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Florence Boos

In my mind's eye it will remain the same:
 Poor women's Autobiographies
 in the Nineteenth Century Scotland

[A]utobiography must always include, as a decisive element, ... the meaning an event acquires when viewed in the perspective of a whole life. ... autobiography is not just reconstruction of the past, but interpretation ... (Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, 17, 19)

Autobiography is merely the literary expression of a person's reflection on the course of his life. Such reflection, though it may be limited in extent, is frequently made by every individual. The power and breadth of our own lives and the energy with which we reflect on them are the foundation of historical vision. It alone enables us to restore life to the bloodless shadows of the past. (Wilhelm Dilthey, *Pattern and Meaning in History*, p. 86-87)¹

Every life has its own significance. This lies in a context of meaning in which every moment that can be remembered has an intrinsic value, and yet, in the context of memory, it also has a relation to the meaning of the whole. The significance of an individual existence is quite unique and so cannot be fathomed by knowledge; yet, in its way, like one of Leibniz's monads, it represents the historical universe. (*Ibid.*, 89)

In moments of reflection, we have all felt the irrevocable loss of access to past consciousness – not only the myriad associations of our predecessors' existence, but the elusive reflections in which they valued and cherished them. Formal histories 'reconstruct' fragments of the

¹ *Pattern and Meaning in History: Thoughts on History and Society*, edited and introduced by H. P. Rickman, Harper and Row, 1961. Translated from vol. 7 of Dilthey's works, Teubner Verlag, Stuttgart. Dilthey's is one of the fullest nineteenth-century meditations on the understanding of 'meaning' in individual lives.

former but little or nothing of the latter, and no knowledge of outer circumstances can begin to recreate the inner order of our predecessors' lives. Poor people particularly elude our intermittent efforts at historical and literary *Verstehen*, for they have always been with us – indeed, they are our ancestors – but few were fortunate enough to leave crafted, pictured or written traces of their imaginations and hopes. Researchers of 'family trees' typically dwell on a few briefly prominent twigs and blossoms, but discover little or nothing of the lost characters and sensibilities that drove them through the green fuse.

The shards and traces of autobiographical writings that have come to us from the poor of past centuries therefore seem to me especially valuable, for these fragments of once-vivid consciousnesses are bits and artifacts of a true *«archéologie du savoir»*. Wanting sponsors, outlets for publication and formal education, most poor authors cherished paper and writing utensils as well as leisure and space to write, but most of what they managed to commit to paper has been discarded or lost.

In this vast and cavernous silence, students of life-writings have understandably enough tended to concentrate on the autobiographical retrospectives of highly literate and distinguished authors, most of them men, whose reflections satisfy plausible criteria of coherent retrospection established by theoreticians of the genre. In a well-known study of *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, for example, Roy Pascal claimed that

... the best autobiographies are by men and women of outstanding achievement in life, who experience «a consistent relationship, a sort of harmony, between outward experience and inward growth or unfolding, between incident and the spiritual digesting of them. . . . (10). [G]ood autobiography represents a new stage in self-knowledge and a new formulation of responsibility towards the self; it involves mental exploration and change of attitude» (183). . . . [I]ts object is wisdom, not just self-knowledge or self-exposition . . . True autobiography can be written only by men and women pledged to their innermost selves (193, 195).

Whatever epiphanies they may have experienced, it is obvious that very poor people – most of them barely literate, decimated by high

mortality and scarred by struggles for survival – may have found it harder to articulate Pascal's «consistent relationship [and] sense of harmony» between the parts of their experience, and had less leisure for a sense of «mental exploration and . . . change of attitude» such integration required. Yet several surviving memoirs of the poorest inhabitants of nineteenth century Britain revealed exactly such searches for meaning and self-knowledge. Their personal lives were marked by largely failed resistance to the obstacles and sorrows life brought them, and their «outstanding achievement in life» was preservation of an idealism that they saw as an aspect of their personal dignity, sometimes associated with one or another sort of religious faith.

Roy Pascal did acknowledge that «[o]ne can take delight in the records of quite trivial people [sic], not only because of what they tell us, but even because of themselves as human beings. . . . They are a valuable corrective to historiography, which cannot allow its attention to wander too far from what is common to a people and a period, from general determinants and a general outcome, and must ignore much of what is specific in the individual» (179). More concretely, Linda Peterson remarked in *Traditions of Victorian Women's Autobiography*, that «women's auto/biography is . . . a hybrid genre [which] drew on many genres of life writing – biography, diary, family history, domestic memoir, *Bildungsroman*, *Künstlerroman*, as well as classic spiritual autobiography,² and Valerie Sanders has argued in the introduction to her collection of Victorian women's autobiographical writings that many women «rejected canonical formal patterning» to focus on «the unpredictable sequence of events which mirrored the randomness of their own real lives.»³

Other historians and critics have endeavored to explore the sparsely preserved memoirs and autobiographies of Victorian working-people on their own terms. In the first full-length study of such works, David Vincent found efforts to record personal suffering and changes over lifetimes mixed with acts of qualified pride and a sense of ac-

² Linda H. Peterson, *Traditions of Victorian Women's Autobiography: The Poetics and Politics of Life Writing*, UP Virginia, 1999, p. x.

³ *Records of Girlhood: An Anthology of Nineteenth-century Women's Childhoods*, edited by Valerie Sanders. Ashgate, 2000, p. 9.

complishment: «The . . . most convincing reason why the[se] autobiographers believed that some progress had been made . . . during their lifetime was the simple fact that they had been able to write [them]. The autobiographies were sustained by and . . . transmit[ed] a deep sense of pride in the way of life they describe» (203). In a comparative study of middle-class and working-class autobiographies, Regina Gagnier also suggested that «working-class autobiography alters the genre of autobiography as it as been conceived in literary studies» (139) to embrace (for example) confessions, self-examinations and political and polemical narratives, and observed that autobiographers could fashion a convincing sense of self to the extent that they shared a kindred language and sense of values with their audience.⁴

Vincent attributed his own failure to find more poor women's autobiographies to an «absence among women of the self-confidence required to undertake the unusual act of writing an autobiography, and in particular from the . . . exclusion of women from most forms of the working class organizations».⁵ Be that as it may, I have found somewhat more than two dozen such memoirs in recent years,⁶ and will here consider two:

⁴ Regina Gagnier, *Subjectivities: A History of Self-Representation in Britain, 1832-1920*, Oxford, 1991, pp. 151, 167. Gagnier also considered a category of «gallows or conversion narratives,» which she characterized as «the most formulaic pole of working-class autobiography,» and examined working-class writers' anticipations of middle-class expectations and the defenses they offered of the worth of their writings. The only pre-Edwardian woman's work she examined was Ellen Johnston's prefatory memoir in her *Autobiography, Poems and Songs* (1867).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 8. Vincent mentioned five: by Catherine Horne, Janet Bathgate, Mrs. Burrows, Elspeth Clark, Lucy Luck and Mary Smith. Another more recent source for such lives can be found in Barbara Penny Kanner, *Women in Context: Two Hundred Years of British Women Autobiographers, A Reference Guide and Reader*, G. K. Hall, 1997.

⁶ Among other working-class women memoirists of the period not listed by Vincent were Elizabeth Storie, Jane Andrew, Sarah Martin, Lucy Broad, Mary Ashford, Minnie Tyrell, Elizabeth Dobbs, Mrs. Collier of Birmingham, and Peig Sayers, and the poets Jane Jowitt, Marianne Farningham, Janet Hamilton, Mary Smith, and Jane Stevenson. An anonymous account by «A Labourer's Daughter» appeared as *The Pearl of Days* (1849), and five memoirs of women born before 1880 – Ellen Scott, Mrs. Wrigley, «A Plate-Layer's Wife,» «A Felt Hat Worker,» and Mrs. Burrows (mentioned by Vincent) – appeared in Margaret Llewelyn Davies, ed., *Life As We Have Known It by Cooperative Working Women*, Norton, 1975.

1. a truncated and very brief (nine-page) sketch of her childhood which prefaced Elizabeth Campbell's volume of poetry, *Songs of My Pilgrimage* (1875); and

2. *The Christian Watt Papers* (written between the 1870s and 1923, and edited by David Fraser in 1983), a much longer account of its elderly author pencilled in a mental asylum.⁷

Campbell had worked as a servant, factory worker and seller of her own poems, and Watt had been a fishwife and servant before she worked as a volunteer for room and board in the asylum which had treated her. Both authors did indeed take pride in the «simple fact that they had been able to write,» in part at least as a retrospective testimony of their long lives (Campbell was seventy-one when she wrote, and Watt wrote her last entries at ninety). Vincent remarked that working-class memoirs evolved from traditions of spiritual autobiographies and oral narration, and one can hear speaking voices in both these writers' accounts.⁸ Both were Scots, both lived outside major metropolitan centers, both worked at several occupations, and both witnessed the early deaths of their spouses and many of their children (and in Watt's case, grandchildren). Neither took introspection or self-analysis as a conscious aim, but both reflected (and reflected on) their temperaments, hopes, convictions and the effects of circumstances on their inner lives. Both tried, finally, under severe constraints and in contemplation of death, to interpret the events that seemed to them most significant «in the perspective of a whole life.»

Elizabeth Campbell

Elizabeth Duncan Campbell (1803-1878) was the fifth of eight children born to a farming family in Quarreyhead, Edzell, north of Dundee. Her mother died when she was three, and she began work as a farm servant at seven. She was thirty when she married William Campbell, a flax-

⁷ Edinburgh: Paul Harris Publishing, 1983.

⁸ Vincent, pp. 14-21.

dresser, rather late as such things were judged then, and she lived with him thereafter in Brechin and Arbroath, where she worked in a textile factory and bore eight children. Two of her four sons died as children and two as young adults, and an accident at work incapacitated William Campbell before he died in 1869. Campbell began to compose and sell small pamphlets of personal and socially critical verses in her fifties, and the Dundee editor George Gilfillan helped bring out a blander but more polished collection of her poetry as *Songs of My Pilgrimage* in 1875.⁹

In his introduction to this work, Gilfillan praised Campbell's work in unintentionally generous terms as «an experiment [in] how much can be done by *naked nature*, [which] appears to us completely successful» (iv), and added that «[h]ad Elizabeth Campbell produced nothing but her fragment of Autobiography . . . , it had been enough to stamp her a woman of genuine genius. Anything more simply graphic and unostentatiously beautiful we have seldom, if ever, read» (iii). He also dwelled for a moment on Campbell's «clean, humble, simple dress, in thorough keeping with her age and circumstances, the quiet earnestness of her face, the mild gravity of her manners, and above all, the solemn, measured, and enthusiastic tones in which she recited her own poetry» (v).

Campbell designed the *lieux de memoire* of her carefully delimited prefatory «Life of My Childhood» as a testimony to the underlying qualities that animated her poetry – her intense love of beauty, aspiration to learning, and keen sense of the pervasive cruelty and uncertainty of life. In keeping with Gagnier's remark that the often painful «first memories» of working-class memoirs «resonate[d] . . . differently from the evolutionary narrative of childhood familiar to readers of middle-class autobiography»,¹⁰ the first memory Campbell recorded was of her mother's death:

⁹ Campbell, *Songs of My Pilgrimage*, Edinburgh: Andrew Elliot, pp. iii, iv. For accounts of George Gilfillan (1813–1878), see *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 144, *Nineteenth-Century British Literary Biographers*, ed. Steven Serafin, Gale: Detroit, 1994, pp. 117–126. Campbell's poetry is discussed in Florence Boos, «We Would Know Again the Fields. . . : The Rural Poetry of Elizabeth Campbell, Jane Stevenson, and Mary Macpherson,» *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 17.2 (Fall 1998), pp. 325–47. Florence Boos, «Class and the Spasmodics: W. E. Aytoun, George Gilfillan and Alexander Smith,» *Victorian Poetry* 42.4 (2005): 553–83.

¹⁰ Gagnier, p. 43.

My mother died when I was three years old. . . . These were the lonely days for me and my two little sisters that could not dress ourselves. Mary herded the Castle cows, and came home at night. Agnes and Barbara and I wandered like forlorn crows from morn to night, weep, weep, weeping, as motherless children do. (ix)

I never knew the loss . . . Her death was to me like a dream. The morning she died my elder sister milked the cow, and gave us our porridge with the new milk out of doors by the side of the turf stack, and I have never thought any feast half so grand since. Truly God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb. My infant heart felt not the great loss. God hid it from my knowledge (xi).

In brief passages charged with pain, regret and nostalgia, Campbell also recorded in preternaturally detailed images her intense love of beauty, desire to learn, and keen sense of the cruelty and uncertainty of life:

[O]ne sunny morning I saw a moth among the willow leaves; I was so amazed at the size of the wonderful creature, with its coat of brightest green and scarlet, I ran to the house for my sisters to come and see it; but when we came it was nowhere to be seen. Thirty years after I saw one in a doctor's window. I went in and asked him what it was. He said, «That's a moth,» I told him. I once saw one among willow leaves, but it was of a beautiful green, with a scarlet bridle to its neck and velvety scarlet horns on its head like a butterfly. He said, «that one was green; the spirits that preserve it make it white.» (x)

Employment at seven brought «shades of the prison house» and «six shillings in the half year.»

I could not tell how miserable I felt in that strange ugly hovel – me that had such a strange love for the beautiful. It was a prison to me. . . . Every morning I awakened to sorrow when my eyes looked upon that ugly little window, with its mouldering clay sole. I could not treat any one's child as that woman treated me. . . . she beat me and pushed me out of doors into the dark, and called on the ghost of Brandy Don to take me. I was as unhappy as a banished convict in that ugly cot on

the whinny moor . . . I wept among the willows and among the whins, and talked aloud to myself as I gathered my load. (xii-xiii)

Blended once again with these painful memories were her ecstatic responses to nature and «strange love for the beautiful»:

That great kail-yard in the wilderness was the paradise of my childhood. . . . I loved the bourtrees' white blossom, and the sweet-briar roses, the bed of sweetwilliam, the southern wood, like a great bush of broom, the lint, with its sweet blue bells, for my father got the Castle plough to plough up the western part, and sow lint and barley in the eastern. . . . The peppermint is still growing in the cornfield, after the house has been gone some fifty years and more. . . . The dear old cot with its surroundings, its lochs and springs, its bents and grassy footpaths, are bright in my memory, all glowing with a halo from heaven. (x)

Life brought few other rewards for these sensibilities, but she treasured isolated moments of encouragement. One occurred when she won a prize for the best church examination, an annual rite:

The Examination was a great thing in those days. . . . I came off victorious in my examination – the best little scholar, in my seventh year. The minister and the master were walking together in the afternoon in the fields when sister Barbara and I were going to the well for water. When we met them he said, «this is my little scholar,» and gave me twopence. It made me very proud. . . . (xiv, xv)

Another flash of recognition opened in the clouds when she was nine, and sent in her second service «. . . to herd cows and sheep in Blenesk. I was at the top of the hills before the sun rose in the month of June, with my dog, gathering ewes and lambs, singing like a mavis. A neighbour farmer's son said to my shepherd brother that he never saw the like of me, for the earliest morning he was up I was on the hilltops making them ring with my singing.» (xvi) She also recorded lovingly the books she had been able to find and read,¹¹ most of them local,

¹¹ As did others; see Vincent, p. 94 ff. and chapter 6, «The Pursuit of Books.»

biblical and European histories and Scott's novels. Few Victorian women of any class had much good to say about their schooling,¹² but the poorest of them clung to every term they could get («I got a quarter at the white seam in my ninth year, and that is all the schooling I ever got while at home,» xii).

An aspect of Campbell's childhood sensibility was a keen affection for animals, whom she regarded as her fellow-creatures and companions:

«Cherry» was a cunning dog, and saved us children from many a beating. If my father laid a hand on us he was at him in a twinkling. Poor silken-haired «Cherry!» I could feel no more though I saw a man or woman shot than I felt when «Cherry» was shot for old age. It seemed to me like a murder when I saw her life-blood ebbing away in little streams from every pore where the small shot entered her side. So we lost our friend and protector that cheered us in the dark nights when we were left alone afraid in the dark, with our cow, our cat, and six hens, and the great barnyard cock, that crowded to us in the morning. (xi, xii)

«Cherry» was in fact was one of the few living beings Campbell mentioned by name in her brief narrative, but several poems testified to strong empathy for others at the margins of the social order she knew – prisoners, slaves, orphans, gypsies – for whom a shot in the side might be considered a form of 'mercy'.

Regenia Gagnier has also remarked that many working-class memoirs «[did] not end with success but rather in *medias res*,»¹³ and this was strikingly true of Campbells. She spent the happiest years of her early adult life in service with local gentry who relocated temporarily to France (where she worked hard to learn French) until «the Revolution of 1830, when Charles X was dethroned, broke out, and my master and his family left France, . . . so I lost my travels and my grammar lessons. [I]t was such a beautiful country, with its vines growing in the fields by the river, where I used to watch the vessels and pleasure boats sailing like swans in the clear sunlight» (xvi).

¹² Sanders, p. 15.

¹³ Gagnier, p. 43.

Near the end of her narrative, Campbell remarked only that «I was married, at Brechin, by the Rev. Mr Gray, to William Campbell, who was a flaxdresser to trade,» and led a life «full of toil and sorrows so many and so deep that I never could tell them» (xvi). Her favorite son Willie survived the Crimean War only to be killed at thirty-five by a machine used to make furniture, and «I cannot tell what a bitter and sad trial it was for me to go to identify the mangled remains . . . This was the greatest of the many sorrows of my life, and I have mourned sore, and still mourn, his untimely end» (xvii).¹⁴

Like many of her Scottish contemporaries Campbell sought solace in religious resignation and stoic exhortation («God has brought me through the furnace, but . . . gave me strength to bear what was laid upon me . . .»), but she added a Socratic nuance in her memoir's final sentences: «I have been long subject to the ague, and it often takes me badly, helping to wear out my frail body, which shall soon be for ever at rest. I will wait with patience till God's good time will come» (xvii).¹⁵

Campbell's love of fantasy, meditative response to natural beauty and ingrained sympathy with the displaced, disappointed and dispossessed were also transparent in her poems, among them the following stave-rime denunciations of her generation's principal imperial war.¹⁶

¹⁴ She did express her grief in her verse, particularly «The Death of Willie, My Second Son» and «The Graves of My Sons» in *Poems of My Pilgrimage*.

¹⁵ According to her death certificate, December 24th, 1878, Campbell died of «mortification from Burn/Nervous Debility, inclusive 13 days.» According to Gilfillan, another admirer of Campbell's memoir told him that, «[h]er love of the beautiful and the progressive, in spite of overwhelming obstructions, may well astonish her hypercritical detractors. Such things are too wonderful for me. How her head and heart have kept so sound and strong under such tragic pressure of circumstances, is a priceless tribute to human truth» (v).
¹⁶ Examples of «fairy» poems include «The Fairy King's Wedding» and «The Man in Satin Shoon»; on nature, «The Sea» and «The Evening Star»; and on the unfortunate, «Kidnaped Slaves»; «Francis the Slave,» and «A Prison Cell.» A characteristically autobiographical poem is «My Infant Day and My Hair Grown Gray.» Although Campbell grieved the death of her sons, she said less about her daughters; a hint of the fate of one may be provided by a stanza of the latter poem: «Alas! That ever I should have wished/ Of one whom God me gave/ That cypress bough or deep green yew/ Had shaded their early grave» (62).

I think it's a pity that kings go to war,
And carry their murderous inventions so far;
Since Adam did blunder such blunders have been,
And I weep for those that's the victims of kings.
I weep for the coward, I weep for the brave,
I weep for the monarch, I weep for the slave,
I weep for all those that in battle are slain;
I've a tear and a prayer for the souls of all men.
(«The Crimean War»)¹⁷

Older working-class women often wrote poetic «retrospects,» in which physical return to a decayed or destroyed homestead quickened a sense of loss, as well as the sensibility that sharpened it. Something of this heightened intensity emerged in «The Summer Night»'s return to the site of her childhood epiphanies, which was now a family gravesite,

. . . all I could see was an old ash tree,

‘Twas hallowed, ‘twas gloriously green;

Still as death as it stood, and no breath stirred the wood,

As the setting sun brilliant did sheen.

I stepped very slow, with a heart full of woe,

From wounds that death can but heal

I wept like the cloud, and praised God aloud,

Who else would have cared for my tale?

I passed a brow that shut the scene from my view,

And the glory that over it shone;

Lit up every tree, and flower on the lea,

All so calm, all so still, but my moan.

(«The Summer Night»)¹⁸

¹⁷ *Poems*, Fourth Series (Arbroath: Printed for the Author, 1867), p. 24. Other poems on the Crimean War included «The Absent Soldier,» «A Dream,» «The Mother's Lament,» «The Windmill of Sebastopol,» «Bill Arden,» «The Attack on the Great Redan, and the Fall of the Malkhoff,» «The Amber Cloud,» and «Spring.»
¹⁸ «The Summer Night,» *Poems* (Arbroath: Printed for the Author, 182), p. 14.

The cottage of Campbell's girlhood had dissolved into the heath, and the long-orphaned poet knew her tears and prayers would have no earthly auditor. Only memories of beauty and love remained («the glory that over it shone»), and the eternally recurring desire to mourn their transience («All so calm, all so still, but my moan»), humble variants of Walter Pater's universal «desire of beauty quickened by the sense of death.»

Campbell's long life was marked by hard manual labor and baffled aspirations, as well as the deaths of those she loved, but Gilfillan was right that her brief memoir shone with the intensity of her childhood experiences. Alternately blurred and preternaturally clear, they remained deeply significant to her in her frail old age, and she used the energy left to her to memorialize these moments and incidents of startling beauty – not her works and days, or her humble career as a poet, but the sensibility which animated them. Roy Pascal's remark that poets wrote the best autobiographies is borne out by Campbell's small but lucid mirror.¹⁹

Christian Watt

The memoirs of Christian Watt (1833-1923) are much longer than Campbell's brief «Life of My Childhood,» and their density of detail and «thick description» were foreign to Campbell's intentions.²⁰ Watt composed them over the course of many years in the Aberdeen Royal Mental Asylum at Cornhill, where she went as a patient in 1879, and remained as a voluntary worker for the rest of her life. Fellow inmates urged her to write, and David Fraser, a descendant of one of the fami-

¹⁹ Pascal, p. 14, where he cites Benedetto Croce's comment that «recollections» are possible only to poets.

²⁰ *The Christian Watt Papers*, edited by David Fraser, Edinburgh, 1983. Christian's account and her editor's glosses and historical explanations filled 153 pages. The manuscript had come down to Christian Sims, daughter of her eldest son James, who wrote in her turn *A Stranger on the Bars: The Memoirs of Christian Watt Marshall of Broadsea*, edited Gavin Sutherland, Banff and Buchan District Council, 1983. David Fraser, who was a cousin of Lady Saltoun and a descendant of Christian's former employers, remarked that Watt's narrative «needed a good deal of editing, in terms of punctuation, or paragraphs, and in a rearrangement of narrative, in order to bring them into a . . . more comprehensive, chronological order. I hope that in no place has this affected the sense or significance of what she wrote – nor diminished the impact of her frankness and spontaneity» (viii-ix).

lies mentioned often in her account, edited her pencilled draft (inmates were not permitted the use of pens) many years after her death.

The income and status of Watt's family of fisherfolk near Fraserburgh in northeastern Scotland gradually disintegrated during the century under the weight of class-stratification and newly-industrial market forces, and she herself worked unceasingly in the face of constant obstacles. Her final breakdown occurred after her husband had drowned at sea and she could not earn enough to support her children. Her reflections veered accordingly between bafflement and cogent analysis, grief over the deaths of many and satisfaction at the survival of a few. The long course of her struggles anticipated Roy Pascal's remark that «life is represented in autobiography not as something established but as a process; it is not simply the narrative of the voyage, but also the voyage itself.» (182).

One of eight children, Watt was the only daughter of James Watt and Helen Noble, and her editor David Fraser noted that «Most folk were related [in Broadsea]» (4). The direct line of Watt's family had occupied a house at 72 Broadsea for two and a half centuries, and she devoted parts of her memoir to descriptions of some of these ancestors and living relatives, which included members of the local minor nobility.

Christian was devoted to her father, who fished every day, and her mother, who cured and sold the catch in the countryside with the help of her children: «My parents' day began at three in the morning and often ended at midnight . . . I have seen both of my parents fall down with exhaustion at the end of a day, after my father had come in from the sea. Everybody in the village were the same, and for their efforts they got scarcely enough to keep their life in their soul case. . . . We had to give our parents credit for the dignified way they accepted their poverty with great courage» (15-16).

Watt's worklife also began with seasonal labour and stints of «service.»²¹ When she began to cure fish at eight, she learned from her parents that, «if a person was old or sick or a widow with bairns it was your duty to help them out» (15), and she spent three months in «drudgery and half starvation» as a kitchen-maid at eight-and-a-half

²¹ Vincent, p. 85.

(17). Her situation improved when she worked thereafter from time to time at Philorth Castle, the manor of her distant relatives the Saltouns, and she became an expert fish-gutter who travelled with her mother and other women to sell cured fish throughout the Highlands.

These girlhood wanderings also enabled her to meet a wide variety of people, among them Gaelic-speaking Highlanders as well as «tinkers» or gypsies with whom «[w]e . . . had a friendly relationship» and from whom «[a]s solitary women on the road we had a certain amount of protection. . . . Fishwives were often attacked both for money and carnal knowledge. All carried sharp gutting knives. I would not have hesitated to plunge it into anybody who attempted to molest me» (25-26). Quick throughout her life to sympathize with outsiders and see forms of social abuse, she «liked travelling the fishing, for it gave a true picture of the highland way of life, and the clearances which the Government turned a blind eye to» (28). It also angered her that Highland children could not use their own tongue in school, and she made short shrift of the newly created deer parks, baronial estates and other «vast palaces [built] in relentless pursuit of pleasure, at the expense of a race who had probably been there since the end of the ice age» (31).

Watt's modest formal education was much more extensive than Campbell's, for she attended a primary school for three years, and intermittent winter classes till she was twenty (work permitting). Like Campbell, «I could never get enough to read, I read everything I could get my hands on» (14), but she could not attend the local secondary school with her brothers: «I was always furious that girls were not allowed to be educated. It was assumed a man must work for a wife and needed learning[. A] lot of men I would not have seen in my way – I would have worked any of them blind» (31).

In her early twenties Christian also «made up my mind to be an old maid» (33), and when a Captain Melville at Philorth «put his arms round me and embraced me,» she «dug my claws in his face and with all the force I could [and] tore for all I was worth[;] his journey into flirtation had cost him the skin of his nose» (40). Interestingly, her forthright views as well as apparent good looks brought her four rather remarkable proposals of marriage.

The first and perhaps most remarkable came from Murray Fraser, a younger son of the laird of Philorth and future captain in a Bengal regiment, who told her that he liked her «way of thinking» (41). She found him in turn a «chaste and clean minded young man,» who had a «way of inclining his head in a half thoughtful smile; it gave him a most attractive face» (42), and showed none of «the completely double facade men of his class have» (44). Rather surprisingly, Murray's father, Lord Saltoun, also gave his blessing to the match: «You have a mind of your own and [are] an unusual thinker . . . If I had been 40 years younger I might have asked you myself» (43).

The second suitor, Peter Sinclair, was an amiably intelligent sheep-shearer who offered to share with her his croft, and «Shemmy Lovat,» the third, was the heir of the neighboring Strichen estates. The fourth was her cousin Peter Noble, a ship captain she «liked as a person,» and found «tall, fair and of handsome countenance» (60). One by one, she rejected them all²² – Murray Fraser because she didn't wish to live in India, though she corresponded with him for some years; Peter Sinclair for «hard as all the county folk work the crofter is the hardest, it is one slave and traughle from the marriage bed to the grave» (51). She turned down Shemmy Lovat because he was a Roman Catholic Tory and she a levelling Congregationalist, and Peter Noble for genetic reasons: he had several deaf mute siblings. Her subsequent fate makes it hard not to wince at her choices.

Five of Watt's brothers died in rapid succession when she was twenty-one – one from disease, two at sea on their way to America, and two at work on the Black Sea – and their deaths left her with heightened obligations and grieving parents. One brother left her an insurance policy of three hundred pounds at a New York bank, and she sailed on Peter Noble's ship to New York to claim the money when two years' efforts to obtain payment were of no avail. Once there, Christian visited her widowed American-sister-in-law and fatherless nephews,

²² Murray Fraser never married, and died in India at 40; Peter Noble married an English wife and died soon afterward in a shipwreck; Peter Sinclair died in a lumber camp in America; the Master of Lovat married at 40, and Christian described seeing his son at a train station.

and worked as a servant in the wealthy house of Winston Churchill's grandmother as she pressed her claim.

She was eventually successful, and delighted in the higher wages she earned (four times her pay at home), as well as a social order in which there were «thousands of folks of every creed and race with one common factor and aim – poverty had brought them. Anybody with eyes could see the rising of a great democratic nation, that will one day be as a lamp to the western world» (62, 63). On the other hand, she was well aware of «the bitterness that burns in coloured folks hearts towards those who brought them there. . . . As a subjugated Scot I could sympathise, for a handful of greedy blockhead peers should never have had the power to vote to sell an independent minded nation for English gold.» (62).

In the end, she had to heed her bereaved parents' pleas that she return: «I toyed with the idea of talking my parents into coming out, but they were too old and sad, so I had kept my promise and sailed for home on the Albatross, back to scab wages and the awful grind.» (63). After giving fifty pounds to her two nephews before she left, she hoped initially to start a dressmaker's business in Aberdeen with the rest, but accepted «against my better judgment» (66) a new proposal, from James Sims, a Crimean veteran and «chief of high principles and intelligent [who] read a lot.»

Physical attraction may have influenced her choice («[l]ife had given me its last and final hidden secret, a moment poets have all written about,» 68). Be that as it may, she warily agreed to a «marriage contract» – a rather remarkable arrangement in puritanical Scotland – which obligated the couple to marry if and only if they conceived a child within a year. This they did, and Christian eventually bore ten children – roughly average, she remarked, for a family in Broadsea (a datum which would seem to have provided a good rationale for her early resolution to «be an old maid»).

Once married, James demanded certain forms of «service» each day when he returned to port, whereas she thought he should at least be willing to clean his boots himself once a week. He also insisted that they use her insurance money to build a house in his more southerly village, farther from the port where she could purchase fish, which deprived them of her income, and he «was very hard on the boys. He gave them some awful hidings for hardly anything. . . . I have seen

Peter flee into Mary's next door on a Sunday morning, and dive into the butt bed down between her two daughters who were considerably older. . . . My husband's intentions were good, but he had no bending in his nature. . . .» (87). When Christian's mother and surviving brothers died a few years later, James also refused to let her father move in with them – a bitter fate for a woman who understood that «then women foolishly believed they must obey their husbands» (84).

As I mentioned earlier, the region and its principal industry were also in deep depression: «We . . . were very poor in my childhood, but my own children had far less to eat than we had[,] for times were now geared to put all the profit into the curer's pocket. . . . I had no hope of sending any of my bairns to University [an interesting and unusual aspiration in itself], for we did not know where our next breakfast was coming from» (89, 90). The couple did inherit three local dwellings, and conveyed two of them to Christian's Aunt Betty and James's aunt and mother,²³ but the former sued for possession of Christian's ancestral home (72 Broadsea), and the case took two years to settle before Christian could regain it.

More grimly, child labor began to kill her children. Joseph died at eleven of tetanus contracted carrying lime for two pence a day, and her clever second son Peter at thirteen on a herring ship in the Baltic Sea. She always believed her sense that Peter was calling her the day he died was «the start of the breakdown of my mental health» (95), and this death even moved the harsh James, who thenceforth became «very kind to me» and never «hit the boys again» (96). In 1877, he himself drowned in a great storm offshore, and the scene remained etched in her memory.

I saw our own boat and that of our cousin Dougal Noble, . . . then a cluster of boats and intuition told me something was wrong; and after nearly an hour with the rain lashing down, the boats went round Kinnaird [and t]he Congregational minister came to the door. I asked him which one of my folk was lost, he said, «It is the husband.»

. . . I had loved him, though often I did not see eye to eye, but our last 7 years were reasonably happy and sad ones. (101-102)

²³ Even after James' death, on inheriting his house at 50 Pitullie she transferred the lease to his Aunt Jean Breente, to whom she felt it rightfully belonged.

visit, since it was «not the sort of place bairns should see» (107). She did find work in the Asylum kitchen, however, and recovered swiftly enough, to return home with new hopes. Now, however, the stigma of her 'madness' had made her unemployable:

Never did I love anything so much as that spring, when the trees burst into leaf and the primroses came out. How glad and grateful I was when I was told I was going to be discharged. I came home, and my bairns were so glad. Isabella, only a child, had the house beautifully clean and everything in good order (107).

... [But] I found folk constantly trying to shun me as if I had leprosy. The usual pattern was to smile and be pleasant for a moment, then make some kind of excuse they were in an awful hurry to do something. I went to the farms in the country, and in many places where they could see me coming I found the door barred in my face. ... It was a terrifying experience. (108).

Most of her former customers at Philorth and Strichen House also deserted her, for «[w]e can't have a madwoman coming about the place» (108), and Charlotte, Lady Saltoun came to visit, but sat by the door so that «if I acted peculiarly she could make a quick exit... I felt very sad for nobody was going to trust me anymore...» (111).

«[A] terrible winter of hard work and near starvation» (111) returned her to the Asylum a few months later. There she worried about her bairns, taught fellow-patients to embroider linen for sale, and most importantly, began to write:

[A] young doctor and lawyer shewed me how to keep a journal, and to make notes as something came in my head to revive my memory, and to write it down before I forgot... two boys kept sharpening my pencil for me, they were fascinated with my travels abroad... It is tragic to hear folk joke about padded cells and make fun of mental illness, but if they gave one thought to the thousand tragic things that have led to a person being in an asylum, they should hang their heads in shame (112).

Christian struggled thereafter to support the eight remaining children, but the laws' inflexibility thwarted her at every turn. At seventeen, James was too young to legally skipper their boat, and he found work with a ship company that enabled him to leave a stipend of four shillings a week for the family, often their only income. Ten year old Andrew and fourteen year old George brought in small catches, but wholesalers and the need to care for the four younger children kept her from carrying fish for sale out into the countryside. To fill the measure, her executor defrauded her²⁴ and James' relatively prosperous mother Jinna refused to help them, so that she was «sick with worry, neither eating nor sleeping, for I had no money except my son's 4/-... When the bairns had gone to schoool and the little one was still asleep, I would put my arms round [the dog] and break my heart crying» (106).²⁵

In 1878, a doctor urged her to enter the Royal Mental Asylum in Aberdeen in the hope that adequate food and rest might help her regain her mental equilibrium. The family's boat now brought in five shillings rent, and ten-year-old Isabella was old enough to cook, keep house, watch over two-year-old Charlotte, and send the three youngest children to school with the help of an adult cousin. Christian's decision to accept this offer was a mistake that marked the rest of her life:

The world is so unwilling to accept the disturbed mind functions in exactly the same way as the normal one. It is a tremendous problem the mind is trying to cope with... We passed through Brucklay station, and as I went up that time to start my life sentence little did I dream that later so many of my grandsons would go up that line on their death sentence (107).

On her arrival «the door was firmly locked behind us [as she passed through each corridor]» (107), and she refused to let her children

²⁴ «Twice a 'one' had been added before a figure. He was cheating me twenty pounds. ... A hasty retreat was made by Crookie, and Munro, the advocate, found a skipper for my boat» (103).

²⁵ Christian later acknowledged that «I should have gone to the Parish for help, but I was far too proud. It may be wrong but that was how we were brought up; and selling your possessions is a degrading game» (106).

Lady Saltoun, who came now to visit her regularly, shared her religious beliefs, and Christian began to interpret «my landing in the Asylum [as] all part of my fiery trials. . . . I have had the experience of both the firing pot and the furnace of affliction in Isaiah 48, and no matter how fierce, he will eventually come forth unhurt» (113-14).

And she was indeed able to return home once more, but «folk scorned me more than ever before» (114). She found work splitting fish but lost it when coworkers refused to work with her, and turned in desperation to gathering whelks for sale on the beach. When the cousin who had helped with childminding died of cancer, she finally felt «like a castaway on a desert island alone. . . . I could only liken myself to the black population in America These poor unfortunate souls expect [scorn] from people, and I had now learned to do the same. They cannot help the colour of their face any more than I could help my mental illness» (115).

As a last resort she even applied for permission to return to the United States, but «was told I would have to be put onto Ellis Island and . . . deported back to Britain. It plunged me into a deep depression» (115). Suffering «from lack of food and sleep, for I had gone hungry to give it all to the children» (117), she experienced the worst moment of her life:

I knew the exact moment my reasoning broke. I struggled to hang onto it, it was distinct as a butter plate breaking on the floor. A bottle of paraffin lay near the hen-house, I remember pouring it over the small shed and my son George struggling with me. . . . The doctor gave me a sedative and now I was on my way to America. I was lying on my bunk on the ship, I could hear the sailors singing as they shifted the sails (115-16).

This return was for life.

Scottish laws of the period confiscated the possessions of the certifiably insane, and she lost her boat, her house, and many small treasures that had been in the family for two centuries. A neighbor took in the three youngest children, ten-year-old Nellie became a servant, and friends took twelve-year-old Andrew and Isabella. George was homeless at fourteen, but a passerby found him living in a boat and took him in. A lawyer and an auctioneer pocketed many of her personal possessions,

one of them a gold watch James had earned for a rescue at sea. James' mother sold the home which might have provided a haven for her grandchildren, and «[t]he lord Chancellor [also] wanted my boat,» but the courts granted her a stay until the youngest child reached sixteen.

Christian's final stay in Cornhill Asylum was to last almost forty-five years.²⁶ She eventually became the institution's fishwife, worked in its laundry, embroidered and sewed quilts, and took consolation in small forms of solidarity she found among the people of Aberdeen: «The porters were all so kind to me – what a difference from the people of Fraserburgh and Broadsea! . . . I am greatly in the debt of all those market folk, they helped me more than ever I can thank them. . . . I went to Aberdeen market and worked in the laundry and had a great measure of peace» (120, 133). Over the years, she gradually began to socialize with a fairly wide range of people in and outside the asylum, and she also took pride in the respect doctors began to express for her opinions about fellow patients' needs. As a still older woman in her eighties, she read three newspapers a day to form her own (critical) opinions about the First World War.

Her deepest regret was her *de facto* abandonment of her children, but next after that came the forfeiture of her ancestral home: «There was something about 72 that spoke to me. I am as much a part of it as the rumble stones of its clay walls. . . . There has been a great deal of sadness there, but I am sure there must have been a lot of happiness also» (64). Remarkably, the house later returned to the family when her son James, now a harbormaster, married its owner Anne Taylor (who had already offered to lodge Christian at cost if she could return home). Later still, widowed and grieving the deaths of all three of his sons in the 'Great War,' James

²⁶ She records that soon after her entry, the superintendent had said to her, «If you are going to be under the threat of mental illness, you would be far better to come here and live a routine life in Aberdeen, where you can get help at any time. I had been certificated and must live under parole» (120), which would seem to indicate that she would have been permitted to leave the hospital but not the area. After a depression that followed the death of her son Watt in 1881, however, she mentions that «[t]here was no hope of being discharged» (123). More than three decades later her son invited her home to Broadsea, but she remained voluntarily, which would seem to indicate that her status by then had changed.

... priggled with me to come home to 72 Broadsea and stay. This I declined. His sons were gone and the single daughters had to travel the fishings to earn their living, so how could I possibly sit alone in that house with all those memories? To sit by myself in the same neuk where I had seen my granny, my parents, and my son pass away. . . . No, my life was among the living, my job was in the Asylum which was quickly filling with shell shocked young [soldiers]. (138).

Other motives also influenced her decision: «I could not live looking on the sea which claimed so many belonging to me» (151), and «I [also] have no wish to be waited on, I will die in the yoke: this morning I peeled a bucket of fatties at 90» (152).²⁷

The war's carnage aroused strong passions in the aged Watt, who went to hear fellow-«radicals» such as R. B. Cunningham Graham and Keir Hardie:²⁸

Hardie [had] tried hard to avert [the war] but was howled down. [I]t showed how childish and immature are the minds of those privileged to rule countries . . . [who] direct wars and expect other folk to fight them . . . Winston Churchill has to live with the conscience of a mass murderer. [They] spend millions on slaughter yet they would never declare war on poverty and hunger. In nearly five years we see nothing but mounting unemployment and more making ready, strikes, disruption and disorder, and a multitude of lies in high places. (142)

²⁷ Sadly, her daughter Isabella, now indigent and ill, also joined her twice in the Asylum, the second time after the death of her consumptive son: «It was one of my saddest days to see my daughter admitted. . . to Cornhill» (135).

²⁸ (James) Keir Hardie (1856-1915), originally a coalminer, was the first chairman of the Scottish Labour Party (est. 1888), the first chairman of the International Labour Party (1893-1900) and the first leader of the parliamentary Labour Party (1906-7). He strongly opposed Britain's entry into World War I and his health broke down soon after it's outbreaks. Robert Bontine Cunningham Graham (1852-1936), landowner, traveller, Scottish nationalist and man of letters, helped found the Scottish Labour Party in 1888 and was elected the first president of the Scottish Nationalist Party in 1928.

Watt had also followed the early Russian Revolution with interest, as well as the tortuous barriers placed in the way of British women's suffrage: «I supported the suffragettes wholeheartedly. . . . Until the war some women put in dreadful lives, keeping silent and tolerating drink and bullying. Rightly they will no longer do it» (147, 130). At length, new generations of inmates, workers and staff enlisted themselves in the effort to help her write: «Dr. Reid started me writing [again], to swacken my fingers, and all the students and everybody encouraged me and helped me.²⁹ A Newcastle quine who had part time work in the kitchen would say, 'How ya henny, can a shappen y' a pencil. . . . I have written reams and reams» (136).

Great age brought still greater self-recognition, and she expressed insights into the sorrows and mutilations she and others shared:

Sometimes the thought crosses my mind when I see so many poor ex-servicemen, why have I myself been spared so long? A living sorrow is really a terrible affliction. Time will heal a heart but it will not heal a broken body . . . I have always had the gift of really knowing and seeing through people, all but the man I married, but then the heart will always find its own reasons for blinding its owner (152, 129).

To this end God puts us into circumstances to prove us . . . and when we have done well and suffered for it [as in providing a dwelling for her aunt] we must take it patiently (130).

When the castle at Philorth burned to the ground, she reflected wistfully:

. . . in my mind's eye it will remain the same, of how a young Officer of the British India Co. and a laundry maid experienced the joy of first innocent love as beautiful as a clump of snowdrops in the wood. From the garret window comes the strains of «Annie Laurie».

²⁹ Dr. Reid was also the kind physician who had asked Christian's help and advice, improved treatment, and expanded the institution's gardens. Before he died, his «last wish had been that I would go into the place for private patients as a reward for my life of hard work» (153).

rie» floating over the trees, sung by Bobby Wilson the strapper at the pitch of his voice or Mary Ritchie singing the 23rd Psalm. One day somebody may again build there but I am doubtful if they will capture the happy ghosts that flit about that place.» (140).

In her concluding remarks, she expressed gratitude once again for her survival, and deep pleasure in a sense of long-deferred vocation:

At the closing of my days I have encountered so much kindness. I am blest every time I breathe. My life has been hard but I would not say it has been a sad waste, for my purpose has been to shed light in a dark place, and I have kept the faith, for which we are told we will be rewarded with a crown of life. I deplore war and urge man to seek the Lord while he may be found. . . . I have a steady stream of visitors. Students ask me about subjects to write theses, at 90 I have taken up the teaching job I started at 16. It is most enjoyable and I have happiness and peace» (155).

Fraser printed a portrait of Christian Watt as an erect ninety-year old woman, in a tasteful black lace dress and head ornament, with a book in her hand. Three of her four surviving children were at her bedside when she died a year later.

Conclusion:

Elizabeth Campbell's and Christian Watt's memoirs shared three underlying attributes: fierce early hopes, quiet pride in the fundamental integrity of those hopes, and elegiac desire to memorialize the needlessly foreshortened lives of those dearest to them. These common qualities give a deeper resonance to David Vincent's wry observation that the «most convincing reason why the autobiographers believed that some progress had been made by the labouring poor during their lifetime was the simple fact that they had been able to write an autobiography» (203).

These women of limited means and high aspirations also sought – like the rest of us – to find stable forms of coherence and equilibrium

in the centrifugal diffusion of their lives. Campbell found these fleeting cadences in an enduring desire for contemplative knowledge and artistic fulfilment. Watt found them in critical detachment and social engagement with the people and conditions she encountered. Religious ideals helped them both live with sorrow and interpret the inexplicable. But neither believed such ideals would «encompass their increasing hardships without difficulty,» as Vincent also suggests (199).

Indeed, I believe their expressions of resignation and reconciliation were grounded in deep forms of critical independence, which enabled them to heed (Blaise) Pascal's injunction to understand our own vulnerability and achieve (Roy) Pascal's

«power of . . . personality over circumstance, not in the arrogant sense that circumstance can be bent to the will of the individual[,] but in the sense that the individual can extract nurture out of disparate incidents and ultimately bind them together in his own way . . .» (10-11).

Their stoic attempts to elicit meaning and integrity in loss and fragmentation confronted the problem faced by Robert Frost's oven bird – «what to make of a diminished thing,» – and their responses exemplified the «dignity» of (Blaise) Pascal's «thinking reed,» which understands its own diminution and annihilation, in a «universe» that «understands nothing.»³⁰

³⁰ Pascal, *Pensées*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Louis Lafuma, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1963, p. 528.