

Emma Donoghue in Conversation with Sally Wainwright

An interview with Sally Wainwright OBE, creator/screenwriter/director of the Bafta-nominated BBC/HBO series *Gentleman Jack* (2019–)

EMMA DONOGHUE Having written biography and biographical fiction as well as screenplays, I'm very aware of the gulf that can exist between those forms. Frankly, I'm in awe of you for creating such an artistically and popularly successful TV series, drawing on a vast archive and staying true to its spirit and texture. Could you talk me through the long development of *Gentleman Jack*?

SALLY WAINWRIGHT From growing up in Halifax, I've always known about Anne Lister. My first real introduction to her was Jill [Liddington's] book [*Female Fortune: Land, Gender and Authority. The Anne Lister Diaries and Other Writings, 1833–36* (1998)]. It was life-changing, I suppose, in that for the first time it gave me this massive hit of just who Anne was. And then I went off to try and find out everything about her – this is pre-Google. I met Helena [Whitbread]. Both Jill and Helena were really generous with their time, and I just binged on Anne Lister. I'd been writing telly for over ten years, so my natural reaction to being obsessed with something was, how can I turn this into a TV show?

I started by reading the diaries myself. I worked out how to use the code one afternoon. In Jill's *Presenting the Past: Anne Lister of Halifax, 1791–1840* (1994) there's a tiny bit of code – it says something about Tib's 'racing calendar' – so I worked it out letter by letter. It was a bit torturous, but it meant it sank in because I had to work it out myself rather than just being handed a key. So I did a massive amount of my own transcription. This was in 2001; the diaries [at West Yorkshire Archive Service] had actually been photographed and I paid for the whole thing to be put on to a disk. I printed off lots and lots of 1830s diary. But I wanted to go farther back. Where Jill starts basically is in 1834 when Anne Lister and Ann Walker get married, and she didn't really touch much on the courtship from 1832 on, so I went backwards and transcribed that.

I took six months off around 2003. For the first time I had too much work and I also had two little boys. I just decided to stop. All I did was

paint, and transcribe the Lister diaries. It was for fun. At the time I thought the show probably wouldn't ever get made because nobody wanted to know about somebody who wasn't famous. It was a real conundrum, that Anne Lister had been trapped in obscurity for so long simply because she was gay.

I wrote a treatment that was based very much on Jill's *Female Fortune*, but it was far too long and convoluted. I found it very hard to pin it down to something that was simple and sellable and people would get very quickly. Looking back, I think I didn't know myself what I wanted to say. I just wanted to dramatise Anne and get into her head and live in her world and make stories out of it. It went through various iterations. I kept on pitching the idea, but everybody turned it down, the BBC, Channel 4 . . . Helena told me she'd once talked to a TV producer who'd said, 'There'll only ever be one film made about Anne Lister.' Which was probably true at that time, but now I can imagine any number of films about Anne being made.

It was a long journey. But I've had so many shows like that – germs of ideas that have been in there for years. I never stopped working on *Gentleman Jack*. I even thought about trying a contemporary version.

ED Did you consider other titles for the series?

SW An early one was *The Trick of Debauching Miss Walker* – a quote from the journal. Then, when *Downton Abbey* [2010–15] was very successful, I thought of a version called *Shibden Hall* – the hierarchy of upstairs-downstairs.

Obviously that was the wrong way to go because Anne is so central to her own journal – surprise surprise! – that she overtakes, she dominates everything.

ED Were there other shows or films you found helpful as models of how to make a biographical drama closely based on written sources?

SW None that I can remember. People call *Gentleman Jack* an adaptation of the diaries. For want of a better word, fine, but the word just doesn't do the process justice. There's some invention, but really it's a dramatisation of a real life. I find it a bit frustrating, because when we think of an adaptation we think of something Andrew [Davies] has adapted, say *War and Peace*, *Pride and Prejudice*, where you've already got a story, plot, characters . . . so, you know, what's left to do? [laughs]

ED You have a long and notable record of creating gritty shows about rebellious women, British and often Yorkshire ones in particular. What previous experience of yours was most crucial in making you the right person – I'd say the only possible person – to create *Gentleman Jack*?

SW When I was writing *Happy Valley* I'd basically wanted to do my own version of *Nurse Jackie* (2009–15), my all-time favourite show. I had to disguise it, obviously, so my protagonist's a policewoman. I wanted it to be very dark, but very funny. And I think it was that idea of writing a show that's a portrait – because I'd never quite thought of TV as that before – that helped me get away from the *Downton Abbey* paradigm when writing *Gentleman Jack*. What I hadn't really taken on board until getting down to the

nitty-gritty of writing the damn thing was, given the time constraints of an eight-hour series, it had to be a portrait of Anne. The fictional story about the Sowdens [Anne's tenants] to my mind is the weakest part of the show because it's one of the only times we go away from her.

ED What enabled *Gentleman Jack* to finally get commissioned? Did you just find the right people to work with, or was it a matter of your own growing muscle, or the changing times?

SW The show was greenlit in 2016, after *Happy Valley* had been massive for the BBC at home and globally. Charlotte Moore [BBC Director of Content since early 2016] asked me, 'What do you want to do next?' It was the first time I'd heard that, rather than 'Tell us what you've got.' It was a combination of the fact that my star had risen and changing attitudes. Now nobody was going to think *Gentlemen Jack* was too fringe. The show could be a portrait of this woman, one of whose characteristics was that she was gay.

ED There's a cliché about historians doing scrupulous, unpaid, unnoticed research, and then 'Hollywood' coming along and simplifying or distorting it to win it a wide audience. Your collaborative relationships with historians and librarians couldn't present more of a contrast. Jill Liddington credits your endless curiosity with pushing her back to the archives to edit and publish a second book of excerpts, this time from 1832 (*Nature's Domain*), and I was also deeply impressed that when you won the Wellcome Screenwriting Fellowship in 2016 you funded the restoration and digitisation of Lister's diaries.

SW It was only when I started writing that I realised I'd possibly bitten off more than I could chew. In October 2016 we rented a villa in the hills of Majorca, really secluded, and I remember thinking, this is great, I've got two weeks, I can really get my head into it. But I soon realised I couldn't write the show just based on Jill's *Female Fortune* and a little bit of the diary. I needed to transcribe the whole period I was covering, to make my own selections. I transcribed for four or five months, then I realised how long it was going to require, so I took Anne Choma on to transcribe for me. I wanted to know everything. When Anne [Choma] was starting out, she said, 'Well, I won't include things like the day's temperature,' but I said, 'No, do, it might be sunny that day, or rainy, and that could make a difference to the mood!' I wanted to get immersed, every tiny detail. You only get to know Anne when you get into that level of detail day after day. And I think I do know her, in a way I didn't when I started pitching this project twenty years ago.

ED How do you think *Gentleman Jack* might have been different or received differently if you'd managed to make it in the early 2000s?

SW Back then, I don't know if I'd have had the confidence to say this is going to take longer than I thought. I'd have been more dependent on Jill's book rather than having the confidence to own the material myself.

Also, *The Crown* [2016–] was ground-breaking in that it was this massive co-production with Netflix, and everybody was trying to get co-pros with

America. We went over and had meetings with big companies, and then HBO came on board. We had the kind of budget that you just didn't get in TV before. So again, *Gentleman Jack* happened at the right time. It was actually great that we hadn't got it greenlit earlier when it would have had a more limited budget. Now we could really go to town. The arrival on the high flyer [carriage] in Episode 1 – I'd wondered how to introduce Anne, a character as big as Anne Lister – that was shot with a Russian arm. Basically it's an SUV with a crane on top with a camera attached. Really expensive bits of kit that you would normally only get in film.

ED Did you always plan to focus on the 1832–4 period, and why?

SW I really didn't want to do a linear biopic. I wanted to start at the point where she was most fascinating – because I could always work backwards, use flashbacks. When Anne came back from Hastings in 1832 after the breakup with Vere Hobart, it was a real low ebb and a turning point. She deliberately looked around her and thought, 'What woman will I pick?' She decided to turn her estate around and make it somewhere worthy to invite her aristocratic friends. She became this formidable and exciting person. So that seemed like a really good place to start, when she was forty-two. I was fifty-three when I began writing this. Twenty-year-olds are boring! Starting earlier in her life, you'd be in this thing of, it's all about sex and romance, and apart from it being gay, it just isn't that different. Starting in 1832 gave me a much more layered character. In that period Anne's got some real agency, at a time when women just didn't, in a world where they were constantly infantilised. In season two, she decides to turn Northgate House into a hotel and casino. You're thinking, '*How* did you get the idea for a hotel in Halifax?' She was a real entrepreneur. Unlike what a lot of people think, she wasn't using Ann Walker's money. She was borrowing lots from people like Mr Waterhouse. She was ridiculously ambitious. The vision! The balls!

ED What genres were you aware of drawing on? I'm thinking of the romance, the eccentric-family drama, the prestige period drama, suspense/crime, comedy . . .

SW I never really thought about genre. I just wanted to tell Anne's story. But I didn't want it to be another BBC costume drama, dressing-up box, namby-pamby Jane Austen stuff – I'd do anything to undermine that. So the comedy, silly bits of surreal stuff, her talking to camera . . . which to me was a no-brainer because it's just like the immediacy of reading the journal. In her diary Anne presents herself as she'd like to be portrayed. Not consciously – she never tells us lies, in fact quite the opposite, is brutally frank. I don't think she thought anybody else was going to read it, really it was an *aide-mémoire* – so she could be as frank as she wanted, which is endearing and engaging in itself, because you can trust her.

ED Tell me about the work of shaping story arcs from this material you were already so familiar with.

SW I have a lot of support at Lookout Point [production company]. We're working to strict deadlines and I have to churn out an episode every two months, whereas on other shows it would normally take me one. My script

editors and producers – basically there's a team who meet and discuss the diaries, how we're going to turn them into TV. You try to develop a process, but the process develops all the time. It's so mercurial, the content of the diaries, it can slip through your fingers when you try to dramatise it. So, if we are lucky enough to get a third season commissioned, we've got a new plan for how we'd approach it, to save a little bit of time . . . But it's just a very hard process. In the diaries there are almost no stories with a beginning, middle and end. There are shaggy dog stories where I'd get really excited, thinking ooh, this could run right across from Episode 3 to 7. . . and then Anne just stops mentioning whatever it was.

I think going forward I might start letting myself take a few liberties. Borrow bits from earlier in the journal, which will still reflect the truth. But then again, there might be so much stuff to use as we move forward.

ED Is it ever uncomfortable for you as a writer with a working-class background to be writing from the side of the landlords?

SW One of the misconceptions from some viewers is that Anne was an aristocrat, and of course she wasn't even landed gentry – more like the level below, yeomanry, because the Shibden estate isn't that big, only about 400 acres. Until she inherited it, she never had any money – always had to borrow or wait for handouts. When Anne got the estate, she had to work really hard. She was so careful with money. She was very good to her tenants, for that period, and paid for one boy to go to a good school. I know she had children working down her coal pit, which is weird, but it's what people did then. We have to see them in their own time, their own context. In season two she's trying to influence every vote she can for the Tories, and I've tried to make it funny rather than diss her for it. And it kind of works, because Halifax was really radicalised, so she was never going to win! It's about presenting the complexities of someone who isn't always likeable. There's no drama in people who are just worthy and good.

The show's a bit . . . is picaresque the right word? It's episodic, and Anne's roguish, and you feel quite ambivalent about her. I mean, I'm basically in love with her, but I can see that she's horrible sometimes. That's why she's interesting to dramatise, because she's so complex. So Machiavellian – I think she had to be. So profoundly intelligent, every page there's something that surprises you. So eloquent and witty and resourceful.

I love Suranne [Jones] in the part. She's got this very modern energy, and Anne Lister was born out of her time, and almost like from another planet. But also Suranne's physical energy. She can be all angular – not in real life, she's very feminine, which is a bit of a shock when you meet her. There are very few people who can carry a TV show. I now can't imagine anyone else who could play Anne.

ED Was there material you found you needed to leave out because it might disgust or shock viewers? Or because there just wasn't room for everything?

SW I've not come across anything in the 1830s diaries that I wouldn't include in the show. In season two, Anne comes out of her watercloset and says, 'My

bowels are all wrong again.’ This is how meticulous a diarist she is! I’d love to have a little running joke that every episode we find out what’s going on with her bowels. But that’s the problem with only having eight hours per season, it’s just not enough. We covered about eighteen months in season one and the same in season two. It’s heart-breaking how many scenes we shot and had to drop: there’s the editing when you’re writing the script, then the editing to get the page count down, then the editing of the stuff you’ve shot, and what tend to go are the incidental gems. There aren’t as many flashbacks in season two because we realised, having made season one, that they tended to be the things that got cut out because they weren’t germane to the plot, they were just little luxuries. Like a massive scene in season one that Suranne was really glad we dropped, because it was a five-pager of her talking French with Cuvier [the French naturalist]. I was really sad about that.

ED Given that Lister has had quite a lot of attention paid to her since the 1980s, but specifically for her love life, I was thrilled by your series’ equal attention to her other prodigious ‘oddities’ – timing and measuring, long-distance walking, autopsy-attending, coal mining, quarrying . . . Given that she had her finger in so many pies, how did you decide which of her activities to focus the story on?

SW I’ve tried to show all Anne’s interests. I keep saying to Suranne that I want her to learn to juggle so I can include a scene where Anne’s doing about ten things and also juggling.

One of the things I love about Anne is her optimism, her belief that life is for living. She always seems to bounce back, move on, put it behind her. That’s something I find captivating about her because, like most people, I can obsess and worry about things and be miserable till the cows come home. If I’m down, I ask myself, ‘What would Anne Lister say to you?’ Pick yourself up off the floor and do something outside!

ED I want to finish by talking about the extraordinary response to the series worldwide. *Gentleman Jack* has finally brought Anne Lister to a mass audience, with effects ranging from plaques and statues and buildings named after her, to fan art and cosplay, to charity fundraising in Ann Walker’s name . . .

SW I’m very proud of the show. They’re making a documentary about the fans. I get these letters from all over the world, predominantly gay women but not all, about how it’s made them feel validated. Often it’s women who are already out, but the show’s made them feel more confident about who they are. Hopefully that’s because it doesn’t just concentrate on Anne’s sexuality. She was this fantastic polymath, so capable, so fascinated by everything. It presents a portrait that’s more holistic – not just her romance with Ann Walker, but her as an estate manager. I think people have responded so strongly because she’s this strong, complex, clever woman – *and* she’s gay.

Ann Walker was absolutely besotted with Anne Lister, starstruck, and I think there’s no doubt that she was gay too and didn’t know what to do

with it. I think that accounted for a lot of her inability to engage with the world or go out in the world. The only language they had was very private, like ‘dinky’ when they were talking about orgasm. So I imagine that must have been very compromising mentally, to live like that and not have the courage, the bizarre courage, of Anne Lister, who said, ‘This is me! Let’s get on with it.’ For all the furore about the blue plaque in York, they could have fixed something more about it: two people took part in that marriage, yet only one has their name in capital letters.

ED Was it hard to write season two given your awareness of this fandom – how many people out there are longing for such different things from it?

SW No, the pressures are all internal.

ED And now *Gentleman Jack* has prompted hundreds of volunteers to train themselves to contribute to a crowdsourced transcription, not only of the diaries, but of the huge cache of letters as well. As far as I know, this kind of virtuous feedback loop between a TV creator and the archive on which she’s drawing is unprecedented.

SW The whole thing is a unique situation. How rare it is to find such a fabulous historical document that hasn’t even been transcribed yet. It’s like suddenly going, ‘Look, this guy called Shakespeare wrote all these plays four hundred years ago and here they all are.’ Can we even imagine not knowing them? To me, Anne Lister is on that level – an extraordinary writer. One of my greatest fantasies is to have a published collection of her diaries on my bookshelf. That’s why I put money into the archive and that sort of thing. I can’t make it happen by myself, but I hope someday it will happen.

I do sometimes wonder, if I was given the chance to make an art film about Anne Lister, how different would it be from *Gentleman Jack*? Because the TV show is a conceit. It’s very accurate in many ways, but I sometimes have this notion, I’d love the chance to make a film where I could just represent what I have in my head about who Anne really was, in a more realistic way. If I made Anne Lister in the style of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, would that be more like stepping back into the past? I’ve got this fantasy that I travel back in time and end up in 1832 at Shibden Hall, and I’ve got nowhere to go because obviously nobody knows me, and obviously Anne won’t speak to me, I’m far too common . . .

This interview of 31 January 2022 has been edited for length and clarity.