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FINDING POETRY IN THE ARCHIVES WORKING WITH HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS

Fly in Resin by Avril Staple
From an article in the Gloucester Chronicle 1932

I wanted to keep you that way;
never more than two feet from me
resting like a fly in resin
in a suitcase beneath the bed.

Your head inclined slightly to the left
mourning for my sour milk,
knees bent in a colic pose,
shoulders, wrists, elbows folded.

I planned to go grey while you,
Unchanging, remember me as I was,
flushed puerperium,
haloed against the pillows.

I watch them crack you open,
peel you like a fruit to find the stone.
They clasp me neck to ankle in iron
make me beg to kiss your bones.

This poem was produced from a workshop at Gloucestershire County archives. The poem was triggered by a small newspaper piece, just a couple of sentences, about a woman in court because a baby had been found under her bed in a suitcase full of concrete. I had been invited to run some workshops in the archives as a means of increasing public engagement and getting different groups of people visiting the archives. Archives are wonderful places for writers and I was immediately bowled over by the amount of potential inspiration and, without the experience of running the workshops, I would not have found out what was possible for the work I'm doing now on my next collection. While many institutions have specialist archives, for social history with its characters and controversies, its scandals and tragedies, the county archive cannot be bettered. Most county archives are council run and free to use; they hold a wealth of material for inspiration and can provide a quiet environment for working. While some materials may be on display, specific documents have to be ordered; this does mean that we need some idea of what we are looking for to search the online catalogue. If you don't have a specific project to research, the archivists and volunteers are invaluable for their knowledge of what treasures are hidden in the archives.

To run the workshops, I met with the archivist to agree documents to be available; without her encyclopaedic knowledge of the archives, I would not have known where to start. The treasures brought out for us included:

Asylum admittance log and corresponding doctors' records
School log books in which head teachers made daily entries; these were particularly interesting for how they tracked transient populations such as travelling farm workers and canal families
Court records; a logbook with columns for name, age, crime, sentence and height

Factory samples for salesmen
Bound collections of newspapers

All of these items provided a spark of inspiration for someone in the group, sometimes just a line or description was enough to set off an imaginative journey. One poet, Kathryn Alderman, was moved by a particular woman in the asylum records and took the few details of her life to build a narrative in her son's voice:

from *Flame-red Hair* by Kathryn Alderman
In tribute to Mary Ann Royale
Gloucester Asylum inmate 1833 to her death in 1886.

They sent me a lock
of her hair, flame red
I remembered her

she lulled me soft and low
with a mad-eyed keening
and fears of being sent
to somewhere worse than this.

//

There are pitfalls in working with historical documents; they can be so interesting it is easy to disappear down a rabbit hole of fact and anecdote, resulting in no more than versified history. I think of writing from historical documents as similar to ekphrastic poetry; to succeed as a poem, it needs to reach beyond the frame of the original image or, in this case, beyond the historical facts. In both the examples quoted above, the writers have used historical evidence to inform their poetry but have not merely written history as poetry; they have both followed the language to find the poetry. For example, the asylum records which inspired Kathryn Alderman's poem *Flame-red Hair* included the detail that the woman's home was 'Gloucester Island'; this was an area which was mostly slum at that time and is even now prone to flooding. Rather than go into detail about Mary Ann's home circumstances, Kathryn used that knowledge to suggest something about how women in poverty were treated: "Here where she stood waist-deep / in others' guilt".

I have since been using the county archive extensively in researching my next collection which attempts to blend my own history of walking in a specific place with layers of history, in particular one incident of social unrest associated with rights of way. There is a huge amount of archive material available including six boxes of court papers and witness statements, letters to local newspapers, diaries, and newspaper reports. Many of the documents are fascinating and full of wonderful language and anecdotes and there is a great temptation to form what I read into poetry. While studying the archive material is essential to lend authenticity to the poems' voices, I have to keep pulling back from the documents and reminding myself that I am not writing a history book. I have found that I need to leave space after reading in the archive before I start writing so that what I have read can work on my subconscious and inform creativity. For instance, one document, written in beautiful copperplate, is a "List of aged witnesses", together with their individual statements. The statements were colourful, often humorous, and filled with wonderful language but I needed to resist the temptation to turn them into found poems. While I used some of the statements to offer historical voices for context, giving myself some space to think about the original list resulted in a fantasy of the 'aged witnesses' commenting on the changes in the place since their time:

Calling the Witnesses

The aged witnesses grumble over the hill,
stop to point at narrowed paths and fallen trees.
Hawker kicks at encroaching roots while Bill Tilling

beats down an earth-packed ramp, prods the debris
and asks how a man can carry bread on the stoneway
to Cubberly and Cowley when young men speed

down the trails on bikes, making fresh ruts every day
to catch a foot or twist a knee. Sparrow Hiscock
climbs past the quarry to Devil's Chimney, waylays

walkers who follow the signposted way along the top,
demands to know where his garden went. His staff
points at the rocky slope below, the treacherous drop
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To sum up:

- Find your local county archive and its opening times and terms of use
- Get to know the archivists and volunteers, their knowledge is invaluable
- Don't let the facts get in the way of a good poem
- Be open to small details setting you off in unexpected directions

Angela France