**A review by Rose Hendrie and Ruth Mather**

**A Colloquium: Writing Marginal Lives, or a Medley of Characters | Saturday 8th January 2011 | CECS**

On Saturday 8th January, students, staff, and those drawn from further afield, emerged bleary-eyed (and perhaps taut-bellied) from the Christmas period, for the **Writing Marginal Lives conference** at King’s Manor. Professor Harriet Guest, the convenor, immediately tickled the curiosity of the colloquium-goers by outlining the concern with, ‘recovering the life stories of relatively hidden people; subjects whose voices may have been obscured by differences of class, gender, or religion’.

York’s Professor John Barrell, of the Centre for Eighteenth Century Studies, began proceedings with the – perhaps misleadingly titled – paper, *‘Edward Pugh: Not Much of a Life’*. I was not alone in being unfamiliar with this artist and topographer – famous for miniatures and landscape paintings, and even exhibited, multiple times between 1793 and 1808, at the Royal Academy. Though, neither was I alone in being won over by the charms of Pugh’s extraordinary (and ultimate) work, *Cambria Depicta: a tour through north Wales illustrated with picturesque views by a native artist*. John Barrell walked us through Pugh’s life and in particular this book, which provided a pictorial and narrative view of Wales from the perspective of a native Welsh-speaker, rather than an alien traveller. *Cambri Depicta* included interjections of gossip, amusing incidents and idiosyncratic musings, providing a personal and insightful tour of the surrounding area. Some of the images also posed challenges – for example, one scene showed a widow weeping, a political symbol in a time when criticism of the Napoleonic Wars focused upon the common tragedy of families who lost their menfolk to the conflict. However, Pugh had himself attempted to contribute to the war effort by joining a militia regiment composed of artists, although this was not a success. That there is insufficient evidence to resolve this apparent contradiction in Pugh’s political ideology is just one of the difficulties which Professor Barrell highlighted in discussing his attempts to build tantalizing glimpses of a life into a more complete picture using scant evidence.

Professor Colin Jones, from Queen Mary at the University of London provided the second paper, entitled *Charles-Germain de Saint-Aubin, a Voltairean Embroiderer at the Court of Louis XV*. Brought to court by the patronage of the King’s official mistress, Madame de Pompadour, Charles-Germain appeared rather pompous in his portrait, in which he looks the image of the successful bourgeois courtier. Little did we know that this paper would descend into a bizarre – and frankly rollicking – tour of unusual caricatures and engravings, ranging from curiously ‘humanised’ butterflies in *Essai de Papilloneries Humanies*, to satirical, scatological images. The *pièce de résistance* comprised of the *Livre de caricature tant bonnes que mauvais*, compiled collectively by the Saint-Aubin brothers between the 1740s and 1770s, and familiarly known as their ‘livre de culs’: ‘book of arses’. The key target of this work was Charles-Germain’s former patron, the Madame de Pompadour, who the ungrateful royal embroiderer lampooned for her excessive political maneuvering, deemed to have a destructively emasculating effect on the king. Had it become publicly known in the eighteenth century, this politically dangerous humour would probably have caused the book to be burnt, and its authors placed in the Bastille. Though, scatological tittering aside Colin Jones’s paper illustrated how ‘marginal lives’, with their straddling of both the public and private spheres, could become a vehicle for political exploration and (albeit private) challenge.

From private betrayal, we moved to a character who launched a much more open attack on his former friends. Professor Jon Mee of Warwick discussed the work of Charles ‘Louse’ Pigott, apparently given his less-than-flattering nickname by his Jockey Club comrades due to his rather relaxed attitude to hygiene. Nevertheless, these friends – who included such Whig luminaries as Charles James Fox – were happy to sub Louse whenever his gambling got him into financial difficulties. It must therefore have come as quite a shock, when Pigott published a series of exposes entitled *The Jockey Club, or a Sketch of the Manners of the Age* in 1792. His motivation was political – the radical Pigott had become disillusioned with the Whig party, who he felt were failing to live up to their reformist credentials. While the violent turn taken by the French Revolution in 1792 caused many former supporters to temper their enthusiasm for similar political change in Britain, Pigott became even more staunchly republican, suggesting that George III should share the fate of France’s luckless monarchs. He shared none of the respect many within the popular radical movement had for the virtues of the ancient British constitution. Thus, dissatisfied with the lukewarm enthusiasm of the Whigs for radical reform, Pigott used his personal knowledge of the leaders of the party to undermine the moral authority of their rule, littering his account of drinking, gambling and general debauchery with such crude sexual puns that he was criticized for publishing a work as scurrilous as the tittle-tattle it contained. Following the three-part original, Pigott went on to publish *The Female Jockey Club* in 1794, in which he criticized the public display of Whig elite women such as Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire. His works not only challenged the Whig party’s moral laxity and networks of patronage, but advocated an alternative morality based on challenging the evident sexual energies of the group into companionate marriage. Facing prosecution for libel, Pigott attempted to flee the country but eventually faced his trial, at which he made another spectacular volte-face, defending himself in the language of patrician Whiggism by invoking his right to liberty under the Bill of Rights and the very system of constitutional monarchy he had proposed destroying. Whether this reflects a genuine change in his political sympathies is not known – his ability to change his ideas is evident from his earlier rejection of Fox and Sheridan as the champions of reform. Thus, while his radical ideals may have been marginal within the wider campaign for popular reform, Pigott reflects the struggles of a movement trying to find its ideological foundations in the political upheaval of the late eighteenth century.

It’s never easy to be the last act before lunch, but Oxford’s Dr. Mark Philp managed to silence any rumbling tummies with a fascinating insight into the private life of William Godwin. Dr. Philp showed us how the digitized diaries of Godwin can be used to indentify patterns in his communication and visits from friends. Doing just this revealed an unusually intense period of visits from and to a lady by the name of Sarah Elwes. Even more interesting, for the gossipy among us, the pattern of these visits is very similar to those of two other women – namely Mary Wollestonecraft and Mary Jane Clairmont. One can only speculate as to whether Elwes also shared a more intimate relationship with Godwin, while the other details of her life offered further scope for mystery: Elwes’ previous husband prosecuting for adultery but failing to claim the damages won. Perhaps the tale of Sarah Elwes would be better documented had her possible relationship with Godwin become official, but instead it has been left to our imaginations to answer the questions posed by Dr. Philp’s ability to turn dry statistics into a potential love story.

While the morning’s characters were marginalized by accident or circumstance, Dr. Emma Major’s talk, *Exemplarity and Anonymity: women and praise in the long Eighteenth Century*, detailed the way in which women writers in the late eighteenth century deliberately marginalized themselves. The afternoon continued with Dr. Kate Fullagar from Macquarie University giving a paper entitled *Writing Indigenous Biography: The Parallel Lives of Ostenaco and Mai*. This was complemented by Professor Iain McCalman, from Sydney, providing the ultimate ‘marginal life’: *In search of pre-contact Indigenous lives. The narrative of the Barrier Reef castaway Barbara Thompson*. Both talks rounded off the conference with a more exotic feel, highlighting interactions between British people and indigenous cultures. Dr. Fullagar showed that Ostenaco reached sufficient celebrity in London to be painted by Reynolds, whilst Professor McCalman discussed how the story of castaway Barbara Thompson, who was rescued and adopted into an aborigine tribe, were sidelined in the early Victorian period in favour of nationalist accounts of primitive savages.

This account provides a fairly base outline of what was an incredibly rich set of biographies by the eminent academics – or should I say detectives – of this colloquium. In fact, writing so briefly on ‘Writing Marginal Lives’ appears to be a curious adherence to ‘the problems of producing biographies of obscure, incomplete or fragmentary lives’, as outlined by the conference programme. Yet, this fascinating subject certainly illuminated a ‘Medley of Characters’ of the eighteenth century that would perhaps otherwise remain ‘off the beaten track’.