel in which the mother lived for two years was a church training hostel to train women to migrate for domestic service. The training period in such hostels was usually a few months at most, not a couple of years. The author's initial suggestion that it was a rescue hostel for unmarried mothers seems much more likely. A youth group like the young women shown in the photograph in the Bible would participate with reform and support efforts for the residents in such a hostel. They would not be associated as a prayer group with a migration hostel.

Stirred to further action, I managed to find an email address for Portsmouth Council and lodged a request for further information about the hostel. After surprisingly few dead ends, I was put in contact with Portsmouth Central Library which houses a Historical Collections Department and a Genealogy Section dating from the 1780s. And finally, I obtained an answer of sorts: the hostel had been run by the Free Church Council, an amalgamation of non-conformist churches in the area. Unfortunately, the admission book covering the period when my mother lived there had not survived the bombing during World War Two. More pertinent, considering the motive for my search, this email also informed me that the Free Church Council had two homes in the city, one of which was for unmarried mothers and their babies. The building on King Street, however, was believed to have been simply a hostel for young single women to live in.²⁶

Armed with this knowledge, I drew some tentative conclusions. First, I assumed that Edith was a resident of the hostel. Of course, given the circumstances of her arrival in Portsmouth, it is possible that she was originally housed at the home for unmarried mothers and lodged at the hostel afterwards, but I had no evidence to indicate that this was the case. I remained puzzled, however, about what she did while she lived there as I cannot imagine that she was unemployed during those two years. Yet so many stories of her working life in England are jumbled together in my memory that it is difficult to distinguish between them. I know she left school at fourteen and, like most working-class girls of that time and place, went to work in one of Manchester's cotton mills. I know Edith worked in the mill for about two

http://www.naa.gov.au/naaresources/publications/research_guides/guides/immig/chapt07.htm, last accessed on 2 October 2009.

²⁶ Portsmouth Museum and Records Service, e-mail correspondence with Lainie Jones, 22 May 2009.

years until her mother forced her to quit so that she could become the family's housekeeper and child-minder while she herself went back to work as a seamstress. Edith resented this imposition but there was no question of choice: "I was the eldest daughter," she told me. "It was expected."²⁷

I once assumed it was expected because my grandmother was a tyrant, but Roberts's oral history study makes clear that at that time and place obedience to parental wishes was such that "parents decided which school a child would go to, when they would leave, and what job would follow."²⁸ Later, when her mother became pregnant with her twelfth child, Edith, then eighteen, began working in a local pub where she lived on the premises and did general cooking and cleaning duties as well as bartending. It was while she was working at the pub that she was raped and subsequently left home and arrived at Portsea; but what she did for the following two years I cannot say.

Before I could close this chapter, another email arrived from Portsmouth City Council Library Service with some additional information:

According to Kelly's Directory of Portsmouth, 1926 to 1929 (annually), 66 King Street, Portsea, was the Free Church Shelter and Hostel for Women and Girls. "Sister Ethel" was recorded as being in charge. "Free Church" refers to the non-conformist churches, that is Baptist, Methodist, Congregational, Presbyterian, etc., working together.²⁹

While this did not contribute to my understanding to any large degree, another piece of the jigsaw fell into place. "Sister Ethel," I realised, was the name inside the Bible. This stirred another memory. Turning again to my mother's photograph album, I found a picture of a woman with the name "Sister Ethel" printed alongside it in my mother's hand. Revising my earlier impressions, I now think it is likely that the Bible was simply a farewell gift when Edith left the hostel. The dates on the card and in the Bible, together with a date written under another photograph from her album, support this conclusion.

²⁷ Edith Foden, interview by author, 22 June 1986.

²⁸ Roberts, *A Woman's Place*, 37.

²⁹ Historical Collections Librarian, Portsmouth City Council Library Service, e-mail correspondence with Lainie Jones, 29 May 2009.



Image 8. Sister Ethel, circa 1928³⁰

That other photograph, shown below, is of the *SS Ballarat*, the ship on which Edith travelled to Australia. It is dated 19 April 1928, just five days after she made her vow in the Lake Road Baptist Church. So, as Edith did over eighty years ago, I decided to leave Portsmouth and follow her to Australia. I hoped that by recalling the stories she told me of her migration and her early days in Australia, I might discover further clues.



Image 9. *SS Ballarat*, circa 1926³¹

³⁰ Photograph of Sister Ethel, from the photograph album of Edith Foden, now in the possession of Lainie Jones.

What I know is this: in 1928, my mother's journey from England to Australia took almost eight weeks. The *SS Ballarat* had been launched by P & O in 1920 especially to service emigrant passengers on the United Kingdom-Australia route via the Cape of Good Hope. Thus, rather than taking the shorter route through the Suez Canal, it travelled down the West African coast to Cape Town, crossed the Indian Ocean to Fremantle and battled the rough seas of the Great Australian Bite to Adelaide and Melbourne, before finally docking in Sydney.³²

My mother often told me that the church that had arranged work for her in Australia sent representatives to welcome her at every port of call along the way. As a young woman travelling alone, she found this attention reassuring. In Sydney she was allowed a day to enjoy the city before her minders bundled her onto a train to Harden. As the steam engine chugged through the night she wondered, not for the first time, what it would be like, this new place with its English name. No one in Portsea had been able to find it on a map but she had been told it was a rural town. She used to laugh when she told me how images of leafy dells, quaint churches, village greens, and thatched cottages had excited her imagination for months. The reality was very different.

By 1928, Harden had grown from a rough settlement on the Yass Plains of New South Wales to an established township with its own hospital, several banks, numerous hotels, a courthouse, a library, schools, and a public swimming pool. There was a regular power supply but residents had to rely on rainwater tanks for water, and as the town was unsewered, homes had outdoor toilets serviced by a night cart.³³ It was not the village of Edith's dreams but she liked the wide skies and its contrast with Manchester appealed to the sense of adventure which, she told me, had been reinforced by the new and different sights she had seen during her long voyage.

It was not unusual for single female immigrants like Edith to be sent to country settlements. As part of a plan to overcome the isolation faced by rural wives and to increase the population, the government reasoned that female domestic servants would not only free middle-class Australian women to bear more children, but also the newcomers would act as potential wives and mothers themselves.³⁴ Edith was not averse to marrying an Australian and

³¹ Photograph of *SS Ballarat*, from the private collection of Edith Foden, now in the possession of Lainie Jones.

³² These are the ports Edith remembered, most particularly Cape Town and Fremantle. Information about the ship can be found at <http://www.clydesite.co.uk/clydebuilt/viewship.asp?id=513>, last accessed on 20 September 2009. Note that I have not been able to establish all ports of call or the exact duration of the voyage.

³³ Richard Littlejohn, "A Brief History of Harden-Murrumburrah," <http://www.harden.nsw.gov.au/about/1001/1003.html>, last accessed on 2 October 2009.

³⁴ National Archives of Australia, Prime Minister's Department, "Immigration: Training of Women. Domestic Duties" [68 pages, 1927-30] A461, I349/1/6

becoming one of those young country mothers but her employers, recent arrivals from England themselves, had other ideas.

Her new boss was a pastor; oppressed by the heat and hideousness of the country to which he had been sent, he scarcely spoke to her. His wife, however, was more than willing to outline the rules that would govern Edith's life. Her place, it was made clear, was to scrub floors, dust furniture, polish silver and brass, cook, launder, mend, and take care of her employers' three children. At meal times she served the family and returned to the kitchen until summoned to clear the dishes. On her half-day off she walked aimlessly or read in her room; as a servant she was forbidden to socialise. My mother once told me that when she was invited to join the local tennis club, her employers had insisted that she refuse. According to them, her journey to Australia was an opportunity she was expected to repay by hard work; mixing with the locals would distract her from her duties.

My mother spoke of that time with bitterness. It was not the work she minded – hard work had been her lot since she was seven – but at the end of the world, thousands of miles from friends and family, she was distressed to find herself excluded from everything that might have bridged those gaps in her life. "I felt as if I'd woken up and found my leg amputated," she told me. "I couldn't imagine a place more cut off from Manchester than Harden."³⁵

Edith left Harden as soon as her contract ended. By then it was 1930 and the Great Depression had thrown a pall of gloom over the world. Not realising the extent of unemployment in the cities, she caught a train to Sydney where thousands of people were out of work. She might well have finished up homeless and starving, yet in the midst of all that poverty and suffering the wealthy could still afford servants. Almost immediately she found a live-in position with a judge and his family at Double Bay, one of Sydney's elite suburbs. Compared to her former employers, they seemed like saints, but when the Depression deepened in 1931 and the basic wage was cut by ten per cent, those saints cut Edith's wage in half. What could she do? By then she knew she was lucky to have a roof over her head.

Most of the female domestic servants in the nearby mansions were from Britain, so Edith also found friends to take the edge off her loneliness. Two of these women, Nell from London and Phyllis from Edinburgh, both fondly remembered "Aunts" from my own childhood, remained Edith's friends until they died. Yet despite their companionship and the security of paid employment and comfortable accommodation at a time when so many had neither, it was a hard life. "We had no rights, no privacy," my mother told me. "We had half a day off a week and if we didn't go out we'd likely be called on to make afternoon tea. I was often asked to get up and make supper after I'd gone to bed. I say *asked*, but there was no question of refusing."³⁶

http://www.naa.gov.au/naaresources/publications/research_guides/guides/immig/chapt07.htm, last accessed on 2 October 2009.

³⁵ Edith Foden, interview by author, 17 July 1986.

³⁶ Edith Foden, interview by author, 31 July 1986.

Many of my mother's comments illustrate how the upper classes dominated and oppressed their domestic servants, and how little thought they gave to their personal needs.

Edith remained in service for several years after the Depression ended. I am unsure of the dates but know she had three different live-in positions, all in Sydney's elite Eastern suburbs. Eventually she stopped laundering, cooking, scrubbing and polishing for a pittance, gave up being at the beck and call of the wealthy, and went to work at Bradford Cotton Mills, a position similar to her first job in Manchester. She rented a little furnished flat a short walk from the factory and with her nights finally free of employers' demands, a day-and-a-half to herself every weekend, and new friends amongst the mill girls, Edith began to live an independent life. This new beginning, I think, would have been around 1939, making her thirty-three, about the time this photograph was taken.



Image 10. Edith, circa 1939³⁷

³⁷ Photograph of Edith from Edith's mementoes, now in the possession of Lainie Jones.

In 1940, Edith received a letter from her mother. By then she had been in Australia for over a decade and had corresponded regularly with her family. But it was not until that letter, she told me, that she really became aware of the extent of her separation from them and from the land of her birth. Her mother had written to inform Edith of her father's death. "He was only fifty-eight," my mother said. "I couldn't believe it. My first thought was to rush home, to comfort and be comforted – as if home was just around the corner. It took a while to sink in that Dad had been buried weeks before Mam's letter even arrived."³⁸

Now, with phone lines and airlines shrinking the world, you can make a phone call, borrow money, and book an airplane ticket. In minutes you can be speaking to family, in twenty four hours you can be *home*. But then, time and space were shaped by different forces and the mysterious lines of longitude and latitude circled a globe too vast for unproblematic crossing. For women like my mother, years turned into lifetimes and they were never reunited with their families.

Before I began this project I would have described my mother's life as a dense fabric of stories. Now, I realise it is more like the lace doilies she loved – yarns patterned around holes to form a pleasing shape. Her stories are the threads that hold the pattern but the holes they weave around, the silences she kept and the gaps in my knowledge of her life, are equally part of the pattern and tell their own stories. But even as I trace those threads through Edith's working-class childhood, adolescence, and her life as a young woman, I have not yet unwound the tangle of how Edith became the mother I remember.

Some images gleaned from a capricious memory and knitted into my memoir are as loosely woven as Edith's own yarns. I write of my mother's everyday workload, of how she cleaned the house, washed dishes, laundered clothes, nappies and sheets without any electrical aids. I describe her as a worrier, how even the rare treat of a day at the beach was shadowed by the anxieties that spilled constantly from her lips: "Don't go too deep. Watch out for sharks. Oyster shells can cut your feet, sand dunes might collapse, waves could sweep you out to sea." I portray the family structure typical of the Australian working class in the 1950s: "My father was the breadwinner, my mother the homemaker. Dad went to the pub after work and Mum slipped his dinner out of the oven and onto the table as he walked in the door."³⁹

I also acknowledge in my memoir that by the standards of the 1950s, Edith was a good mother. She was not affectionate – she never cuddled us or said she loved us – but that was not unusual; people of that generation tended to hide their feelings. Yet she was always there for us: there when we left for school, there when we came home, there to put plasters on scratches and with home-made soup when we had a cold. She was a constant and reliable

³⁸ Edith Foden, interview by author, 18 September 1986.

³⁹ Jones, "Disobedient Daughters."

presence. Her food nourished, her cleanliness was next to godliness, and her stories entertained.

Piece by piece, the fragments of my mother's life begin to form a picture. I suspect it will never show the whole woman but nor will the stories I write about my daughter or myself – my memoir is a reconstruction of our lives bound by narrative concerns, not the lives themselves. Whoever knows another person fully? My daughter says I am a mystery to her because I am so reserved, yet for all her directness and availability, she is equally a mystery to me. But as I work on the puzzle of our three interlinking lives, I begin to appreciate that it is those unknown qualities that intrigue me, and that my efforts to see behind the mysteries of our individuality not only draw me closer to my mother and my daughter, but also closer to understanding myself.

I began this article by pointing out that I am a writer rather than a historian, but I have also argued that in whatever time and place a personal narrative is set, a sense of history is always implicated. My writing project would not exist without Edith's stories and conversely Edith's stories, and the ways in which these have the potential to interact with and validate other stories of her era, would have no future without my writing. I do not know if my memoir will be published when it is completed but I posit, with Jennifer Jensen Wallach, that "life writing has the potential to enrich our historical understanding in ways that cannot be replicated in any other single source material."⁴⁰ Oral histories are able to collate many case studies to form a bigger picture. My memoir looks at the lives of only three women, each of whom, if not representative of her time and place, is a witness and a participant nevertheless.

Carolyn Steedman writes of a "specifically historical consciousness [which] has provided the framework for the emergence of the autobiographical form."⁴¹ Historical consciousness informs my writing but I would also suggest that there is a deeper link that underlies both oral history and life writing – that in fact history, biography, and biology are intertwined. Like physical characteristics, memories and stories are passed down in families and inscribed on our flesh. Generational patterns woven into the cells of our being bleed from the past into the present and are the source of our future. My mother's stories and secrets have contributed not only to my life and my writing but also to the ways that I perceive the past and the passing of time in life histories. I cannot separate them.

⁴⁰ Jennifer Jensen Wallach, "Building a Bridge of Words," *Biography* 29, 3 (Summer 2006), 446.

⁴¹ Steedman, *Past Tenses*, 43.