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ALL WRITERS ARE BORDER WALKERS: EMMA DONOGHUE BETWEEN HISTORY AND FICTION IN *ASTRAY* AND *THE WOMAN WHO GAVE BIRTH TO RABBITS*

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Abstract. Historical fiction has gained a degree of popularity among readers in the last two decades it has not enjoyed since the fashion for writing novels about national history was set by Sir Walter Scott in the early 19th century. Later in that same century, however, the value of historical fiction *as such* was challenged by historians who were eager to make history a science; they claimed that academic historical writing provided an objective view of the past based on archival research and was therefore fundamentally superior to historical novels. A devaluation of historical fiction took place which is still felt today. In the context of this opposition of history and fiction, Emma Donoghue's recent historical fiction offers a fresh approach to the genre. The aim of this article, after reviewing the issue of its relationship to history, is to analyze Donoghue's innovative combination of fiction and the archive in two collections of short historical fiction, *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits* (2002) and *Astray* (2012). Donoghue's own reflections on her work are applied in this analysis, as well as the theoretical approach to this kind of fiction by Lubomir Doležel.

Key words: history and fiction, historical fiction, Lubomir Doležel, Emma Donoghue's historical fiction, minor and marginal historical figures

INTRODUCTION

Emma Donoghue has concluded one interview with the evocative statement: 'I suspect writers always feel like border-walkers' (Fantaccini and Grassi, 2011: 406). Among the borders that Emma Donoghue walks, one is that of national identity. In 1998 this Irish writer moved to Canada to join her partner and start a family, finding in Canada, as she has stated, a more tolerant atmosphere for same-sex couples (Swilley, 2004). However, this study focuses more on a different kind of border, that between the fields of history and literature, which Donoghue crosses in a manner very much her own. Internationally she is celebrated for *Room* (Donoghue, 2010), a psychological novel set in the present, but she is also well-known for historical fiction that uses a great deal of research to provide a detailed picture of the past. Among this kind of writing, the most formally innovative are her two collections of short historical fiction, *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits* (2002) and *Astray* (2012).

Donoghue enjoys her dual national identity, just as she enjoys writing what she calls 'hybrid fiction' (Jordan, 2012), historical narratives not quite like any other work in the genre. This analysis begins by looking at historical fiction and the problematic relationship between the historic and the fictional, referring to the recent boom in historical fiction as well as to the hostility which the genre still provokes among literary critics. This context makes it easier to recognize how distinctive Donoghue's method of bringing together the fictional and the historical is in two collections of short historical fiction, *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits* (2002) and *Astray* (2012). These are unusual literary works that merit more critical attention than they have so far received.

ON HISTORICAL FICTION

Although there are single works that can be given this label earlier, literary history tends to consider Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832) as the founder of the historical novel (see, for example, Lukacs, 1962: 38–39; Baldick, 1991: 99–100; Cuddon 1991: 411). His novels celebrating the national past of Scotland and England created a literary fashion in many European countries, inspiring major novels like those by Alessandro Manzoni, Stendhal, Balzac and Alexandre Dumas, Leo Tolstoy and Henryk Sienkiewicz (Lukacs, 1962: 39–45). Beginning with Scott's *Waverley* in 1814, these novels re-consider events in the national past that are held to be especially meaningful, whether they are defeats or triumphs. Scott's success came in part from the way in which he deviates from the norms for non-fictional historical writing by giving the major roles in his narratives to fictional characters. As critics explain, his narrative formula is to place an invented character, most often a very ordinary person, alongside historical figures participating in major historical events; this fictional character, with whom readers can identify, transports readers to the past in a way that academic historical texts cannot (Lukacs, 1962: 41; Danytė, 2008: 54–55).

After their period of success in the 19th century, historical novels appeared again as a major literary genre during the period of postmodernism, although in this period writers were more likely to approach the national past ironically. As Linda Hutcheon notes, such novels are more concerned with those who did not fight in national struggles or who appeared on the losing side (Hutcheon, 1989: 51). Nevertheless, although questioning national myths, these novels still use Scott's narrative formula with invented fictional characters serving as protagonists, narrators and focalizers that participate in past events alongside real historical figures. It is in this respect that Donoghue makes a radical change, for instead of centring her narratives around fictional characters, her protagonists are almost always historical figures themselves. However, they are not leading players in events of national significance: some are minor figures in historical events, while others are extremely obscure and even marginal, 'written off', as she explains in the foreword to *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits*, 'as cripples, children, half-breeds, freaks and nobodies' (Donoghue, 2002: ix). For example,

in this collection *The Fox on the Line* does not direct her readers' attention to Frances Power Cobbe, a 19th century activist in animal rights, but to a much less documented woman, Cobbe's long-time companion, Mary Lloyd, while in *Looking for Petronilla* she gives equal room to a woman who was known as a powerful witch in 14th century Ireland and to her faithful servant who was burnt at the stake, but about whom nothing beyond her existence is really known.

Furthermore, Donoghue uses a two-part structure that emphasizes how much the text is her own creation, bringing fiction and the archive very close together. First one reads a brief fictionalized narrative about the past, and then what is titled as a 'Note', in which Donoghue as a historian comments on her sources and the gaps in her knowledge. In this Note, which Sarah Crown usefully calls a postscript (Crown, 2012), readers are moved very abruptly from the fictional domain to an academic one. Acknowledgements of sources are not uncommon in many genres of fiction, but in the case of Donoghue's works, the academic text follows, often on the same page, as the final sentences of the fictional story. Where most authors of historical fiction are concerned not to break the illusion of reality by such direct archival references, Donoghue feels there is much to be gained in confronting history and fiction. She calls the long labour of searching through printed and archival sources, 'ten years of sporadic grave-robbing', and concludes cheerfully, 'I have tried to use memory and invention together, like two hands engaged in the same muddy work of digging up the past' (Donoghue, 2002: ix). She also makes her double allegiance evident: 'I'm aware that what I'm doing is simultaneously research and fiction. […] Plus, ethically, I don't own these cases: I'm drawing on the scholarship of others and the lives of the dead' (Crown, 2012). In her unabashed readiness to bring together two ways of representing the past, academic history and fiction, Donoghue is very unusual in the current controversy about the relationship between the historical novel and works of history.

CONFLICT BETWEEN HISTORY AND HISTORICAL FICTION

Donoghue's texts have appeared in the context of a boom in historical fiction which has taken place since the late 1990s; lately, in addition to novels, films and television series that fictionalize history have attracted large audiences. In the English-speaking market, for example, the British are prolific producers of both print fiction and filmed historical narratives like the BBC series *The Tudors* (2007–2008) which are popular beyond the United Kingdom itself. Within Britain, however, these productions are seen not only as entertainment but also as treatments of the national heritage. Literary specialists like Tim Gauthier have argued that these celebrations of the English Renaissance and 19th-century imperial history are linked to the widespread feeling known as 'declinism', the difficulties the British have today in accepting the way their country has lost status and power since the mid-20th century: 'Generally perceived as having

relinquished its position as a global and economic power, the country reconsiders regretfully its diminished place in the world' (Gauthier, 2006: 3). Gauthier treats such fictionalized history as a desire to compensate for national decline by regaining 'contact with the country's glorious past' (ibid.: 4).

It might be expected that the literary world would welcome any new trend that draws the public to reading novels, yet not all critics are happy with the rise in popularity of historical fiction. Most often this dissatisfaction seems to spring from the belief that, by nature, historical fiction is an inferior genre that cannot be treated like academically elite works. In an article titled 'Can a Historical Novel Also Be Serious Literature?', the American writer Alexander Chee admits that he was made to feel he had broken a 'literary taboo' by moving from fiction set in the present time to historical novels (Chee, 2016). The same is said in an interview, though in sharper terms, by a well-established historical novelist, Philippa Gregory: 'I think it's really funny how the genre is […] despised by critics'; she enjoys pointing out that now that it has become so very popular, those who earlier labelled it as written by 'rather stupid women writers' find themselves without much to say (Taylor, 2011). Gregory is ironical about how she and other historical novelists have been criticized both for being too historical and not historical enough, with some reviewers complaining that using historical plots shows little imagination and others condemning novelists for interpreting the past too imaginatively (ibid.).

Examples of this elitist approach to the genre of historical fiction can be found even in sources that one would expect to maintain a neutral position like on-line *Encyclopaedia Britannica* articles. One of these states flatly that many historical novels 'are written to mediocre standards' ('Historical novel', n.d.), while another begins contemptuously: 'for the hack novelist, to whom speedy output is more important than art, thought or originality, history provides ready-made plots and characters' ('Types of novels', n.d.). Furthermore, this second writer asserts, without providing any examples, that 'the technical conservatism of most European historical novels' puts them into a 'second place' category among kind of fiction (ibid.).

In the English-speaking world, these elitist convictions about the relative value of different sub-genres of the novel were shaken when the very prestigious Booker Prize went to Hilary Mantel for historical novels in both 2009 and 2012. Mantel's career shows how views are changing, for in 1979 she was unable to get her first historical novel published and had to turn to writing realistic fiction set in the contemporary period. There was still unease in 2009 when Mantel's *Wolf Hall* took the Booker Prize away from well-established writers like J. M. Coetzee and A.S. Byatt who are analysed in academic programs (Edemariam, 2009). Even in 2012 the chair of the Booker Prize jury was defensive about its decision, and not only because Mantel was the first British author to win the Booker twice. He later denied that an additional criterion was used by this jury, 'readability', and insisted that a 'rigorous process of literary criticism' was applied; he did admit no vote had been taken and that the decision had not been unanimous, suggesting

that discomfort with ranking a historical novel as equal to those seen as having greater literary merit has not disappeared (Singh, 2012).

In a broader context, the denigration of the genre of historical fiction can be linked to an on-going attempt by historians to present the writing of history as a social science that is based on strictly factual sources. Trying to raise the status of history to a science is considered to have begun in the 19th century with the demands for a clearly documented presentation of the past by Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886). Ranke propagated scrupulous analysis of multiple archival sources so that an objective historical account could be written (Boldt, 2014). For a time, this attempt to give history a higher intellectual status than literature was successful, but by the later 20th century, specialists in rhetoric and narrative theory had turned their attention to non-fiction texts and undermined the claim that historical writing were fundamentally more objective than historical novels. A leading figure in analyzing the rhetoric of texts, Hayden White, concludes that historical studies have failed to achieve the status of a science; he notes that historians tend to use narrative as a structuring device and so encounter the same problems as historical novelists, 'the problem of the too much and not enough' and of 'what to leave out in their treatment of real events and processes in the past' (White, 2005). Richard Slotkin focuses on the same problem, that of making a choice from available and often conflicting evidence: 'What we call 'history' is […] a story we choose to tell about things […] facts must be selected and […] made to resolve some sort of question which can only be asked subjectively and from a position of hindsight' (Slotkin, 2005). He argues that 'all history writing requires a fictive or imaginary representation of the past', implying that there is no fundamental difference between the work of historians and that of novelists (ibid.). As a historian himself, Slotkin deals with the problems raised by the kind of archival research that Ranke insisted on: 'Anyone who has worked with historical records knows that the documentation of any large, complex human event is never fully adequate or reliable' (ibid.). Moreover, if one moves from trying to establish the facts of a past event to the motives that made people act as they did, 'information becomes even more slippery' (ibid.). He sees the difference between history and literature as merely 'a difference of genre' which predisposes readers to adopt different approaches to what they read (ibid.).

Both he and Richard Carroll see the fundamental goals of history and a historical novel as the same; in Slotkin's words, it is to 'create in the reader a vivid sense of what it may have been like to live among such facts' (Slotkin, 2005; Carroll, 2011). In his review of the conflict between history and fiction, Carroll concludes that these two fields 'are still struggling to clarify a number of core issues', in part because they have not only differences but also similarities (Carroll, 2011). 'Who owns the past?' asks another specialist, Ludmilla Jordanova, raising a sensitive issue especially where the national past is concerned (Jordanova, 2006: 143). Both historians and writers of historical novels act like owners of the past, shaping their texts to convince readers that their interpretation is correct.

What is interesting about Emma Donoghue's attitude to her work is that, in comparison with writers like Alexander Chee or even Philippa Gregory, she is neither troubled nor defensive. She locates herself as both a writer of fiction and a historian, not feeling any contradiction between the two roles. As the former, she needs to entertain readers: 'I'd never start with the facts […] that would be too much like a history lesson' (Crown, 2012). As a historian, she finds it imperative to include her sources in a postscript: 'But I had to put them in' (ibid.). Donoghue does not ignore the duality of historical fiction and historical study; she puts them side by side in her work, believing that her readers are sophisticated enough to enjoy the movement between the two fields.

LUBOMIR DOLEŽEL ON ANALYSING HISTORICAL FICTION

One of the most useful approaches to the analysis of historical fiction has been developed by Lubomir Doležel, writing within the context of possible worlds theory. He states that historical fiction creates worlds that have a 'dyadic structure', 'two domains that are clearly distinguishable by their different relationships to the actual world of the past' (Doležel, 2010: 84). One domain is that of elements in the narrative like characters, events, settings and cultural contexts 'that do not have counterparts in the actual past', calling these 'fictional entities', while the second includes those elements that 'have counterparts' in the historic past, 'fictionalized entities'. Despite this distinction, Doležel emphasizes that when any entities, especially characters, enter fictional worlds, all of them 'have to change into the fictional possible', a 'general transformation' (Doležel, 2010: 85). In this way, he explains that 'in the realm of fiction, historical fact is a construct', which makes it easy for writers to combine history and fiction (ibid.: 87). Finally, he asserts that it is the right of the creator of historical fiction to make decisions: this writer 'gathers as much historical knowledge as he or she wishes and transforms it in ways that correspond to the general order of the world under construction' (ibid.: 85) In this way writers of historical fiction, in Doležel's terms, produce a confrontation between history and fiction within a single text.

What is happening in Donoghue's short historical narratives becomes clearer when Doležel's theory is applied to her stories. A good example is *The Last Rabbit*, the text that opens and gives a title to the first collection, *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits*. This begins with the first-person narrator, Mary Toft, deciding to play a joke on her husband by pretending to give birth to a rabbit: 'We were at home in Godalming, though some call it Godlyman, and I can't tell which is right, I say it the same way my mother said it. I was pregnant again, and cutting up a rabbit for our dinner, I don't know what sort of whim took hold of me to give a scare to my husband' (Donoghue, 2002: 1). Encouraged by others, she becomes involved in a scheme to make money from a gullible public by apparently giving birth to rabbits. The story ends when she realizes she will have to admit the truth

to an investigator: 'So I turned and walked back to the room where Sir Richard was waiting for my story' (ibid.:13).

Then comes the postscript, which gives the historical evidence for Mary Toft's life; Donoghue writes: 'For "The Last Rabbit", which was inspired by William Hogarth's famous engraving of Mary Toft (1703–63) giving birth, I have drawn on many contradictory medical treatises, witness statements, pamphlets and poems' (ibid.:14). She goes on to name five of them. The postscript concludes with what is known about Mary's life after she spent a few months in jail for the hoax: 'Back in Godalming with her husband, Mary had another baby in 1728 [...] and was occasionally shown off as a novelty at local dinners [...] she lived to the age of sixty' (ibid.). Stylistically, the fictional domain is narrated in Mary's relaxed and colloquial style, while the historical domain has a more academic style with an abundance of dates and the specific titles of the pamphlets and poems which are Donoghue's sources.

According to Doležel's distinction, the first part, the story, combines fictional and fictionalizing entities: in one sense, Mary Toft is a 'fictionalizing entity' with a real counterpart in 18th-century English history, while the character who reflects on what happens, along with the whole of the opening scene are 'fictional entities' invented by the writer. The postscript emphasizes Mary Toft's historical status, with the information about her later life making her historicity credible. Yet most of the story must be fictional, as very little precise information about Toft's actions, let alone her feelings, has survived, and even this, as Donoghue states, is 'contradictory' (ibid.).

DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF DONOGHUE'S SHORT HISTORICAL FICTION

One of the features of her narratives that heightens the apparent reality of her characters is the abrupt way that many of her stories begin. There are no lengthy introductory descriptions of time or place to warn the readers that they are entering a world of the distant past. In the second collection, *Astray,* Donoghue does precede each story with an identification of where and when it takes place, while in the earlier collection, there is not even this. Instead, the fictional texts plunge readers into the historic past in a kind of baptism through immersion, with the shock of hearing a distinctive voice that in its diction and cadences is not that of the 21st century. Readers have to make an effort to identify the historical period through occasional brief references, which is more difficult because the stories in each collection are not given in any kind of chronological order. Nevertheless, they are encouraged to make this effort by Donoghue's skill in beginning her stories in dramatic ways. One reviewer comments on the startling energy these obscure figures demonstrate, emphasizing how the 'people of these tales come hurtling off the page from the deep past with the emotional force of the newly awakened dead' (Brown). For example, *Last Supper at Brown's*, which

relates how an African-American slave poisons his master and runs off with his master's wife, opens like this: 'Before the War there's two women in the house but last year Marse done took them to auction. Now's just me, the cook and all-round boy. My name Nigger Brown, I don't got no other, I was born here' (Donoghue, 2012: 65). The young African American addresses the readers abruptly as though they already understand his situation and the historical context from which he speaks. Readers can pick up clues, combining references to 'the War', people sold at auction and the casual use of the term 'nigger' to guess that the action takes place during the American Civil War, in a southern part of the United States where slavery still exists.

In another case, that of a girl whose mother was an African slave made mistress to a British aristocrat, the speech patterns are completely different because she has been brought up in the upper class. Nevertheless, the effect of the opening sentences is also surprisingly direct: 'I was in the Orangery at Kenwood that June morning, picking plums and grapes. I knew nothing. My name was Dido Bell' (Donoghue, 2002: 170). The second and third very short sentences sound taut with emotion: Dido is describing the day that she comes to a brutal understanding of her true status in a racist society.

In the postscripts to these stories, Donoghue explains that 'Nigger Brown', as he is called, survived historical oblivion only as a single entry in a newspaper of his time (Donoghue 2012: 72). Dido Bell was both more celebrated and more elusive. Donoghue refers to the evidence of her father's and great-uncle's wills to show that she was loved and provided for, but admits that everything else in her story is a series of probabilities, not hard facts: she was probably the young black woman painted by Johan Zoffany in a remarkable portrait of the period, allegedly showing her with her white-skinned cousin; she was probably the reason that her great-uncle, in a famous legal judgement, took a step towards making slavery illegal in Britain (Donoghue 2002: 183).

At least Dido exists in many sources, while some of Donoghue's most vivid characters are known only through a single sentence they spoke. There is Minnie Hall in *Daddy's Girl*, whose father, a pillar of the Democratic Party in New York City, died in 1901, and was then discovered to have been a woman. Minnie refuses to acknowledge his biological condition in public, snapping at the judge, 'I will never say she' (Donoghue, 2012: 239). In *The Necessity of Burning* in 1381, when the Peasants' Revolt saw hundreds of hand-written manuscripts set ablaze in the streets of Cambridge, Margery Starre, further identified only as an 'old woman', enthusiastically pitched volumes into the flames, shouting: 'Away with the learning of the clerics, away with it!' (Donoghue 2002: 198). Minnie's and Margery's declarations are documented historical facts, but Donoghue creates their personalities, fills in earlier events and provides motivation for their actions.

Donoghue explains her evident interest in marginal historical figures through two formative events in her personal life. One was preparing her doctoral thesis at Cambridge University on the concept of friendship between men and women in

the 18th century. This work was part of a new movement to make women a central subject in historical research, something that made her feel it was legitimate to go beyond monarchs and politicians: 'Looking through history for the women also led to the Other: the slave, the witch, the whore, the freak, the poor, the criminal, the victim, the disenfranchised, the child, the migrant' (Palko, 2017). She also links her interest in the marginal through her uncomfortable awakening to her homosexuality: 'I grew up in Dublin [...] Pretty much everyone I knew was white, had two Irish parents, and was a practicing Catholic. I had no objection at all to this until, at about fourteen, I realized I was a lesbian, and therefore, in my society's terms, a freak' (Fantaccini and Grassi, 2011: 400). She calls this 'the trickiest border I've ever crossed [...] I wasn't bothered by religious guilt, only social shame; I found it hard to accept being socially abnormal' (ibid.: 401). She refers in more than one interview to the determining nature of this experience. It was this 'moment of alienation' that she feels 'turned me into a writer': 'I've remained fascinated by the things that make us feel at home, or out of place, or even monstrous' (Palko, 2017). In another interview she states: 'This theme – not just homosexuality but the clash between individual and community, norm and 'other' – has marked many of my published works' (Fantaccini and Grassi, 2011: 400). Then, in a characteristically ironic comment, she concludes: 'to know yourself to be the Other is very educational' (ibid.: 402).

In her historical fiction Donoghue writes about men, women and children who were not leading figures in their own societies, but who acted out some form of difference. She is interested in same-sex unions, fictionalizing some that may or may not have been consciously homosexual. For example, in the first collection, *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits,* there are Mary Lloyd and Frances Power Cobbe, trying to pass a law against animal vivisection in Victorian England (*The Fox on the Line*), while in *Astray* readers encounter the Americans Frances Loring and Florence Wyle, who led a successful career as sculptors in Canada (*What Remains*). In general, she is fascinated by those who go against the norms of their society. There are a great variety of eccentric figures from the past in her stories, like Elspeth Buchan who as the charismatic 'Friend Mother' led a suicidal religious sect in Scotland in the late 18th century (*Revelations* in *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits*) and Mollie Sanger in *The Long Way Home* in *Astray*) who, dressed in men's clothing, successfully worked for many years as a prospector in mid-19th century Arizona.

In other cases, she is attracted to fragmentary historical records, accounts of people's lives which she can complete through fiction. As she puts it, many of these stories 'are woven around the known facts, and could be considered history as well as fiction, especially as my source notes are included, to insist on the reality of the stories' (Swilley, 2004). In her first collection she sensitively develops what a blind poet's childhood must have been like in *Night Vision*; in the second, her story *The Gift* supplements letters that have survived about 19th-century American adoptions, depicting a man who refuses to give up the child he and his wife had adopted despite later claims by the birth mother.

Donoghue's postscripts also vary and do more than provide a list of sources. Historical novelists often receive criticism from reviewers and readers about what are perceived as factual inaccuracies, but Donoghue's protagonists are mostly so obscure that readers make their way through her narratives without any sense of which details are historical and which invented. Reading the postscripts then provides a new kind of pleasure; the readers have identified with the main characters and inevitably want to know more precisely what their later lives were like. The story *Salvage* in *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits* describes two cousins known as the 'Cottage Ladies' directing attempts to save sailors drowning on their shore. One may believe that their lives in the early 19th century would have been very limited by gender norms, especially given that one of them, Anna, can move about only in a wheelchair. It is refreshing to find out in the postscript that Anna was a noted Anglo-Saxon scholar and, as the last sentence lists triumphantly, the two 'acted as their relative Fowell Buxton's secretaries in his long campaign to end the slave trade, founded a school, travelled to Rome and Athens, and were finally buried together in the seaside graveyard at Overstrand' (Donoghue, 2002: 105). Another variety of story leads readers to sympathize with those who broke laws; in such cases, they may be relieved in reading postscript that, for example, Margery Starre in *The Necessity of Burning*, who participated in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 at least does not figure in the lists that Donoghue's research turned up of those imprisoned or executed (Donoghue, 2002: 199). Similarly, the postscript to *Last Supper at Brown's* reassures readers that the African American slave and his white mistress who murder her husband seem to have escaped punishment. After his dramatic escape from being re-sold by his master, any possible romance seems to have ended: he apparently took up with a Mexican woman, while she married a man with whom she 'ran a boardinghouse, then worked mining claims and set up a goat ranch', rather a mundane conclusion to their story (Donoghue, 2012: 72).

However, among so many sympathetic and even celebratory accounts of those who deviated from social norms, the postscript to *The Long Way Home* in *Astray* shows that society could be unexpectedly harsh on rebels against norms like the swaggering prospector Mollie. After depicting her forcing a man who has abandoned his family to return to them, in the historical postscript Donoghue decides this story is possibly true but adds that three years later 'she was the first woman in Arizona committed for insanity, which probably translates as cross-dressing, promiscuity and alcoholism'. After twelve years in an asylum Mollie escaped but was tracked down trying to survive in the desert 'on one bottle of water and a few crackers'; she spent her remaining years back in the insane asylum (ibid.:122). In this way contemporary readers, who have become accustomed by previous stories in the collections about strong women successfully breaking norms, are brought up suddenly and even brutally with the reality of women's unequal status in an earlier historical period.

Only in one case, *How a Lady Dies* in *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits* does Donoghue use the historical postscript to extend the narrative she has focused on in her story. It is the 18th century: Frances Sheridan is a mother and

the middle-aged wife of a theatre director, but she leaves husband and children temporarily to take her beloved friend Elizabeth, younger, wealthier and dying of tuberculosis, for treatment to Bath. Elizabeth toys with the idea that death will be welcome but is shocked when she coughs up blood and determines to make the most of her remaining days. The fictional story ends at this point in her life, but the postscript, after referring to historical sources, ends with an additional detail about the pair of women: 'On their return from Bath to London, Elizabeth died in Frances's arms' (Donoghue, 2002: 162). The sentence concludes this historical narrative as high romance. However, this kind of extension of the emotional narrative is a single example, as in all other postscripts the tone is much cooler and more academic.

CONCLUSION

In the present context of conflicting opinions about the value of historical fiction and its relationship with history as an academic discipline, Emma Donoghue's declarations on the subject are refreshingly confident. She feels no guilt about her use of the historic past. 'To me all of history is a kind of warehouse of stories for me to burgle. I don't feel I should be restricted to my own era,' she states in one interview (Richards, 2008). Nor does she apologize for her manipulations of past events or the way she plays with her readers' feelings. She sees herself as rescuing the minor and the marginal for a new life as literary characters: 'to me what feels good is to give these characters subjectivity, agency, a chance to rule the page even if I can't always grant them happy endings' (Palko, 2017). In her hands this kind of fictional narrative does not deny the limits that people's sex, race, class or physical disabilities set on their lives. Her historical fiction does not erase pain or reverse the defeats which they experienced in the past. However, it does give them a kind of power over the past: 'That's a second life you're granting a long-dead person in fiction: a chance to show what they're made of, strut their stuff, have their say' (ibid.). She selects for her stories people that academic historians might include, if they did at all, in statistical reports or footnotes to the main narrative. In this way Emma Donoghue moves away from the dominant tradition in the writing of both history and historical fiction, the analysis and celebration of major events and figures from the national past. She does not deny the value of those texts that take a more traditional approach, but her sympathies are with those 'whose lives exist as only minor, almost anonymous footnotes in history's back drawer' (Brown, 2002). In comparison to critics who find historical fiction in general trivial or un-historic, she sees it in a very different way: 'yes, trying to write the past into life will always be in some sense an impossible task, but I find it a thrilling and even rather heroic one' ('Emma Donoghue and Laird Hunt on writing historical women', 2016). Her historical fiction defies the traditional principles of the genre developed by Walter Scott and his followers as well as those critics who see history and fiction as hostile to each other rather than neighbouring genres.

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