



**Steven King, *Writing the Lives of the English Poor, 1750s-1830s*  
(Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019, ISBN  
9780773556485).**

**Florence Boos, *Memoirs of Victorian Working-Class Women: The Hard  
Way Up*  
(Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, ISBN 9783319642147).**

**Rachel Woodward and K. Neil Jenkins, *Bringing War to Book:  
Writing and Producing the Military Memoir*  
(London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, ISBN 9781137570093).**

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Over recent decades, scholars from a range of disciplines have used life writings from below to explore the lives of people outside elites and the secure middle class. Such texts offer information otherwise unavailable about the decisions people made, and the terms in which they understood or presented their experiences.<sup>1</sup> Three recent monographs about life writings from below in Britain, although dealing with very different genres – pauper letters, working women's autobiographies, military memoirs – across two hundred and fifty years, demonstrate what can be gained from the comparative reading of a corpus of texts.

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## Pauper letters

Over the past twenty-five years, a substantial body of scholarly research has been devoted to what have been termed 'pauper letters' – letters written by poor people either seeking discretionary welfare assistance from state authorities, or appealing for help from private charitable organisations or individual benefactors. In describing the circumstances which justify them in making this appeal, the writers construct autobiographical vignettes. While this research has been especially extensive in Britain, parallel work has now developed in other European countries with different welfare regimes, and comparative projects are also under way. Steven King, whose research in this field now extends over thirty years, has made a very substantial contribution both through his individual publications, and via the several volumes of essays he has co-edited. His recent book, *Writing the Lives of the English Poor, 1750s-1830s (WLEP)*, draws on his deep familiarity with both the body of (scattered and fragmented) source materials, and the relevant scholarship of colleagues which he extensively and generously cites.<sup>2</sup>

In England and Wales from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, under the regime of the Old Poor Law, paupers had to apply for relief to their parish of settlement (that to which they legally belonged). If they now resided elsewhere, this was most conveniently done by a letter in which the claimant provided a convincing narrative of such a part of their life and current circumstances as would substantiate their request. Much documentation of such claims has survived in the archives of local government. This was a discretionary welfare system: paupers had the right to apply for assistance, and for that claim to be heard; but the officials (overseers of the poor) who responded had considerable flexibility over what if any relief they offered. The local practice of welfare, King argues, was – and was meant to be – malleable, the result of a form of negotiation between claimants and officials (11-16, 91-92, 221-222). In this way, the welfare system fitted into a wider 'economy of makeshift,' in which any member of the labouring population might, at some point in their life, need to supplement or replace their income with state assistance.

*WLEP* is based on a major corpus of English and Welsh pauper letters, compiled by King and other scholars, containing more than 25,000 items by, for or about the poor.<sup>3</sup> King emphasises the need to locate and understand pauper letters within a tripartite epistolary world, comprising writings of poor people themselves, their advocates (doctors, clergy, employers or neighbours who wrote to support or endorse their claims), and the officials administering the poor law who had to respond. Hence the letters of advocates and officials are also included in the corpus

(22-23). Only in this way is it possible to understand the *process* by which a request for help was composed, evaluated and responded to.<sup>4</sup> Paupers who wrote either one or only a few letters account for 64% of all *writers*; but 60% of the *letters* came from individuals whose overall correspondence amounted to between 30 and 50 items each. It is analysis of these latter sustained clusters of writing, through which it is possible to trace continuing processes of negotiation, and sometimes fragments of an individual's changing life course, that forms the core of the book (26-27).<sup>5</sup>

The extensive analytical work which King has devoted to understanding how these texts were created, delivered and read is evident in the sophisticated typologies (often with sub-categories), of both letters and rhetorical devices, which permeate the book. He begins with a typology of letter-types, defined by their role in opening, continuing or resuming a correspondence with officials (50-56). This involves attention not only to the words of the letters, but to the resources of time, space, paper and ink which their writing required, and to the means by which they reached their destination (whether by post, travelling carrier, family member, or friend) (ch. 3). To this, King adds a lucid reconstruction and dissection of the choices which the poor had to make at each stage in advancing their claim: when to write; how to transmit the letter; what values to invoke and attest in establishing respectability and responsibility; which advocates to secure. An especially valuable feature of *WLEP* are the substantial quotations from individual letters, carefully transcribed to preserve the original orthography and punctuation (often revealing of the oral quality and rhythm in the text). This allows the reader to sample the evidence on which King has based his analyses.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout the book, King emphasises that the poor, their advocates and the officials shared a common language within which requests were couched and responded to. He analyses this language in great detail, tracking the various linguistic registers in which requests were framed to make them effective.<sup>7</sup> He also links the deployment of particular registers to specific letter-types (ch. 7). He then considers in greater detail four specific rhetorical strategies: first, what he terms 'anchoring rhetoric,' found across the corpus, which formed 'the core building block of entitlement' (183; discussed in detail in ch. 8); and then rhetorical emphases on character (ch. 9), dignity (ch. 10), and the requirements of key life-cycle stages (pregnancy and old age, ch. 11).

He argues that the poor understood very clearly the constraints of a discretionary welfare system (their claim for help versus the local ratepayers' wish to keep down costs). The terms of their requests acknowledged this – directly or indirectly (107, 122-123, 250-252), while they nevertheless remained poised to demand (as a *de facto*

right) whatever they knew to have been previously or currently conceded to others. By examining the correspondence of officials with one another, King is able to show that they in turn acknowledged the need to respond to requests, and to recognise certain rights; and were ready to criticise one another when these expectations were not met.

King argues that most of the circumstantial narratives made in pauper letters to support a claim were 'broadly truthful' (42). He offers cogent reasons to believe this is the case.<sup>8</sup> While the reception they anticipated from officials may have shaped the form of their writing, '[we] should beware of the sense that authors *simply* wrote what they thought would be most palatable to their readers' (90, original emphasis; cf. 148). Instead, he suggests, we need to recognise the 'element of fiction' which inevitably entered such narratives, emerging out of 'partial statements, silences, the act of forgetting, and unconscious decisions about what information was important to convey and what not' (147; cf. 150-151). Officials understood that 'they were engaged in a process that both had a fictive element and was actually a process of unfolding knowledge and action' (151-161, at 151). Moreover, they were inclined to tolerate this because at times they were 'themselves deeply involved in creating fictions' about their own practices (162-163).

King's findings will contribute significantly to the history of English welfare regimes, in particular the issue of how well the Old Poor Law was functioning during the period when campaigners were stressing its supposed failings and arguing for the reforms which led to the introduction of the New Poor Law in 1834. Here, I will focus on his contribution to understanding pauper letters as a specific example of life writings from below. Two aspects may be highlighted. The first concerns the mechanics of and resources for writing by the poor, a topic which has received growing attention in recent years.<sup>9</sup> By the early nineteenth century, the poor had greater opportunities to participate in an expanding epistolary and literary culture (16-20). They had increasing experience of presenting a coherent story in front of a range of legal and medical authorities (21-22). While some letters in the corpus were dictated by, or written at the behest of, the claimant, most letters were written by the claimants themselves (34-37). King sees them as a form of 'oral writing,' arguing that the discreteness of oral and literate cultures should not be exaggerated: the strategies and rhetoric of letter-writers were not different from those who applied to the officials of the local vestry in person (44-46, 119). Chapter 5 explores in depth where the poor drew their language and rhetorical devices from. King identifies linguistic resources that looked back to older behavioural codes (language of proper conduct, fair dealing, religion and philanthropy, as well as

traditional oral culture); but these were complemented by new linguistic patterns (drawing on developments in medicine, economics, the press, and state administration) which the poor could appropriate.<sup>10</sup>

The second aspect concerns the role of pauper letters in creating and expressing an identity for their author. They were not, King asserts, written only to obtain financial support, but served a range of supplementary purposes. These included achieving community recognition, through establishing an epistolary exchange with officials (108-111). He poses the question of whether the poor participated in the changing understanding of selfhood which has been posited for the later eighteenth century. Allowing for the limitations and ambiguities of the evidence, King argues that the poor did acquire a new sense of interiority in this period. Their letters were 'infused ... with individual personality'; those who had migrated 'went to great lengths to make themselves known and knowable, elaborating where they could a shared history [back in their home parish]' (314-315). They asserted a sense of belonging to their community, and insisted that they had an identity which transcended their current (and they hoped temporary) situation as poor; they were *ordinary*, inasmuch as their current plight might afflict anyone within the makeshift economy.<sup>11</sup> Overall, King argues, the poor 'actively sought to better their rhetoric and extend it beyond their intensely personal circumstances' (192-4, at 194; cf. ch. 12).

The obverse of King's deep familiarity with, and intricate analysis of, his corpus is that the textual world he conjures up can seem at times rather hermetic. The reader is given little opportunity to stand outside it and discern its contours. Although at times individual statistics are deployed to very good effect (for example 246, 285, 324), there is no comprehensive statistical overview.<sup>12</sup> As a result, it is hard to determine the full significance of the evidence on which some specific arguments depend.<sup>13</sup>

The overall thrust of King's argument is to depict what might be termed a 'consensual moral economy,' shared between the poor, their advocates and the officials.<sup>14</sup> This is signalled in his punning transformation of the pauper letter process into a 'co-correspondence' (110-113). Hence his stress on examples of (financial or emotional) generosity by officials or advocates, and his insistence that the evidence of the corpus does not support wider arguments that officials were motivated primarily by the wish to keep down costs.

King notes that, although claimants were at times ready to challenge or criticise officials, in doing so they always referred to the tenets of the shared epistolary language (231-232). They never drew on radical analyses of the condition of the

poor, which leads him to suggest that such analyses may have had no traction with them (137). This might be true; but since, by his own argument, the poor were so well acquainted with the rules of the Old Poor Law game, they would surely know that any such appeal to an alternative analysis would be very unlikely to bring them the immediate relief they required – and so they would not make it.

King sketches the possibility that claimants were deceitful:

... over a series of letters from or about the same person, it is normal to see some assertion of dignity or its equivalents. Such claims might simply *be* rhetoric, reflecting either an accepted convention of application or a version of what poor writers thought officials... would best respond to. The poor might, in other words, have really constituted that sly, dishonest, slothful underclass that some commentators portrayed in nineteenth-century England. Their essential lack of dignity and honesty would in this sense define them. (original emphasis)

'Yet,' he concludes, 'we should not take this casual assumption too far' (280). This wish to vindicate and restore agency to the poor may – paradoxically – come to replicate that suspicion of paupers shown by authority. To write what you think officials want to hear is not necessarily to belong to a 'sly, dishonest, slothful underclass'; it is to exercise a different form of agency, and perhaps follow a different standard of honesty.

These caveats notwithstanding, *WLEP* is a major contribution to the analysis and sympathetic understanding of life writing from below, whose conceptual and methodological example will be of great value well beyond the genre of pauper letters and the history of welfare.

### **Working women's autobiographies**

An exceptional number of working people in nineteenth-century Britain left a written account of their lives.<sup>15</sup> This body of life writing first attracted sustained scholarly attention in the 1980s. David Vincent, in *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, situated his autobiographers' struggle for literacy and knowledge firmly against the insecurity of their often impoverished circumstances, while arguing that some of these self-improving workers strove to improve the situation of their class as well as themselves. Regenia Gagnier, in *Subjectivities*, explored tensions between canonical models for the representation of subjectivity and the realities of working-class lives which could not fit these narrative patterns. Although many essays have since been



devoted to individual texts, and historians have increasingly drawn on life writings to explore aspects of working-class social and cultural history, perhaps surprisingly no further monographic study was published until Ursula Howard examined a range of texts from the point of view of literacy.<sup>16</sup>

Florence Boos, who had previously published extensively on Victorian working women's poetry, has now contributed a further substantial study, of their autobiographies. In *Memoirs of Victorian Working-Class Women: The Hard Way Up* (MVWW) Boos has selected a corpus of some fifteen texts for close analysis, supplemented with some further, briefer references.<sup>17</sup> In her opening chapter, she offers an overview of British working-class women's life writing in the period, and the many obstacles to the creation of such texts. These memoirs do not fit the categories which Vincent outlined for his (mainly male) subjects, nor did many of these women identify themselves as members of a wider social class. Noting previous suggested categorisations of working-class autobiographies outlined by Gagnier and by Nan Hackett, and (for female texts) by Jane Rendall, Boos outlines the similarities with and differences from her groupings of her own chosen texts (11-13).

Four aspects of this valuable study can be highlighted. Firstly, Boos situates these individual women's experiences in the wider matrix of the harsh conditions of working-class women's lives. She stresses the poverty, hunger, illness, early loss of parents, frequent family deaths (of siblings and children), limited education, lifelong toil, and occasional gross mistreatment (at work; sexually; by the legal system) which many working-class women faced – of which these authors too had their share (13-19, ch. 5, and *passim*). In chapter 2, she examines their struggle for a fuller literacy, in the face of the very limited access to (often poor quality) formal elementary education available to them in childhood, only marginally improved for those growing up after the Education Acts of 1870 and 1880 introduced state provision and then made it compulsory.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, while some parents fostered a desire for education, others forcefully discouraged more than the most limited schooling, eager for their children to begin paid labour or assist with housework (46-55).

Secondly, having established this common matrix of experience, Boos then carefully differentiates her autobiographers' experiences, in terms of urban/rural locale, region, religious affiliation, as well as occupation and relative poverty. The subsequent chapters group the authors thematically, by a combination of their social circumstances and the aims of their writings. Thus chapter 3 pairs two narratives of bodily pain: Elizabeth Storie's as a result of medical malpractice, Mary Prince from

injuries and assaults received as a slave. Both texts demand redress: Storie's through the legal system (which fails her), Prince's through the campaign to abolish slavery. Chapter 5 examines texts by six of the poorest and most marginalised authors, who suffered considerably (variously from poverty, ill-health – physical or mental, domestic stress, or the deaths of children). Several found support and consolation in their nonconformist faith; some drew from their experiences socially critical stances (against war, class deference, neglect of female education). They took pride in what they had been able to achieve against enormous difficulties, and in leaving a record of their lives.

Domestic service was by far the largest form of employment for working women in the nineteenth century, yet personal accounts by servants are exceedingly rare. Mary Ann Ashford (ch. 6) recounted her seventeen years of service, gradually rising up the hierarchy but suffering ill-treatment from employers. Her record of battling injustice – refused a pension after the death of her first husband, she fought for and won the superannuation her second husband was wrongly denied – parallels the motivations of Storie and Prince, as well as those of Christian Watt and Elizabeth Oakley (ch. 5).

Also very rare are memoirs written by female factory workers. As Boos points out (21), poetry was the commonest form of writing by working woman at the time, and often a point of entry to publication. Ellen Johnston (ch. 7), a textile factory worker, wrote poetry rooted in her community; through it she expressed her solidarity both with her fellow workers, and with struggles for liberty in the wider world.

Becoming a teacher was one of the few forms of upward social mobility available to working women. Both women discussed in chapter 8 achieved this, against considerable obstacles. Janet Bathgate, whose own formal education was very limited, started a school tentatively, at the suggestion of a friend; it proved very successful, and its abrupt closure as a result of local religious conflict caused her great distress. Mary Smith had a lifelong desire for learning and considerable literary ambition; she was eventually able to establish her own school and thereby make a secure living.

Thirdly, Boos foregrounds the importance of the processes of intermediation. Many working women needed both encouragement that their life story was worth telling, and practical support (both finance, and contact with editors) to achieve publication. Some women benefitted from patterns of patronage, by local or national elite figures, familiar from the eighteenth century. These patrons might be engaged by the wish to right a wrong (Storie: 65, 69-71; Ashford: 178-80); or to support a worthy literary endeavour (Barbara Farquhar: 162; Johnston: 199).



But newer forms of support were evident. Among this cohort of women, intermediaries also included pioneering democratically-minded editors such as publisher John Cassell who launched ventures specifically to attract working-class writers (helping Janet Hamilton, 93-8, and probably Farquhar, 164); and newspaper editor Alexander Campbell, who actively promoted worker's poetry (helping Johnston, 207-9, 219-20). Such support could however entail drawbacks. George Gilfillan, an author, editor and cleric who promoted Scottish working women's poetry, edited and introduced a volume of Elizabeth Campbell's poetry (previously sold by her in leaflet form). He also praised Johnston's autobiography, thereby helping it to secure distinguished subscribers; but its second edition removed the more unacceptable revelations about 'parental desertion, an authoritarian stepparent, repeated family and workplace conflict, sexual and other violence, and single parenthood' (199-200; cf. 120 on his blander edition of Elizabeth Campbell's poems).

Alexander Campbell was exceptional in fostering an audience of poetry readers who then 'wrote back' to Johnston; but communities based on locality could also offer support. As a teacher, poet and essayist, Mary Smith was rooted in the radical and literary world of Carlisle; after her death, the publisher of her earlier books brought out her autobiography (249-57). Memoirs might be supported by religious or political organisations to promote their cause, as with Mary Prince by the Anti-Slavery Society or Mrs Collier by the Religious Tract Society (9-10, 72-6, 153). Help could also come from family members or personal friends, and the networks to which they belonged (Bathgate: 225-8, 233, 238-9; Jane Andrew: 156, 161).

Nevertheless, despite their success in seeing their work in print, authorship could hardly ever provide these authors a living (22-3). The most successful in commercial terms was Farquhar, whose *The Pearl of Days* went through seven editions in five years, was translated, and published in America. She was able to publish two further treatises, and later a book of poetry (162). Although Johnston's *Autobiography, Poems, and Songs* (1867) sold well and enabled her to pay off her current debts, it did not allow a permanent escape from the factory; at the end of her life, she was applying for poor relief (217, 220-2).

Fourthly, Boos situates these life narratives intertextually, with reference especially to the Victorian problem novel and fictional (purported) autobiographies; and intergenerically, between memoir, autobiographical sketches or poems, and part-fictionalised autobiographies. As regards the problem novel, she shows – through detailed comparison with novels about servants (189-93), and more

generally (294-9) – how even sympathetic examples necessarily displayed an outsider's perspective on and evaluation of working-class lives.

Generically, Boos makes clear the wide parameters of life writing. Of Janet Hamilton, she writes: 'Even in the 1860s, a directly autobiographical account of the life of a shoemaker's wife and mother might have seemed presumptuous' (106). So, in addition to a brief autobiographical sketch in her *Poems and essays of a miscellaneous character* (1863), her *Sketches of Peasant Life and Character* (1865) 'display many autobiographical features in their reflections on her childhood and present circumstances as a blind poet' (86). In her third-person memoir *Aunt Janet's Legacy* (1892), Janet Bathgate 'uses fictional and literary techniques to present the emotions of an outwardly unremarkable and contented life' (224-5). In addition to her memoir, Ellen Johnston's poems 'evolved into autobiographical performances in response to her periodical readers, several of whom interpreted them as evidence of a fellow worker's triumph over adversity' (197, cf. 210-6).

As regards fictional (purported) autobiographies, Boos points out that Victorian novels 'frequently borrowed the forms of diaries and interpolated memoirs' (25). It becomes apparent that there is a 'grey zone' where determining the authenticity of a purported autobiography is very difficult. Burnett et al. treat *The Autobiography of Rose Allen, edited by a Lady* (1847) as an autobiography (vol. 1 no. 11); whereas Boos's analysis (182-8) suggests at the least a considerable fictional element. Conversely, Burnett et al. describe *The Autobiography of a Charwoman, as chronicled by Annie Wakeman* (1900) as 'Allegedly a record of the life of Elizabeth Dobbs .... but most probably fiction' (vol. 1 no. 960). However, in a strikingly original analysis (ch. 9; cf. 26-7), Boos, together with a collaborating researcher Sharon Knapp, establishes a convincing case that the life story behind the figure of the charwoman 'Elizabeth Dobbs' is, in fact, that of Martha Grimes, a one-time servant of Annie Wakeman, journalist and diplomat's wife. From that perspective, she teases out the reasons for both Wakeman, as transcriber/author, and Grimes, in the course of constructing their narrative, to have each distorted some aspects of Grimes's biography. That in turn enables her to suggest the values which each contributor to this unusual cross-class collaboration was seeking to preserve in the final account.

In her conclusion (ch. 10), Boos briefly considers some autobiographies by women of a later generation, born after 1870.<sup>19</sup> She notes some changes, including a reduced role of religion, with moral judgments increasingly expressed in psychological terms. The range of texts published, and the experiences they recounted, widened as publishers 'sought less to preserve the records of exemplary lives than of unusual ones' (308).

Through tracing the family and work histories, and current circumstances, of her authors, and the immediate prompts and possibilities for publication, Boos is able to identify the connections as well as the differences between these working women autobiographers: often facing poverty and ill-health, struggling to survive and improve their education, but sometimes also to express themselves publicly, it was with the support of sympathetic intermediaries and/or family members that their stories were recorded and preserved.

### Military memoirs

Rachel Woodward's and Neil Jenkins's *Bringing War to Book (BWB)* makes an important contribution to understanding the genesis and social role of contemporary military memoirs. Whereas many studies of war memoirs have focussed on questions either primarily historical (how true is this account? what does it contribute to our understanding of war?) or literary (what textual genres, tropes and narrative devices does this account deploy in its representation of war?), Woodward and Jenkins define their approach as sociological. Although their arguments do bear on those established issues, they centrally address two questions: how are military memoirs produced ('the journey from lived experience to published text' [20; cf. 254]) and what work do they do in contemporary society ('as commercial products with a market and associated sales profiles, ... within a set of cultural products and practices which make sense of war and military activities in particular ways' [43])?

Woodward and Jenkins have assembled a corpus of more than 250 military memoirs produced by members of the British armed forces (army, navy and air force) serving between 1980 and 2017. Their analysis of these texts is supported by interviews with twenty-one of the authors.<sup>20</sup> Contemporary military memoirs have in the last few decades extended a form of life writing from below which has existed since the early nineteenth century (11, 45).<sup>21</sup> Memoirs from NCOs and other ranks tell 'the stories of those without authority, power or control over larger state narratives. Memoirs have a utility akin to that of oral history in providing personal narratives drawn from private, individual experience which go on to inform more public, collective ideas and arguments about war' (45; cf.130).

From the perspective of life writing from below, one of the most interesting themes in *Bringing War to Book* is what Woodward and Jenkins term 'military literacy' (168-83). Many of Britain's volunteer servicemen, often from working-class backgrounds, enter the military with no post-compulsory education, relatively

limited literacy, few formal qualifications, and no sense of themselves as potential authors (177-8). The structure of military service gave them incentives to expand their reading, including books which could offer (critically-appraised) models of 'positioning, tone, narrative style, structure or genre' (171-7, quoted at 171); and also afforded opportunities (of time and space: 170, 179) to start writing. Specific military training developed crucial skills to structure a detailed, accurate and lucid narrative. These skills were acquired variously through, for example, patrol report writing, studying for promotion, compiling training manuals, or writing for in-house journals.

Woodward and Jenkins conclude:

Military literacy ... provides a resource enabling a military memoir to be written; these authors are already writers before they start. The style and purpose of the writing that they do may have a specific (military) communicative intention, but training and discipline in the act of writing a non-fiction text, describing and explaining the world for others, is a core military skill as much as cleaning a weapon or navigating through sea or air. (183)

Woodward and Jenkins approach authorship by these memoirists as a collaborative process. While the authors they interviewed insisted that this was *their* story (164, 168), both the ways in which the decision to tell the story was initiated, and the form in which it was finally published, were shaped by the input of many collaborators (ch. 7). These collaborators ranged from family members, friends and military comrades, to agents, ghost writers, editors and designers. The transition from lived experience to published book involved the author recognising and negotiating with the demands of genre – understood here as a publishing, rather than simply a literary, term. Books were designed, packaged and marketed to readers interested in militaria: shelved alongside war fiction and books about military strategy and weaponry, rather than among auto/biographies (51). Hence close attention was paid not only to narrative structure (most followed well-established patterns [12-16]), but also to precise details of the book's paratexts (including its dedication) and its cover (the form of the authorial name, the cover image, and typography) (ch. 8).<sup>22</sup>

Woodward's and Jenkins's attention to the collaborative production process of military memoirs offers a different approach to questions of the truthfulness and authenticity of military memoirs. They emphasise that, for the authors they interviewed, conveying their experiences accurately was of central importance. For most, this meant making a contribution to history, by recording through their

personal story experiences which would otherwise be neglected (ch. 3, esp. 70-1, 85-6; cf. 139-41). To this end, they drew on a wide range of resources to ensure the accuracy of their account, supplementing their individual memories with those of comrades, and with contemporaneous records (letters or emails home, diaries) and published accounts by other participants (ch. 6). Constructing a narrative which would be recognised as authentic by military comrades was a major consideration (87). Woodward and Jenkins conclude that, notwithstanding the silences and omissions arising from self-censorship through (carefully considered) authorial discretion (to maintain loyalty to military institutions, or to protect the families of deceased comrades), and limitations placed by genre constraints, changing social and linguistic conventions, publishers' caution, and pressures from state agencies (ch. 5), these texts 'do indeed describe war rather well' (23, cf. 256).<sup>23</sup>

This leads Woodward and Jenkins to make what they term a provocative comparison with the genre of *testimonio* (112-6).<sup>24</sup> As in *testimonio*, 'the narrator [is] speaking for, and in the name of, a community or group'. Military activities are collective, and '[a]lthough military memoirists may frame their books as personal accounts, they are also emphatic about the collective experience around the events described' (113). Like *testimonio* (and slave narratives), they are often produced through collaborative acts of writing (214; cf. 113). Central to the comparison is a similar communicative purpose: 'Although loss may be inevitable in armed conflict ... it is characteristic of memoirs that they assert the need for wider recognition of this, particularly amongst a civilian readership with little knowledge or understanding of military activities and potentially antipathetic to idea of the soldier as victim ....' (116).

Woodward and Jenkins also explore the readership of military memoirs (ch. 4), distinguishing the authors' original intended audience, and its extension during the process of writing, from the publishers' targeted readers.<sup>25</sup> Authors often began writing for a very immediate and concrete reader, such as a family member whom their text would inform about experiences of military service and combat. Wider audiences might include former comrades and friends with whom drafts were shared. Some authors had particular intended readers in mind: from future potential recruits or servicemen who would benefit from understanding specific aspects of military life and combat experience, to a civilian public who understood little about the realities of Britain's wars and foreign interventions (72, ch. 4).

From their sociological perspective, Woodward and Jenkins also explore the nature of the work done by the circulation and consumption of these texts. Here they draw out contradictions. They explore a tension, evident both in individual texts and the genre as a whole, between the capacity of military memoirs to contribute to a

militarisation of society, and their potential to challenge such tendencies. On the one hand, military memoirs, and in particular the way they are visually designed and marketed, can be seen as part of a 'military-industrial-media-entertainment network,' a 'complex of ideas, objects and practices [including videogames and films as well as books] through which ideas of war—and specifically an idea emergent over the past two decades of war as virtuous, justifiable and bloodless—circulate and are reproduced' (54; cf. 54-5, 241-5, 254). On the other hand, these memoirs, 'which revolve around the problems which follow from being caught up in military operations and dealing with their excitements and traumas,' also display a 'communicative urgency [which] is evident around the need to explain what exactly this means and does to a soldier for a civilian readership' (113). Hence they may also challenge or escape this frame, questioning some values of military training or Britain's 'liberal interventionist' actions overseas. They highlight in particular the role of paratexts in potentially prompting a reading at odds with the generic appearance of the text (96-7, 220-1, 232).

The highly-detailed and carefully structured attention which Woodward and Jenkins give to the process whereby an individual's story becomes a commercially-published book offers a valuable model for future studies of other such commercially prominent (and sometimes collaboratively written) sub-genres of life writing from below, including misery memoirs, and autobiographies of entertainment and sports stars.

Though these three books deal with very different forms of life writing – manuscript pauper letters, a sample of the scarce and diverse Victorian working women's memoirs, the commercially successful genre of military memoirs – separately and together they make a significant contribution to the understanding of life writings from below. Pauper letters are examples of compelled narratives, fragments of lives written for the immediate and urgent purpose of securing welfare assistance. Working women's memoirs were much more diverse in intention: some certainly hoped to redress an injustice (individual or collective), while others aimed to promote a wider literary endeavour, others again simply to record a life for family members. Military memoirs too might aim to put right a wrong – a misleading account of a shared campaign, or civilian ignorance about military experience.

Three themes are shared. The importance of orality: the oral quality and rhythm of pauper letters; the dictation of memoirs to an amanuensis. The key role of intermediaries: the neighbours who sometimes drafted or wrote, and the worthies who supported, the appeal of a pauper letter; the family members or friends who prompted or assisted the writing of a memoir, and the progressive editors who



brought it to print; the commercial publishers who shaped, packaged and promoted military memoirs. The power – both enabling and constraining – of genre: paupers learned how best to address the Vestry; working women drew on tropes of oral story-telling or religious conversion narratives; military authors were, or became, familiar with the conventional narrative shape of such stories. Together, these monographs – written from the varied disciplines of history, literary studies, geography and sociology – vividly demonstrate what can be learned from the sensitive reading of a corpus of life writings from below.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For an overview, see Ashplant et al. 2018.

<sup>2</sup> For existing research, see *WLEP*, 3-5.

<sup>3</sup> For details of the compilation and transcription of the corpus, and its geographical and chronological coverage, see *WLEP*, 23-26.

<sup>4</sup> King emphasises his focus on the process of claiming, not the outcome (*WLEP*, 8-10); hence, for example, his teasing out of the implications of each decision taken in constructing and sending a pauper letter (ch. 3).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the detailed reconstruction of a widow's changing circumstances over eight years: *WLEP*, 151-160; cf. tracing the outcomes of two letter series: 101-104.

<sup>6</sup> Facsimiles showing the range of quality in presentation: 17-20, 68-69. Some advocates' letters are also quoted: e.g. 227, 256-258, 270-273, 335. For collections with transcripts of full texts, but of letters of the poor claimants only, see: Sokoll; S. King et al.

<sup>7</sup> These registers include: backward- and forward-looking linguistic platforms for advancing claims (*WLEP*, 121-130); and the vocabulary of the poor (131-141). For growing linguistic richness between the 1750s and the 1830s, 116-117.

<sup>8</sup> These include the difficulty of sustaining a deception in the face of local public knowledge, and spot-checks by officials: *WLEP*, 38-41. Chapter 6 explores this issue in depth.

<sup>9</sup> See Lyons; Ashplant 2015; Edlund et al.

<sup>10</sup> On law, see also *WLEP*, 211-218; on medicine 134, 140-141; on administration, 320; on emerging linguistics of emotion, 291, 315, 326.

<sup>11</sup> Such an assertion of an individual self was not open – or valuable – to all paupers; for the aged, securing continuing relief required 'universalising the individual story to the wider and inevitable condition and position of all the poor of the same age' (*WLEP*, 316).

<sup>12</sup> The information about frequency of letter writing (*WLEP*, 26-27) would be more helpful if in tabular form, with a detailed breakdown including also authorial status (claimant, advocate, official), gender, and date. This would give a context for isolated statistics such as those at 111, 141-142, 246, 285.

<sup>13</sup> For instance, the proportion of advocacy letters by clergy (*WLEP*, 124) would be more valuable set alongside the data for other advocate categories, whether authority figures (doctors, employers, landlords), or friends and neighbours. Men abandoned by their wives wrote in different terms than

did abandoned wives themselves; but there is no figure for the smaller number of such men, to compare with the 494 letters from women, to evaluate the significance of this difference (292-296).

<sup>14</sup> This would be in contra-distinction to E. P. Thompson's concept of a moral economy forcefully asserted by the people *against* the authorities.

<sup>15</sup> Burnett et al., vols. 1 and 3, compiled in the 1980s, record 923 autobiographers born before 1896, of whom 92 (10%) were women.

<sup>16</sup> Ashton and Roberts explore the autobiographies and other life writings of eight working-class men alongside their poems and other writings; and consider issues of patronage and publishing.

<sup>17</sup> Approximately 120 life narratives by working-class women from the nineteenth century are currently known to survive (those located by Burnett et al. having been supplemented by the research of other scholars over the past thirty years). Of the three-fifths which were published during (or shortly after) the author's lifetime, Boos's corpus contains 12 (a sixth of these), plus two which have been published subsequently, and one by a West Indian-born slave later brought to Britain.

<sup>18</sup> The representation of the acquisition and use of writing (as well as wider questions of literacy) in Victorian (male and female) workers' autobiographies is treated in greater depth by Howard; cf. Ashplant 2015.

<sup>19</sup> All authors in her main corpus were born before 1850.

<sup>20</sup> Only nine of the corpus of over 250 memoirs were written by women (*BWB*, 17); all the 21 authors interviewed were male (24).

<sup>21</sup> Their corpus does also include some campaign narratives and career accounts by senior and junior officers.

<sup>22</sup> There are also a growing number of memoirs self-published in e-formats, available relatively cheaply online (*BWB*, 11).

<sup>23</sup> There are now an increasing number of online and print-to-order self-publishing memoirs, which might not have been commercially viable. This can enable publication without the intervention of publisher (though the design often follows established conventions [223]), including some texts which might have met official disapproval (261-2).

<sup>24</sup> On *testimonio* see Beverley, and the chapters by Ana Forcinito and Arturo Arias in Martínez-San Miguel et al.

<sup>25</sup> Dedications may offer both indications as to the intended readership, and cues to how the text should be read: *BWB*, 95-101; on the difficulties of estimating the size, and especially the demographics, of the actual readership, see 49-52.