British Women's Life Writing, 1760–1840

Amy Culley

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Friendship, Community, and Collaboration

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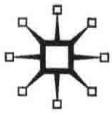

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1500–1900, 48.3 (Summer 2008), 677–92 and sections from this essay are reprinted with permission. Part II also includes an analysis of Elizabeth Fox, whose Journal is the focus of my essay 'One Cannot Judge What is Like Oneself: Elizabeth Fox and the Ties of Community', in Meg Jensen and Jane Jordan (eds), *Life Writing: The Spirit of the Age and the State of the Art* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 102–11. It is published here with the permission of Cambridge Scholars Publishing. Quotations from manuscripts in the Fletcher-Tooth collection are reproduced by courtesy of the University Librarian and Director, The John Rylands Library, The University of Manchester and quotations from manuscripts in the Holland House collection are published with permission of the British Library.

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Introduction

I have also been occupied when I have had leisure for it in reading letters that was addressed to my dear Mrs Fletcher many of which relate to persons & things which are no longer of any moment to the living those I need not leave behind me, but some of them are of that import that I am desirous of retaining & will as time will admit enter in this journal.[1]

Mary Tooth, 'Journal' (1841)

In order to give the reader an opinion of the authenticity of these memoirs, it may not be unnecessary to inform him, that I was acquainted with Mrs. Baddeley from her earlier days; that as children we were brought up together, and educated at the same school; that our intimacy continued through the whole of her life, and that for several years of it, she lived in my house; that as her friend and confidante she unbosomed herself to me.[2]

Elizabeth Steele,
The Memoirs of Mrs. Sophia Baddeley (1787)

I have there been treading on the territory of History, and a trace of my footsteps will perhaps be left. My narratives make a part of that marvellous story which the eighteenth century has to record to future times, and the testimony of a witness will be heard.[3]

Helen Maria Williams,
Poems on Various Subjects (1823)

Despite their differences, these extracts from women's life writing of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries share a common focus in their emphasis on personal relationships, communal identities, collective memories, and collaborations. Methodist Mary Tooth writes in a manuscript journal to preserve the letters of her friend Mary Fletcher alongside her own thoughts. Elizabeth Steele's published narrative of the life of celebrated courtesan Sophia Baddeley is authorised by friendship and foregrounds biographical intimacy. Helen Maria Williams identifies her eye-witness accounts of the French Revolution as a contribution to the collective history of the age in a preface to a collection of her poems. My approach to theorising women's life writing therefore begins with the writers' own words. They frequently acknowledge the relational and communal aspects of self-representation, in contrast to the idea of autobiography as an individualistic practice, or an assertion of unique difference and solitary genius, most commonly associated in this period with the writing of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and William Wordsworth.[4] The argument of this book is that approaching life writing as an expression of personal feeling by a single author has tended to obscure its importance as an articulation of relationships and communal identities or as a contribution to the history of a family, community, or nation. To address these themes, I examine the life writing experiments of three female groups; a network of Methodist women preachers, late eighteenth-century and Regency courtesans, and British women in Paris during the French Revolution. The term 'life writing' enables explorations of self-representation beyond a narrow Romantic canon, which has privileged published autobiographies, linear narratives of self-development, and the interior life of an individual subject.[5] I consider a wide variety of women's self-narration, including spiritual autobiographies, family memoirs, scandalous memoirs, diaries, journals, biographies, correspondence, travelogues, *romans à clef*, and eye-witness accounts in both print and manuscript sources. The hybridity of life writing is evident in the interactions between auto/biography, fiction, and history that characterise these works. None of the texts discussed here fit within Philippe Lejeune's well-known definition of autobiography as a 'retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality'.[6] As Felicity Nussbaum argues, with reference to Lejeune, 'when applied to eighteenth-century autobiographical writing, such definitions can only be used to demonstrate the ways in which the texts fail to measure up to generic expectations'.[7] My sources include fragmented texts that blur generic categories and narrate the lives of others within the story of the self.

I focus on women's life writing as it is a relatively neglected genre within literary histories of the period, despite the rich and diverse range of sources and the significance of women's contribution to the culture and practice of self-narration. Furthermore, life writing provides new perspectives on women's personal and familial relationships, religious, social, political, and national affiliations, intertextual networks, and literary collaborations. Attention to both print and manuscript sources illuminates the complex relationships between these modes as well as the different models of authorship available to women in the period. Scholars of women's writing in the long eighteenth century are now addressing 'the myriad ways in which women might enter the literary marketplace: not only as novelists, but as writers of plays, poetry, translations, children's books, travel narratives, memoirs, conduct manuals and political works; not only as writers, but as printers, publishers and patrons'.[8] Assessments of women's life writing have been an essential part of this diversification in critical focus. Nussbaum's *The Autobiographical Subject: Gender and Ideology in Eighteenth-Century England* (1989) broke new ground for studies of eighteenth-century life writing in addressing previously marginalised works, including spiritual autobiographies, scandalous memoirs, and journals, particularly by women writers.[9] Nussbaum demonstrates the ways in which 'women's autobiographical writing, organized within prevailing discourses, helped to shape and resist the dominant cultural constructions of gender relations and to substitute alternatives.'[10] James Treadwell's *Autobiographical Writing and British Literature 1783–1834* (2005) also provides a welcome revision to the image of autobiography as 'the literary mode corresponding to expressive Romantic individualism' and instead argues that it is a 'debatable practice', self-conscious, anxious, and in a 'fraught negotiation with the arena of publication and the fact of textuality'.[11] Treadwell's wide-ranging study touches on a number of women autobiographers, particularly Mary Wollstonecraft and the scandalous memoirists, but detailed attention is reserved for canonical male authors. More recent historicist studies have confirmed the significance of women's contribution to the genre, particularly Eugene Stelzig's *Romantic Autobiography in England* (2009), which explores the 'variety of women's self-writing without reducing it to any straightforward gender binary' and includes essays on Dorothy Wordsworth, Mary Hays, Mary Robinson, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Mary Shelley within a broader study.[12] *Women's Life Writing, 1700–1850: Gender, Genre and Authorship* (2012) extends the discussion to argue that examining the variety of women's life writing across the long eighteenth century also contributes

to 'our understanding of literary genres, constructions of gender, the relationship between manuscript and print culture, the mechanisms of publicity and celebrity, and models of authorship in the period'.[13] This book builds on these advances, exploring the writings of established literary figures in the eighteenth-century canon, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Robinson, and Helen Maria Williams, in dialogue with sources that have not been discussed by literary scholars, such as the manuscript journals of courtesan Elizabeth Fox and Methodist Mary Tooth or the memoirs of Grace Dalrymple Elliott. This approach sheds new light on familiar works and introduces neglected writers to a wider critical audience. Addressing authors from 1760–1840 (concentrating particularly on the period 1780–1825) also reveals the continuities between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women's life writing that lie beyond the scope of Nussbaum's study or the extensive research on women's autobiography in the Victorian era to which I am indebted.[14] By discussing political and historical narratives, I also take the analysis of women's life writing into less familiar territory.

In its emphasis on personal and communal relationships, imagined communities, collective histories, and collaborations, this study offers new ways of theorising eighteenth-century and Romantic auto/biographical writing. I focus on the texts and communities of women writers in particular as their personal relationships and communal identities are influenced by their distinctly gendered roles within the family and society, while gender also shapes their relationships to autobiographical traditions, and frames the reception of their works. I adopt a historicist approach, as Nussbaum's study has shown how attending 'to particular historical moments allows us to resist temptations to read the history of women's autobiographical writing as a separate and self-contained reflection of the essence of woman'.[15] The writers discussed here often wrote in relation to prominent male life writers of the period, particularly John Wesley, James Boswell, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and William Godwin. The recovery of life writing by less familiar figures like Methodists Mary Fletcher, Sarah Ryan, and Mary Tooth places an established author like John Wesley in new contexts, for as Jacqueline Labbe rightly argues 'any new understanding of "women's poetry" or "women's writing" in general advances our knowledge of literature *in toto*, by women and men' and creates new webs of interpretation.[16] Gender is only one of a number of possible identifications that enable women's life writing, as Linda Peterson's study has shown that writers in the Victorian period 'negotiated the competing claims of gender, social class, politics, religion, family allegiance, and regional affiliation'

in their autobiographical texts.[17] Life writing therefore reminds us of the complexities of women's affiliations and suggests how gendered identifications may interact with other forms of belonging.

Female relationships and communities

Women's Life Writing and Imagined Communities (2005) contends that 'the idea of communities producing texts has quite naturally called into question the *auto*-based part of autobiography' and its editor Cynthia Huff concludes that 'community', whether embodying nations, diasporas, or cultural and personal identification, 'seems central to the future of studies of women's life writing'.[18] In contrast to the dominant focus on heterosexual romance in the eighteenth-century novel, life writing frequently explores a range of other interpersonal relationships, including friendship, patronage, political or national affiliation, spiritual belonging, and social and literary networks, even if the tropes of the family and marriage are often used to articulate these more ambiguous forms of connection. All of the women in this study reject conventional family roles and inherited identities in favour of alternative affiliations that are articulated and negotiated in their life writing. I am particularly interested in the rare occasions when friendship or identification works across class divisions (evident in relationships between Methodists Sarah Ryan and Mary Fletcher, and writer Mary Robinson and her patron the Duchess of Devonshire), or national boundaries (seen in Grace Dalrymple Elliott's identification with Marie Antoinette, and Helen Maria Williams' friendship with Manon Roland). My examples extend to imagined relationships with historical, biblical, and mythical figures, and intergenerational connections between the living and the dead, which are frequently mediated by auto/biographical texts.

There has been fascinating research into female friendships and communities in the eighteenth century, although, in contrast to my study, literary scholars have generally paid more attention to fiction than life writing on this topic.[19] An exception to this is Betty Rizzo's *Companions without Vows: Relationships among Eighteenth-Century British Women* (1994), which ranges across fiction, life writing, and historical examples of female connection, focusing on the mistress–companionate relationship.[20] By examining a genre on the borders between literature and history, fact and fiction, I consider actual relationships depicted in life writing texts, as well as imagined and intertextual forms of connection. This approach follows Rebecca D'Monté and Nicole Pohl's

Female Communities, 1600–1800 (2000), which combines study of 'literary visions of female communities and actual communal experiments'.[21] Within eighteenth-century studies, the intellectual circle of the Bluestockings has been central to our understanding of female literary communities. Elizabeth Eger's analysis of this group argues for the importance of friendship and patronage, as well as 'transitory and ephemeral forms of communication [...] such as letters and conversation'.[22] Furthermore, the ways in which 'Bluestocking friendship could also be significant in the bringing of work to print publication' has been demonstrated by Betty Schellenberg.[23] The Methodist preachers, courtesans, and radical women writers who are the focus of this book would, in the main, have been excluded from Bluestocking circles. Their works therefore provide new insights into female textual sociability and the role that friendship and community might play in shaping women's writing practices in other contexts. Reflecting on the variety of forms of cooperation between women of the period, the editors of *Woman to Woman: Female Negotiations During the Long Eighteenth Century* (2010) comment:

> Kinship provided a foundation for much communal female activity: some women gained confidence from the intimacy and support of family networks; others derived their challenges and inspirations from rebellion provoked by domestic friction. Other alliances were formed by communities of women brought together by shared religious experience, or shared hardship. Some relationships arose from common involvement in publication and state affairs, while still others were friendships which supported philanthropic work or inspired literary achievement.[24]

These different models of collaboration, along with many others, are taken up here in an aim to respond to the insight that 'there is still much to be learned about female sociability in all its forms'.[25] However, as scholars have shown, it is important not to idealise women's relationships, which for Rizzo can be characterised by tyranny as well as benevolence and for Pohl and D'Monté may be regressive, particularly in their class exclusions. Tensions as well as mutual support are explored in the texts under discussion, including Methodists' competitive self-comparisons of their spiritual experiences, Mary Robinson's attacks on female hypocrisy, and Harriette Wilson and Julia Johnstone's 'friendship' based on competition and betrayal in the sexual marketplace.

Collaborations, intertextualities, and collective memories

This book therefore contributes to the recent challenge to the image of the Romantic writer as a solitary figure and original genius by highlighting the inadequacy of this model for theorisations of women's life writing and demonstrating the influence of familial, social, religious, and political networks on female identity and authorship.[26] The potentially distortive effects of the model of Romantic genius on literary history have been articulated by Schellenberg, who suggests that it has helped 'to subordinate those authors whose work authorized itself by its relation to a tradition, to a contemporary community, or to a social good'.[27] Revisionist studies such as Schellenberg's have done much to decentre this Romantic figure and change the critical landscape, for, as Julie Carlson argues, 'the number of collective projects in the period makes one wonder how the cult of the isolated genius ever became associated with this age.'[28] Family authorship has been established by Michelle Levy, Carlson, and others 'as a distinctive and influential cultural formation of the Romantic period' (rather than an outdated literary mode).[29] To advance our understanding of family authorship I consider its role in the literary traditions of Methodists and in the life writing of more 'scandalous' women, such as Mary Robinson (whose *Memoirs* is edited by her daughter Maria Elizabeth) and Grace Dalrymple Elliott (whose *Journal* is posthumously published by her granddaughter).

Collaboration is a helpfully capacious term for an ambiguous practice that complicates our ideas of authorship and ownership, self and other, within women's life writing traditions. Bette London argues that 'collaborations exist in a range of "authorial" activities not necessarily named authorship: acts of assistance and inspiration; acts of mentoring or mutual influence; acts of revision or editorial input.'[30] The fruitfulness of considering women's collaborative life writing projects is evidenced in a number of recent studies, which include Catherine Delafield's analysis of Frances Burney's *Diary and Letters* (1842–1846), co-edited by Burney's niece Charlotte Barrett,[31] and Peterson's discussion of the Howitt family whose writing makes 'the family, rather than the singular subject, the unit of life writing'.[32] My experience of reading women's life writing suggests that in many cases female friendship was at least as important as a source of literary support as family authorship. This is evident in the as-told-to life story of Methodist Sarah Ryan written by her friend Mary Fletcher, Sophia Baddeley's memoirs written by her friend Elizabeth Steele, Mary Hays' obituary of Mary Wollstonecraft, and the use of an amanuensis in diary-keeping in old age by both

Elizabeth Fox and Mary Fletcher. I also consider women's collaborations with male authors, editors, and publishers, especially William Godwin's role as Mary Wollstonecraft's editor and biographer, Methodist women writers' relationships with John Wesley and their nineteenth-century editors, and Elizabeth Steele, Harriette Wilson, and Julia Johnstone's fraught commercial transactions with their publishers.

Writing about the self inevitably incorporates the texts of others, while relationships may be negotiated through quotation, allusion, and revision, as well as more direct forms of representation. The conversations between literary texts are the focus of Stephen Behrendt's *British Women Poets and the Romantic Writing Community* (2009), in which he suggests that community interactivity can be measured in terms of a 'conspicuous intertextuality that figured especially large in Romantic-era writing'.[33] The over-determined emphasis on confession and interiority in autobiographical studies has worked to minimise the importance of intertextual relationships.[34] However, as Max Saunders argues, 'life-writing is fundamentally intertextual' in its dependence on sources such as letters, diaries, recalled conversations, other people's narratives, and the author's literary works.[35] These intertextual connections illuminate and, at times, complicate the self-representation in the narrative, and are central to the life writing practices of Methodist women writers, the interlocking memoirs of Harriette Wilson and Julia Johnstone, or the palimpsestic layers of Mary Wollstonecraft's self-representations.

My interest in textual relations extends to the ways in which these authors imagine and interact with their readers, described by Treadwell as 'the autobiographical transaction.'[36] Communities of readers range from the carefully controlled circle of the manuscript journal to an anonymous public. The influence of the culture of sensibility on life writing, and the extent to which readers are imagined in sympathetic terms, will be an important theme throughout. Drawing on the extensive body of scholarship addressing sensibility and sentiment in the eighteenth century, I consider the ways in which an emphasis on feeling shapes the articulations of spiritual fellowship within Methodism, the courtesans' self-vindicatory appeals, and the sympathetic histories of events in France. In addition, many of these writers look to readers beyond the present and understand their personal narratives as a contribution to a collective history of the age and an address to posterity. Methodist Mary Tooth uses a variety of life writing forms in order to preserve a history of women preachers and ensure the enduring influence of her friend and mentor Mary Fletcher (despite attempts within nineteenth-century Methodism to erase women preachers