

**HISTORICAL THINKING BUILDS BRIDGES:
A REFLECTION ON OTHERNESS ...
THEN, NOW, AND YET-TO-COME**

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There is a little game I like to play with old photographs. I like to look in the eyes of the person captured in black-and-white—maybe an old relative in a portrait hanging on the wall of the dining room, maybe a mystery person in a random photo in a book or magazine. I look in this person’s eyes, and I try to imagine that she is living in my time: Take away the funny hairstyle or the weird hat, fix the teeth up a little, add some modern clothes and modern furnishings in the background ... could she be here now? Can I imagine her as a friend of mine? A neighbor? A teacher? Could we have a conversation about the new John Grisham novel, or the recent Oscar winners, or what’s currently happening in the world?

I cannot remember when I started doing this, but it is a bit addictive, especially for a historian like me. This mental exercise is a way of trying to elide the differences between then and now, between them and me. In this game I’m trying to cross the barrier of yesteryear in order to bring people from the past into the present. People in the past, especially though not exclusively the long-ago past, are vulnerable to being rendered “other” because we so quickly spot surface differences. But, with a little imagination and empathy, we might recognize the differences as less important than the essential consistency of the human spirit. When I teach my college history classes, I often have to caution students against declaring that people in the past were not as “smart” as people today, that they thought the earth was flat, that they were prudish, that they could not draw, that they were all “traditional” (whatever that may mean). It is so easy to use people in the past to define ourselves, and in our era we use history not to show what we have lost so much as how much we have progressed. This tends to make us guilty of condescending to people of the past. We have “othered” them for our own benefit, as is so often the case.

This connecting with people in the past is an important exercise that we historians do, as we try to bring people from the margins into the mainstream. Some post-colonial theorists in academia insist that we should not speak for groups outside our own—that we inevitably misrepresent them and that they should speak for themselves instead. But we historians have no choice. Speaking for others is a difficult and serious responsibility. Especially when it comes to women, who were voiceless for generations, there might be few sources that let us listen to their voices. Beyond the lack of women in leadership roles, beyond the educational and time deficits that prevented women from writing about themselves, the activities of women were often considered uninteresting, unimportant, even unchanging and therefore unworthy of note (not really “history” at all). Since women of the distant past are not here and will never be here again, we must either let them remain silent or try to speak for them. This is a

heavy burden to bear, speaking for those who can no longer speak for themselves, yet it is preferable to an ignorant, uninterested, and erasing silence. To be faithful to the dead, we historians must try to understand them, to relate to them, and even more to see ourselves in them.

And yet, this has its limitations. When I right my vision again, the people in the old photograph still have the funny hats and the weird hairstyles and the crooked teeth. I am still confronted by the vast differences that lie between us: They were then, I am now. As a historian, I can try to speak for people in the past, but I always have to be aware of how much I could be missing about their experiences, their beliefs, the way they grew up, the constraints under which they lived.

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's classic, Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812*, provides an example of how difficult yet useful it can be to listen to those marginalized in the past—by the past. The book is based on a diary preserved for generations in a Special Collections library. Rare as it is, one would think this diary must have been a real treasure to historians over the centuries. But the diary lay unexamined and uninterpreted for many years because it was so, well, mundane. One historian of the 1870s called Martha Ballard's diary entries "brief and with some exceptions not of general interest," while another said the diary was "trivial and unimportant . . . being a repetition of what has been recited many times," and even a feminist historian in the 1970s said, "Like many diaries of farm women, it is filled with trivia about domestic chores and pastimes."¹

Yet Ulrich was able to find meaning in the trivia. Ballard's experiences can help us to see what activities but also thoughts, heartaches, ambitions, and struggles made up women's lives in the period of the Early American Republic. Not only did she perform strenuous and time-consuming chores just to keep her family healthy, not only did she bear eight children and watch three of them die, Ballard also helped other women in similar circumstances, including assisting in more than eight hundred births. Being a midwife necessitated travel—sometimes in desperate weather conditions and to desperate situations—and brought her into a large network of women, men, and children in her region of Maine. Her diary records actions both small and heroic, a sensibility both searching and pragmatic. Ulrich concludes that "it is in the very dailiness, the exhaustive, repetitious dailiness, that the real power of Martha Ballard's book lies. . . . For her, living was to be measured in doing. Nothing was trivial."² How important a revelation that is as to why women were so overlooked in history, and why we should listen very, very closely, and understand without condescension, the reality of everyday life for people in the past.

¹Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 8-9.

²Ulrich, 9.

As cryptic as the diary was—with its trivia and bad handwriting and incomplete sentences and unexplained references—Ulrich was able to allow Martha to speak again to us some two hundred years later. After reading *A Midwife's Tale*, I thought I could perhaps squint a bit and see myself in Martha, see myself in the context to live such a life. This can be at times more difficult with some people than with others. We might find it harder to put ourselves in a vastly different country or religious belief system, to cross socio-economic classes, ethnicities, or genders. It can be uncomfortable, even uninteresting, to study people who seem vastly different from ourselves.

When people are mostly like we are, but make decisions counter to our own, this can be one of the hardest times to listen to them with empathy, interest, and respect. Here is an example from my own experience: Mrs. Humphry Ward and Gertrude Bell, two middle-class, well-educated, well-traveled, socially-reforming women writers. They seem to be just like I am—except for one very significant part of their biographies. Today, of course, there is tremendously widespread acceptance of women's suffrage, regardless of one's political position. In early twentieth-century Britain, there were women's anti-suffrage leagues: *women* who organized in order to demand they *not* be given the right to vote. Mrs. Humphry Ward, as she is invariably called, was a popular novelist who advocated strongly for women's admission to higher education and helped found one of the Oxford University colleges for women. She played a major role as a social reformer, focusing on children's after-school care and the education of children with special needs. She would become one of England's first female magistrates. Yet, in 1908, this pioneering woman helped found the Women's National Anti-Suffrage League. The secretary of the organization was Gertrude Bell, a phenomenally independent woman who traveled to the Middle East as a contemporary of Lawrence of Arabia, served as a spy, and published books about her adventures, as well as significantly contributed to the founding of the nation of Iraq post-World War I.³

What are these two women doing in an Anti-Suffrage League? People can be so interesting in their contradictions and in the ways they fail to fit into our present-day ideas about what "side" they should be on, or what their beliefs "should" be. Both of these women thought that it was acceptable for women to vote in local elections and for school boards, as they already had the right to do in Britain at this time. But they said that because women did not participate in the business world and did not serve in the military, they should not be able to vote for the national British Parliament. Ward might have agreed to head up the women's branch of the Anti-Suffrage League in order to win Parliamentary support for her other causes in the service of women. Bell seems to have been of the opinion that the wives of workingmen, already so overburdened in

³For more on each of these women, see Georgina Howell, *Gertrude Bell: Queen of the Desert, Shaper of Nations* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006); John Sutherland, *Mrs. Humphry Ward: Eminent Victorian, Pre-eminent Edwardian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

Britain, could not bear the additional strain of national political participation. Ward's and Bell's choice to participate actively in suppressing suffrage has had a negative effect on how they have been remembered. These pioneering women, despite their achievements for themselves and for other women, are rarely honored or even noticed by posterity. Because we do not respect what seem to us to be internal contradictions—and certainly contradictions to our own thinking—we do little to remember these women. When we do, we cast them as unrecognizable enemies of progress. Ward's biographer has called her leadership in the Anti-Suffrage League her “ticket to oblivion.”⁴

I use this example to demonstrate how alien people of the past can seem. When we find elements of people that seem contradictory or bizarre or problematic or confounding, this is exactly the moment when we should become intensely interested to reach across the boundary of time to try to connect with their experiences and perspectives. In doing this, although we should try to see the common element we share, it is important not to gloss over the differences. This is one of the great strengths of the study of history: People in the past resist our attempts to make them just like we are, and this becomes a reminder that marginalized people in our own time also cannot be made “just like us.” This is precisely why we should try to engage with those marginalized in our society: Difference is valuable, beautiful, interesting, and necessary. Other people always remain to some degree mysterious, and we have an obligation to try to respect those unreachable parts of them.

This way of thinking not only benefits our ability to connect with the past, or with those marginalized in the present, but also with future generations. The Millennial Generation is the subject of much commentary and study, and of course millennials are predominantly the students we find in our classes. What a mystery they can be. How frustrating they are in their contradictions (labeled both narcissistic and oriented to social justice, for example). Their ways of communicating the exhausting dailiness of their lives through trivial texts and tweets perplex those of us in earlier generations. How frustrating that they make choices so different from our own.

Here at Marietta College, I recently attended a pedagogy workshop directed toward connecting with this generation of the future. How can we understand them? How can we respect their differences from us at the same time we urge them toward our own standards and values? In the aftermath of these discussions, it has occurred to me that historical thinking might hold the key. We must look into them and see a little bit of ourselves. But we must also respect and appreciate their qualities that make them different. We cannot expect them to be like we are. They are in their own time, and we must build a bridge toward them—toward the future.

⁴John Sutherland, “The Suffragettes’ Unlikeliest Enemy,” *The Guardian*, June 4, 2013, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jun/04/suffragettes-mary-ward.

Having three young children, I have cultivated an amateur interest in child development. One theory proposes that when children become a few months old, they start to realize that they are not the same being as their mother. This is considered as an explanation for separation anxiety that can stretch from six months of age to a year and a half. Babies realize that they are not the same as their caretaker, and they cry and fret about the gulf that exists between them and others. Likewise, we should see discomfort engaging with others as part of the human experience. It hurts to know they are not us and that we are not them. But this is also what allows for independence and the development of unique identities that are crucial to human growth, our growth as well as theirs.

Students in my classes sometimes think of studying history as simply a matter of discovering facts about the past, as if the past is somehow static and fixed. People stand at the center of history, though, and people are unpredictable, sometimes unfathomable, especially to those of us in different times. Even in our own age, as we encounter people who grew up in different contexts from our own, whether because of socio-economic, gender, ethnic, or even generational differences, we must stretch our imaginations to build a bridge between them and us, from yesteryear through tomorrow. This is how we can understand the human condition in general, but also how we address the particular challenges of our age with its many rapid changes.

The great challenge to history teachers is to help others to speak or to be heard in order to bridge differences without trying to erase the differences entirely. We need to communicate the voices of the past to our students, and also to listen to their voices that pull us into the future. And when we look into the eyes of the other, maybe we can see some of ourselves, some of them, and some of the mystery unique to each of us.