

## Introduction

I first had the idea for this book around the time that I wrote *The Other Boleyn Girl*, when I found a woman, Mary Boleyn, who made her own remarkable life but enters history only as the sister to the more famous Anne. She made me think of all the other women whose names and stories are lost, and even the stories my mother told me: about growing up during the war years, of her mother who did not dare to be a suffragette, of her aunt, a scholar who could not graduate from an English university, of the letters she edited, written by her kinswoman – an eighteenth-century feminist. This book is about them, and all the women who ‘lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs’.<sup>1</sup>

The first schools in England were church schools and the first scholars were priests, so the first historians were men like the Venerable Bede who wrote the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* in AD 731, naming only 18 women in their own right from a population of about 1 million: 0.0018 per cent – statistically invisible. There are only six chronicles surviving from the early medieval period – all written by men, mostly about the kings and their wars, and these are the basis of all the histories of the period.

They set a tradition. *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples* by Winston Churchill, published in the twentieth century, is a description not of the ‘peoples’ but of English-speaking men: 1,413 named men, and just 98 named women. What we read as a history of our nation is a history of men, as viewed by men, as recorded by men.

Is 93.1 per cent of history literally ‘His Story’ because women don’t *do* anything? Are women so busy with their Biology that they have no

time for History, like strict timetable choices – you can't do both? The only women of interest to the male record keepers were mothers, queens, taxpayers and criminals. The records are all written by men – mostly men of the church – and they have little or no interest in women. Women are there, making fortunes and losing them, breaking the law and enforcing it, defending their castles in siege and setting off on crusades; but they're often not recorded, or mentioned only in passing by historians, as they were just normal women living normal lives, not worthy of comment.

Medieval women only enter the records when the record keepers complain of them: when they are accused in the church courts of adultery or promiscuity, when they are named in the records as gossips, when they appear in the criminal courts charged with thieving or usury or fraud, when they are registered as prostitutes or kidnapped. They're often named as rioters: every time land was enclosed, women in England broke fences, trespassed, poached, reclaimed the common land. Every hungry year they broke into bakers, corn mills, or the barns where grain was stored for export, and divided it among the crowd and paid the right price. Sometimes the local priest or magistrate would arrive and oversee the weighing and the selling. If the baker or the merchants resisted, windows might be broken and food might be stolen, but usually everyone understood that the poor women – women whose names were not even recorded – were price-setting and rationing food. But then, in the eighteenth century, the mood changed: merchants and the landowners stopped appeasing the crowd and the women were named as troublemakers, identified in the court records and their harsh punishments recorded. Part of my work in writing a history of Normal Women has been recognising the normality of women, however they are named: rioting women, power-mad women, manipulative women, viragoes, angels, witches.

Poor medieval women had a sense of themselves: supporting each other, employing each other, naming other women as their heirs, holding other women to a standard of behaviour – but legally they were owned by their fathers or husbands and bound to stay in their communities. Only in work gangs and guilds could they have a sense of themselves as a group with a distinct shared female life. They did not record themselves as a group, they did not define themselves, describe themselves nor publish, nor are there are many diaries of individual

women's lives: until the English civil wars in the middle of the seventeenth century drove women into writing petitions and demanding rights from the men-only parliament, keeping journals of their experiences, recipes for their medicines, private letters to keep families together and businesses intact, and then – finally publishing, so that women could read about themselves.

They asked why women were not in the Creation story as an equal to Adam? In the explosion of women writing fiction in the eighteenth century, they asked: 'How is a woman different to a man?' About 1860, they asked, 'Why can't we get a divorce on the same grounds as men?' Around 1890, they started to ask, 'Why can't we vote?' Around 1950, they asked, 'Why are we not in History?' – and women historians began the process of rereading the historical records to find out what the women were doing in their dark and silent past while men were shining a spotlight and amplifying themselves. These are the historians who produced the first great histories of women, succeeded by biographers of heroines and of the family, social historians of movements and then the editors of lists of 10 memorable women or top 20 names. All these publications help put women into history. But the biographies emphasise exceptional individuals, histories of the family see women as daughters and mothers – Biology again! The histories of groups speak of witches or suffragettes or midwives – focusing on bizarre or campaigning groups, not the normality of women's lives, and the shortlists of women are too short – only 20 women in history? Even Winston Churchill counted 98!

Indebted to all these authors, what I wanted to write was a *huge* book about women – those engaged in unusual practices and those living uneventful lives, those who were up against their society and those gliding along the top of it, the few we have heard of and the millions that we have not. And I wanted to show that murderers and brides, housewives and pirates, whores and weavers, farmers and milliners, female husbands, hermits, the chaste, the jousting, painters, nuns, queens, witches and soldiers – are all part of women's history, all part of our national history – even though they lived and died without a man noticing them for long enough to write down their names.

And finally – here is just one, very dear to me:



Elaine Wedd, around 20 years old, a member of the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry. This picture reminds me that when we write normal women into the history of our country, we restore ourselves: our sisters, our friends and our foremothers. And this is my mother – a normal woman, like all heroines.