Hidden in Plain Sight

A conversation with Alfred F. Young about *Masquerade*

*Sarah Pearsall: Given that Vera Laska, author of the first full article on Deborah Sampson, wrote that a book-length biography of her would require "a graduate seminar with a dozen doctoral candidates working on various aspects of her life," (*Masquerade*, 395) what made you decide to undertake such a task yourself? In other words, what drew you to Sampson's story, despite the monumental research challenges it entailed (especially since the main sources about her story are not reliable)?*

Alfred Young: Doing the story of George Robert Twelves Hewes, the Boston shoemaker, convinced me that you could break through to the consciousness of ordinary people in the Revolution by focusing on an individual. I was challenged after the Hewes article and some other scholarship on artisans appeared: "where are the women?" I did an essay on the women of Boston as a group in the decade from 1765 to 1776, but I also wanted to see if I could find a woman of the laboring classes whose life story I might do. In the late 1980s, while working on the Chicago Historical Society exhibit "We the People," I stumbled across Herman Mann's strange as-told-to memoir of Deborah. We put the book on exhibit in a section called "Veterans Remember the Revolution," but I really could not make head nor tail of it. When I received an invitation from the Institute of Early American History and Culture to do a paper for a conference on identity in early America, I decided to see what I could make of

Deborah Sampson for an essay.

For Hewes, I had not one but two as-told-to memoirs and a rich body of sources to test his memory. For Sampson, there were three versions of Mann's memoir: one published in 1797; a revised version by Mann in manuscript in the Dedham Historical Society written after Sampson died; and still a third reprinting by Mann in the 1860s with rich editorial notes by the New England genealogist and historian John Adams Vinton. I thought that among the three I could dope out Sampson, but I made a mistake: my experience with the Hewes sources did not prepare me for the difficulties of unlocking Sampson's secrets. Early on I was guided by one of the self-trained historians in Massachusetts who had been working on Sampson for years and who took me around to the sites. Then I started discovering things in material culture with which I had never worked before: the houses in which she lived; a replica of the hut above West Point in which she might have lived; a dress that turned out to be her likely wedding dress. After that, I was hooked on the project.

True, I didn't have a graduate seminar or a team of colleagues working on phases of the project, but as my five pages of acknowledgements may suggest, I got a lot of help from friends as well as strangers. And I had a very able researcher who tracked down Sampson in Sharon, Massachusetts sources and two others who did specific tasks. Your question goes to the heart of one problem with doing life histories of ordinary people for whom there are sparse sources: it is very labor intensive and the profession is not prepared to encourage collaborative or team work to facilitate these sorts of projects.

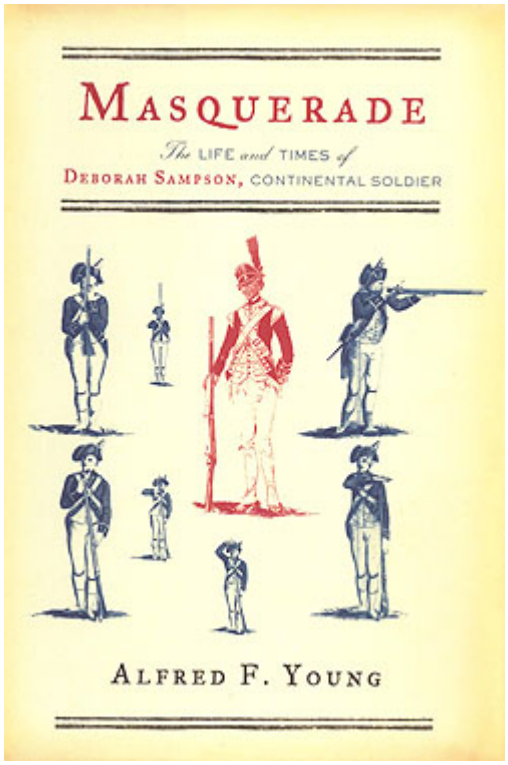

Fig. 1: Masquerade

SP: Your response leads me to think about your decision to focus on the story of one remarkable individual in this way (employed successfully in both of your last two books). I wonder if you could say more about this method (which some might call biographical, others might call microhistorical), and what its advantages and disadvantages might be.

AY: Jill Lepore's article in the *Journal of American History*, drawing a distinction between microhistory and biography, is a must-read for anyone working in these genres, both stimulating and cautionary. But for me I am not so sure it is an either/or matter. Hewes was more microhistory than biography. I was interested in him as a man in the street in Boston whom I thought was typical of the so-called inferior artisans. The Sampson study combines the two kinds of history: I was interested in her life and what was singular and unique, but also in what Lepore calls her "exemplariness," or what I might call her class. I felt I was constantly going back and forth between the two. Take the big question of "why did she do it?" That is, Why did she disguise herself and go into the army? She was a rural woman of the laboring classes: daughter of a farm laborer, an indentured servant, a near orphan more or less abandoned by her family. Her only real option was to become someone's wife and the mother of seven or eight children. But she was unusually gifted and self-educated in book learning—which opened a wider world to her—and she had a wide range of interests. She wanted something more out of life. So perhaps that made her special. But then she was a weaver in Plymouth County, a part of New England which was a center of women weavers and weaving and, as Laurel Ulrich posits, offered a range of "liberating opportunities." Sampson also became a Baptist in Middleborough, a town which was the major center of New England Baptists. As Susan Juster has shown in her work on women Baptists, Deborah's particular church attracted many poor single women in the 1780s. She learned civil disobedience from the Baptists.

In cross-dressing, Deborah was like a good many other plebeian women we are discovering who were in flight: to escape indentured servitude, to avoid the shame of a pregnancy, to get out of the reaches of the law, and so on. But to explain why she carried it off so long, you have to fall back on her skills and resourcefulness. This double approach works as well with members of the elite: witness Rhys Issac's recent portrayal of Landon Carter in all the individuality his diary reveals, yet sharing characteristics of his class of large slave-holding planters. Some of the biographers of the great leaders of the Revolution could profit from this double approach.

SP: Of course, pursuing this double methodological approach also meant mastering a considerable range of sources, including material ones (objects owned by Sampson, spaces in which she lived). Do you have any advice for other historians interested in incorporating more material evidence into their studies?

AY: First, I mined whatever traditional sources I could lay my hands on: petitions, military records, real-estate deeds, tax records, church records,

newspapers, almanacs, and so on. I have also always been open to sources in material culture, especially after serving as a co-curator of a museum exhibit where we took whatever object we could locate in the Chicago Historical Society to build the story of an individual: a farmer's plough, a woman's needlepoint, a slave's note to her master, or a page from a wheelwright's journal. I think historians should allow themselves to learn more from objects and work up from the object to the person. But it also helps to know about the category of objects with which you are dealing.

I also think professional historians should be more open to what self-trained, so-called amateur historians can teach them. Patrick Leonard, a former Pinkerton detective who had been researching Sampson for years, took me to the sites of her life. Beatrice Bostock, a descendent, showed me the dress her mother had kept and the cup plate, handed down from Deborah. Daniel Arguimbau took me around the land he farms which was the Sampson farm and into the house in which Deborah lived. You might say this is serendipity, but you really have to make these things happen. I think it goes without saying that you should visit sites, local historical societies, museums, and should also track descendants. You also have to seek out specialists: museum curators, historians of clothing, town historians, and others. The Internet is of great help here. I think you have to take the attitude: you never know what you will find unless you look and (in my case) you have to keep in mind you are not the first or the only person who is interested in your subject. Others have gone before you.

Fig. 2. Deborah Sampson, the frontispiece of The Female Review, published in Dedham 1797, commissioned by Herman Mann. The engraving by George Graham was from a drawing by William Beastall, in turn based on Joseph Stone's painting, which it closely resembled. Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.

SP: Among the people who had earlier explored Sampson's story were scholars in

the field of women's history. What made you decide to focus in this area?

AY: Let me sort this out. I have always known that women's history was a subject. As an undergraduate in the 1940s at Queens College, one of my favorite teachers was Vera Shlakman, the author of one of the first studies of women textile workers in Chicopee, Massachusetts. I took a course with her on labor in which women workers figured prominently. During the McCarthy era, she was fired for refusing to answer the questions of a congressional investigating committee, and yet she made a comeback and is alive and kicking at ninety-five—an inspiration. So I suppose you could say that I was introduced to women's history by the "old Left" which was feminist before feminism.

I learned nothing about women's history at graduate school at Columbia and Northwestern where there were no women professors in history. In the 1960s, I was influenced by the feminist movement and the example of pioneer historians such as Gerda Lerner, whom I asked to do a volume of documents on women in America in the American Heritage Series. It seemed obvious to me in the 1970s that I should commission an essay on women in the Revolution in the first explorations in American radicalism collection, but I must say I was never content with Joan Hoff-Wilson's interpretation and welcomed the books that followed by Linda K. Kerber and Mary Beth Norton.

My first foray into women's history in the Revolution may have a lesson for others. I was invited to do a paper of my choice on women in the American Revolution for an international conference on women in the democratic revolutions of the late eighteenth century. I had never done research on women's history *per se* and said I didn't think there was enough for such a paper. However, I did a very simple thing. I re-read all my notes on original sources on the Revolution in Boston and was amazed at how many references to women I had copied down but never used. They were hidden in plain sight.

And out of this came an article on the many roles of the women of Boston in the making of the Revolution.

Then I started teaching a graduate seminar I called "First Person Sources in Writing Social History," and I was off. I remember Laurel Ulrich sending me a piece of the original of the diary of Martha Ballard so we could compare it to the bowdlerized printed version. The sources for women's history, I discovered, abound. I think you could say I learned what was possible from the examples of women scholars in the same way I had learned earlier of the possibilities of recovering American history from below from the examples of E.P Thompson, George Rude, and Christopher Hill in English history.

Fig. 3. Hannah Snell, as depicted in an excerpt from “The Life and Adventures of a Female Soldier,” the narrative of the most famous cross-dressing British soldier of the century. It appeared in Isaiah Thomas’s New England Almanack (Boston, 1774). Printers recycled the image on other imprints. Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.

SP: In addition to women’s history, Masqueradealso required knowledge of new scholarship on the history of gender and sexuality. What drew you to those fields?

AY: Deborah Sampson did. The terrible Herman Mann, Sampson’s biographer, drove me up the wall on matters of sexuality. I concluded early on that he simply could not be trusted because he (with Sampson as likely collaborator) made up too much (for example, portraying Sampson at the battle of Yorktown when even he admitted she enlisted the following May). But what to do with Mann’s allegations about sexuality: that Sampson had an affair with a beautiful heiress in Philadelphia (a chaste one in his 1797 version, a warmly erotic one in the 1830s unpublished manuscript) or that hearsay in her neighborhood had it that she denied her husband “the rites of the marriage bed” (possible because she stopped having children after she had three).

I wasn’t going to find out via Mann or any other documents, so I embarked on a voyage of discovery of context (just as I did for example with what it meant to be a weaver, a Baptist, a member of the Light Infantry, and other such topics). There was a lot to read about heterosexuality, same-gender sex, cross-dressing in England, but, when I started, there was next to nothing (save for Jonathan Katz’s anthologies) about early America. I had a feeling that, for colonial America, the subject came to life among scholars as I was working on it, and I am grateful to the scholars who joined me in trying to puzzle out these mysteries.

I ended up writing a long chapter, “The Sexual Landscape in Eighteenth-Century New England,” which I later ditched, in part because the manuscript was just

too long, but mostly because I just could not draw dots for connections with Sampson. I was left with speculation. So I distributed it as context where it was relevant. Was she "lesbian" as some claim? I doubt both versions of the romance in Mann's tellings. Other scholars may draw different conclusions. We have a growing sense of the likely and the possible in early American expressions of sexuality. This is another reason for historians to take on life histories of early Americans of all classes.

SP: Do you think Deborah Sampson would like your life history of her? Do you think you were not only taken but taken in by her, as Alan Taylor has suggested in his review of the book?

AY: Oh, I think Sampson would love the book. After all, a book made her a celebrity, and my book may help make her better known. I don't think she would mind my correcting Mann or saying she collaborated with him in his tall tales. She would wink at me. She would love the idea that an independent producer in Hollywood is developing a movie about her.

Alan Taylor's review was a joy: appreciative, analytical, critical. Every author should be so blessed. He brings us back to another of Jill Lepore's propositions. A biographer ends up either loving or rejecting his subject; a microhistorian preserves a distance by pursuing mysteries. I was doing both. I don't think I was taken in by Sampson because I was so skeptical of my evidence and because I was also doing history. There's no question I was intrigued by her and that I admired her. And I think I have told a life which others may interpret in different ways. The film may be a good medium to portray the mysteries and uncertainties about Deborah Sampson.

Further Reading:

For further information on Deborah Sampson, see Herman Mann's biography of her, *The Female Review* (Boston, 1866). This edition, edited by John Adams Vinton, is available in some libraries as a 1972 Arno Press imprint. It is also available in a digitized version in the Harvard University Library Open Collections. Also see Julie Wheelwright, *Amazons and Military Maids: Women who Dressed as Men in Pursuit of Life, Liberty and Happiness* (London, 1989).

For the general background of women in Deborah Sampson's world, see Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect & Ideology in Revolutionary America* (New York, 1980); and Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Boston, 1980). For background on New England Baptist women in particular, see Susan Juster, *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics & Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England*(Ithaca, 1994). For the context of women and weaving in New England, see Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Wheels, Looms, and the Gender Division of Labor in Eighteenth-Century New England," *William & Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 55:1 (Jan. 1998): 3-38. Issues about women and army life in the Revolution are ably

covered in Holly A. Mayer, *Belonging to the Army: Camp Followers and Community during the American Revolution* (Columbia, S.C., 1996).

For early American sexuality, see "Special Issue: Sexuality in Early America," *William & Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 60:1 (January 2003).

A helpful discussion of microhistory can be found in Jill Lepore, "Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography," *Journal of American History* 88:1 (June 2001): 129-44.

Further work by Alfred Young includes *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution* (Boston, 1999), and two edited volumes, *The American Revolution* (Dekalb, Ill., 1976) and *The American Revolution Reconsidered* (Dekalb, Ill., 1993). He sums up his life at the point of his "retirement" from Northern Illinois University in "The Outsider and the Progress of a Career in History," *William & Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 52 (July 1995): 419-512; Alan Taylor reviews his scholarship as a whole in "The Transformer," *New Republic* (June 21, 2004), 32-37.

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Common-place asked Sarah M. S. Pearsall, who has been a fellow at the Newberry Library this year, to interview Alfred F. Young about his book *Masquerade: The Life and Times of Deborah Sampson, Continental Soldier* (New York, 2004). Young's life-long commitment to history from the bottom up has inspired many early Americanists. We wondered what new challenges he faced when writing about a woman who became a continental soldier.

Alfred F. Young, emeritus professor of history at Northern Illinois University and senior research fellow at the Newberry Library, Chicago, was recognized by the Organization of American Historians in 2000 for distinguished service to the historical profession. *Masquerade* was a finalist in history for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for 2004; his essays, some old and some new, will appear in *Liberty Tree: Ordinary People and the American Revolution*, forthcoming from NYU Press, after which he hopes to complete *In the Streets of Boston: The Making of the American Revolution*.