

**MARY HARDY AND HER WORLD, 1773-1809**

**‘FOREWORD’**

**by Penelope J. Corfield**

**Foreword to: Margaret Bird,  
*Mary Hardy and her World, 1773-1809,*  
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The magnificent enterprise that appears here in the form of *Mary Hardy and her World* is the stuff of a historian’s (happy) dream. For some time now, there has been an awakening interest in discovering personal documentation relating to women in history. They are, generally speaking, less famous and publicly important than men. Their lives are less well recorded. And, as a consequence, their fortunes have, until recently, been less well studied. So that makes every new discovery a matter of some moment. Hence this full analysis of the voluminous diaries of Mary Hardy (1733-1809) is positively epic.

One fascinating sign of historians’ eagerness to find women’s personal records appears in the story of a fake (or at least a semi-fake). Anne Hughes’s *Diary of a Farmer’s Wife, 1796-7*, published in different editions in 1964, 1980 and 2009, has been serially discovered, published, and debunked, before being re-discovered, re-published and re-debunked. This source originated in a genuine document, now lost. It then came into the hands of a local historian in the 1930s, who, seeking to add interest, inserted extraneous nineteenth-century materials relating to cookery and folk customs. The outcome was a hybrid. One sign of its doctored contents was a certain archness of style: ‘Men be just like childer and as much trubble in many ways ...’. As a result, this diary does not

pass muster as a *bona fide* source document. A similar archness was apparent in a known fake. Cleone Knox's *Diary of a Young Lady of Fashion in the Year 1764-5* (1925) was written as a spoof and its real author was taken aback to find it taken seriously. At one point, the fictitious heroine muses: 'Men are such Silly Fools'. Diary-hunters, be warned. Any newly-discovered diary which generalises about male-female relations in such knowing terms (trying to raise a smile), should be regarded with instant suspicion.

No such generic meditations worried Mary Hardy during her busy life in eighteenth-century Norfolk – or, if they did, such views did not appear in her long-unpublished diaries. Her recorded concerns were immediate, quotidian, and practical. That indeed is one prime characteristic of diaries. Of course, these highly personal records vary considerably. There are no rules. Nonetheless, diaries share some common features. Overwhelmingly, they tend to concentrate upon everyday affairs, often written in terse prose. And it's not uncommon to mention the weather. (So it's interesting but not surprising to learn that Mary Hardy's very first diary entry, on 28 November 1773, was: 'Fair weather').



Informal eighteenth-century drawing:  
'Writing by Candlelight' (n.d.)

Within a fairly common format, however, there is plenty of scope for personal variation. Different diarists use this private medium to record a range of different preoccupations. For instance, there are religious diaries, food diaries, work diaries, travel diaries, military diaries, political diaries, prison diaries, and so forth. For many diarists, writing daily (or sometimes more intermittently) allows them to gather their thoughts and then to free their minds by logging the key points. The resultant document functions as a personal *aide-memoire*. An example can be seen in the prison jottings, scribbled in Newgate in the years 1794-6 by a young radical named Thomas Lloyd. He tried to keep some sense of control by secretly diarising his grim experiences. No doubt, too, his developing facility of speed-writing helped him in his later career, when he emigrated to the USA and pioneered the American version of shorthand.

Reference to secrecy highlights one important point about diaries. It's important always to assess for whom they were written. The greater the privacy a diarist can maintain, the greater the frankness of the entries. So diaries that are written deliberately as semi-public resources, to be read or shown to others, are habitually the most carefully composed and the least spontaneous. A majority of diaries, meanwhile, are written as private records. But if the resultant document is not well hidden, there is always the risk that it might be read casually by others. So most private diaries are candid but usually with some reservations. By contrast, those records which are kept in complete secrecy – and, especially, those written in secret codes – are usually the most explicit.

Sex provides one test. Personal sexual encounters (as opposed to gossip about other people's escapades) are not often described frankly in diaries. However, the more secretive the format, the more likely are such matters to be included. Samuel Pepys is the paradigm case. He wrote in his own variant of a standard seventeenth-century shorthand code. Yet what would Pepys have thought in the 1660s had he known that his cipher would be cracked and that,

with the publication of his diaries from 1825 onwards, every interested reader to this day could read full details of his sex life, which were concealed from even his closest family? Possibly he might have been pleased. After all, he had saved copies of his diaries and (separately) a code to the cipher. Either way, Pepys's fate sends a clear message. Diarists seeking complete retrospective privacy should ultimately destroy their handiwork. Otherwise, all surviving personal documents – coded or otherwise – are considered by historians as fair game.

Generally, however, the greatest safeguard against casual diary readings by nosy friends and neighbours is the sheer ordinariness of most diary entries. They are often repetitive, sometimes boring. Sometimes cryptic. There is no overarching narrative line, other than the passing of the days. Not much humour except at times inadvertently. And, above all, the sheer abundance of many terse entries on many diverse topics can be hard for an uninitiated reader to process mentally. Diaries are thus, on the one hand, highly accessible historical documents but, on the other hand, they are very opaque – hiding bigger pictures among a forest of mundane details.

These preliminary observations serve to highlight the utter magnificence of Margaret Bird's interpretation of Mary Hardy's diaries. The basic entries in themselves constitute invaluable historical evidence. As already noted, there is a dearth of personal documentation relating to non-elite eighteenth-century women. But between 1773 and 1809 Mary Hardy penned half a million words on an exceptionally wide range of topics. Indefatigably, she recorded details of her daily housework and family dynamics, her practices of childcare, her business as the working wife of a Norfolk farmer and brewer, her relationships with workers and servants, her active social life, her questing religious life, her observations on significant local and national events, and so forth, not excluding the weather ...

In short, a veritable cornucopia. This resource stands comparison with already treasured big diaries from the eighteenth century, such as those of (in Britain) Parson James Woodforde (1740-1803), another Norfolk resident, or (in North America) the Philadelphian Quaker Elizabeth Drinker (1735-1807).

Yet voluminous diaries cry out for expert guides. That is where Mary Hardy has had the posthumous good fortune of finding her ideal editor and interpreter. It takes a lot of energy, pertinacity, and powers of self-organisation to maintain a daily diary over many years. Margaret Bird has proved equally pertinacious in studying these materials in depth. Not only has she already presented the diaries immaculately in a stylish layout, but here she elucidates the material in a series of sustained essays. These convey Margaret Bird's big picture analysis of the world of Mary Hardy, accompanied by well-chosen illustrations, tables, graphs, maps, family trees and extensive side-notes. There is much to savour, to learn, to debate.

*Mary Hardy and her World* constitutes a publication *de luxe*. It is worthy both of the diarist herself and of Margaret Bird, her editor and historian.