

2. Norah's Story: Writing History from the Inside

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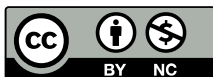
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Cover image: Norah Hodgkinson, 1941, W.W. Winter, Derby. A selection from Norah's archive, Alison Twells, 2025. Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal.

2. Norah's Story: Writing History from the Inside

But was Norah, as my mother exclaimed, 'a bugger'? I suspected that my mum was seeing her aunt in the light of Norah's later years, when we'd been endlessly entertained by her interest in men. But this correspondence took place in the early 1940s when Norah, the daughter of a devout Christian mother, was in her mid-teens. My immediate reaction was to wonder if it was a reciprocal exchange, whether Jim's intimate questioning was wanted by Norah. It was surely not commonplace, during the war or at any other time, for a grown man to write such letters to a young woman.

I found myself musing whether this odd wartime correspondence was in any way related to Danny's later disappearance. Whether the sexually forward letters to schoolgirl Norah from Jim the sailor had any bearing on the mystery of the great-aunt I knew: the woman who lived 'in sin' with her married German lover, and who kept her distance from us, her poor-relation family, and the ever curious yet faintly disapproving village of her birth. Was this anything more than a vaguely insalubrious personal story or – the historian in me – might Jim's letters and Norah's diaries tell us something about sex and romance in WW2, now well-established areas of enquiry, but persistently tricky?

I have lost count of the number of people who, on hearing the barest of outlines of Norah's story, have responded with 'well it was the War and they didn't know if they were going to live to see another day'. To some extent, the evidence bears this out. This is especially the case in stories told by men. A Canadian soldier in London just prior to the Normandy Landings recalled the scenes and sounds of Hyde Park and Green Park at dusk and after dark. 'They just can't be described', he said 'You can just imagine, a vast battlefield of sex'. More movingly, an American combat

engineer in London described meeting a young woman while on a four-day leave, and talking, walking, sightseeing, making love while rockets exploded. Raised as a Southern Baptist, he acknowledged that 'by most peoples' standards we were immoral, I suppose. But we were young and lonely and could die tomorrow'. His time with her, he said, was 'one of the loveliest and cleanest experiences of my life'.¹

Young women received endless cautions about their wartime behaviour. Their entry into men's jobs and other public spaces aroused many anxieties – that their economic independence would de-sex them, their new-found freedoms leave men wondering what they were fighting for. The government and mass media tasked them with what historian Philomena Goodman has called 'patriotic femininity': the job of reassuring men and boosting their morale through gentle allure and looking good. But it was a fine line: too much glamour and flirtation saw them hastily condemned as irresponsible, a threat to the war effort. The last thing our servicemen needed was the worry that their women were having a wild time without them.²

Yet despite the efforts to reign them in, many women pursued romantic and sexual encounters in a no less than revolutionary manner. Studies from Australia and Britain, Germany, Denmark and the USA, show young women rejecting the domestic drudgery and self-sacrifice of their mothers' generation and embarking instead on quests for erotic adventure. 'It was the wilfulness of girls and young women that contemporaries remarked upon, their agency in "picking up" men', writes historian Marilyn Lake. Colonel Geoff Calway of the United States Army charged that Australian women – who called themselves 'Yank Hunters' – 'waited on street corners' for his troops. 'When the girls go up to our boys, saying "Come on, sweetie," said film star Carol Landis, 'the boys have to beat them off with clubs'. Reporting the increase of sexually transmitted diseases among young women between sixteen and twenty, Dr Cooper Booth, Director of Social Hygiene in Sydney, told the Housewives' Association in 1943: 'Don't get the idea that these girls are of one class only. Many of them come from the best homes and have a good education... The girls simply have a desire for sexual life'.

Looking back, it was the Americans' difference from Australian men that the women enjoyed: their interest in dancing, their uniforms and personal care, their almost-feminine conversation and clear enjoyment

of the company of women. Their reputation as lovers preceded them, Hollywood style. 'I wanted to fall in love with a Yank, badly', remembered Maureen Meadows of Brisbane. 'All the other girls were falling in love with Yanks, lots of them... I was all set to fall in love, really in love. Not the quiet, respectable, lukewarm affair I had known with Robert, but the sort of love I had always associated with Americans – tender, thrilling, tempestuous, and no half measures'.³

We see a similar story in Denmark, where social workers' reports reveal young women and girls, some no older than fourteen, roaming the streets of Esbjerg, looking for German men. As one explained, 'she simply did not know what had happened, but since 9 April [1940, the first day of the occupation] she had not been able to control herself and stay away from German soldiers. Now she feared for her own sanity'. Other incidents saw girls discovered in houses with half-dressed soldiers. 'One of the Nazi fronts is the erotic one', a local paper stated, and 'the Germans are having too much luck in this particular area'.⁴

Young Danish women, eager for fun, adventure and sexual experience, found the Germans to be polite and attentive lovers. Meanwhile, German women claimed to prefer the French. As relationships with prisoners of war were illegal in the Third Reich, women's words are revealed in statements made in court. 'Germans make love like bulls, but the French and Belgians know how to make love without making children', one woman said in front of the judges. A married farmwoman encouraged her friends to 'supply themselves with a Frenchman' because they 'know how to do it much better than the Germans'. With her new experience of cunnilingus, she claimed to finally have learned what 'real love' was.⁵

And in England? Among scant evidence, there is a vivid report from the *Sunday Pictorial* of late August 1945: 'The scene was Bristol, most English of all English cities', it opens. 'The time was 2 a.m. yesterday. The actors were a mob of screaming girls between 17 and 25' who, on learning that the four companies of African American soldiers currently in the city were leaving for home, had 'besieged the barracks', waiting through the night in pouring rain, singing "Don't Fence Me In". 'This was too much for the coloured men who began to break down the barbed wire', the report continued. 'In a few minutes hundreds of girls and U.S. soldiers were kissing and embracing... "I don't mind getting wet," said one 18-year-old. "I intend to give my sweetie a good send-off"'.⁶

The Danish press decried women's behaviour as morally lax, an insult to national honour. An African American newspaper denounced girls who 'roam the streets, loving men for a night or an hour. They search for the bright lights and bars; seeking the thrills of new faces and new sensations. Patriotism to them is a cheap affair'. The moniker used in Britain – 'good-time girls' – was relatively benign compared to the US Feds' term of choice; women who crossed the all-too ambiguous line were known as 'patriotutes'.⁷

The 'experts' – social workers, sociologists and manifold psychologists – saw such girls simply as wrongdoers; lawless and unruly. 'None of the dozens of schedules, studies, questionnaires, or interviews designed to help authorities understand why so many girls and young women defied social conventions by having sex outside of marriage asked their subjects about their sexual feelings', writes US historian Amanda Littauer.⁸ In stark contrast to their approach to male sexuality, it was assumed that girls who engaged in premarital sex did so because they were delinquent, not on account of desire.

Yet women around the world were peeling off the husks of traditional femininity, discarding layers of respectability, censure and shame, embracing a new kind of self-expression, an autonomous, erotic self-assertion. 'Today, seeing the 1940s and 1950s as a time of "sex anarchy" seems strange', writes Littauer, 'but worried observers at the time used this term – as well as "sex revolution," an "addiction to promiscuity," and a "morals revolt" – to describe changes in sexual culture'. 'Little is still known [...] about women's and girls' own motives for entering into relationships with occupation soldiers', writes Lulu Anne Hansen of Danish women. Yet '[i]n the midst of all the conservative efforts of social workers and nationalist resistance rhetoric, the beginnings of a sexual revolution can be glimpsed'.⁹

With her risqué letters from Jim and the *hot times* in bed with Danny that so shocked my mother, where, I wondered, did Norah fit into this picture?

A second set of questions lie at the heart of this book: how best do I uncover, and then convey, Norah's story?

Norah's diaries, I knew, were an unexpected treasure. Historical accounts of the lives of ordinary girls and women, written on their own terms and in their own words, are a rarity. Historians are commonly forced to rely on sources written *about* such women: newspaper articles, claxoning fears about lax morality, or the commentaries of social workers, probation officers, the police, the records of juvenile court proceedings and government departments, the concerns of which are usually very far from the girls' own, and where disclosures may be prompted by a line of questioning and expressed in words chosen to justify or play down their part in a transgression.¹⁰

Yet despite being written in her own words, Norah's diaries are a challenge to read. It is not simply that much of what she wrote about was very mundane. Norah's daily concerns – the weather, her routines and household chores, the comings and goings of family and friends, her health, love interests and occasional world events – were shared with other diarists, like the women who wrote for Mass Observation during the war.¹¹ But Norah's entries – written in tiny squares that allow for no more than twenty words a day – are more akin to almanacs and pocketbooks than to the discursive, introspective diaries that find their way to publication.¹² Laconic and telegraphic, they have little in the way of plot, dramatic tension, character development or self-reflection. Her use of parataxis, the juxtaposition of unrelated daily events, gives the ordinary and extraordinary an equal value within any given daily window. The personal pronoun, the 'I', is almost entirely absent. Full sentences too. Norah relies on phrases composed of verb/object pairings ('wrote to Danny'), with an occasional adjective thrown in ('beautiful letter from my love'). Her style is so terse as to seem almost coded, her disjointed, staccato sentences hard to decipher without insider knowledge.

'There's nothing in them, no detail, no context', my then-partner Mark had insisted that first Christmas after Norah's death. 'The way she combines personal and national events can be quaint and funny. But most of it is very mundane'. He shook his head. 'You're going to make a right fool of yourself if you start trying to write history from these. What exactly would you talk about? Who Norah sat with on the school bus in 1939?'

'But that's the point', I had retorted. 'The world is awash with historical accounts of the lives of well-heeled men and women. These are ordinary diaries, the kind kept by people who rarely find themselves

in history books. That's their charm. I just need to find a way of letting them speak, that's all'.

That's all. I sounded so confident, more than I really felt. Historians have long been wary of the diary as a reliable source. And pocket diaries like these...¹³ I knew as I argued that I had delayed reading Norah's diaries precisely because I feared that they would turn out to be lacking: too trivial, too tweet-like, too terse.

Such dismissals, made with even greater certainty, have long been the fare of women's historians. When women at a History Workshop event at Ruskin College, Oxford, in 1969 declared that they planned to embark on a new brand-new venture, researching the histories of women as workers, wives and mothers, their suggestion was met by 'a gust of masculine laughter'.¹⁴ What had women ever done, except keep houses and have children? And how did these timeless and commonplace activities warrant a history?

When Laurel Thatcher Ulrich was reading the diaries of New England midwife Martha Ballard in the midst of the first wave of women's history writing in the 1980s, a fellow historian expressed his impatient wish that she should get back to some 'real' history and stop wasting her time and talents on this little women's stuff. Even a feminist scholar, committed to recovering women's lives, had dismissed Ballard's diaries as unimportant and uninteresting, filled with mundane entries about domestic chores and routines, insufficiently 'epic' to warrant attention. Philippe Lejeune, scholar of girls' diaries, found the same: 'When I talk about my research, I can see that people pity me'.¹⁵

'What you notice first [...] is all that it lacks', Jennifer Sinor writes of the diary of her great-great-great-aunt, Annie Ray, a homesteader on the late nineteenth-century Dakota Plains. Written 'in the days rather than of the days', Annie's short, fragmented entries, composed in the pages of a ledger, are dull, repetitious and bare. They take their shape from her everyday tasks and routines: setting and hoeing beans, baking bread and churning butter, making and mending clothes, the time spent waiting for her unfaithful husband and the baby she failed to conceive. Writing like Annie's 'everyday' entries – the closest we can get to daily life – is rarely preserved in an official archive. Like shopping lists and other daily scraps, such 'ordinary writing' is destined instead for a garden bonfire or house-clearance skip.¹⁶

Yet as Ulrich makes clear in her Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *A Midwife's Tale*, diaries like Martha's, like Annie's, like Norah's, while sparse and disjointed, are 'unparalleled documents', revealing whole worlds, often female and familial, so frequently absent from the historical record. 'My effort to recover the significance of Martha Ballard's life was in large part an enterprise in recapturing the historical significance of "trivia"', Ulrich writes. 'For her, living was to be measured in doing. Nothing was trivial'.¹⁷

And Norah's diaries, when read alongside her letters from Jim? An atypical turn of events – what micro-historians term the 'exceptional normal' – can illuminate big themes and throw light on the culture at large.¹⁸ Like the hidden histories of sex and love contained in Bertrande de Rols' acceptance and then betrayal of the (kinder, more loving? status-conferring?) man who, on his return from war in sixteen-century France, assumed the identity of her husband. Or the insights into frontier life gleaned from the unexpected choices of Eunice Williams and Esther Wheelwright, two girls abducted in childhood during the French and Indian Wars, to remain with their adoptive Native American families rather than return to their Puritan homes of birth.¹⁹

Norah Hodgkinson's 1938 and 1939 *Letts's School-girl's* diaries, her *Spratt's Game Foods* diaries from 1941 and 1942 and her 1943–1946 *Railway Clerks' Association of Great Britain and Ireland* diaries, and all of those that follow, composed every day over seven decades: they hold a life. Her teenage diaries, seemingly unpromising, are an extraordinary first-hand account of an ordinary girl in wartime. Not simply a transparent 'chronicler of the everyday',²⁰ Norah writes on a social stage, her daily happenings and personal feelings interacting with wider cultural themes. Alongside the 'exceptional normal' of Jim's lewd letters, what insight might Norah's diaries provide into sex, romance and working-class young womanhood in Britain during the Second World War?

But how to bring them to life?

Norah's story doesn't tell itself. Like many private diaries, her writing is not artful or crafted.²¹ She wrote without an audience in mind and had no need to explain her abrupt but sundry storylines or develop her barely-drawn characters. Her gaps and silences are inconsequential.

She does not even have to finish her sentences; an ellipsis or em dash refers to a context with which she is wholly familiar and has no need to elaborate for the benefit of readers. Things happen between her entries, not in them.²² It will not be enough for me, therefore, to respectfully enter her diaries and carefully listen to her words. I have to engage in detective work, attend to her silences, omissions and repetitions, deploy what Elizabeth Hampsten terms 'a special inventive patience' if I am to flesh out her days.²³

The best way to do this, it seemed to me, was to draw on the insider knowledge that comes with close acquaintance with Norah's life. My mother, Norah's eldest surviving relative and her niece, could remember any person, item or place given even the most cursory of mentions in her early diaries. Long-dead family members, neighbours and friends and their quirks of character: she knew them all. The lay-out of the garden at Moira Dale, the colour of Norah's eiderdown (pea-green), the cardigan (also green) that Norah knitted in 1946: so vivid were they in her mind's eye, she might have seen them just yesterday.

Norah's wider archive, the half-curated 'stuff' that she left behind, sparked further memories, many entangled with family stories that I have heard since childhood. These stories, which came in the main from my mum's conversations with her mother, Helen, Norah's sister, were at times inextricable from their 'explanations' of Norah's life; the way she was, her difference from us. Her wartime love affair with Danny the airman that had knocked her life off course. That she'd shacked up with Eddy because she was 'on the shelf' – and – slightly contradictorily, perhaps? – that she'd been too-easily impressed by a sharp suit, a nice car, a sister in Bordeaux. That despite her unhappiness, snobbery and shame conspired to compel her to stay. And at the root of it all, 'that school', that gave Norah high ideas and led her away.

It is striking how many of the mementoes that Norah kept throughout her life come from her High School years. A sturdy brown box tucked away in her wardrobe held her navy winter beret, the red-and-white ribbon and badge that once adorned her summer boater and, neatly folded, her red and white scarf, hand-knitted in an attractive basket-weave rib with N. I. HODGKINSON embroidered above the tassels:



Fig. 4 LGHS scarf, beret and hat-band. Private papers etc. of Norah Hodgkinson.
Photo: A. Twells, 2025.

Packed away in her small blue ottoman, we found her Upper V French exercise book, a second-hand copy of *The Merchant of Venice*, *Practical Pattern-Making for Schools* and its companion *Garment Making*, the latter still covered in brown paper to keep it clean. Alongside them were Oxford School Certificate exam papers, some decorated with ink doodles of film stars, a homemade pattern for a dress, sewn up by Marsie (I assume), and an autograph album with messages from family, teachers and friends.

Norah took custody of other 'orphaned objects'²⁴ saved from her mother's belongings when Marsie died in 1964: photographs of Hodgkinson and Leadbetter extended family members – grandparents, siblings and cousins – stretching back a century or more; a bundle of letters from Marsie's friends from her service days; wartime mementoes – ration books, identity documents, Birdy's Bevin Boy card.

And more schooldays' 'stuff'. Two letters, typed on thick, quality paper, from Leicestershire County Council Education Committee

in 1923 and 1934, inform the parents – ‘Sir (Madam)’ – that their sons, Norah’s brothers, Dennis Vernon Thomas Hodgkinson and Francis Edward Hodgkinson, had been awarded a ‘Special Place’ at Loughborough Grammar School, which included payment of all tuition fees. Dennis’s letter spells out in more detail that although the numbers of free scholarships were restricted for that year, it was recognised that ‘he would otherwise be debarred from receiving a Secondary Education through inability to pay fees’. An attached sheet contains a warning that the parents must understand that the child is to remain in school until the end of the school year in which he turns sixteen; and that they will be fined £10 for removing him sooner.

A letter from a Mr Taylor in 1929, the year after Dennis finished his schooling, reveals that the postponement of the Civil Service exam had temporarily scuppered his plans. They – his parents included here, possibly in recognition of sacrifices made – had been ‘exceptionally unlucky’ in this matter, the schoolmaster wrote, as ‘neither the Co-operative Society nor the Railway have any place for your boy’. However, he had contacted the manager of Boots the Chemists, who had an immediate vacancy for a four-year pupilage. ‘The position is not for a dispensing chemist, but the manager tells me he would have a chance of working up to an assistant managership, if he did good work’.

Working up. Working up, up and away. This little archive is testimony not only to the place that ‘getting into the Grammar’ held in Norah’s family, but to its later resonance in her life. For my mum and gran, it acquired new meanings, as the source of family differences, between those who left for white-collar jobs and the two siblings who failed to make the grade and stayed in Castle Donington for the rest of their days. Birdy, Norah’s middle brother, was happily blue-collar, settling down after the war to work as a coachbuilder at Willowbrook. Helen, my gran, had been on the reserve list for the High School, but never got in, and left the council school at the age of fourteen in April 1927 to start work at Gibson’s hosiery manufacturers (‘the long-john factory’) in the village. (Marsie and then Norah kept her school exemption certificate too. My gran – who lamented for the rest of her life her failure to pass the scholarship – would’ve binned it many moons ago.)

Indeed – another story – if I had to pinpoint a moment when I became passionate about history, it is this: sitting in our kitchen at

Garden Crescent, listening to my gran's stories of Hill Top and the school assembly in 1924 when 'Gaffer Wes'on' read out the scholarship pass list and her name wasn't on it. This was the same year that she was told she couldn't join the Girl Guides; with Dennis to kit out for the Grammar, Marsie and Pop hadn't a hope of affording the uniform. Even if she had passed the scholarship, it is quite possible that the lack of funds would have meant that she was unable to take her place. I wonder if Marsie breathed a heavy-hearted sigh of relief when her daughter returned from school that day, tearful and dejected but able to start work a few years earlier and contribute to the family coffers. Helen's feeling of having missed out deepened as the years got longer and I remember vividly how she received with pleasure and tears my own school reports and academic successes.

Despite telling stories of my own, I haven't always been fully on board with our family folklore. Tales about Norah's life were fuelled by a whole load of emotion – my grandmother's feeling that Norah 'had it easy', our universal dislike of Eddy and his angry, superior ways, and our wider incomprehension about her chosen life and the vague threat it presented to those left behind. Academic snobbery no doubt played a part here. Academic historians' sense of themselves as professionals has long excluded those designated 'amateurs', family historians prominent among them. Family history has been commonly dismissed as self-indulgent, too subjective, too parochial, concerned with small stories adrift from big historical themes. Memory too is notoriously unreliable; as any historian of the Second World War will confirm, not only do we forget so much, but we 'remember' things that didn't happen at all.²⁵

While residual suspicions remain,²⁶ this hierarchy has been challenged in recent years.²⁷ We see now how the exploration of family trees, memories and stories enables better understandings of the histories of communities, nations and the world. We see too how public archives are 'assembled',²⁸ collections given shape by families, estate executors, archivists; by ideas of value that are rarely extended to the lives of men and women like Norah, those who wind up as little more than ever-receding figures in family photographs and sets of official certificates – birth, marriage, death. But how to attend to this absence, to find ways of moving beyond what Ivan Jablonka calls the 'pulse of silence',²⁹ to

write histories of those excluded from 'outside' repositories or whose lives feature in such partial ways?

For so many people, family history is all that we have. As Alison Light writes in her study of her own working-class family, family stories are histories 'from the inside', histories 'from within', passed down to form a kind of 'emotional and psychological inheritance' across the generations. History may be 'the enemy of memory', writes Richard White as he reflects on his mother's stories of her early life in County Kerry between the wars, 'but there are regions of the past that only memory knows'. Women like his mother, like Norah, like my mother, are 'kin-keepers', who cherish, curate and pass on these family inheritances, keeping memories alive.³⁰

A Place of Dreams is a kind of inter-generational history. My conversations with my mother have been key to my exploration of Norah's life. As well as drawing on her memories, I choose to put my mother's voice on the page. She can be funny, my mum, her sense of humour on the camp side of banter: playful, ironic, with an eye for the transgressive, the ever-so-slightly-in-bad-taste. It is my view that the history we write needs some of that.

In *A Place of Dreams*, I seek to take Alison Light's idea of 'history from within' a little further, to tell Norah's story 'from the inside' too.

I knew from the start of this project that I didn't want to accept that the form of Norah's diaries – disjointed, unstoried and unpublishable – meant that I could only write *about* them. Despite its difficulties, Norah's diary-writing voice has a delightful immediacy to it. I wanted to somehow get inside her daily entries, to feel her emotion, to see the world as she saw it, to coax her life from the bare bones of her days.

I felt sure that my training as an academic historian wouldn't stretch to this. Academic history has much to commend it. It is trustworthy, for starters. Our skills of research mean we know our sources: their strengths and shortcomings, how they came into being, what they might mean. We are good at probing beneath the surface, steering clear of simplicity, unsettling false certainties.

But academic history is history from the outside. A hangover from claims to scientific status, detachment and distance are central to what we do. Our points of reference are external. We open our studies with an explanation of how our research builds on what has come before; what Louis Masur calls 'reciting the begats'. We engage with this body of work in a combative manner, our findings conveyed by a 'hidden narrator' – the 'I' erased – in a voice which is solemn, remote, argumentative, expository. Story is drummed out of us. Despite our twentieth-century scepticism about the possibility of scholarly objectivity, we purport neutrality. We have no interest in inspiring empathy, emotion and imagination. Even in cross-over books written for a non-specialist audience, we have little truck with variety in point of view, cadence and tone. 'Tough, tight, filled with fact and source, stripped of personal intonations', academic history is 'scholarship served cold'.³¹

'It's nice to have on the shelf, but you wouldn't actually want to *read it*', my mother said of the book I published the year that Norah died. I had laughed at her cheek. This is a woman who lapped up historical novels and enjoyed regular visits to country houses, museums and history-themed community events, and she couldn't be bothered to read her only child's published book! Yet her comment pithily captures the gap between lay person interested in history and stolid academic tome. While historical novels, period films and television programmes from *A House Through Time* to *Who Do You Think You Are?* are testimony to the popularity of history, the public passion does not extend to academic texts. History 'continues to fascinate', writes Hayden White, 'but its academic variant always fails finally to satisfy our curiosity about the objects of study to which it draws our attention. The dead can be studied scientifically, but science cannot tell us what we desire to know about the dead'.³²

Despite more than sixty years of 'history from below', we still have so few ordinary peoples' histories, at least those told in their own voices and on their own terms. The diaries of a working-class girl are a rare find. But what if I want to know the girl who wrote Norah's diaries? If I want to weave her words into my writing, capture her voice, write *from within* her diaries as well as *of them*,³³ tell a story she would recognise as her own? Putting Norah's archive through the academic mill, subjecting her daily entries to an unrelenting outside *telling*, cannot get close to her life as she lived it.

I went AWOL for a while and signed up for a course in life writing and then, a full creative writing MA. I wanted to see if the techniques of the novelist – the appeal to the senses, a striking image, a nifty piece of dialogue, an imagined scene, a character for whom we feel a degree of warmth, a voice that doesn't pretend to neutrality – would allow me to get closer to Norah and move beyond an 'outside' rendition of her life. Whether thinking about voice and form, even 'troubling the line between history and imagination', in Saidiya Hartman's words, would make her more knowable, allow me to glean her desires and dreams from her tiny, symmetrical windows, give them a shape, bring them to life.³⁴ Could I do this and still call it history?

I was confronted from the off with unfamiliar claims about fiction and getting closer to life. I discovered that novelists, those masters of making it up, often believe they are telling not only the truth, but a deeper truth than the facts of history can reveal; that 'story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth', in Tim O'Brien's words. 'You don't become a novelist to become a spinner of entertaining lies', said Hilary Mantel in her Reith Lectures of 2017. 'You become a novelist so you can tell the truth'. After following the historical evidence, Mantel explained, she performed another act, putting the past into action, imagining not just what happened but what it felt like, from the inside.³⁵

I got lost here for a while, playing around with story-truth vs historical truth, story-fiction vs history-fiction, fact vs imagination, imagination vs invention. I came to see the fault-lines more clearly, the places where literary aesthetics threaten to trump historical accuracy, or the novelist's promise of neatness and closure not available in honest historical investigation. *To historicise* is different from *to dramatise*. Creative writers are generally not interested in the thing that most motivates historians: our curiosity not just about what happened in the past and how people felt about it then, but how close we might get to the truth of it, and with a sense of what else could have happened, how we judge what any of it means.³⁶

But when historical sources are so one-sided, as with the 'outsider' accounts from which Hartman tried to wring African American women's lives, or are so sparse and abrupt, like Norah's diary entries... how else might we hear, and tell, their stories?

A Place of Dreams is a history. I place Norah's diaries and Jim's letters alongside archival sources, published diaries, newspaper reports, oral

history interviews and more. I build on, am in conversation with and kept in check by the research of many historians – scholars of diaries, of women's lives, the Second World War. But if I am to do anything more than tell the same old story – another 'outside' rendition of a working-class life – I have to try to enter Norah's diary entries, to make 'imaginative incursions' into her days.³⁷ My sometime-use of memories, dialogue and dramatised scenes does not detract from the truth of history, I argue, but allows me to *write with* Norah, to amplify her voice on the page, to draw out the vitality in her diary fragments and reach 'into the marrow' of her life.³⁸

Like the life writer, I make my reading of Norah's diaries and Jim's letters part of the story. Confessing to what I don't know (what can't be known), revealing my doubts, dead ends, my minor jubilations, I try to make visible my workings out. As I cut and arrange her life, I select from her archive (I can't tell it all), make narrative decisions to include some diary extracts or letter segments over others. I can only speak openly of the mysterious process I find this to be, how consciously and unconsciously, a range of factors – the enigma that was Norah, her diary entries about Danny, Jim's dodgy letters, my knowledge of women's history, my role as the mother of teenage girls – come together to shape the story (my story) of her life. As Maria Tamboukou writes, the way historians are 'drawn to certain storylines, topics, characters or themes and not to others' is 'more than pure serendipity'. Something resonates with our life experience, leads us to 'feel it, in a narrative, in the vibration of an archival fragment in our hand'.³⁹ Showing my means of production in this way seems to be a preferable way of writing: warmer, more *felt*, more human, more honest.

Writing with an honest, authorial 'I' means telling you too about the impact of Norah's diaries on my own life. *A Place of Dreams* explores the meaning of Norah's story, for her and also for me, as a historian and a feminist, a daughter, a great-niece, and a mother of girls. I tell you too how, as my daughters approached adolescence and young womanhood, I placed Norah's wartime experience alongside present-day questions, about sex, desire and danger, modesty and shame.

This is not too slight a tale, too obscure a life. We know that the smallest of stories can move us; can pack a mean punch. A story can crack the world open, slow it down long enough for us to get a good look inside, ask questions, lose ourselves briefly, allow us to contemplate emotion, uncertainty and fleeting possibilities.⁴⁰

A young woman's coming of age, her appetite for life amidst unexpected dangers, the insistent presence in all our lives of love and hope and longing, of pain and sorrow, memory, ageing and regret.