

OTHER LIVES IN SAMUEL PEPYS'S DIARY

A Collection of Creative Writing inspired
by Pepys's journal of the 1660s



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Cover image: Ornatus Muliebris Anglicanus (The Clothing of English Women) by Wenceslaus Hollar, 1640, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

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INTRODUCTION

This collection is inspired by the lives of people who feature in Samuel Pepys's diary, which he kept between 1660 and 1669. Pepys's diary provides a remarkably detailed account of his experiences in late seventeenth-century London, with vivid descriptions of major events such as the plague and the Great Fire. In his journal we can also find glimpses of the lives of female servants, enslaved Black people, and other Londoners whose lives are hard to trace in more conventional historical records.

In May 2022, members of the public were invited to two online creative writing workshops as part of the 'Reimagining the Restoration' project. Based at the University of Leicester, the project investigates Pepys's diary and the responses to it since its first publication. Ever since the diary was published in the early nineteenth century, it has attracted the attention of writers of historical fiction.

Both workshops were led by Dr Yvonne Battle-Felton (a historical novelist and creative writing tutor) and by me, Dr Kate Loveman (the project's lead researcher and a specialist on Pepys). Participants were introduced to the lives of five

characters in the diary, using diary entries and new research from the project. We discussed some of the opportunities and challenges of representing lives which are under-represented in historical records. The writers then developed short creative pieces based on this historical evidence, with further feedback from Dr Battle-Felton and me after the workshop. The prose and poetry that you can read here came from those workshops and the creative writing showcase that followed.

This collection features work inspired by three figures: Jane Birch who was a maidservant in Samuel and Elizabeth Pepys's household; an unnamed Deaf boy whom Pepys encountered at a party; and Mingo, a young Black man who had been enslaved as a child and who worked for Pepys's neighbour. Each section has a historical introduction on these figures, while some of the authors have also reflected on their writing experience.

We hope you find these pieces as interesting as we found researching and working on them.

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Quotations from Pepys's diary are from *The Diary of Samuel Pepys: A New and Complete Transcription*, edited by Robert Latham and William Matthews, 11 volumes (London: HarperCollins; Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), with additional glosses and punctuation clarification supplied by Kate Loveman.

JANE BIRCH

Historical introduction by Kate Loveman

Jane Birch (1641–1715) was the favourite servant of Samuel and Elizabeth Pepys. Jane had been born in the village of Dymock in Gloucestershire, first arriving in London during the 1650s. She worked for Samuel and Elizabeth for much of the 1660s. She was promoted in their service and continued her association with the family long after Pepys ended his diary. Jane could read and write, while her father signed his will with a mark, indicating he could not write easily. In the diary, she appears capable and brave (when things went ‘bump’ in the night, it was Jane who investigated). She was also able to stick up for herself, dealing with Pepys’s sexual advances and upsetting a carpenter in mysterious circumstances (see below). In 1666 she was an early witness to the Great Fire, which would go on to destroy much of the City of London.

Extracts from Pepys's Diary, edited by Latham and Matthews

14 September 1662

‘Among other things, Sir W. Penn [Pepys’s colleague and neighbour] did tell me ... of my Jane’s cutting off a carpenter’s long Mustacho, and how the fellow cried and his wife would not come near him a great while, believing he had been among some of his wenches [women/mistresses]. At which I was merry, though I perceive they discourse of it as a crime of hers, which I understand not.’

2 September 1666

[The Great Fire of London started at 1am, about 450 metres from Pepys’s home; Pepys was due to hold a dinner party later that day:]

‘*Lords day* [Sunday]. Some of our maids sitting up late last night to get things ready against our feast today, Jane called us up, about 3 in the morning, to tell us of a great fire they saw in the City. So I rose, and slipped on my nightgown and went to her window, and thought it to be on the back side of Markelane at the furthest; but being unused to such fires as fallowed, I thought it far enough off, and so went to bed again and to sleep. About 7 rose again to dress myself, and there looked out at the window and saw the fire not so much as it was, and further off. So to my closet [study] to set things to rights after yesterday’s cleaning. By and by Jane comes and tells me that she hears that above 300 houses have been burned down tonight by the fire we saw, and that it was now burning down all Fishstreet by London Bridge. So I made myself ready presently [immediately], and walked to the Tower...’

DIARY OF JANE BIRCH (MAID SERVANT) SELINA LOCK

Sept 1662

I caused some trouble yesterday. I don't regret it. Marston got his just deserts.

I didn't intend mischief when I woke, with my lead-heavy legs and sore, roughened red hands. Aches and pains are always worse after wash day, but I had to be up and about all the same.

Cleaning grates, setting fires, and mopping floors on two hours sleep had already made me irritable when I stumbled on one of Sir William's youngest housemaids, Mary. I found her crying on the back step when I went to throw the mop swill away. She wiped her face with her hands when she saw me but that made her cheeks even redder. I was tempted to just turn back inside, but instead I asked what was wrong.

Mary told me Sir William had a carpenter in doing some repairs to the hallway wood panelling. A man called Marston. The older maids were all swooning over how handsome he was. His beard worn in the Van Dyke style and looking comely

in his work breeches. Mary had sneaked in to watch him work. He'd noticed her and "come to see what the pretty little thing wanted". She'd giggled at the attention but took fright when he'd grabbed her. He tried to kiss her and more. She'd wriggled free and run outside.

I gently wiped Mary's face and warned her against being alone with strange men, or any men if she could help it. I sent her off to Sir William's cook with instructions to tell her what had happened. She might get an earful for shirking her work, but Cookie would look after her and make sure the other maids were mindful.

I returned to my work, but Mary's tear-streaked face kept floating through my thoughts. The swipes of my mop got more and more vicious until I finally threw it across the floor.

I stalked over to Sir William's kitchen. Mary was at the table, beside Cookie, eating a piece of cake. She gave me a little smile when I walked in. I pulled Cookie aside to talk. She was happy to supply me with some strong beer from the larder. I slipped a pair of kitchen shears into my apron while she was away. I straightened the woollen dress beneath my apron and smoothed down my hair. My heart beat a little faster when she handed me the flagon and pointed me in the direction of carpenter Marston. I flung my shoulders back and walked quickly towards the hallway where he was working. This was a bad idea, but I was not one to back down.

The carpenter did not see me at first. He was too busy measuring some wood. His side profile was indeed pleasing. A long straight nose, under which bloomed a luxurious, curled moustache. His cheeks were smooth, and his beard carefully trimmed in the style made fashionable by King Charles. His tradesmen clothes were good quality but strained against the muscles in his arms. I could see why the maids had been all

a-dither. Hopefully they now knew better.

I made myself known, smiled, and offered up the beer. I noted that all that labouring must be thirsty work. He glanced at me as I moved towards him. He downed tools and swung round to face me, looking me up and down. I gave him the same treatment. He smiled slowly and stroked the right side of his moustache. He asked me who I might be and why he hadn't seen me flitting about the house. He moved so close to me, that I could smell the sourness of his breath. I almost turned away but stopped myself. I jutted my chin upwards and answered his questions. His skin was less smooth on closer inspection. Pockmarks peeked out from under his facial hair and his fingers kept curling his moustache upwards. His eyes crinkled smugly as he suddenly reached out and pulled me against him.

I pushed him back as he tried to kiss me. I turned my head and felt his beard scratch against my face. I warned him of Sir William's wrath if he spilled beer all over the place. He laughed but took the flagon from my grasp. He went to put it down, but I urged him to have some. I teased that I only liked a man who could still stand after a drink. I feigned giggles and clapped, urging him on to upend the jug. He swallowed the last drops and flourished the empty flagon aloft. Marston began to sway a little and my smile grew true.

His hands started roving over my body as I removed the jug and set it aside. I gritted my teeth. This felt more threatening than Mr P cornering me when a desire to tussle came upon him. A gentle shove, a stern look, and a whispered threat to tell his wife was enough to fend him off.

Marston's hands were still squeezing and groping as I moved him over to a chair further down the hall. The beer was starting to make him muddled. I pushed him lightly and he landed

heavily in the chair. I climbed atop him, pinning his arms beneath my legs. His beery breath wafted into my face as he tried to wiggle his arms free. I leant further forward, pinning him solidly. He yelped, but I stroked his face with my left hand and murmured promises that it would feel good soon enough. I swiftly removed the shearing scissors from my apron pocket with my right hand while my left trailed down his face to the end of his moustache.

I curled the long end of that carefully nurtured hair around my finger, lifted it away from his face and snipped with the scissors. He gasped, his eyes wide with horror and struggled in earnest. I threw the locks of hair away and leaned my left arm against his throat. Marston thrashed against me, half choking. He stilled in fear of injury when I waved the kitchen shears before his eyes. I quickly snipped the other end of his moustache off. Not as neatly as the other side, leaving his prideful appearance in ruins.

I scrambled and fell backwards. Laughter burst out of me as I lay on the floor waving around the shears. He loomed over me, red welts on his face where I'd shorn him. He raised a leg to kick me. A couple of the manservants appeared and grabbed him while I scuttled away. I ran home and up the stairs to my room. Occasionally stopping to catch my breath and giggle, as I remembered the state of the carpenter's face.

Sir William visited Mr P earlier tonight. Fearful of what he might say, I sneaked up to the door to listen. He related the tale of my attack on Marston and how I'd cut off his long moustache. That the carpenter had returned today wailing and lamenting that his wife thought it had been done by one of his wenches. He said how ill the carpenter was being treated at home. There was condemnation in Sir William's voice, but to his credit, the Master sounded most merry as he brushed the incident aside.

TOO WEARY TO WRITE ALL WEEK

SUE WRIGHT

Woolwich

My beloved mother,

Forgive me, I have been too weary to write all week, preparing for the master's feast and there has been great commotion, of which I shall tell you more.

The night before the feast, while my master was in his chamber, snoring loud enough to rattle the windowpanes, we worked through the night roasting fowl, proving and baking the breads he likes, gutting fish, making pies. Awake since five the morning before, Sarah fell asleep by the fire, too tired to turn the spit. Perhaps you will think I was harsh, splashing cold water on her face to wake her, but that is how I was taught. I worry that she will lose her position if she is caught sleeping, although our master and mistress are kinder than some. I tell Sarah it is a good house, if she keeps out of the way of my master's twinkling eyes and roaming hands. She will soon settle in, I hope. The other girls tell her she is lucky to work here but I am not sure she is of a mind to

believe them yet.

Do not be alarmed when I tell you about a fire. All is well. James saw the first signs when he went out to fetch more wood for the stove. He called me outside where I witnessed an orange glow over the rooftops, black smoke darkening the night sky hiding any stars. My master was not alarmed when, frightened, I roused him. Indeed, he cursed me and soon returned to his bed and seemed undisturbed by the commotion in the streets as people fled the fire. Sarah wept until dawn for fear we would be burned. My teeth were on edge with all her sobbing and wailing, and her complaints about the smell of fish causing her to feel ill. James sought to comfort her when my back was turned but I soon sent him back out to keep an eye on the fire and for the watchman for any word.

Although many houses were lost in the fire, we remained safe, thank the Lord. Our neighbours were uninjured, but I feared there are people without homes. My master woke early, demanding breakfast. I told him of houses burned down in the night and he ventured out to explore, returning with his clothes and wig smelling of smoke and smeared with ash, hurriedly changing before his guests arrived. He has no thought for the laundry he creates or the laundry-maid's chilblains.

The feast went well, and all were merry, although some guests had fled to the countryside in fear of the fire. Our mistress gave us leave to eat some of the food that was left. I had to scold James who was being liberal with the ale.

Soon there was talk of the fire spreading and we were all tasked with packing and saving as much as we could, moving by cart and boat. You will smile when I tell you that my master buried his wine and cheese in a hole he had dug in the garden.

My master has found somewhere to stay away from the

fire, and we will remain here until it is safe to return, should the house still be standing. Please do not be fearful. I am well, although tired.

I will send this letter with the carrier, along with some money I have managed to put by. I give thanks that you taught me to write and hope this will help improve my situation in time. I overheard my lady say she does not like servants to write but I keep the paper and ink hidden safely away, and only write when everyone is abed. The carrier knows to put any reply into my own hand only.

My love to you all

Jane

Author's reflections: I was immediately drawn to Jane's story. I am interested in and curious about the people whose stories are not written about, those who are almost invisible. Jo Baker's book *Longbourn* gave life to the servants from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* – Elizabeth Bennett's muddy shoes and petticoats had to be cleaned by someone. My own maternal grandmother was in service in the early part of the twentieth century. I wish I had asked her more about her experiences, but I do remember her telling me about being homesick and crying. Modern inventions and technology may make some tasks less laborious, but taking care of others and their property is still hard work and entails long hours. There will be experiences modern servants and staff will have in common with those who worked for Pepys and his contemporaries. I enjoyed the challenge of writing about the era, thinking of the language that may have been used and the everyday experiences of living and being in service in London in the 1660s.

THE DEAF BOY

Historical introduction by Kate Loveman

In November 1666, Pepys and his family attended a party at the home of his friend Elizabeth Pearse in Covent Garden, travelling by coach across London to get there. The other guests included Elizabeth Knepp, an actress, and ‘Captain Downing (who loves and understands music)’. This was John Downing, a captain in the royal Foot Guard. While they were singing and dancing, they learned a large fire had broken out at the Horse Guards’ barracks in Whitehall Palace. The guests panicked, for it was just two months since the Great Fire had ravaged London. After the initial fear was over, a young man arrived, whom Pepys refers to only as ‘the Dumb boy’. By ‘Dumb’ Pepys meant the boy was unable to speak: it was not intended to indicate that he was stupid, and — as Pepys recognised — this was very far from the case. From what Pepys says about their prior acquaintance, the ‘boy’ was in his late teens or early twenties. The young man relayed news about the fire in sign language to Downing and some others present. This diary entry is one of the first detailed accounts of a signed conversation in English.

In the mid-seventeenth century, there had been interest in teaching deaf people to speak and, as part of this, (hearing) tutors had devised various fingerspelling alphabets, some more practical than others. While it's possible that the boy and Downing were using a bit of fingerspelling, it is more likely to have been a signing system devised by the young man and his friends. Pepys – intrigued and puzzled – decided to test the language and the young man. He also wanted to stop the hired carriage, which was waiting for his family downstairs, from departing early because of the fire...

Extract from Pepys's Diary, edited by Latham and Matthews

9 November 1666

‘By and by comes news that the fire is slackened; so then we were a little cheered up again, and to supper and pretty merry. But above all, there comes in that Dumb boy that I knew in Oliver [Cromwell]’s time, who is mightily acquainted here and with Downing; and he made strange signs of the fire, and how the King was abroad, and many things they understood but I could not – which I wondering at, and discoursing with Downing about it, “Why,” says [he], “it is only a little use, and you will understand him and make him understand you, with as much ease as may be.” So I prayed him to tell him [the boy] that I was afeared that my coach would be gone, and that he should go down and steal one of the seats out of the coach and keep it, and that would make the coachman to stay. He did this, so that the Dumb boy did go down, and like a cunning rogue went into the coach, pretending to sleep; and by and by fell to his work, but finds the seats nailed to the coach; so he did all he could, but could not do it; however, stayed there and

stayed the coach, till the coachman's patience was quite spent, and beat the dumb boy by force, and so went away. So the Dumb boy came up and told him all the story, which they below did see all that passed and knew it to be true. After supper another dance or two, and then news that the fire is as great as ever, which put us all to our wit's end, and I mightily [eager] to go home.'

ALL EYES WERE ON HIM

HAZEL STUART

All eyes were on him. It was uncomfortable. Thom wanted to position himself neatly, back to the wall, his usual safe vantage point in a crowd.

Mrs Pierce's reception room was a grand affair. It had high ceilings and smooth walls, hung about with tapestries. It was blessed with a fine-tuned clavichord and, when the dancing started, the oak floorboards vibrated beneath one's feet. In the days before the plague, Thom had enjoyed the sensation on many occasions, resting his fingertips surreptitiously on the wainscoting to pick up the rhythm. It was, in part, why he had made himself useful to the lady in the first place.

This particular evening however, he had come bursting in, the crisis outside eclipsing any niceties. Sweating from the run, he was at first consumed with a coughing fit. The irksome phlegm that caught at his throat was even worse than during the last fire. He tried to stifle it, with his cuff to his cheek, and noted that the scent of Mrs Finch's meat-pie still lingered on his fingers. Given the pervasive smell of smoke, this was surprising.

The wind was driving north outside, and flakes of ash floated down like early snow.

He regained his composure. Took a deep breath. Let his shoulders fall, and looked around for Mrs Pierce. She was not amongst the throng. He searched the frowns and questioning eyes, and it was the familiar figure of Captain Downing that came forward. His wig and lace collars flapped. His head bobbed left and right. His lips moved rapidly, and his brow was contorted with concern. Thom braced himself for a scolding – but his tutor’s eyes settled on him with a warm smile of soft reassurance. A wave of his hand confirmed it.

Relieved, Thom raised his own in response and delivered his pressing message, of the advancing flames and the King’s retreat, in the simplest terms he could – with sweeping arms as if he were at home telling Ma or Pa. Downing reached out calmly to him and Thom checked himself. He gave a sigh of consent, accepting the captain’s mild rebuke, noticing that, though framed by lace and adorned with gold rings, those hands were still calloused and worn by a life at sea. Thom knew full well that flailing arms were not to be seen in polite society – whether or not a fire was raging at the Palace.

The captain reached across, and his fingers touched the boy’s own in encouragement. Thom felt them warm against his own skin, which had been chilled in the November night air. He stilled his mind to concentrate as Downing continued to finger-spell:

“K. C. G. O. N. E. G. E. T. D. U. K. E. Y. O. R. K.”

KC was King Charles. The Duke of York was his brother, James. Well, that made sense. They were a winning team. The heroes of the last fire.

“C. L. O. S. E. R.” Thom replied, the pads of his fingers

moving methodically, as he did his best to convey the urgency of this with his expression. He had seen the carts stacked with gunpowder and ladders, as they swung between Northumberland House and Charing Cross, heading down to the glaring red of Whitehall, but all that would take too long to spell out, letter by letter. The captain continued:

“S. A. F. E. F. O. R. N. O. W.”

His eyes said the rest and Thom relaxed, before realising that the whole room was looking at him still.

He blushed. Winced. Closed his eyes. Wished he could apologise and sidle unnoticed to his favourite spot by the wall. Then, glancing around, he watched the faces fall away. One by one, they returned to the drinks and gossip and, when he turned back to take his leave, he noticed a curious gentleman was now by Downing's side.

The two gentlemen fell to speaking and the subject was no mystery as their hands moved about in a mimicry of finger-spelling. It was clear this man was a novice to the art and Downing was enjoying sharing all he had gleaned from the Spanish book.

Looking for a gap to excuse himself from this new conversation before it required further demonstration, Thom found himself settling on a familiar pair of lips in this newcomer's face. He was sure they had uttered something useful before. Not just for Pa, with his ambitions, but something about a place for a dumb boy like him to make his name. Lips alone could sometimes be as deceptive as the words they formed, Thom reasoned. There was little more frustrating than trying to recall precisely who said what in a conversation for Pa. Memory sometimes distorted and mixed the lips up, exchanging one mouth for another when specifics were required.

“What do I send you up to town for boy?”

But then like most other hearing people, Thom’s Pa did not appreciate how much effort it took to lip-read conversations not meant for him.

He thought he had seen this face before though: those large glossy eyes, the expressive sort – dancing with interest now – were easy to work with. A man of influence he was; there was a confidence in the way he held himself and the way Downing stood tall as he spoke to him. The cheeks had good proportions, with volume and elasticity. A fuller sort of lip too – those slash-in-the-skin sorts of mouths were never good. This bow-like pair though were a ripened fruit: succulent, juicy, overhung; snug in the surrounding folds of flesh. Like a cherub’s almost – were it not for the evidence of stubble.

Quite suddenly, it then came to him and Thom gently tapped the sequence of the name on his own hand:

“P. E. P. Y. S.”

That was it. But was it definitely Pepys who had said about The Society?

The lips began to move again, replying to something Downing had said. Thom watched them twist and pull, stretching to one corner, then the other, gambolling up and down over what were good and solid teeth. Teeth helped. Teeth could make or break it as to whether someone could be understood. They alone could define things. Still, it took a little time become attuned.

...*Baker... Blue...* or, more likely *blew?* ... then *fire*.

Well, it was the word on every pair of lips in town. Thom couldn’t help but wonder at these Admiralty sorts: dining, dancing, carrying on, for all the world, as if they were still at sea

and could just up-anchor, and sail away from any maddening inferno that arrived. Did they not remember September? How all the roads out the city were jammed with carts and the docks were clogged with frantic passengers pressing their last coins in the hands of the ferrymen? But he supposed these were brave men who had seen far more of the world than he.

...f-ire...

There, the word again. Unmistakeable: the lower lip tucked tight beneath the upper teeth. Blowing down towards the chin, and then, recoiling, the whole mouth opening up and then the jaw rolling round to close.

...stop my carriage... ...home...

The two men turned to him bearing smiles and Captain Downing began to finger-sign again. Thom had a fair idea he was about to be sent on an errand – and even what it might be – but he patiently let Downing relay the specifics on his hands. Only good could come from helping a man like Pepys.

Author's reflections: It was really interesting to explore how much time and research is needed to write convincingly as a deaf teenager in 1666 when you are actually a middle-aged woman in 2022. People say “write what you know” but the reality is that none of us can step into the past or understand all aspects of another person’s lived experience first hand.

For me, it was the opportunity to learn about deaf people and sign language at the time that drew me to my character. I had no experience of deafness and had therefore never learned to sign. YouTube came to my rescue with deaf people sharing all the ways they communicate and videos where you can practice lip reading. It was a relief to find there was a wide spectrum

here. I was less likely to get it wrong. I learned so much about the Deaf community from this research and I feel much richer for the experience.

In Pepys's time, one of the few publications on the subject was Juan Pablo Bonet's 1620 *Simplification of Letters and Art of Teaching the Dumb to Speak* – it was not yet translated into English. This I refer to as 'the Spanish book' in my creative narrative. The university had also provided us with some information about 'finger-spelling', as one of the possible seventeenth-century methods.

When I explored my character lip-reading Samuel Pepys, I had a portrait of the diarist up on my screen. Interestingly that section is the part that most people seem to find the most compelling in my piece so it goes to show that working from an image works for me.

In all, my research, the writing and editing for this 1200-word piece took almost a full week. I think I have a renewed appreciation for what historical novelists put into their work. Certainly, the concept that you just need an hour or two each day to write and you'll have a novel in no time does need a bit of a rethink when you are rewriting the past.

THE DUMB BOY

BEN PAYNE

You taught me how to write and now I'm writing this. Well, this morning, I was going to write you a goodbye. I'd fully decided that, *Captain Downing*.

Instead, I'm writing this to forget my Family for good. From this day forward, let it be known, they are dead to me. Even though, like me, they cannot hear: like me, they can still read the signs.

Being that The World is all in flames again. Maybe this really is the End of Days and Chaos has come, not Jesus. But I doubt it. Could be the Dutch, could be the French or it could just be someone's buns going up in smoke again like last time. Either way, I think this World will still stumble along just like me, just as it has always done. So in dangerous days like ours, you've got to look out for yourself, haven't you?

I am writing this down for you because you always get too drunk to remember. Last night I had to come out looking for you again – my *master*. London may be burning down again, but still The Quality want to dance, like you, even right

through the flames. Even though *you* were supposed to be back at barracks doing your duty, helping to put it out. Well, I can *always* find you. You love your music so much that I just have to follow the thump, thump, thump of it up through my feet from any floor, and there you'll be dancing. It's bad enough I have to see you jig, Jack – at least I never ever have to hear the sound. To never hear the music; but just watch you leap about like a ridiculous chicken. Well, if that's what you want to do in the Apocalypse, that, and go chasing skirt, knock yourself out.

You taught me to write and I taught you to sign so we could understand each other better, Jack. Instead, we just argue. You speak my language with your hands so no one else understands what we are. Except my Family and none of them could ever get near a party like that, could they, Jack?

As soon as I found you out in the crowd, and we start to sign, we quarrel.

“Where have you been all night? I've been worried sick”

“Is that any of your business?”

“Lots of women here”

“Jealous, are you?”

People started to mark our gestures. They squint out that there's something between us: a master and his servant. Or is it? And that always makes you nervous.

“Not jealous. Just disappointed. You know just because I'm a dumb boy, doesn't mean I can't feel ... *Jack*.” Yes, I'm signing you your own name, *Captain Downing*.

There's another well-dressed, well-fed man watching us. He's baffled. Eyeing us like a fat cock. I catch his eye and smile as always, dazzlingly, in that way you know I have.

“Ah, bless him!” I sign to you. “Look at him, he doesn’t understand a word.”

“Well, be careful. There might be those here who do.”

“Why? Have you taught them our secret language too?”

“*He* only understands naval talk and housemaids. Very straight. Total bore. Only ever talks about himself. Talk to him about tits and ships and tonnage and poundage and he might just get excited.”

“Not like I get you excited, Jack, though, right?”

We’re both aflame now, our faces furious. So you started talking to him in heard words, just so as to put me in my place. Only switching to sign again to make sure I got the final cut.

“It’s so easy to finger-talk, Mr Pepys. Look, this poor dumb boy can understand every word I say. Just like a dog”

You can be such a c, u, n, t, sometimes, Jack. I finger-spelled that one out for you.

“Mr Pepys here is very anxious about how he’s going to get home safely in this inferno.” Everyone now was crowding around the window, tired of dancing, drunk and goggling at the flames. “Well, aren’t we all? Look at us all here, fiddling whilst Rome burns!” To me, you were just a bunch of open-mouthed, fire-lit faces, laughing but terrified, like all the devils in hell.

“Dumb Boy, please go and make sure that the coachman doesn’t leave without Mr Pepys. Please do everything in your manifold speaking powers to ensure it. Steal the seat out of the coach if you have to, my dear Dumb Boy, I beseech you”

So I went out to the coachman and I did your bidding. A thief is what I am, after all. Whilst you and your crowd hung out the window guffawing, to watch me do it. Only it turns out that this coachman was from my Family too. Did you know that?

Because my Family is not like your family, Jack. We're a Family of Dumb Boys.

Coachman signs to me: "What's your game?"

"What game, mate? I don't have a game"

"Every Dumb Boy has a game. That's how we survive. What are you doing here? Hanging out with these knobs?"

"Maybe I like knobs" I leered, because you know I just didn't care anymore.

He let that one slide for a moment.

"The Dumb Boys of Covent Garden are your Family, your gang" he signs. "You need to have a bit of loyalty."

"Loyalty?!" I spelled out every letter of that word for him, slowly, sarcastically, Jack. "Don't talk to me about loyalty. What do you even know of the word?"

"You're one of us. Those who try to get away, get what's coming to them."

And I did get what's coming to me. Horsewhipped black and blue for being your man. So maybe this really is my End of Days then.

And that's why I'm still here shackled to you, Jack, on the morning after I was going to say goodbye. When I'd fully decided to go, go with the smoke still in the street.

I wrote it all down for you – while you were still sleeping it off next door.

So you remember. So *I* remember.

Why it was I couldn't leave:

Because I can't be a Dumb Boy anymore.

MINGO

Historical introduction by Kate Loveman

Mingo, a young Black man, worked for Pepys's colleague and neighbour, Sir William Batten. In sources from the early 1660s, Mingo only has one name. Pepys says nothing about whether Mingo was enslaved or not, as this was not an issue that interested or troubled him. However, other evidence shows Mingo had been enslaved as a child. He was therefore likely to have been enslaved while he was working for Batten in the 1660s. Mingo appears several times in Pepys's diary, including joking with Pepys on Valentine's Day. Batten died in 1667. In his will he left £10 to 'my servante Mingoe a Negroe That now dwelleth with mee', along with the rights to tend the navigation lights at the port of Harwich for £20 a year (these were not small sums). 'Servant' in this period could mean someone was enslaved or free; however, if Mingo had not been freed before, this will would have signalled that status. I've identified a record that shows Mingo promptly got himself baptised: he gave his name as William Mingo and his age as 'about 23'. I'm on the trail of what happened next.

Extracts from Pepys's Diary, edited by Latham and Matthews

14 February 1661

'Valentine's day. Up earely and to Sir W. Batten's. But would not go in till I had asked whether they that opened the doore was a man or a woman. And Mingo, who was there, answered "a Woman;" which, with his tone, made me laugh.

So I went up and took Mrs Martha [Batten's daughter] for my Valentine (which I do only for complacency), and Sir W. Batten, he go in the same manner to my wife. And so we were very merry.'

Context: According to seventeenth-century Valentine's Day custom, the first person of the other sex who you saw on the day became your valentine – so people were often very careful about who they saw! Men were also expected to give their valentine a gift.

27 March 1661

'Then to the Dolphin [tavern] to a dinner of Mr. Harris's, where Sir Wms both and my Lady Batten and her two daughters and other company – where a great deal of mirth. And there stayed till 11 a-clock at night. And in our mirth, I sang and sometimes fiddled (there being a noise of fiddlers there) and at last we fell to dancing – the first time that ever I did in my life – which I did wonder to see myself do. At last we made Mingo, Sir W. Batten's black, and Jack, Sir W. Pen's, dance; and it was strange how the first did dance with a great deal of seeming skill.

Home, where I find my wife all day in her chamber, and so to bed.'

Context: 'Sir Wms both' means that Pepys's two colleagues, Sir William Batten and Sir William Penn, were both there. Mr Harris, a sailmaker, was hosting this event for the senior navy administrators and their families – probably with an eye to money-making deals. Mingo and Jack would have been there to attend on Batten and Penn respectively.

DOMINGO

NARIMAAN SHAFI

Dear fellow researchers,

I hope my letter finds you all well and moving forward successfully with your research. I cannot contain my excitement and keep this discovery to myself any longer. The papers unearthed at a property in London have left me unable to sleep. What I believe we have are diary excerpts written by Mingo, the slave boy belonging to Sir William Batten, friend, colleague and neighbour of Samuel Pepys. Indeed, Pepys mentions this boy fondly and often, in his diary entries. The excerpts I have included below marry up well and corroborate Pepys. I wonder if reading them you will feel the thrill, as I did.

(Date smudged)

The fire still burns. I am forced to think what I would save if I had to flee the flames. There is nothing material I would salvage, save the clothes on my back, for they give me my perceived status. My wit and my brain would come with me. They're all I need to start anew. I would not be afraid to do so.

(Fellow researchers, there is more on the fire to come.)

(Date unclear)

And so it seems I have begun writing my diary today. This volume of blank pages is a gift from Sir Will. My intention is to leave this as a record of my existence. People of my status in life are not able to record our lives as we live them, we exist only by the pen of others. If this copy survives the centuries, you need to know that I am determined by society to be a slave. You are wondering how you come to be reading words written by someone born enslaved. I will come to your assistance with some description.

My birth was not recorded but someone called me Domingo. It may well have been my mother. My only memory of who I think of as mother is of a lady, her skin the colour of the leaves on the beech hedge in winter. She is wearing a lady's dress. Her hair is wrapped tightly in a turban of many colours, this elongates her neck giving her an aristocratic air. She is dancing before me. A dance not dissimilar to ones I have seen since performed by elegant society ladies.

I'm called Mingo now. Sir Will always said Domingo had too many syllables for such a little thing as me. I grew in stature but the number of syllables did not grow with me.

Somewhere along the way I learnt to read. Maybe the lady in the turban taught me. Sir Will is my master now. I live a comfortable life. I know I am not solely an accessory that many like me become, an ornament for visiting ladies. I am necessary to this household. Sir Will values my honesty, my intellect. He often tells me "a problem shared is a problem half solved Mingo" when he has sought my counsel on a matter.

Valentine's Day 1661

I woke earlier than usual, it being the day we celebrate Love and

I, for one, have much to celebrate. The object of my affection knows she is such. I could not bear that a manservant from her household see her and claim her as his own. And so I woke early to walk the short distance to her residence. Her residence is no more hers than mine is mine. Although born a free woman, she is a lady's companion, a role that leaves her with less freedom than me who was born into slavery and purchased as a child.

My household was asleep and so I left the house unhindered. I know the room she sleeps in. I climbed the wall adjacent to the house and was able to knock on the window with the aid of a stick I had taken from the garden for this very purpose. Movement of the curtain set my heart aflutter. She appeared in the window, like Shakespeare's tragic Juliet, but more beautiful. A happy coincidence that we were both taken to the theatre to see the play performed, in our respective roles with our employers. The significance of this will not be lost on her.

She brought a finger to her lips. I motioned to open the window. I passed her the wooden flower I had carved for her. Wooden so it doesn't perish. I know she will have to secrete this gift from prying eyes. She kisses it then holds it to her chest. We don't speak for fear of waking the household. I climb down, reluctantly, and head toward home. I want to sing out loud but I don't. Anyone watching would have seen the spring in my step, calculated the day and suspected what was afoot.

Stepping through the door, I was Mingo once again, William the lover no more, although she calls me Thomas saying by calling myself William I continue the subservience to my master.

As the household awakened, there was a knock at the door. Our neighbour's voice called out asking who was about to answer. Before opening I replied in as feminine a voice as I could muster "a woman," knowing full well why Mr Sam was

asking. I heard him laugh and I opened the door, directed him to the Mistress's presence where he made her his Valentine.

October 1667 (exact date unclear)

The house has been in mourning for the passing of Sir Will. My heart is broken. He takes with him the affection he showed me. The others in the house no longer view me like before. It is apparent to me that he set the tone. Maybe even loved me like a son.

This was borne out by his bequests. The Mistress is in low spirits, mainly because Sir Will's children from his first wife are not happy with the bequests left to her. The children, all adults, are not concerned by what was left to me. Did they know how highly Sir Will held me in his regard? He left me the same bequest as he left his grandchild. The money is not important but the gesture is pregnant with meaning and emotion. With this I now have my Freedom and an income from an occupation. If the man bought me as an infant, he has paid his debt now and I forgive him for any wrong he did me in separating me from my mother. If not him, another would have, and maybe one whose heart was not so good.

This freedom, this allowance, unlocks my chains and enables me to pursue my dreams. As a free man I can marry. As a man of means I can tell my love that she too is free of a lifetime of servitude. In theory born free she is just as much as slave as I.

Am I wrong to feel immense joy from such sadness?

Consequently Mingo, Domingo, William became the free man that God created. No more beholden to others. One Thomas Mingo married in 1686 at St. Mary's parish church in Huntingdon.¹ I must dig more to ensure this is our Mingo.

He never names his love in his diary; we can only assume it was her that he married. Nineteen years elapsed between his emancipation and this marriage. If indeed this is the same lady that is mentioned in his diary, we can possibly assume that her employer would not let her leave. This was a common occurrence and depended on the reasons for her employment in the first place. Maybe her servitude was to pay off a debt and the employer wouldn't let her leave until this was done.

I look forward to receiving your thoughts on this. I will be sending more as I piece more together.

With best wishes

N. Shafi

Author's reflections: I was intrigued by Mingo. From Pepys's diary it's clear he was a resourceful and intelligent person. I imagined he'd led an unexpected and unpredictable life. He was obviously esteemed by all those he came across. In my piece, I write firstly from the view of a researcher who has stumbled upon some diaries that he suspects are Mingo's with good reason. Then I fabricated Mingo's diary extracts. I wrote entries that corroborated Pepys's diary to lend weight to their authenticity. I finished the piece with the researcher's voice again, promising more.

1 'Black Lightkeepers and their Stories', *The Lighthouse Keeper's Cottage*, blog, 31 Aug. 2021 <<https://www.lighthousekeeperscottage.co.uk/black-lightkeepers-and-their-stories/>>

HIDDEN VOICES FROM PEPYS'S DIARY LIZ CASHDAN

Eliza Knip 1662

I have not heard from my dear Dapper Dickey
for many days. I hope he is in good spirits.

My own wretched husband drives me mad
cruel and dull as he is, but wedded I am
and bedded I must be whenever he wants.

I am struggling to learn the lines of Lucetta
for Mr Killigrew's play *Thomaso*, but indeed
Mr Killigrew is as tiresome a playwright
as ever wrote lines for us poor actors and now
I have heard it is not to be performed.

Some years later comes Mistress Behn, bless her,

and turns the wretched *Thomaso* into *The Rover*
but Lucetta is no longer for me: instead I will
sing and dance with Dapper Dickey while Mingo
the next-door blackamoor dances for us all,
till it is time for my carriage, then home
and so to bed as my Dapper Dickey would say.

**Mary Carvajal – wife of the Jewish merchant
Antonio Carvajal 1663**

There came to our synagogue last week in Creechurch Lane
a certain Mr Pepys with his wife, that same gentleman who
attended the memorial to my husband not many weeks since
and was operated himself by the surgeon who removed
my dear Antonio's bladder stone, though Mr Pepys survived
the surgeon's knife. This Mr Pepys provides all things
for the King's ships for which I have to be grateful –
it was an English ship that brought us on our journey
from France when we fled first Portugal then Spain
to escape the Inquisition.

The occasion of Mr Pepys' visit was our festival of Simchat Torah,
the rejoicing of the law when our menfolk carry the Torah scrolls
round the synagogue singing and dancing in praise of the Lord

but Mr Pepys found this tradition lacked the decorum expected in a church and I fear he has been too much influenced by the Puritans. There is more joyfulness in the Catholic worship though I hesitate to say anything in praise of that popish lot. My Antonio could do business with all, Jew and Christian, Protector and had he lived long enough, King. He traded east and west: our three black servants hail from Surinam.

Aphra Behn – novelist and playwright 1677

Mr Pepys is not often at the theatre but word has it he has been to see *The Rover* at the Dorset Street theatre with the Kings Troupe and a right royal bunch they are and Mr Pepys is a right royal supporter of the King though I hear Eliza Knip has other names for him. Be that as it may, he is a true Royalist as I am and those of you who have read my *Orinooko* know full well my respect for royalty, black or white and how the former slave was loved by the beautiful Imoinda, though there are some of us women like Eliza and myself who do not get the husbands we deserve, not that I have eyes for Mr Pepys for I do believe he has a finger in too many women's pies or rather parts of their anatomies which I am not bold enough to name here.

Bess, servant to Mary Carvajal 1685

Seasick I was on that long sailing from Surinam
when I came to work for the Carvajals, secret Jews
who did not have their own place of worship
either in Jodensavannah or in England.
Their real dedication was to their ships
that crossed the Ocean. It was in Mistress Mary's
house I cooked and cleaned with my two sisters.
Sometimes I went with Mistress Mary to the house
of Admiral Batten where I rejoiced to meet Mingo
his black servant.

Then, marvellous to relate, the Admiral
willed Mingo the lighthouse at Harwich where Carvajal's
ships often passed, and earned Mingo a pretty penny.
We called upon Mingo so he and I could renew
the secret vows we had made years before.
I do believe we were one of the first black couples
to marry in an English church and my Mingo
was surely the first black lighthouse keeper.

Author's reflections: References are taken from Pepys, the Carvajal family research papers, and sources and books by Aphra Behn. Most of the narratives are based on facts, except for the fictional marriage of William Batten's servant, Mingo, and the Carvajals' servant Bess. I wanted to find/give a voice to women, actors and writers, and to black and Jewish women whose voices are rarely heard. The workshop also gave me the opportunity to gather contributions from four other participants and to write an article for *Writing in Education*, the journal of the National Association of Writers in Education, on bringing histories, stories and creative writing together in the practice of both writers and tutors of creative writing.

THE GLORIOUS LIFE OF MINGO
– WILLIAM BATTENBY – IN SERVICE
TO LIFE
ELIZABETH UTER

Letter to Mr George Wickenby

18th January 1723

My Dear George!

Here am I, your poor William Battenby, lying deep within his bed of sickness with the pain of old age plaguing me, readying me for death. Wickie, old fellow – I hope you will not mind that old nickname?

Wickie, If you have the means to run from *Death*, pick up your frail legs, coat-tails and all – flee – *Death* is an older man than you or I – with knobbling knees, chattering teeth in a skeletal frame – he cannot outrun us.

But what a dunderhead! I forget myself, sincerest apologies for the slow reply to your letters; how the years have played mischief with me – when last you saw me, I was upright,

smoke-black hair, now, at eighty years of age – bent to the ground – skullcap full of ashes.

I am not worth a fart these past three months – in agony – imagine – when your bowels pretend they do not know you and your piss looks the other way when you try to rein it in. I know you will laugh at my lamentable state – it was always our way.

Yet, I have one eye open to watch life's folly and what foolishness these poor peepers have seen, particularly regarding you, old fellow – those Harwich lighthouse nights we shared were freezing cold but how you burned to know my history and I was not forthcoming, was I? A mystery, you said. I promised one day I should tell all. Look that day has come.

You will no doubt think me a contrary fellow to have let the years drift so but I have my reasons, my secrets. I have had an epiphany – must make confession. Praying hard in church, looking for redemption loosens one's tongue more so than any brisk champagne.

But, I digress. Let me come straight to the point – let me in my own woeful manner, tease out my tale again as I was wont to do on foggy nights watching over the Harwich lights. But, before you know my past, Wickie, let me tell you something of my present.

My daughter, the eldest, Henrietta, you know that darling, handsome, buck-toothed, little one, well, she is now a matron of forty years – the other day while reading to me, had the nerve to ask her papa why I always sleep with my tailcoat on, she should know better than to inquire as to her old father's foibles, yet she never tires of asking and I never tire of saying,

“Dearheart – I wear the coat in case I need to run away while in my deepest sleep – you never know what nightmare scrapes you may fall into when your two eyes close, so, I always sleep

with one eye open – honest to goodness truth.”

Henrietta shakes her head, she knows her papa is a whimsical creature – and – what is she reading now?

Our dear friend Mr Daniel Defoe – he has become a firm favourite – in our time – if my memory serves me right, he visited Harwich and learnt to spin tales from what the locals told him – about the mineral spring on Beacon Hill – waters containing salts of iron and how it *petrified* clay which was then used to pave Harwich’s streets and build its walls.

There was also the belief that said spring turned wood into iron. Ah, Mr Defoe ... These days, how I enjoy his novels: the trials of poor *Robinson Crusoe*; the high adventures of the *King of Pirates* and *The Life, Adventures, and Piracies of the Famous Captain Singleton* – touching on Africa, West Indies, slavery – all are explored ... we are presently reading *Moll Flanders* – so far – what greed – what a terror she is. I am thoroughly enjoying her and her scandalous ways.

My beloved Amelia who would read to me, has passed away some five years now – resides in the heavenly kingdom – aah – my soul, my saving grace. I will soon join her and why not? I am at one with who I have become, all I have done.

I may simply, freely, happily peep into the future and know that I leave behind a full legacy for my three sons, James, George and Charles, five daughters, Henrietta, Charlotte, Anne, Elizabeth and Mary – they are the delight of my eyes.

They have been schooled well with my support. They have sound livelihoods, have made good matches – have found their place in the world – so that I may breathe my last knowing their children, my ten grandchildren, Jeremiah, Augusta, Caleb, Sebeliah, Cornelius, Keziah, Benedict, Clemencie, Nathaniel and baby Christabella will be blessed. They will have comfort

and succour throughout their young days as I did not – and – throughout their lives.

Wickie, my mind often wonders now to my comely Amelia – Harwich born and bred. I met her at the bakery of her late husband. The shop was situated on the wide Main Street – she was a spinster of thirty years – my age also – in possession of her own business – the husband with no other known family, died intestate and she inherited all.

I would buy bread, the occasional apple tart from her premises. Sometimes I would mimic her voice as she ordered about her young helpers – she would laugh, throw in an extra biscuit bread with a decent amount of aniseed and coriander for flavouring – hmm – quite – quite delicious – she found my heart early.

I would sketch portraits of her, the assistants, the victuals – soon they were festooned about her shop. She would use the drawings to sell the items and was most popular with the neighbours. She had a shrewd business head upon her.

Over that year of our first meeting, we began courting – with no father or mother to seek blessings, I proposed and she accepted me. We considered each other good catches, I, the lighthouse keeper, she, in possession of a shop – a wonderful opportunity to father a lineage, become master of my own household.

Our spousals – the marriage contract – where we said our vows as bride and groom – ‘per verba de praesenti’ – were consecrated in church with all ceremony. It was truly the happiest day of my life.

What a marriage. My Amelia’s key quality was her ability to run our household efficiently. She was well-versed in housekeeping. Well-educated in medicinal and culinary uses

of herbs and plants, needlework, reading, and writing. She was exceptionally good at dairying – the daughter of a farmer should be, after all. She followed the rules assiduously of The English Hus-wife book. Thus, with like-minded virtues we enriched each other's lives, thriving year by year. We were a solid business my wife and I.

There is, also, a well-appointed, four-roomed house from the labours of her deceased husband. A great comfort to me, security – as, was my Amelia – a Puritan at heart – with emphasis on mutual love – as you can imagine – we lived mightily well together.

She is as clear in my eyes today as when we first met, some seven years after I first possessed the lighthouse at Harwich in the year 1667.

I was a diligent and vigilant custodian there to watch the light, to keep a good light with you, Wickie, and, as you well know, my dear benefactor, Sir William Batten set up those lights himself for his beloved navy that he cherished so well in life.

Do you remember how we must charge a penny a ton for every ship that came past with cargo? It was an exceedingly good living, I bless Sir William – an excellent investment to bestow upon me – every day I breathe, I am sure I do him proud. Look how well I have turned out? Family, fortune but not quite fame.

There is so much more to say, Wickie but I am mortally tired – I give up the last of my secrets – I was Mingo, once, servant to Sir William Batten not so free but that I must dance for him when ordered however congenially done – no matter how I was petted by his daughters, Mary, Martha and Lady Batten – I was owned – which is abhorrent to me. I had as much freedom as their caged, pet parrot.

When Sir William died, God rest his soul, I wanted change, I was baptised in another parish far from the prying eyes of those who knew me in my Mingo days. My chance at freedom, a respectable gentleman, with new-coined name *William Battenby* – in honour of Sir William. At three and twenty years of age I became a true member of society, parish, the Church of England.

Sir William left me quite a legacy – giving over the keeping and custodianship of the lights alongside yourself, Wickie – wealth, almost unlimited. My own man.

I know I have led a glorious life and as I close a single eye – the other – alert to possibilities – perhaps – I am not quite yet ready for those pearly gates.

Believe me at all times with sincerity and respect, your friend,

As ever,

William Battenby

Author's reflections: In my reimagining, Mingo's new name is William Battenby and at the age of eighty he reminisces in a letter to a dear friend and fellow lighthouse keeper, George Wickenby whose surname accords with a light's nickname 'Wickie' – so named for the candlewick they constantly lighted at night to bring ships to safe harbour.

I researched extensively into seventeenth- and eighteenth-century life as the letter covers this timeline and I made numerous lists of what I knew and didn't know – clothing worn by servants, food eaten, shops, houses, type of roads/streets, the marriage ceremony, wills, a lighthouse keeper's duties, life of housewives, authentic seventeenth/eighteenth-century forenames and the nicknames i.e. lightkeepers are 'wickies.'

I was fascinated by the entries about Mingo's wit and his 'forced' dancing at a party and gave him an opinion on this. Mingo charmed the Batten household and I wanted to reflect this by giving him a harmonious family life and wisecracking friendship with Wickie.

Mingo sees Sir William's life as a blueprint to success and heart's content – a good wife, a prosperous household, and an ancestry for future generations to be proud of – a tradition dear to both African culture and British.

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