THE DIARY AS HISTORICAL SOURCE: A RESPONSE

Elizabeth van Heyningen
Department of History, University of Cape Town, Private Bag, Rondebosch, 7700

Die dagboek as historiese bron: 'n reaksie

Die stelling van hierdie artikel is dat die dagboek as historiese bron groter waarde bevat as wat deur dr. Maria Hugo in 'n vorige bydrae aan die hand gedoen is. Dit geld veral vir daardie terreine wat voorheen in 'n mate verwaarloos is, soos byvoorbeeld vrouegeskiedenis. Noukeurigheid en betroubaarheid is nie die enigste kriteria wat in sosiale geskiedenis van belang is nie. Selfs tekste wat skraal voorkom, kan waardevolle bronne wees wanneer hulle noukeurig vertolk word. In hierdie artikel is die voorbeeld van die dagboek van mev. Sarah Le Mesurier van nader beskou om die lewenswyse van 'n neëntiende eeuse vrou te verklaar; dié van mev. Mary Brown van Fraserburg verstrek inligting oor die beoefening van kindersorg, huishoudelike arbeidsverhoudinge en die ideologie van huislikheid, terwyl dagboeke uit die Anglo Boereoorlog (1899-1902) nie net die ervaringe van vrouens weerspieël nie, maar ook nuwe lig werp op die wyse waarop hulle taal deur die opkoms van die Afrikanernasionalisme omvorm is.

This article argues that the diary as historical source has greater value than Dr Maria Hugo suggests in an earlier article. This is particularly true in the case of those areas which have tended to be neglected such as women's history. Accuracy and reliability are not the only criteria which should be used in social history. Even apparently impoverished texts can be revealing when they are carefully interpreted. The article considers the example of the diary of Mrs Sarah Le Mesurier to elucidate the life of an early nineteenth century woman; that of Mrs Mary Brown of Fraserburg provides information on child care practices, domestic labour relations and the ideology of domesticity. Diaries of the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) not only illustrate the experience of women but throw fresh light on the way in which language was recast in the expression of Afrikaner nationalism.

Dr Maria Hugo has usefully drawn our attention to the diary as a historical source.[1] Valuable though her article is, and the historian is well-advised to take heed of her advice, it could be argued that she is too cautious in the importance which she attaches to diaries. Read with care and imagination, diaries may yield far more than she suggests. Their importance goes far beyond the purely political or biographical.

Since the point about diaries is not only their immediacy but their intimacy, diaries are one of the sources for historians concerned with private aspects of life. The most obvious example is in the study of the 'hidden' history of women. The point has been made ad nauseam that women have been excluded from history, that the nineteenth century division of society into a public and a private sphere reinforced this separation. It is not the purpose of this article to enter into feminist debate but it is worth remarking that South African history certainly suffers from such a reading of the past.[2] As far as the nineteenth century is concerned, when diaries were kept

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M. Hugo, 'Die dagboek as historiese bron - met verwysing na die dagboek van H.C. Bredell', *Historia* 34(2), Nov. 1989, pp. 108-118.

2. For example, "women" does not appear as an entry in T.R.H. Davenport, *South Africa. A modern history* (Johannesburg, 1977). L.M. Thompson includes a few fleeting references but his remarks are almost entirely confined to the oppression of slave or black women. There is not a single sentence on settler women in the nineteenth century. *A history of South Africa* (Sandton, 1990).

almost entirely by whites,[3] the pervasive impact of colonial conquest, the functioning of Boer society, and the character of missionary enterprise, cannot be fully understood without taking the role of women into account.[4]

In Europe and America a number of writers have begun to make greater use of diaries to interpret the Victorian world, when the practice of writing journals reached its height. While many historians may be uncomfortable with Peter Gay's Freudian paradigm, his complex interpretation of letters and diaries is a persuasive argument against the stereotype of the middle class Victorian woman as sexually passive.[5] Patricia Jalland's study of upper middle class political families in Victorian England not only illuminates the 'actual reality' of such women's lives but broadens our knowledge of the complex social network which bound together the ruling establishment.[6] Although his subject is a seventeenth-century clergyman, Alan Macfarlane's examination of the diary of Ralph Josselin is a revealing example of the fruitful way in which interdisciplinary history may cast light on the functioning of kinship and neighbourliness, debt and credit, and affection in an English village.[7]

A few writers have approached diaries from a specifically feminist framework. J.E. Cooper argues that women kept journals for reasons peculiar to their gender. The diary, she suggests:

> is used by women to sort their own lives. It is a way of ordering the overwhelming number of details women encounter in their own fractured lives, a way of bringing meaning to disorder.[8]

Such diaries, she points out, reflect the daily reality of women's lives, the trivial details which form their daily existence. Women kept diaries because:

> they have sensed the value of such record keeping, because they have explained the pleasures and rewards of such reflection and organization.[9]

While this may be true for some women, many of the journals they kept are intractable material for historians. The details they relate seem trivial and meaningless. They do not serve much biographical purpose since they fail to discuss the events of the day, they often give little clue to family relations and the participants are obscure. They may be curiously impersonal, untouched by emotion so they tell us nothing about the writer's inward state. The entries may be brief, repetitive and uninformative. It is hardly surprising that such unpromising stuff has been ignored or discarded. Yet, can the social historian afford to reject any source, however infertile? In fact, an informed reading, supported by basic research, can yield more than many people are aware. The diary of Mrs Sarah Anne Le Mesurier is a case in point.[10]

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3. Sol Plaatje's diary is a notable exception and makes the point about the importance of diaries for 'invisible' history. S.T. Plaatje, *The Boer War diary of Sol T. Plaatje,* ed. by J.L. Comaroff (Johannesburg, 1973).
4. Work is now being produced which goes some way towards an understanding of the history of black women. See especially C. Walker (ed.), *Women and gender in southern Africa to 1945* (Cape Town, 1990).
5. P. Gay, *The bourgeois experience. Victoria to Freud,* I and II, (Oxford, 1984, 1986).
6. P. Jalland, *Women, marriage and politics, 1860-1914* (Oxford, 1986).
7. A. Macfarlane, *The family life of Ralph Josselin a seventeenth-century clergyman. An essay in historical anthropology* (Cambridge, 1970).
8. J.E. Cooper, 'Shaping meaning: Women's diaries, journals, and letters - the old and the new', *Women's Studies International Forum* 10(1), 1987, p. 95.
9. J.E. Cooper, 'Shaping meaning', p. 96.
10. University of the Witwatersrand. A 26. My thanks are due to them for the use of the diary and to Mr Langham-Carter, who had written a prior article on the diary (cited below). Most of the information regarding the provenance of the diary, and on individuals, is his research.

Sarah Anne Le Mesurier was a widow, the relict of James Morley, who married a Bombay lawyer, Augustus Smith Le Mesurier, at St George's Church in Cape Town, on 19 April 1836. Her diary is of some local significance for it is the record of the daily round of an 'Indian', one of those members of the Raj who took their furlough at the Cape before the opening of Suez.[11]

Sarah's diary started in August 1836 and continued intermittently for several years. The entries are usually brief and almost entirely concerned with her social engagements, her correspondence and other minor items. Its concerns are too narrow to offer much information about general social issues.

To start with, one might ask why Sarah Le Mesurier kept this diary at all. Increasingly it became a record of her correspondence but it did not begin in this way. More probably it had another function. Diary-keeping was a form of discipline - as anyone who has tried to keep up a regular diary will know. Victorian girls especially were encouraged to keep journals in order to promote the development of an orderly and introspective character. Husbands often supported this practice, probably for the same reason. Many diaries were started upon marriage and Augustus Le Mesurier may well have taken an interest in his wife's diary (and kept one himself), for the journal starts with his entries on the day of their marriage. Sarah took it up several months later.

Sarah Le Mesurier's social class emerges very clearly from the diary. She moved in a circle of military officers and medical men and including the occasional peer or local gentry. Major Havelock, later General Havelock of Indian Mutiny fame, was a witness at her wedding, as was Martin West, to become Lieutenant-Governor of Natal.[12] She dined, or on one occasion failed to dine, with the Cloetes of Constantia. Her peripatetic existence reminds us that for Britons of this class the Cape was no more than a pleasant holiday resort. On 22 October 1836 she and her husband left the Cape for India on board the **Carnatic**. She returned to the Colony a couple of years later on 9 February 1839. Their stay was not very long, however, for on 17 September 1840 they returned to Bombay and at the end of 1841 they went to England.

For such people the empire was not a place to put down roots. It is hardly surprising to find that most of Sarah Le Mesurier's important social contacts were with other imperial wanderers like herself. Whether in England, the Cape or in India they constructed a life which took little account of the varied local environments. Even her account of a journey to Caledon, while reminding us of the discomforts of travel at this time, is most remarkable for the way in which social contacts were maintained at every stopping place - Stellenbosch, Paarl or Caledon - and faithfully recorded.

Neither in India nor in Cape Town do her diary entries have any sense of place. A couple of examples give the flavour of her life:

> 18th [February 1839]. Augustus left Cape Town for Rondebosch.
>
> 22nd. Came to live at the [ ].
>
> March 8th. Wrote to Thomas my Mother Anna & Louisa addressed letter to Louisa.
>
> March 9th. Went to Church at Rondebosch. Mr Fry preached on the subject of eternal punishment.
>
> March 14th. Spent the day with Mrs Moyle. Augustus brought a horse for me.

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11. R.R. Langham-Carter, 'Sarah Le Mesurier's journal', *Africana Notes and News* 29(1), 1 March 1990, pp. 22-28. Augustus Le Mesurier was not a military man but the Le Mesuriers moved in that social set and may reasonably categorised as "Indian".
12. R.R. Langham-Carter, 'Sarah Le Mesurier's journal', p. 22.

In such an existence a sense of identity was rooted in class, not place. What emerges even more strikingly from this diary is the enormous importance of family. Sarah's husband and children are almost never mentioned without a term of endearment. This is not a reflective diary but, like most other Victorian women, she never mentions any marital conflict or dissatisfaction with her life. Of course, she may not have felt any. Then, too, her husband may well have read her diary.[13] But a woman like Sarah Le Mesurier, whose social identity existed in her marriage, could not afford conflict. One can only speculate, but it is likely that any undesirable emotion was firmly suppressed. The picture which she presents is that of the model wife, always affectionate, patient and concerned.

Sarah's family network was by no means confined to her immediate circle. She was clearly extremely attached to her parents - there is real grief in her brief mention of her mother's death. In addition, she sustained a large correspondence with her brothers and sisters, with her daughters by her first marriage, who lived in England,[14] and with her husband's family. With such a close but widely scattered family, letters were her lifeline and dozens of letters, sent and received, are carefully noted in her diary. Even more than the social contacts of her class, family seems to have been integral to Sarah's personal identity.

There is, however, a paradox in this relationship. Strong though Sarah's feeling for her family may have been, she was prepared to accept separation from her children at a remarkably young age. Her daughters, who could not have been more than ten or eleven years old for Sarah herself was born in 1805, were left in England. In addition, the two elder boys by her marriage with Augustus, Augustus junior and Robert, were sent home to Britain at three and just over two years respectively - "a sad separation", she comments. This was, of course, the fate of most children of British families in India, but to send two toddlers across the world on a hazardous sea voyage in the charge of someone else, seems extraordinary. One wonders what its psychological effect must have been on her and her family.

In an age of modern medicine we tend to forget how near to death were the lives of early Victorians. In 1841 the average life expectancy at birth was forty years.[15] Infant mortality, of course, was very high, but even those who survived early childhood and were reasonably prosperous could not expect to live beyond their fifties. Health was a major consideration, especially for women who were most vulnerable physically and economically, and it dominated their writings. Sarah was no exception. At thirty she had lost a husband and two children. She herself seems to have been quite healthy at first. She bore four sons in rapid succession, apparently without difficulty.[16] Nevertheless, in her early married days she recorded headaches which were severe enough to interfere with her social engagements. But Victorian women's 'headaches' are difficult to interpret. They can mean anything from stress to migraine to menstruation to pregnancy.

When they returned to the Cape in 1839 Sarah suffered a serious illness. Again she is vague about the details, although the ailment apparently lasted for weeks. She was taken ill on 24th May and the children were removed from the house to give her quiet. On the 18th August the described her late illness as pleurisy, with which she was attacked on 1st July. On 1st November Augustus shaved her head. It is impossible to know whether these episodes were related, or whether the head-shaving was the result of disease but there seems little doubt that she endured a long period of ill health, for which the doctor had no remedy. Indeed, the main re-

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13. This reading of one another's diaries sometimes formed part of the marital relationship. Dr John Brown of Fraserburg, for instance, a liberal man who encouraged the young Olive Schreiner, read his wife's diary and took an active interest in it. University of Cape Town (hereafter UCT): BC 597 D5.
14. She had two surviving daughters from her marriage with Morley, two children having died, R.R. Langham-Carter, 'Sarah Le Mesurier's journal', pp. 22-23.
15. E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield, *The population history of England 1541-1871. A reconstruction* (London, 1981), p. 230.
16. R.R. Langham-Carter, 'Sarah Le Mesurier's journal', p. 27.

sult seems to have been that he was incorporated into their social circle, for he and his wife were now regular visitors.[17] The extreme vagueness of the account is itself indicative of the fear and uncertainty which haunted life. Sarah had good reason for any anxiety she might have felt for she died on 23 April 1844, aged thirty-eight, after bearing eight children. Augustus lived to the ripe age of 78.[18]

The silences of this diary are also telling. Although Sarah obviously belonged to the servant-employing class, they are almost never mentioned. There is one reference at the Cape to servants who accompanied them on the journey to Caledon, and twice in India she commented on the employment of an amah for her children. Apart from that, they existed only as part of the furniture of her life, unacknowledged, uninteresting. The same was true of the local population, both at the Cape and in India. Even when she visited Genadendal she has nothing to say about its inhabitants, although she remarked that it was a missionary institution "well worth inspection". Indians do not appear except for one tantalizing mention of a letter written to Aga Mahomed Jaffer.

Another silence in the diary is any record of philanthropic activity. This is surprising for charitable work was often an important occupation for women of her class - and an evangelical at that. Her husband was apparently generous in his religious endowments.[19] The absence of any such activity may perhaps be attributed to her lack of interest in people out of her own social set. Certainly it would be consistent with her other silences.

In one respect Sarah Le Mesurier did not entirely conform to the stereotype of the middle class Victorian woman, for she seems to have had some financial independence and the freedom to exercise it. The details are too scattered and brief to make much of them, but on several occasions she records financial transactions. Possibly she had an inheritance from her previous husband. Other occasional comments throw a brief light on the economic position of women. At the Cape they could earn some pocket money (probably not more) by selling their paintings for she bought some of Miss Rose's paintings in Stellenbosch.

Otherwise Sarah Le Mesurier's life appears to confirm rather than challenge the stereotype. Marriage, childbirth and death dominated. Mourning was taken seriously. When a close friend was married shortly after Sarah's mother's death, Sarah refused to attend, as she did not wish to put off her mourning. Above all she was, like most women of her class, conventionally religious, attending church regularly, conscientiously recording the text of sermons and being 'churched' after the birth of her babies.[20] Although she was undoubtedly sincere in her religious beliefs, there is little indication that there was great depth of feeling or much self-examination involved. The few words left by her husband suggests a much greater intensity of belief, a fact confirmed by his friendship with Major Havelock, a noted evangelical.

Sarah Le Mesurier's diary, then, is the unremarkable record of a life which was indeed trivial and conventional. It makes tedious reading for it has little literary merit. Yet it has real historical value. It tells us something about the network of Anglo-Indian connections at the Cape, it gives us some understanding of the extent to which metropolitan cultural patterns were replicated at the Cape and it allows a glimpse of the mentality of a woman of this class and period.

The diary of Mary Brown of Fraserburg is more obviously useful. Full and expansive, it is a rich source on the domestic world of women, education and the cultural life of a village community. Mary Brown achieves a footnote in the history books for it was her husband who encouraged the young Olive Schreiner to study

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17. This was probably Dr Daniel O'Flinn, district surgeon of Stellenbosch, and a man of some standing in the colonial medical world, P.W. Laidler and M. Gelfand, *South Africa. Its medical history* (Cape Town, 1971), pp. 148, 230.
18. R.R. Langham-Carter, 'Sarah Le Mesurier's journal', p. 27.
19. R.R. Langham-Carter, 'Sarah Le Mesurier's journal', p. 23.
20. 'Churching' was a thanksgiving service for the safe delivery of a child.

medicine and *The story of an African farm* is dedicated to her.[21] The daughter of Henry Solomon, brother of Saul Solomon, Brown was a member of the ruling establishment at the Cape. She was a cultivated woman from a mildly evangelical background. Like the majority of women of her class, her conventional religious beliefs permeated her thinking and shaped her conception of her domestic role.

Unlike Le Mesurier, Mary Brown was explicit about her reasons for writing a diary:

> I wish to keep some jottings of our every day life here at Fraserburg chiefly because the days go so [...] & quietly past that I should like to have some record of them if it should come to pass that we leave this quiet country life, and it will be pleasant in after life to recall by the help of these jottings the early days of my little ones lives & their sweet sayings and doings.[22]

Fortunately Mary Brown did not confine herself to a sentimental verbal photograph album. Increasingly her journal became a record of "the inner life of our Home & bairns".[23]

As its central intention was to record the doings of her children, the diary is particularly informative on practices of childrearing and education. When the diary was started in January 1873, Brown had two children, Willie, aged three, and Rachel, just weaned. From this we may conclude that Mary Brown preferred to breast-feed her children but she was forced to employ a wetnurse for her next baby, who was sickly. She was unusually explicit about such a custom:

> We have had to get a Nurse for him, our strong cleanly Kaffir washerwoman, is taking lovingly to her foster-child, & comes generally three times a day to nurse him - leaving her own child & work to help me in rearing our frail wee boy. It has been a greater disappointment than one would fancy to have to give up nursing my little boy - but I could not go on - and am more than thankful that we have been able to get him one who can supply him with the needful nourishment.[24]

The education and moral upbringing of her children were her constant concern and she worried about her ability to carry out her task adequately. She was a typical Victorian in her belief that obedience must be firmly inculcated but her sense of duty warred with her natural affection:

> I had to punish my poor little boy to-day for stubbornness. I do feel so sad when such a duty has to be performed, & feel so unfit to train him aright. He is growing so dear to me that it is quite a trial to me to have to punish him - & yet I want so to make him good.[25]

Victorian women were central to the transmission of class and cultural values as the diary demonstrates. Gender roles were taught early. Willie was encouraged to be lively and strong. On holiday on a farm, Rachel played separately from her brother (her occupations were not recorded) while he was active and dirty. Because she found him difficult to discipline, Willie was sent to school at five years, in the belief that the company of other boys would keep him out of trouble and mischief. At the same time "tenderness" was regarded as a male virtue and Mary commented favourably on his manner towards his baby brother - "he is as handy & tender as any

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21. J. Meintjes, *Olive Schreiner, portrait of a South African woman* (Johannesburg, 1965), pp. 24-26, has a glowing tribute to Mary Brown.
22. UCT: BC 597 D5, p. 1.
23. UCT: BC 597 D5, p. 91.
24. UCT: BC 597 D5, pp. 180-181.
25. UCT: BC 597 D5, p. 9.

girl".[26] The Brown children lived in a home which was caring but disciplined, in which the children were encouraged to be independent, to develop their own personalities but in which gender roles appear to have been clearly demarcated.

Maternal love is a dominant theme of the diary and it emerges most poignantly with the birth and death of the third child. The infant mortality rate was high in Fraserburg but this knowledge did not innure Mary Brown to the prospect of her child's death. Her only solace was her religious belief which was central to her identity but conventional religious teaching provided limited consolation to the mourning mother:

> Oh my baby! Baby! How I miss him, how my heart aches for my darling. Could I but see him in his heavenly home I think I could go on bravely, but my faith is dim. ... Oh Johnnie, Johnnie! may Mother never forget the patient little life you spent, & to be worthy of her baby in heaven. God! Help me to be strong & to feel Thy will be done, & not only to feel it & say it, but act & live it. ... Could we sorrowing Mothers but understand & see what our dead were like in Heaven, surely it would not be so hard to be patient. but God Wills it just as it is. The only ray of comfort I get is by saying over & over. It is God's Will.[27]

Although her literary style was commonplace, even banal, the intensity of Brown's emotions provide the historian with unique evidence of the psychological impact of infant mortality. It puts flesh on the bare bones of the statistics and gives some idea of the function and value of religion in a period of personal crisis.

Women's diaries also contribute to our knowledge of one of the most neglected yet widespread forms of labour, that of domestic labour, and to labour-relations between black and white in the home. Some diaries force us to question the prevailing belief that domestic servants were cheap and plentiful in nineteenth-century South Africa.

Evidence from women's writing suggests that domestic labour was most prevalent in those parts of the country in which colonial conquest had had its greatest impact. The western Cape, of course, had a long tradition of servants in the home, based on slavery. In the eastern Cape black women had entered settler employment early in the nineteenth century.[28] The situation in mid-century Natal seems to have been rather different, especially amongst recent settlers. Ellen McLeod at Byrne was never able to afford servants. Throughout her long life, the family depended almost entirely on their own labour in the house and on the farm.[29] Similarly the Norwegian missionary family, the Norgards in Zululand, could not afford to pay servants.[30]

Even families of some substance relied heavily on female family labour. David Dale Buchanan, attorney, leading politician and founder of the *Natal Witness*[31] was the head of a large household of twelve children. In her diary, kept between the ages of seventeen and nineteen, his eldest daughter, Mary Elizabeth, faithfully recorded her daily chores.[32] She and her sister shared a routine of teaching the younger children, cleaning the house, preparing and cooking dinner and tea,[33] and making many of the family's clothes. Cleaning consisted at least of dusting and tidy-

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26. UCT: BC 597 D5, p. 170.
27. UCT: BC 597 D5, pp. 195, 199.
28. J. Cock, 'Domestic service and education for domesticity: The incorporation of Xhosa women into colonial society', in C. Walker, *Women and gender in southern Africa,* pp. 76-96.
29. E. McLeod, *Dear Louisa. History of a pioneer family in Natal 1850-1888. Ellen McLeod's letters to her sister in England from the Byrne valley,* ed. by R. Gordon (Pietermaritzburg, 1970).
30. University of Natal: KL MS NOR 1.05 MS 1089. S. Norgard, *A Norwegian family in South Africa.* Ts, p. 17.
31. W.J. de Kock (ed.), *Dictionary of South African biography I* (Cape Town, 1968), pp. 132-133.
32. Natal Archives, Pietermaritzburg, A 924.
33. Like many middle class families the main meal was eaten midday and tea was probably a high tea.

ing and she made her own and her mother's beds. Saturdays were devoted to starching and ironing the family wash. Presumably the younger children also had household duties, for there were at least four younger sisters, some of whom were old enough to take responsibility. It seems likely, therefore, that only the harder work was performed by a servant but the daughters were never idle.

Unlike Le Mesurier of Buchanan, Brown commented regularly on her domestic employees and her relations with them. The family income was too limited to allow a large entourage. Isabella Beeton recommended that a family with an annual income of £500 could afford a cook and housemaid, while at £300 a maid-of-all-work was appropriate.[34] District surgeons' salaries rarely rose above this level in the Cape and it was clear that the Browns battled financially. Mrs Brown's main concern was help in the kitchen since she found the effort of lighting fires, cooking and washing up exhausting, especially in the Fraserburg heat and when she was pregnant. Throughout her stay in Fraserburg, she seems to have employed a maid-of-all-work and a nursemaid for the children. A washerwoman did the heavy washing. She herself worked alongside the maid, cleaning the pantry, making preserves, and doing all the sewing and mending. When the maid was absent, all the work fell on her shoulders and she clearly found it distressing.

Within the home the middle class colonial woman was trying to create the ideal domestic environment. This meant the imposition of middle class notions of order and discipline not only on herself and her children, but on her staff as well. Given the fact that the latter usually possessed a precapitalist work ethic, a high degree of stress could result. Despite her relatively generous employment attitudes, Brown found her servants unsatisfactory.

Most of the employees were young local women. One was a farm girl, unused to middle class domesticity, and needed much training. She was followed by another, much more competent but inclined to drink. Mary Brown was prepared, regretfully, to invoke the law against her errant maid. Eventually Truitje was brought before the magistrate, presumably charged under the Master and Servants Act, and sentenced to two weeks imprisonment. "I am very sorry but it could not go on any longer", Brown wrote.[35] Finally she resorted to an Irishwoman, who was regarded as a mixed blessing because, although competent, she had a baby of her own who was brought to the house "& the kitchen looks a regular muddle".[36] Mrs Welsh remained with the Browns for the rest of their stay in Fraserburg.

Brown's relations with her employees were probably typical of her class and liberal background, displaying a mixture of irritation and concern. The value of the diary lies in the fact that it is evidence for the day-to-day relationship between mistress and servant although the perspective is limited to that of the employer.

Superficially Mary Brown's diary confirms the Victorian stereotype of the perfect lady. Brown is passive, "patient" and "quiet" are the terms she favoured, religious, conscientious in the domestic duties, a loving mother and wife and a charitable visitor to the local sick and needy. But the historian needs to be alert to the signals hidden within the text, to read between the lines. There are indications of depression. True to the stereotype, Mary Brown suffered from a vague malaise, from headaches and a weariness of spirit. On one occasion she expressed her feelings in an extended outburst of frustration:

> I don't think I was ever so 'on the go' as I am now, & only wish my **flesh** would not be so weak. I have so many irritable words to regret, at the close of the day, when a quiet time comes - that I know I would not

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34. Cited in E.O. Hellerstein *et al* (eds.), *Victorian women: a documentary account of women's lives in nineteenth century England, France and the United States* (Brighton, 1981), p. 299. Although servants may have been cheaper, the cost of living at the Cape was at least as high as that of Britain.
35. UCT: BC 597 D5, pp. 120-121.
36. UCT: BC 597 D5, p. 150.

> say, if I did not feel so tired out - and yet how very full of joy & love my life is, & how willingly I do all that is in my power for the good of all. Only the care of these 3 children does tire me out so often - especially if visitors come at unseasonable & unreasonable hours, & upset the order of my days. ... I know this is wrong for most likely they go out of their way to come & see me! Oh I wish I could always feel that the daily crosses, are just the **right** crosses for me to 'take up & carry'. It is an unspeakable comfort however to feel that a Father's loving eye, has watched through the day, & sees the desire to do right, & the earnest wish to please him, in spite of the many failures & breakdowns.[37]

As usual, Brown's emotion was expressed in conventional religious terms, and her writing suggests the function of religion in persuading Victorian women to conform to social norms. But a larger knowledge of her life indicates that she was genuinely bored with her domestic role and the narrow Fraserburg environment. It has been noted above that she was a friend of Olive Schreiner. What did such a perfect lady offer the archetypal rebel? Her husband was an outstanding doctor and the evidence suggests that he was challenged by stimulating women.[38] What companionship did he find in this marriage? The historian needs to look to Brown's later life for an explanation.

After leaving Fraserburg in 1879, the Browns moved to Burnley in Lancashire, an industrial town where Mary became engaged in social work. During this period, and partly through her association with Olive Schreiner, she met a range of Victorian notables like Edward Carpenter and Ellice Hopkins. The latter encouraged her to engage in work on behalf of women. On her return to South Africa she became involved in the South African suffrage movement, and helped to establish the Women's Enfranchisement Movement in 1908, of which she was one of the vice-presidents.[39]

It is always dangerous for historians to interpret psychological evidence but Brown's diary, taken in the context of her later life, indicates that it is legitimate to identify her weariness as more than ill health, as evidence of frustration with her confinement to the private sphere, however fully she had assimilated Victorian domestic values.

Great historical events also have their hidden history. This is particularly true of war. War, however, is not a purely military affair. It is also a great social event, transforming civilian society in complex ways. In the case of the South African war of 1899 to 1902 the engagement of blacks is slowly being acknowledged.[40] This is not true of women who, apart from one brief article,[41] some memoirs and the concentration camp literature, have been almost entirely ignored. Yet no history of the South African war can be regarded as definitive as long as the part played by women is unexplored.

Like men, women regarded the South African war as an episode of historical significance. Consequently they have been unusually willing to record their own experiences and they and their descendants have tended to preserve them. The result is that women's diaries for this period are particularly prolific.

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37. UCT: BC 597 D5, pp. 175-176.
38. R. First and A. Scott, *Olive Schreiner. A biography* (London, 1989), pp. 68-70.
39. Z. Friedlander (ed.), *Until the heart changes. A garland for Olive Schreiner* (Cape Town, 1967), pp. 25-41.
40. P. Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899-1902* (Johannesburg, 1983); W. Nasson, *Abraham Esau's war. A black South African's war in the Cape, 1899-1902* (Cambridge, 1991).
41. S.B. Spies, 'Women and the war', in P. Warwick (ed.), *The South African War. The Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902,* (London, 1980). See also J. Brandt, *Die Kappie Kommando of Boerevrouwen in Geheime Dienst* (Kaapstad, 1915), and similar literature.

In wartime women tended to be alienated from their usual lives and social contexts. Mrs Isabella Lipp remained in Johannesburg after the majority of Uitlanders had been ejected by the SAR government. As a British subject living in the midst of enemy territory, the object of suspicion of her neighbours, Lipp found the time hanging very heavily on her hands. "I am purposing to write from day to day in the form of a Diary more as a means to help wile away a dreary, weary time of waiting than with any idea of future publishing", she wrote. Later on she commented, "This is a very long entry, but I must moralize a bit being all alone up here the whole day except when my husband comes in for meals, this Diary is some kind of companion to whom I can unburden myself a little and though one sided, can also converse or chat."[42]

British women in the besieged towns found in their diaries a release from tension and a means of communicating by proxy with family and friends to whom they could not write their usual regular letters. "To occupy my thoughts and keep myself calm, I am writing to you, my dear brother", wrote "Bess" at the start of the Kimberley siege, knowing well that her letter could not be posted.[43]

Isolation was more than a physical state which gave women the leisure and inclination to set down their experiences. It also created those experiences and it established a frame of mind which brought to the surface subconscious tensions and fears. The circumstances which led women to write and the experiences which they related were part of a single whole.

This was true also of Boer women whose experience of isolation was essentially the same although the war generally treated them more harshly. Many found themselves alone on their farms, struggling with unfamiliar tasks and short of labour. Sixteen-year-old Bessie Grobbelaar of Kroonstad, whose family seem to have lacked black farm labour, found the going very difficult:

> Die stilte op die plaas is swaar, die koring is ryp, ons het net 2 werks kaffers om koring te sny, ons het beetje gehelp maar dit is te swaar werk om met 'n sekel te sny, die eerste dag was ons fluks, die 2de dag was my rug styf ek moes toe vir die perde sorg, ek was bang om tussen die perde te gaan in die stal, maar 'n mens word aan al jou pligte gewoond die eerste maal toe ek die kar inspan het ek die binne lysel verkeerd vas gemaak. O! hoe eensaam ...[44]

It has been observed that adolescent girls were particularly alert to the drama of war.[45] Among the surviving South African journals three of the fullest and most lively are those of teenage girls - Anna Barry, fifteen when the war started, Bessie Grobbelaar who was sixteen and Elsa Leviseur, a little older at about twenty. Elsa Leviseur had no doubt that she was living through history: "This diary is begun in a troublous time", she wrote. Later on, isolated in Bloemfontein before it was taken by the British, she remarked: "It is a weird feeling, that of being shut off from the rest of the world, that we are in the midst of war - yet what an experience - ah God what an experience".[46] Anna Barry, a cultivated girl, shared this view:

> Ek het besluit om 'n dagboek te hou want daar is sterk gerugte van oorlog teen Engeland en as ons in 'n oorlog gedompel word, sal daar dinge gebeur wat van groot historiese belang sal wees.[47]

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42. Transvaal Archives (hereafter TAB), Pretoria: A 1842, pp. 1, 24.
43. McGregor Museum, Kimberley: Bess to Dick, 4.
44. Free State Archives (hereafter VAB), Bloemfontein: A 248. Mrs Bessie Venter, Diary, 1899-1902, pp. 2-3.
45. J.D. Begos, 'The diaries of adolescent girls', *Women's Studies International Forum* 10(1), 1987, p. 70.
46. Johannesburg Public Library: S Store 920 LEV, pp. 1, 6.
47. A. Barry, *Ons Japie. Dagboek gehou gedurende die driejarige oorlog* (Johannesburg, n.d.), p. 1.

It is no accident that all three girls should have been republican, for the Boers had a much stronger sense of their historic role than the British. The dialogue between past and present in their writing was a continuing process. This may be seen in the matter of language. Many educated Dutch women wrote in English before the war. This was true of Annie Rothmann, the sister of M.E. Rothmann,[48] Anna Barry and Henrietta Armstrong.[49] Yet few of these diaries have survived in their original form. Anna Barry switched to Nederlands after the death of her brother but the diary was subsequently retranslated into Afrikaans for publication. Bessie Grobbelaar, now Venter, rewrote her diary in fractured Afrikaans in 1938, while although it is not acknowledged, Marie Fischer's has patently also been translated and polished.[50] From one point of view this is unsatisfactory for the historian, but it does say something about the place of these writings in the formation of political consciousness.

The image of passive female suffering, which has become integral to the mythology of the concentration camps and the formation of Afrikaner nationalism, has led historians to ignore the totality of the camp experience. The many studies of resistance to oppression, of slaves and blacks in South Africa, to name only two, should alert us to the narrowness of this focus. The young Bessie Grobbelaar, whose naive unpublished diary is more revealing than the 'cleaned-up' published variety, recorded a number of instances of resistance, major and minor. The most dramatic occurred when the women in Brandfort camp confronted the unpopular camp commandant, Jacobs, about the quality of the food:

> Op die 25ste November 1901 vroeg in die more Baie vroeg in die more gaan eenige lydende moeders rond in die kamp om ons aan te sê, dat ons 9 uur by die Komandant se kantoor was: om 9 uur was honderd vroue en dogters by die kantoor. Elk een met die randsoen vleis. van die more. Ek ook in die getal. Ons stel Mevrou van Tonder aan om te praat, met die Komedant, hy was 'n onbeleefde Kolonie boer. He word virsoek om uittekom. Hy weier so 'n bang broek. hy stuur die hoof dokter om met ons te praat. ...[51]

Jacobs promised reform and, although the ringleaders were subsequently arrested for a couple of weeks, the authorities had clearly taken fright for Jacobs was replaced by a more efficient man.[52]

Such confrontation seems to have been fairly rare. More common was resistance to the hospitalization of their children, a practice which the Boer women bitterly resented. Bessie Grobbelaar considered that "Die beste wegsteek plek is in 'n trommel. as die dokter en suster virby is haal hulle dit uit, en dan weer in die bed".[53]

One of the most striking features to emerge from women's writing on the concentration camps is the extent to which a clash of cultures contributed to the embitterment of the Boer women. This conflict centred on issues of health. In their blue books the British authorities implied that camp mortality rates were comparable with those elsewhere in South Africa and that the lack of Boer vital statistics masked

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48. TAB: A 321, A Rothmann, Diary, 1899-1900.
49. H.E.C. Armstrong, *Camp diary of Henrietta E.C. Armstrong. Experiences of a Boer nurse in the Irene concentration camp, 6 April - 11 October 1901,* (ed.) T. van Rensburg, (Pretoria, 1980).
50. M.A. Fischer, *Tant Miem se kampdagboek Mei 1901 - Augustus 1902* (Cape Town, 1964).
51. VAB: A 248, pp. 52-53.
52. Mortality at the Brandfort camp was at its height when it was visited by the Ladies' Commission on 29 October 1901. Even their hostile report agrees that there was disorganisation and corruption. They recommended the dismissal of the camp doctor for stealing medical comforts. Cd 893. *Report on the concentration camps in South Africa by the Commission of Ladies,* 1902, pp. 79-82.
53. VAB: A 248, p. 42.

the existing high rates in the Boer republics. There was some truth in this.[54] The impact of mortality in the alienating conditions of the camps, however, was traumatic.

What made the experience yet more devastating was the taste of ruthless modern medical bureaucracy. The tone of the Ladies' Committee, sent out by the British government to investigate camp conditions after Emily Hobhouse had roused an outcry, exemplifies this. The forthright recommendations did much to instigate reform, but the contempt for Boer medical practice demonstrated their lack of sympathy for a pre-industrial culture. Boer women were not the first South Africans to reject modern sanitary reform. Capetonians had done so years before. But war involved a violent modernization of a pre-industrial social ethos which greatly enhanced the bitterness of conflict and defeat.

The example of the removal of the children to hospital has already been cited. Another was the Boer lack of faith in British medicines. The Ladies' Committee commented critically on Boer vernacular medicine. Maria Fischer was dubious about the efficacy of British medicine: "Ek het die doktor ingeroep om moeilikheid te voorkom, maar ek was bang om sy medisyne te gebruik. Ons gebruik die gewone huismiddels. ..."[55] As a result of this fear and hostility doctors often became a major focus of their resentment, sometimes with good reason for the Brandfort doctor seems to have been a thoroughly dishonest man.[56]

The examples above are a limited attempt to suggest that diaries may contribute to historical understanding in a broader way than Dr Hugo suggests. No diary is compromised if it is read correctly. Intermittent entries may emphasize the desperate attempt to impose order on a fragmented life. Alterations to the text by the editor may tell us something about the historical context in which the work is published. Factual errors indicate the personality or education of the writer. The point at issue is how sensitively or imaginatively the historian interprets this invaluable and under-utilized source.

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54. Cd 893, pp. 1, 10-13. Certainly Alie Badenhorst recorded a severe mortality from measles on the farms in the Klerksdorp district. A. Badenhorst, *Tant Alie of the Transvaal* (London, 1923), pp. 164-170.
55. M.A. Fischer, *Tant Miem Fischer se kampdagboek,* p. 44.
56. M.A. Fischer, *Tant Miem Fischer se kampdagboek,* p. 58; Cd 893, pp. 80, 82. See also H. Armstrong, *Camp Diary,* for the perspective of a Boer woman with a modern medical ethic.