

## **After Lolly Willowes, For All The Aunts**

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In studying history we consider the past in order to understand the formation of our present, in its myriad and complex ways. Successful historical writing requires research of facts, presented with balance and accuracy. Yet to fairly read history we must build networks of understandings that link seemingly innumerable factors often requiring interpretation and imagination. Catherine is right in her assertion that historians must be pragmatic, but there is a point when the facts give out and the boundaries between what is known and the gaps that we must fill become indistinct. We look at all the information we have – images, artefacts, writings, etc. – and we write a history from it but in doing so accept that we may be disapproved or underwritten if and when new discoveries are made. So despite many trite sayings telling us we cannot change the past, history remains in flux, constantly growing and developing with every new offering we bestow.

As well as the slippery nature of the histories we consider ourselves to already know there are also those that remain unstudied; those that have slipped through and been lost over time. Recent trends in historical scholarship have followed some of these ‘forgotten figures’, meaning that the previously (and often still) marginalised are finally gaining some credit for their pivotal roles. The study of the everyday has also grown, along with a surge in ancestral research and at-home historians looking back through their family trees. While this research aids in building our wider historical knowledge, arguably these searches often throw up little of much interest to anyone outside of the family in question, with the most salacious discoveries being secret lovers and illegitimate children.

In a recent conversation with my mother she told me how she had, like presumably many others, used the recent lockdown to look into our own family history. The only new information she had found out during her searches was that distant Jewish relations had probably actually not been Jewish and the first name used by her grandmother that we had always assumed was a diminutive was in fact her given name. Both things that are not even really of interest to us, beyond a slight embarrassment about the mistaken name. Nothing had been able to be learned about the family members she had actually been trying to find out more about, Aunt Kit and her daughter Aunt Hetty. These aunts were the kind of figures that will be familiar in many family trees; widows or unmarried and childish women that lived together until they died, fairly unnoticed in their lifetimes and their histories now even more so. These women exist all throughout history and are seemingly still considered to be unworthy of deeper study and when there is an interest in looking further into them there is little that can be found beyond anything on the census. Family anecdotes about them also do not go very far either, limited to stories around, for example, the same gift they gave every year Christmas or a certain item of their homewares; strange embroidered cushions or an overly ornate lampshade. This would in part be because these women would have in some cases been the source of shame for family with questions around their sexuality or ‘lifestyles’ being the reason for learning as little about them as possible. The notion of a woman choosing to live alone still causes some raised eyebrows and suspicions that something more untoward must be going on but, of course, none of this is reason for these women to be forgotten within discourses and we must

reconsider how we look ton certain figures from the past. At this point I must divulge that I am not a good historian by traditional standards. I quickly grow tired of exposition and the data that should be included in arguments, instead offering disparate and non-linear sources with conclusions that muddy rather than clarify any points I was trying to make. Because of this I do not think it matters that searches for information on the aunts are fruitless and believe we can simply find their stories elsewhere, broadening our understandings of where history can be found.

While official narratives have failed the aunts fiction has not, with a great deal of novels featuring this character type. Now in some cases these women are vilified or presented as some kind of cautionary tale; the Ugly Sisters in Cinderella or Dickens' Miss Havisham for example. These women are firmly presented as Bad Spinsters, the women we should not wish to and must not become. But beyond these simplistic portrayals of what are essentially single women there are more sympathetic and engaging character. Agatha Christie's Miss Marple is in some ways odd but outsmarts the police time and time again and though her family find her monstrous I was somewhat charmed by Margaret Drabble's Freda Haxby. Going further than these examples are the novels where these women are actively thriving in their roles. It would be remiss to not mention Charlotte Perkins Gilman's science-fiction *Herland*, where upon discovering the land occupied only by women the male explorers are horrified to see the satisfaction of the inhabitants. Written after *The Yellow Wallpaper* it is not difficult to understand why Gilman wanted to imagine such a world. Then there is Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes; or The Loving Huntsman* (1926), a story gives these aunts the power they deserve.

In the story Lolly Willowes has lived for twenty years with her brother and his family in London, providing childcare and giving into perceived family obligations. The family are aghast when she announces that she will leaving the family and the city to live alone in the village of Great Mop. Along with her new found independence Lolly also discovers witchcraft, making a pact with Satan and adopts a kitten named Vinegar who is assumed to be a representation of the Devil himself. Lolly states about her new life, "*One doesn't become a witch to run round being harmful,*" she says of her liberation. "*Or to run round being helpful either, a district visitor on a broomstick. It's to escape all that — to have a life of one's own, not an existence doled out to you by others.*" In the book all women are witches but have not all discovered their power with it being entangled with their independence and solitude. It flips the traditional narrative of spinsters being lonely, craving a family unit rather than relishing their aloneness and that it is the family that prevents them from achieving their great potential. We are even presented with an alternative for the cliched cat lady, there is nothing depressing about a witch and her feline familiar.

Through the lens of Lolly Willowes we can reimagine all of the ancestral aunts as witches in contrast to the uncomfortable figures they have often been forced to become. They are in fact the women who have risen to a higher power with witches not being fearful characters but ones of strength and independence. The history of witchcraft is a rich area of scholarship but, returning to pragmatism, will look to describe and explain rather than lean into the magic and leave things without clarity. Like some kind of street magic trick the aim is to figure it out, which flattens the stories, much like what history has done to the aunts. How can we reimagine historical study in such

a way that we do not do this and instead emphasise the unknown, the space between the facts and take this forward as legacy?

One of the most well-known histories of witchcraft are those of witch trials and burnings, the results of the hysterical fear that swept across Europe and North America in the early modern period. Though the populist story, in actuality these events were rare in England, with a total of approximately 500 people being executed for witchcraft across the early modern period. What surrounded the relatively low number of trials and death was still a terror of witchcraft and those (women) believed to be practicing it. While this terror does not exist in the same way today it can be paralleled with the continued distrust of anyone living outside of mainstream norms, which was anyway often how 'witches' were identified and persecuted. It was believed that witches gained their powers from forging pacts with the Devil, like Lolly, but entangled with this was the easy scapegoating they received for any misfortunes being faced. A poor harvest, sick livestock and manifold other issues could all be blamed upon the imagined presence of witches within a community, with eyes turning to women living alone or in some other way that was understood as sinister. What these histories tell us are really little to do with witchcraft but rather further evidence for women's oppression and victimisation when they have pushed against the stringent limits put upon their lives. These are the ideas explored in Caryl Churchill's 1976 play "Vinegar Tom" which, written in the wake of Second Wave feminism, links the torment of witches in the 17th century with the contemporary frustrations around their own subjugation. In the play, with its nod to Lolly in its title, the characters break their historic personas to perform modern songs that further highlight the similarities and urged the audiences to reexamine their own position on societal conformities. Churchill had been inspired to write the play by the 1970s Equal Pay Act that while now a historical piece of legislation is still called upon in contemporary struggles.

"Vinegar Tom" highlights the persecution of women from the 17th century through to today and it is important when remembering forgotten figures from the past, like the aunts, that society was unkind in its treatment of them and history has been similarly unkind it's remembering, or lack of remembering, of them. Catherine notes the futility in attempting to really know the histories we are attempting to learn but recognises how she is able to connect to them through the land she works on as an archaeologist. When considering these mistreated women and faced only with partial histories how can we instead connect with them, how can we pay tribute to them? We must remember them as valid in their lives and choices. Whether witches or not the aunts had lives far more absolute than the abridged histories of them we can access. There is no singular or definite way in which we can reimagine their lives but in whatever way we do we must not be reductive but consider the expansiveness of history that weaves through every moment and through this see significance in everyone's own role.

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