

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: Loughborough University		
Unit of Assessment: D27 English Language and Literature		
Title of case study: Enriching staff and public understanding of Women's History through events, exhibitions, and creative activities at the National Civil War Centre		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2013-2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Catie Gill	Lecturer Early Modern Writing	Gill: 2007-present
Dr Sara Read	Lecturer in English	Read: 2013-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2017-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Representations of the English Civil Wars are dominated by accounts of men's military and civic activities, yet Loughborough University research on women's religiosity, politics, family circumstances and health demonstrated that the story of these years is incomplete if it does not attend to gender. Gill and Read collaborated on three projects with the UK's National Civil War Centre to extend the representation of women in the museum, with the following impacts: 1) diversified the content of a four-year exhibition 'The World Turned Upside Down' (2019 - 2023); 2) empowered museum staff and volunteers to confidently tell stories about women's history, and 3) changed public understanding of and increased their engagement with women's histories through creative activities focused on the NCWC collections.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Gill and Read's research reveals a gendered dimension fundamental to developments in social and religious history in the seventeenth century. For instance, Read's work on the literary and cultural representations of female reproductive bleeding has shown that loyalist propaganda from the civil war-era sometimes sought to undermine opponents by likening Parliament to a menstruating woman [R1]. This finding illustrates how gendered insults were deployed in propaganda, and through Read's analysis such language may now be viewed as a significant element in the war of words, a key front in these wars. Read's co-edited scholarly edition [R2] provides extracts from women's writing that reflects on the physical and spiritual effects of the war, as was the case for Puritan Brilliana, Lady Harley, whose letters describe the siege of her home, and the toll this took on her health. Read and her co-editors searched amongst archives and little-known print and manuscript sources to locate the texts that they provide for their readers.</p> <p>In 'Margaret Cavendish and War', Gill asks whether the line between truth and fiction is blurred in the accounts that Cavendish produced in response to the battle of Marsden Moor (1644) and the siege of Colchester (1648), both notable for the scale of the Royalist defeat [R3]. Her assertion that fiction offers greater scope than biography in terms of depicting atrocities is a salient finding for Cavendish studies. Gill's research also analyses the decade of national instability and religious uncertainty that the civil war resulted in. She focuses on the Quakers, who were the fastest-growing religious organisation of the post-war period and, significantly, illuminates how non-elite women found a voice within this movement. She has uncovered examples of women's responses to changes of government, and their experience of imprisonment [R4].</p>		

Gill and Read's investigation of facets of women's everyday life thereby challenges earlier assumptions about which incidents are of national importance to British history. Gill reveals individual Quaker women's stories and presents evidence of the real influence that ordinary women had in their religious communities. Likewise, Read shifts perceptions of gender and relationships, such as through analysing for the first time how men and women interacted at times of reproductive trauma such as miscarriage [R5]. Read has written about historical midwifery practices in popular history periodicals (*Discover Your Ancestors; Who Do You Think You Are?*) and peripatetically elsewhere in her output as a literary historian, including an ODNB entry on a midwife, Elizabeth Whipp (d. 1646). In her debut novel *The Gossips' Choice*, Read draws directly on her research to convey the life and times of a midwife in 1665. These interconnected research foci work together to address the false perception that the English civil-war period (1642-51) had a lesser impact on the lives of women.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

R1 Sara Read, *Menstruation and the Female Body in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). <https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9781137355027>

R2 Rachel Adcock, Sara Read and Anna Ziomek, eds, *Flesh and Spirit: An Anthology of Seventeenth-Century Women's Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014). <https://manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/9780719090233/>

R3 Catie Gill, 'Margaret Cavendish and War', in *A Companion to the Cavendishes*, ed. by Lisa Hopkins and Tom Rutter (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), pp. 441-67. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/11950344>

R4 Catie Gill, "'Harden not thy Heart": "Antinomian" Appeals to Rulers in Restoration England', in *New Critical Studies on Early Quaker Women, 1650-1800*, ed. by Michele Lise Tarter and Catie Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 41-64. <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/new-critical-studies-on-early-quaker-women-1650-1800-9780198814221>

R5 Sara Read, "'Before Midnight she had Miscarried": Women, Men and Miscarriage in Early Modern England', co-authored with Jennifer Evans, *Journal for Family History*, 40.1 (2015), 3-23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0363199014562924>

The items listed in R1-R4 have been published by presses with a rigorous review process. R1 was nominated for the Women's [History Network Panel Prize](#) (2014) and reviewed in the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, and other major journals; R2 is an edited collection of work by a number of unknown or understudied Civil-War era women writers, introduced and presented in modernised versions. The significance and rigor of the research in R4 has been recognised in five review essays (see Oxford University Press academic product web page, '[Reviews and Awards](#)'). R5 is a peer-reviewed academic article for a leading journal in the field of history of the family and social sciences.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The National Civil War Centre brings visitors and online audiences to an increased appreciation of this charged period of seventeenth-century history. Typically attracting 17,000 visitors per year, including 20% that are school children or under 18 years of age, its core support is strong amongst interest groups such as re-enactors of civil-war history [S1]. The museum, run by Newark and Sherwood District Council, has been gaining recognition since opening in 2014, through accreditation, national status, and its ambitious goals, but is constantly seeking new and creative ways to diversify its audience and promote engagement with its collection. Discovering the work of Gill and Read through the researchers' longstanding commitment to disseminate their findings via popular history, including a Quaker Society publication (2013), and a *History Today* article (2015) on

women's anti-war demonstrations in 1643, the Team Leader of Exhibitions appointed them as advisors in 2017. The projects undertaken have led to three main impacts.

1) Diversified the content of the exhibition 'The World Turned Upside Down' (2019-2023) at the National Civil War Centre

Our research on women's lives enabled the NCWC to address a problem they had identified with its previously male dominated exhibitions, as *'there should be more about women's stories in the Civil War'* in the museum [S2]. This was achieved firstly during the consultation process for the exhibition 'The World Turned Upside Down', when the research in R1-5 was discussed, then latterly through improving how the Centre presents and interprets its permanent collection.

In 2017, the Team Leader of Exhibitions proposed a new project *'to capture the excitement and experiment of this period'*, and *'the impact on people'* through an exhibition titled 'The World Turned Upside Down' [S2]. A report by heritage consultants DBA Consulting commissioned by Newark and Sherwood District Council during the planning stages for the exhibition indicated that within a visitor focus group *'some felt there should be more about women's stories in the Civil War'*, a point shared by some volunteers [S2]. The museum reflected that it *'wanted but didn't have'* adequate knowledge of women's history, resolving to make future exhibitions more inclusive [S2]. Seeking a more *"balanced version" of people's experiences during this key period of English history'* has become a strategic goal, as noted by the Learning and Participation Manager [S3].

The Team Leader of Exhibitions wanted to ensure that women were central to the story, as *'too often, they are peripheral'* [S2]. Mindful not to reinforce this assumption, the museum sourced a new and unnerving object to display: a scold's bridle – a muzzle to put over women's faces which stops them from talking (Fig. 1 below). He consulted Gill as her research about Quakers demonstrates that women could express agency, even when faced with persecution, for instance through writings that seek to gain a commitment from figures of authority to show clemency [R2]. As a direct consequence of Gill's research, the display includes an audio reproduction of the words of servant and Quaker Dorothy Waugh, who wrote the century's only known account by a woman of being placed in the bridle.

Our research has further enabled diversification in the permanent collection, ensuring that it is curated and contextualised in ways that maximise public understanding of women's history. In addition to the scold's bridle, we worked on the display of the birthing chair, thought to be the only one on display in an English museum (Fig. 2). To improve the context in which the chair is viewed, Read directed museum staff to authentic accounts of the birthing chamber. Working together to contextualise the artefact, Read and museum staff re-vitalised the display so visitors could smell and touch items such as straw, linens, and herbs such as 'mother thyme', which evoke the preparations for childbirth in a seventeenth-century home.

2) Empowered museum staff and volunteers to confidently tell stories about women's history

Once 'The World Turned Upside Down' opened (September 2019), the focus of Gill and Read's impact switched to enabling staff and volunteers to use the objects to confidently tell women's stories. The Team Leader of Exhibitions appreciated how Read and Gill's *'grasp of the subject and ability to present very human experiences quickly, provided the museum with the means to engage and inspire not only general museum visitors but also primary and secondary students'*, insisting they *'inspired confidence and personal development within the museum team'* [S2].



Left: Figure 1: Example of a scold's bridle. Credit: Wellcome Collection. Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) Right: Figure 2: The Birthing Chair currently displayed at the NCWC. Credit: Science Museum Group. Parturition chair, Germany, 1601-1700 (CC BY 4.0).

Simultaneously, The Learning and Participation Officer (LPO) began working more closely with Read to understand the birthing chair. Read's research has evaluated pregnancy both from the expectant woman's perspective and through analysing how medical professionals intervened in the birthing chamber and in infant feeding [R2, R3, R4]. The LPO observed that the birthing chair 'is an object that we have found very difficult to talk about with young people' [S4]. Empowered with what Read provided via talks (in person and in online presentations), the LPO reflected that she could now 'explain the way in which birth happened at this time [...] and how the chair would have been a helpful and comfortable part of the process' [S4].

3) Changed public understanding of and increased engagement with women's histories through creative activities focused on the NCWC collections

The Centre long strategized the need to network with organisations beyond its usual interest-groups in order to increase and diversify their audiences [S1]. In 2019-20, Gill and Read gave ticketed talks on aspects of seventeenth-century women's history which according to the Team Leader of Exhibitions were 'two of the most popular talks at the museum and best attended; they attracted a much more diverse audience', and which drew on their research [S2, R1-5]. Gill and Read's short video that was filmed at the Centre also reached a significant online audience, c.4.5K viewings, and Read's online presentation for the NCWC foregrounding this object has received 455 viewings to date [S5, S6].

A third event, a symposium focussing on the birthing chair, included visitors from 4 national midwifery groups, 4 universities, and the BBC's Clinical Editor for *Call the Midwife*. A fourth event, 'What Stories it Could Tell', was the first creative writing event to be held at the Centre. As the Learning and Participation Manager attests

'the engaging events you held from September 2019-February at the museum using key objects in the collection in a creative way, have been very effective in attracting local people who had never previously visited the museum and in numbers that are significantly higher than we had previously attracted to our events' [S3].

Surveys from the participants at the two events confirm increased understanding of women's history: *'to find out about the role of the gossip was a revelation. It has given me a different perspective but would like more information'*; *'[I] didn't realise that historically women had this level of support during childbirth'*; *'the event has given me greater understanding of maternity practises throughout history'* [S7, S8]. As a result of the creative writing exercises held at the Read and Gill events, 93.75%, and 46% at the symposium agreed their understanding of the birthing chair had increased [S7, S8]. In addition, the creative writing event attracted 6 (out of 15) participants who were new to the Centre.

Seven members of a Midlands-based Creative Writing group (Fosseway Writers) attended the creative writing event, 'What Stories it Could Tell' in February 2019. Directly because of what they learned about taking inspiration from historical objects, two of the seven wrote stories about or influenced by the birthing chair, which were then included in *The Brinwade Chronicles: A Collection of Gothic Short Stories* published in September 2020 and launched at the Newark Book Festival, online (a festival which has previously attracted 9,000 visitors). The writer of the story focussing solely on the chair reflected that the workshop had inspired *'something that had potential to be developed into an interesting short story'*, which he called 'The Chair' [S9]. Another story ('The World Spins') also refers to the birthing chair; neither writer had prior knowledge of the object before the workshop [S9]. The group's Chair reflected on the creative process used in the workshop: *'we had learned some new techniques that we could incorporate into our practice'* [S9].

Strategically, these engagement activities are important to the Centre, as noted by the Learning and Participation Manager:

'These ways to encourage people to engage more with the museum and our collections, whether in person or online, represent a very positive and important development for the National Civil War Centre' [S3].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

S1. DBA consulting. National Civil War Centre Audience Research Report Volume 1. Key Findings and Next Steps, June, 2020.

Testimonial from Team Leader of Exhibitions and Collections and Outreach Officer, NCWC, 16.11.2020

S2. Testimonial from Team Leader of Exhibitions and Collections and Outreach Officer, NCWC, 16.11.2020.

S3. Testimonial of Learning and Participation Manager, NCWC, 05.01.2021.

S4. Testimonial from the Learning and Participation Officer, NCWC, 03.03.2020.

S5. Screenshots of social media engagement with online resource 'The Birthing Chair', by Sara Read. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqnfF2OC9wl&t=4s>, 11.01.2021

S6. Screenshot of the Loughborough University Facebook page engagement with the Fake News Film

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OaDePcBqxBw&list=PLPj9Kg8KZEf1JtkCTYhGX-CI6Blv7ATUf&index=3&t=3s> 14.12.2020.

S7. Questionnaires from participants at 'Aiding Upright Births' at NCWC on the birthing chair 28.02.2020.

S8. Questionnaires from participants at 'What Stories It Could Tell' at the NCWC on the birthing chair, 28.02.2020.

S9. Testimonial of the Nick Rowe, Chair of Fosseway Writers, 04.12.2020.