

*Caroline Gonda in Conversation with  
Helena Whitbread*

An interview with Helena Whitbread, the first editor of selections from the Anne Lister diaries.

CAROLINE GONDA Your work has been vitally important for decades now to those of us who study Anne Lister – historians of sexuality and gender, literary scholars and others. What took you to the archives in search of her?

HELENA WHITBREAD In 1976, at the age of forty-five, I decided to pick up my neglected education and enroll on a three-year degree course in politics, literature and the history of ideas at Bradford University. Following on from that, I thought I would like to write short articles with a view to publication in magazines, etc. Casting around for a subject, I remembered that Shibden Hall in my home town of Halifax had once housed a woman called Anne Lister, and one afternoon in 1983 I went to the Calderdale archives department to make inquiries about any material about her that might be lodged there.

CG What did you know about her already, and what did you expect to find?

HW I actually knew nothing at all about her, apart from a vague memory of an article in the local *Halifax Courier* many years ago which referred to John Lister, the last resident of Shibden Hall, having mentioned that her letters were still extant and were housed in the archives. So a bundle of her letters is what I expected to find on my first visit there.

CG What surprised you most?

HW Initially, on that first afternoon, the fact that she kept a journal was my first surprise. The archivist had shown me some of the letters – and to my dismay, I saw that many of them were crossed, giving a trellis-like pattern which looked exceedingly difficult to transcribe. When I expressed my doubts about this, he asked me if I knew that she had kept a journal. Of course, I didn't. He produced some of her journal pages on the reader-printer screen and my second surprise that day was to find that much of it was in a secret code. Fortunately, there was also a key to the code, so that afternoon I photocopied the key and the first fifty pages of the journal and took them home with me. I was curious to find out why this woman who had lived in my own home town almost two hundred years ago had felt the need to write sections of her journal in code. My biggest surprise was when

the transcribed passages revealed her need for secrecy. Whatever I had speculated might be hidden in the crypt-hand sections, the fact that she was a lesbian had never occurred to me.

CG What was your process for working with the journals? How easy did you find them to transcribe?

HW It has to be remembered that in the 1970s the Computer Age was in its fledgling state of development, and in 1983 I certainly was not computer literate. In fact, it was Anne Choma who taught me to use a computer in the early 1990s. So, my initial process for working with the journals was very much a pen-and-paper system. Anne Lister used two strategies for recording her life on paper: plain hand, in which she wrote about her everyday life, and what she called her 'crypt hand' – the esoteric code she used to depict mainly her emotional and sexual life with women. Both types of writing threw up many textual difficulties. The plain hand was not easy to read, mainly due to Anne's cramped handwriting and her use of abbreviations for almost every other word – but with usage, one could read it on the page. The coded extracts needed a different technique. The lines of symbols give no indication whatsoever of any punctuation and, to add to the obfuscation which Anne obviously intended, there is no space between individual words. When every symbol in each extract had been decoded, symbol for letter, the transcriber is then left with long, unpunctuated lines of letters of the alphabet. It has to be the decision of the decoder to impose a structure on the sequence of letters – to define where words begin and end. Only then can a sense of what could be found in the crypt hand emerge. The next step is to form coherent sentences from the words until the full meaning of the coded passage emerges. With practice, it eventually became easier to read the un-transcribed crypt-hand passages than those in plain hand.

CG How early in the process of transcribing the journals and decoding Lister's crypt hand did you realise what you were dealing with? What was your reaction to that moment of realisation?

HW When I first saw the journal pages in the archives, I was under the impression that they began early in March 1817. The transcriptions of the early sections of crypt hand at this point in her life were certainly indicating Anne's keen interest in what was going on in the married life of Mariana and Charles Lawton – but there was little indication of any sexual tie between Anne and Mariana. It appeared she was bemoaning the loss of her best friend to a marriage which took her away from York. Had I had the 1816 journal (which was actually appended at the end of the whole body of the journals – after 1840), I would have discovered her lesbianism much sooner. As it was, I think the first indication I had, in her 1817 journal, was the fact of her cross-dressing, i.e. *'Began this morning to sit, before breakfast, in my drawers put on with gentleman's braces I bought for 2/6 on 27 March 1809 & my old black waistcoat & dressing gown.'* [Journal entry 2 April 1817] My reaction to that entry was, first of all, to go back and

reread it – wondering if I had got the true sense of what she was doing with such a strange assembly of clothing! I think this was the clue to why she needed the necessity of the crypt-hand passages. Once the realisation of what I was dealing with truly sank in, although I will not pirate Tony Blair's 'I felt the hand of history on my shoulder', what I can say is I became conscious that Clio, the muse of history, must have joined me on that first visit to the archives and ordained that everything that followed was possible.

CG What was the point where you knew this needed to be a book?

HW My first reading through the first batch of fifty pages which I took home from that initial visit to the archives in 1983 dispelled any idea that a short article would ever do justice to Anne's enthralling life. As I worked through the pages and transcribed the crypt-hand passages, I soon formed the idea that a book was the necessary vehicle to convey an idea of the riches contained in her journals.

CG How easy was it to find a publisher for this material?

HW Amazingly easy! I looked through the *Writers' and Artists' Yearbook* in the library and decided that Virago was the obvious publisher for this amazing story of a nineteenth-century lesbian writing in a secret code about her love affairs. I sent them a short proposal and, I believe, a couple of chapters, and I got an almost immediate answer of acceptance. When I look back, I wonder why I never thought to find myself an agent!

CG How did Virago shape the book? What did they want from it?

HW On my submission of the completed manuscript, I was informed by my Virago editor that the word count was too high and she wanted me to go through it and make a good many deletions to trim it down. I demurred, and proposed instead to lift out a large section of the MS – all of which pertained to Anne Lister's stay in Paris. I knew that this could then form the basis for a second book – which it has done, i.e. *No Priest but Love*. Although at the time (1988), Virago declined to publish this second volume, it was published by Smith Settle in 1992 and eventually by Virago in 2020.

CG What was the response to that first volume, *I Know My Own Heart*, and was it what you expected?

HW I have to admit that I felt some trepidation when *I Know My Own Heart* was published. I had thought that there would be an outraged response locally, in my home town (and Anne Lister's) of Halifax. The Listers had been a well-respected family ever since they inherited Shibden in the 1400s and here was I, disclosing the best-kept secret in the town! However, there was very little local notice taken apart from the Halifax Antiquarian Society members and other readers of local history. In terms of media attention and in the world of academe, the book attracted a great deal of attention – but sales were modest. The first print run of five thousand copies took a while to sell and for the next three decades, until the *Gentleman Jack* series appeared in America, the book was well under the radar so far as sales went. Virago is to be commended for keeping it in print!

- CG The emphasis of your work in the two volumes of *Secret Diaries – I Know My Own Heart* and *No Priest but Love* – falls more on Anne Lister’s personal relationships with other women than on the economic and political aspects of her life. With such a mass of material to choose from, how did you decide on the focus and narrative shape for your selections from the diaries?
- HW Obviously, faced with such a mass of material (five million words!), I knew that difficult choices had to be made. During those first five years (1983–8) of reading and transcribing, I was living in Anne Lister’s Halifax of two hundred years ago – and it was enthralling! I was born and brought up in Halifax and I had walked the streets which she had walked before me. It is almost impossible to describe the thrill and the sense of wonder I felt as modern Halifax dissolved for me and Anne Lister’s Halifax took over my life. The temptation to make the book as much about the town itself was almost overwhelming – but when the love stories emerged from the transcriptions of the crypt hand, the dilemma became acute. I then reasoned that, given the proliferation of articles, books and societies (such as the Halifax Antiquarian Society), there were many available resources to be had for the history of the town – but who knew about the intimacies and affairs of Halifax people in the past? Or the fact that a circle of women had formed a small lesbian community, the locus of which was our own Shibden Hall? The detailed accounts of Anne’s private life in her crypt hand are riveting. All her angst over Mariana Belcombe’s marriage to Charles Lawton is depicted in heartbreaking detail. She analysed her disenchantment in true Romantic fashion. Her sardonic appraisals, also in crypt hand, of the social scene in the small, provincial town of Halifax tucked away in the Pennine hills are hilarious. So, for me, it was this whole encapsulation of thwarted lesbian love and Anne’s sardonic appraisals of the Halifax social world of the day contained in what I called ‘the Halifax narrative’ which I wished to work on and present to my readers.
- CG I imagine those questions of focus and narrative shape are even more pressing when it comes to writing a biography of Anne Lister, as you have done. What has that process of writing Lister’s biography been like, and what have you found most rewarding and most challenging about it?
- HW The process of writing a biography of Anne Lister has been (and is) absorbing, enthralling, exhausting, tiring, exasperating and compelling. I have to say that picking out the tiny factual details in the journals and letters sometimes makes me feel as if I am engaged in the literary equivalent of single-handedly stitching the Bayeux tapestry!!
- In my first two books I had worked more or less solely from the journals. That, of course, was too limiting for the necessary expansion which a full biography demanded. The first challenge, therefore, of writing the biography lay in that there was an extensive back-story to be told prior to Anne’s life before her journals began, and this involved years of visiting the Calderdale Archives department – sitting for many hours reading documents and taking notes from them which the ever-willing and

wonderful staff members produced for me on request. This was a far different cry from sitting at home with the pages of the journals decoding the crypt-hand passages and weaving the story by selecting relevant passages. In addition, the background reading has been immense – as my bookshelves and the footnotes in the biography will testify!

I began the story then with a prologue which covered the history of the Lister family and the involvement of Jeremy Lister (Anne's father) in the American War of Independence in the 1770s. From then on, chronologically, Anne's life unfolds from the day of her birth on 3 April 1791 to the day she inherits Shibden Hall in 1826.

- CG I'm intrigued by Lister's statement that she has had thoughts of being a published author, perhaps under the name Constant Durer. Do you think she saw the diaries as in any way a preparation for that – either as raw material, or as a kind of regular writing practice?
- HW It is true that Anne longed to become a published author and at various intervals, she confided her literary ambitions to her aunt: 'Spent all the evening talking to my aunt . . . *Talked of my ambition in the literary way, of my wish for a name in the world, all of which she will second. She really is very good & is surely fond & proud of me.*' [Journal entry 3 March 1819] But she was also very wary of drawing unseemly attention to herself. '*I would do many things if I could but at present I must be as careful as I can & study only to improve myself in the hope of a possibility of making something by writing.*' [Journal entry 30 October 1819] In 1822 she even went so far as to contemplate writing up her love affair with Mariana. '*Thought . . . I would write an account of my acquaintance with M[ariana], surely, in a series of letters to a friend. Think of calling myself Constant Durer, from the verb, dure, to endure.*' [Journal entry 16 December 1822] So, my conclusion is that Anne's journal constituted both a regular writing practice and a therapeutic exercise in which she could analyse her deepest emotions about her love affairs and her angst about her sexual identity. '*Alas! I am neither man nor woman in society. How shall I manage?*' [Journal entry 26 January 1830.] Her choice of a book based on 'letters to a friend' would have been a much more circumspect publication than the too revelatory content of her journals.
- CG Do you read the journals as unmediated outpourings of emotion, or is there a kind of self-consciousness to them even if they're not written to be read by anyone else?
- HW I think there is a great deal of self-consciousness in Anne's journal writing. She had a finely honed sense of the dramatic, and the almost forensic examination of her own feelings is at the core of most of the crypt-hand entries. Consider the following entry, especially the last line, when Mariana had broken the news that Charles Lawton had proposed to her and she apparently asked Anne's permission to accept him: '*To sink January 1815 in oblivion! Oh, how it broke the magic of my faith forever. How, spite of love, it burst the spell that bound my very reason. Suppliant at her feet, I loathed*

consent but loathed the asking more. I would have given the “Yes” she sought tho’ it had rent my heart into a hundred thousand shivers [sic]. It was enough to ask. It was a coward love that dared not brave the storm &, in desperate despair, my proud, indignant spirit watched it sculk [sic] away.’ [Journal entry 20 August 1823] Anne is fascinated by her own ‘proud, indignant spirit’! She is carried away by the impact of the scene – and the carefully wrought language she uses is in the true Romantic idiom of the day:

‘The chivalry of heart was gone. Hopes brightest hues were brushed away. Yet still one melancholy point of union remained. She was unhappy. So was I. Love scorned to leave the ruin desolate; & Time & he have shaded it so sweetly, my heart still lingers in its old abiding place.’ [Journal entry 20 August 1823]

To that extent, I feel that her crypt-hand passages, in particular, are mediated to some extent by her desire to present the events almost as an onlooker despite her use of the first person. As one commentator said, ‘Anne Lister’s journals are a long love-letter to herself.’

CG With all the detail Lister gives about her life in the journals, are there nevertheless aspects of her life that you wish she’d said more about?

HW There is, I feel, a great deal more that could have been said about Anne’s mother, Rebecca Lister née Battle; her background, her family connections, her unhappy marriage to Captain Jeremy Lister, her decline into alcoholism and the troubled relationship between her and Anne. Anne’s mentions of her mother are brief. In my current biography I address this omission by providing a fuller picture than Anne’s journal conveys, but from what can be gleaned, it is obvious that she has no respect for her mother and yet, despite their turbulent relationship, Anne was extremely saddened not to have arrived in time to be at her mother’s side when her death occurred. Nine pages, covering the dates 13–21 November 1817 have been cut out of her journal, but a letter sent to her Uncle James at Shibden Hall, Halifax, dated ‘Market Weighton, Friday morning 14th Nov. 1817’, gives some indication of her feelings: ‘Not to have had the satisfaction of seeing my mother ere she closed her eyes forever, has indeed been a shock to me which no language can describe.’ The trauma of losing her mother before having the opportunity to make some sort of reconciliation remained with Anne for many years. More than ten years later, her emotions were still running deep on this issue. ‘Looking over my journal of November 1817 – *Could not help crying over the account of my poor mother’s death.*’ [Journal entry 22 September 1828] The relationship with her sister, Marian, is also worth an in-depth analysis – which again can be addressed in the more capacious form of a biography.

CG Reading your work on Anne Lister, and hearing you talk about her, one thing that comes through very strongly is the sense of your affection for her. Has that ever wavered?

- HW It is true that I do feel a sense of affection for Anne. She has been a constant companion for forty years of my life. From my first reading of her journal, I almost immediately found myself intrigued with her. I would not say I have ever really wavered in my affection for her – rather that I recognised that, like every human being, she was not without faults, some of them quite glaring, all of which added more ingredients to the complex brew of emotions which reading her journal engenders. Obviously her faults had to be weighed in the balance against the more positive aspects of her character, but the poignancy of her struggles to forge her own identity as a lesbian (although she never used that word in relation to her own sexuality) in an alien, binary world, plus her heartbreak over Mariana's defection into a heterosexual marriage, always touches me.
- CG Has your view of her changed much over the years?
- HW I can't really say that it has. The first five years of my reading and transcribing Anne's journal from start to finish implanted a strong impression in my mind of this remarkable woman which has never really been dislodged, despite all the scholarly articles, books and media representations which have proliferated over the years. All this additional work by others has been fantastic – and has added greatly to my initial understanding of Anne's character. I have collected every article and book, so far as I know, that has been written about her and been involved in every possible media outlet – radio, TV, film – in addition to giving talks and lectures in the UK and a number of European countries, yet I always return to the original view which those first five years of solitary reading formed.
- CG Have there been times when you really disliked Lister?
- HW I think the correct term here might be rather that I was 'dismayed' – by some of the less attractive facets of her personality. The crypt-hand entries which relate her sexual affairs frequently depict some reprehensible behaviour towards the women with whom she became involved. Mariana Lawton's marriage changed Anne's attitude towards women. She became more cynical – in one instance, speaking of a young woman, Miss Vallance, who was awaiting the return of her soldier sweetheart: '*I think I could have her in the meantime if I chose*' [Journal entry 28 September 1818] – and, as this indicates, more of a philanderer, as one of her friends, Miss Marsh, described her. When Miss Marsh 'quizzed' Anne about whether or not she had been in a young woman's room the previous night, Anne replied that she had not, '*but said I had been with her for an hour from seven this morning. Miss M[arsh] said it was like me. I was determined not to lose my philandering.*' [Journal entry 12 September 1823] It also has to be acknowledged that, as a member of the upper class, she had many of the less attractive features of her kind in that era. She was undemocratic in her political stance in that she was diametrically opposed to any form of radicalism in either politics or religion. She was unable to appreciate the innate justice of the demands of those who were denied a voice, or deprived of earning a decent living, in their own country. Reading a publication in the *Manchester Observer* by one James Wroe which favoured the reformers



and the rights of women, she dubbed it ‘a most seditious rousing article . . . what will not these demagogues advance, careless what absurdity or ruin they commit!’ [Journal entry 6 December 1819] She was no flag-bearer for the higher education of women, despite her own rigorous programme of study. Indeed, she rather opposed than supported such educational ideals: ‘I spoke against a classical education for ladies in general. It did no good if not pursued & if [it was] undrew a curtain better for them not to peep behind.’ [Journal entry 20 September 1824] Her snobbishness was also an unattractive feature and gained her a level of unpopularity in her home town of Halifax. It was obvious that she felt she had to make do with what she saw as an inferior set of people, the middle-class manufacturing families of the town, but, as she found out to her cost, many of them were well aware of her feelings of condescension towards them.

CG Did you ever imagine, when you started this work, that Anne Lister would one day be the subject of so much attention?

HW No, indeed I didn’t! I was writing about a local historical figure in an obscure Yorkshire town who was unknown to the world. My ambitions for the future of my books were limited. I had hoped that she would become better known through the agency of those publications and this indeed did happen – as I have indicated above – but only in the world of (mainly lesbian) academics. The attention of the media was soon exhausted and the books dropped below the radar, so to speak, for the next twenty years. But I now understand the perspicacity of the remark made in 1988 by the headmaster of the school I was working at when my first book came out. He said, ‘You have lit a slow fuse,’ and now, thirty-five years later, thanks to Sally Wainwright’s brilliant epic series *Gentleman Jack*, Anne Lister has become a global icon, particularly in the lesbian world. Anne Lister and the town of Halifax are firmly established on the world’s cultural map, and her journals are on the United Kingdom Memory of the World Register for documentary heritage of UK significance.

CG What has it been like to go from those early days with fifty microfilmed pages at a time, to the developments of the past few years: the success of Sally Wainwright’s *Gentleman Jack*, the commemorative plaques at Holy Trinity in York and at Shibden, the Anne Lister Research Summit, the Anne Lister Society, the transcription project with participants from around the globe, the founding of a college named after Anne Lister at the University of York, the unveiling of a statue of her at the Piece Hall?

HW It has been an astonishing four decades for me – a woman from a working-class background who left school at thirteen with no educational qualifications. As a child, I devoured books; as an adult, I yearned to immerse myself in highbrow literature. I had what Charles Dickens called ‘the nagging consciousness of faculties unexercised’. My foray into the Anne Lister journals – which I privately entitle ‘Entering the Labyrinth’ – has quieted that pervasive sense of unfulfilled need, and I think that title conveys the sense of all that has happened since. This is all on a personal basis, of course. The greater picture lies in the worldwide response from



lesbians around the world, and all the developments encapsulated in your summary above. Anne Lister has made the world a kinder and better place for many women, and I am truly grateful and humbled to know that my initial work was the catalyst – in the sense of ‘an agent that provokes or speeds significant change or action’ – for all that has taken place since. It is, of course, the effect of Sally Wainwright’s *Gentleman Jack* which has caused the most significant escalation of interest in Anne Lister’s story, and, because the series was based on the later years of Anne’s life, I thought that my books, on her earlier years, would continue to exist on a very low-key scale. But people wanted to get back to the source of how all this interest in Anne Lister came about, and very quickly, after the screening of the first episode of *Gentleman Jack*, sales of my books rose considerably, fuelling all that has happened in my life to a dizzying degree!

CG What’s been the best thing about your years with Anne Lister, and what are your hopes for the future?

HW In 2016, a young lesbian friend and I published, through Amazon, a small booklet entitled *Secret Diaries Past and Present: a Q&A with Helena Whitbread and Natasha Holme*. I addressed the above question in that book, saying that the first five years (1983–8) must count as the best experience of my involvement with the Anne Lister journals. No one, apart from my family and one or two trusted friends, really knew about what I was doing. I had Anne Lister and her magnificently detailed life all to myself. It was more or less my secret, and I loved the feeling of intimacy and quiet hours of studying the life of this remarkable woman. This never-to-be-recaptured idyll of quiet, scholarly work, untroubled by the demands of the outside world, has now, of course, to be balanced against the experience of the past two years – and how can one deny that the happiness and courage which lesbians around the globe have drawn from Anne’s story must count as the best thing that has come from my years in the Labyrinth. Given all the wonderful achievements already in place, which you list above – i.e. the success of Sally Wainwright’s *Gentleman Jack*, the commemorative plaques at Holy Trinity in York and at Shibden, the Anne Lister Research Summit, the Anne Lister Society, the transcription project with participants from around the globe, the founding of a college named after Lister at the University of York, the unveiling of a statue of her at the Piece Hall, and including the journals on the United Kingdom Memory of the World Register, part of Unesco’s Memory of the World programme – my hopes for the future, on a personal basis, now rest mainly on getting the biography, dealing with Anne’s life prior to the period depicted in *Gentleman Jack*, published in book form, so that a more complete account of Anne’s life is available to the eager readership which already exists. On a general basis, I would hope that posterity will treat Anne Lister kindly, remembering her as a woman of courage and integrity who defied the world’s opinion and remained true to her own mantra: ‘I love and only love the fairer sex and thus, beloved by them in turn, my heart revolts from any other love than theirs.’ [Journal entry 29 January 1821]