

A Novel in Progress

I'm writing a fictionalized version of Mary Eleanor's life using factual events as a basic framework, so I started by creating a timeline from the year of her birth, 1749, to her death in 1800. It includes only major events such as her father's death, her mother's period of grieving, her London debut, her engagement, marriage, birth of her children, widowhood, meeting Stoney and so on. Then I looked at the periods of her life as a narrative and made chapter divisions. I decided early on that I would have to introduce Stoney in the first chapter as the reader needs to feel some inducement to read on, some tension, question or peril for the main character.

It's important not to let research dictate the novel, as people read this kind of fiction because they care about the characters and want to know what happens to them, but I also want to make it as realistic as possible, so that information about Gibside and the wider world forms an interesting backdrop.

I added a column to Mary Eleanor's timeline in which I noted what would have existed at Gibside, what it might have looked like, what was being built at different points in the story. Three publications were useful for this:

Gibside and the Bowes Family by Margaret Wills (1995)

Gibside – National Trust Publications (1999)

Gibside Landscape Park – National Trust Publications (Revised 2013)

Then I looked at the timeline in relation to what was going on in Britain, who was on the throne, political events at home and abroad. The fact that this was the period of revolution in France and America has a bearing on the themes I'm developing to do with Liberty. This is a word that has real resonance in Mary Eleanor's story: not only is it a political ideal for revolutions and the Whigs, a female figure in paintings and statues, but it is also a personal concept and a state of mind.

As a woman living in overtly misogynistic times, as a land-owning heiress, extremely eligible debutante, wife, wealthy and eligible widow, then wife again, Mary Eleanor had little experience of freedom, but in the last ten years of her life she did find peace. By our standards, she wasn't old when she died, just fifty-one, but I imagine her discovering the pleasures and liberties of late life and enjoying the wisdom of perspective: this, I hope, will infuse the way she tells her story. Diana Athill and Joan Bakewell write beautifully about this, and their books are an influence on how I imagine her to have felt and reflected on her life.

Somewhere Towards the End by Diana Athill (2008)

The View from Here by Joan Bakewell (2006)

The Centre of the Bed by Joan Bakewell (2003)

I set to work on general background reading in order to form an impression of how people of different classes were living – food, transport, houses, working conditions; what the streets of Newcastle and London were like. I wanted to find out what people were reading and talking about and get a flavour of the newspapers, which had a big impact on the story and on Mary Eleanor. How did people with the privilege of leisure time spend it? What

was on at the theatres, which card games were popular? Who were the movers and shakers in Georgian society? Luckily, there was a Georgian season on BBC2 and BBC4 which was absolutely invaluable, and I browsed these learned tomes:

An Illustrated History of Eighteenth-century Britain by Jeremy Black
The Georgians: Eighteenth Century Portraiture and Society by D. Shawe-Taylor
Georgians Revealed: Life, Style and the Making of Modern Britain by Goff, Goldfinch et al for the British Library exhibition 2013.

Then, when I had a far better understanding of the national context, I brought my attention back to Gibside and the surrounding areas. I went to meet the Gibside Research Group, who have been working on their 'Stories of Gibside' with great dedication for the past seven years. They were extremely helpful and freely offered to let me read the products of all their hard work. Two of these documents were particularly useful, and I want to extend my gratitude to Peter Firth and Sue Adamson for letting me read them. The work of the whole group deserves to be made widely available, and I hope to see it in print and on sale at Gibside very soon.

From Blakiston to Bowes: The Development of Gibside during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by Peter G.Firth
The Influence of Eighteenth Century Landscape Gardening on the Development of Gibside by Susan Adamson

I wanted to present George Bowes as a benevolent employer, so I needed to ascertain as far as possible that this was a fair representation. I went to the Mining Institute and did some research. By far the most valuable resource the librarian could recommend was the first one in this list:

The Making of an Industrial Society: Whickham 1560-1765 by David Levine and Keith Wrightson. Clarendon Press, 1991.
Annals of Coal Mining and the Coal trade, Volume 1 by Robert Galloway. (1971)
Coals from Newcastle by Les Turnbull
History of the British Coal Industry, Volume 2, 1700-1830: Industrial revolution by Michael W. Finn. (1984) Clarendon Press.

It was important to me during this whole preparatory process to take very few notes because I didn't want to get bogged down in too much detail: that is not what my endeavour is about - it's been done. What I am aiming to provide is an accessible version of her life, an absorbing and exciting story, a fresh, imaginative interpretation of how it might have felt to be Mary Eleanor Bowes.