# The Messenger House

Also by Janet Sutherland

Burning the Heartwood
Hangman's Acre
Bone Monkey
Home Farm

# The Messenger House

*Correspondence between now and then*



Janet Sutherland

Shearsman Books

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*For Lesley, Joe and Moon, with love.*


Baltic Sea
Estonia
Latvia
North Sea
Denmark
Lithuania
United Kingdom
Ireland
Belarus
Poland
Netherlands
Berlin
Warsaw
London
Germany
Belgium
Paris
Czechia
Slovakia
Ukraine
Moldova
Austria
Hungary
France
Romania
Croatia
Serbia
Black Sea
Italy
Rome
Bulgaria
Istanbul
Ankara
Portugal
Madrid
Tyrrhenian Sea
Greece
Spain
Lisbon
Turkey

# INTRODUCTION

## *Early Journeys*

When I was a child my maternal grandparents lived in a cottage in a village called Cranmore, old English Crane Mere, the Lake of the Cranes, a derivation that rose from land and water before settlement, an unsettled place in which birds, disturbed, would take flight out of open water. I didn't know that then, only knew about the pond where we'd sometimes take scraps of bread for the ducks. The village is still small, population 650, just a few miles from the town of Shepton Mallet in Somerset.

My grandparents[1] had bought two adjacent stone-built thatched cottages in Cranmore when they retired. These were one up, one down cottages. The downstairs room in the cottage they lived in also had an adjoining dining room/kitchen, a scullery (a word I particularly liked) and bathroom which at some point in the past had been built on the side. The next-door cottage was used as a storeroom. In later life Grandpa had taken up farming, after having been a GP, and he kept tools there, including woodwork and turning tools and his artist's materials – he enjoyed sketching and painting. This second cottage was kept as an outhouse, dark and dusty, out of bounds. Outside there was a shared footpath to the rest of the row which ran straight past the front door. My grandparents' cottages were at the road end, and across this shared footpath was the garden where Grandpa grew flowers and vegetables. His sister, my great aunt [confusingly called Aunty Bill], lived in another house in the same village and we used to visit her occasionally although they'd always argue. The cottage was dark inside, cool in summer; it had thick Somerset stone walls and small windows. When we arrived, having driven from Salisbury, we'd park outside in the lane, run up the footpath, open the front door and walk straight in.

My Granny was disabled. She had a familial spinal cerebellar degeneration which set in when she was around thirty and progressed very gradually, until in her seventies and eighties it caused severe disabilities of both movement and speech. She subsequently passed this on to two of her five children, my mother, Paddy,[2, 3]

ˈəʊnli wiː kʊd ˌʌndəˈstænd
ðə əˈsɛmbld
ˈvaʊəlz ænd ˈkɒnsənənts
əˈraɪvɪŋ leɪt
ænd ɪn dɪsˈɔːdə

and my Uncle David.[4]

ˈəʊnli ðə θriː ɒv ðɛm
kʊd ˌʌndəˈstænd hɪz spiːʧ
fɔːr ʌs hɪz lɑːf
bɪˈkeɪm ðə ˌdaɪəgˈnɒstɪk tuːl

Her balance, because of this, was poor and her speech slurred. This meant that, as children, our communication with Granny was limited and we didn't hear her side of the family history. As a five-year-old I remember games of Ludo, and her standing propped over the kitchen sink peeling vegetables, but I don't remember her voice. I don't remember her walking much either, and if she did it would have been with a Zimmer frame, crutches or a curious stick with a three-pronged foot. Strangely, she was the one who slept upstairs in the small bedroom under the eaves although she would have had to haul herself up the narrow staircase hanging on by the handrail, with Grandpa following behind in case she fell. He always slept downstairs on an old fashioned dark brown divan in one corner of the sitting room. There was an open coal fire in the grate which he would light in the small hours and keep burning all day, encouraging it when it fell to embers by covering the firebox with a page of newspaper. A dining table was pushed against the outside wall by the door with a chenille tasselled tablecloth in a rich dark red, piled so high with books and papers it was never used for meals. There was a bookcase against the internal wall with diamond paned glass in its doors which held among others an illustrated medical reference book on skin diseases. A budgie in a cage by the window could say one or two words, unlike ours which had only learned to bark like our dog. Below the window was a metal chest which, I discovered when they died, contained various pieces of silverware including an old-fashioned chamberstick,[5] which had come, tarnished, out of the 18th century.

It wasn't that far, just a forty-five mile drive to their cottage. But in those days without dual carriageways on twisting narrow roads with blind spots and hidden dips it would take an hour and a half each way. We went with Mum. Dad would stay home on the farm – consequently, the Cranmore drive was more peaceful. There would be no unnerving accelerations away from tailgating drivers, no swerving round sharp bends, no anxiety over which exit should be taken from a well-known roundabout in Salisbury, no sitting right behind another car on the long stretches where passing places were few and far between and no irritable tensing of shoulders under a for-best tweed jacket, no huffing, no puffing. There would be no travel sickness either. Travel sickness was a perennial problem for me on the way to Dad's sister in Bath when he was the driver.

*Milk Fevers*

here we are again  my father and I
he's doing the fine work  inserting
the needle  anxious but handy

I'm the child fieldworker
lifting a brown bottle
(Calcium Borogluconate) high  higher

checking for twists in the tube
watching practical gravity shift
fluid from one place to another

his calloused hand still  after
all this time  massaging
the subcutaneous gathering of liquid

in her kinked neck  if we are
lucky  she will stand at last
on churned mud  on calving blood

in a cold wind  with rooks cawing
from the copse  as they do
as they always do

These trips to Cranmore continued every six weeks or so until my grandmother's death in the September of 1981 when she was eighty-six and I was twenty-four. By then she'd spent eleven years on a ward in a geriatric hospital just outside Shepton Mallet following a fall when my grandfather discovered he could no longer pick her up. He was eight-and-a-half years older than her, and her falls eventually defeated him. He continued living in the cottage with some assistance from home helps, after she was admitted to the geriatric hospital, and died in early February 1979 when he was ninety-two and I was nearly twenty-two. After he died the cottages were cleared and sold. The new owner demolished them and rebuilt a modern house there, even though they'd been listed.

Wheat seed steeped
in arsenic
gives good clean crops[6]

*The Materials*

When we arrived, we'd hug our grandparents, then immediately ask if we could look in the Chinese Cabinet.[7] The cabinet was in a dark corner straight opposite the front door. Some of the damage to the contents had, no doubt, been acquired through age, but some was due to the exuberant handling of thirteen inquisitive grandchildren.

The five drawers included a South Seas folded piece of skin,[8] a piece of the Royal George,[9] a red bag containing 19th century German pfennigs, a *Brave Girls in War* booklet,[10] a handkerchief belonging to a Great Grandfather Corke in 1801,[11] a pair of Turkish slippers,[12] a measuring wheel, a bean containing six tiny ivory elephants,[13] a handmade doll with a head made from a walnut, and a whole multitude of other objects crammed into the drawers.

We knew there had been the journal of an ancestor's journey to Serbia in the cabinet. We had seen it, the closely handwritten pages, but had not been allowed to hold it – a sensible prohibition in the light of other damage. When my grandparents died this journal went to my Aunty Ann in Norfolk for safekeeping and later made its way back to my cousin, Barbara Collins who, as the eldest

child of David, the eldest of the five siblings, was tasked to look after both it and the oriental cabinet.

I've always been fascinated with the items in the cabinet. They hold for me the mystery of lost things. They have been chosen over all other objects to be kept. To be held in a dark place like something sacred until no one alive remembers how they came to be, nor how they were acquired. I have a physical memory of many of the things in the cabinet, how they felt in my hand. There was a dried lime, wizened and hard, which came back from the First World War with my grandfather and what was described to me as a meteorite, but may not have been: a small but heavy lump of rock which he'd picked up in a desert. There were letters on such fine papers the light shone through them and others where the handwriting was doubled to save space and crawled diagonally over the horizontal until the words crossed and recrossed each other with fluid urgency but defied transcription. There were letters which had been scrutinised by the censor and heavily redacted. There were letters from soldiers and airmen who were billeted in Cardiff with Granny and Grandpa while on leave during the Second World War, or who were recuperating from wounds. There were letters from the parents of these men thanking my grandparents for taking in their sons, and photographs of their children born after the war. My mother's autograph album is full of signatures of men from Canada, the States, New Zealand, Poland and France with such notes as 'A swell time with a lovely family, A Chrysdale 19 Sep 43', a hand-drawn map of New Zealand, with superimposed sailing ship against a bright cloud, labelled 'Aeo-tea-Roa & Waitemata, God's own country, C Douglas Feb 15th 45' and 'In memory of Paddy and family who gave an American soldier the merriest of Christmases. May we be the best of friends always, sincerely Ed, Dec 25th 43.'

Each piece in these drawers had a story. Each piece lost parts of its story until all it had left was the fabric of itself. Consider the Measuring Wheel in the fifth drawer. We know nothing about it or the hands that used it, the mind that set out the numerals it measured and what was made of those measurements or why it was kept. We don't know who used the fans, feathered, carved, broken and plain, or who made or played with the dolls. The handwritten letters are orphans, both sender and recipient are dead, only the words remain on the paper, and we struggle with this because we


know how much flows through the mind before we pick the few words that end up on the page. What did the sender think as they wrote? How did the recipient respond? We try to reimagine the hand grasping the pen, the thought flowing with the ink, the decisions of what to reveal and what to hide, the swift eye of the reader, their anxiety, love, fear.

When my grandfather, a medical officer in the First World War, wrote (on September 7th 1915), a letter to his father in Dublin from Suvla Bay, (which later found its way into the cabinet and then to me), he drew a pen and ink picture of the dugout he made and wrote:

> 'I built a lovely dugout for myself, and there were plenty for the men, and made a fine dressing station of sandbags (& sweat). I would have developed into an excellent navvy if I'd stayed there a little longer – of course when I'd finished it, with the help of a company of engineers, I got orders to move – such is life.'

And later in the same letter:

> 'We are praying for one night's frost to kill the flies – you can have no idea of the appalling numbers there are here, nothing seems to drive them away, they sit on your food as you put it in your mouth, and walk all over your nib as you write. The most unpleasant ones are large and green and shiny, when you remember where they come from the idea is not pleasant.'

'I wish the muzzling order was not so stringent' he wrote 'or I might be able to tell you something interesting' and then:

> 'We also had a couple of furious shellings during the three days we were there, the net result, though plenty of shrapnel & H.E. [high explosive] fell round & into my camp, was one man wounded in the back (he was a sick man who had come in, to rest, having lost his way) & one of my men went potty with nervous strain – he sat in a corner & could not speak & kept rubbing his hands together.'

Towards the end of the letter, he wrote prosaically, 'Gothops sent me another tunic with a second Lt's Star on it. I don't know why they did this as I had already rec'd. the one I ordered, so I am returning this one sometime when I have leisure to do so.'

He ended the letter with the simple 'Addio John'. This is a son straightforwardly writing to his father about what he has experienced. The dips and feints in the letter are the normal undulations of tone, humour even, but the circumstances are extraordinary. He says 'you can have no idea of...' but tries anyway to convey what he is living through despite what he is not allowed to say. It's a workmanlike rendering of atrocity, of conveying on paper lived experience and palpable through the words in the quick flow of thought is the sense of trust this son has for his father.



## George's *Journals*

The journals you are about to read are down to earth and un-self-conscious, like my grandfather's letter, and were written in 1846 and 1847 by a relative on Granny's side of the family, George Sydney Davies, my great-great-grandfather, who travelled with Mr Gutch, a Queen's Messenger for the Foreign Office. These journals prove the point that 'The most durable diarists have not always been those who mix in high society or are connected with the great and the good, the best diarists are those in which the voice of the individual comes through untainted by self-censorship or a desire to please.' (Taylor, 2000, p. ix).

Plant beans
three inches apart—
the common little horse-bean is the best[14]

In each journal George describes one trip from London to Serbia and back. The first is dated from 20th April 1846 to 24th July 1846 and the second from 27th September 1847 to 27th November 1847. On each journey they set out from 77 Great Portland Street in London which was Mr Gutch's residence. The stopping point in Serbia was the town of Alexnitza [Aleksinac] where there was a messenger house, near the then border with the Ottoman Empire. The messengers stayed there while despatches, brought from England by Mr Gutch, and the other Queen's Messengers, were taken onwards to Constantinople [Istanbul] by local couriers who would also bring despatches back from Constantinople to be conveyed back to London. Constantinople had been a source of the plague, typhus and cholera and travel in that area was also considered unsafe owing to brigands and robbers.

There are three main participants in the journals: George Sydney Davies (1822–1895) had just finished training to be a solicitor in his father's firm, Davies and Son, in Crickhowell, Wales when he set off on these journeys. His companion, John Wheeley Gough Gutch (1808–1869), was a Queen's Messenger, having previously been a surgeon, and was a keen early photographer. In 1847 they met Captain Edmund Spencer, in Alexnitza, a prolific British travel writer who writes about their meeting (Spencer, 1851). I have included more detail about the lives of George, John and Edmund at the back of this book, alongside details of Lewis Hertslet of the Foreign Office whose collections of papers at The National Archives at Kew contain the collection of accounts, vouchers, registers, regulations and other papers relating to Foreign Service Messengers and the background workings of the Foreign Office, including sick notes and letters Mr Gutch sent, some of which I have included here. I have also included some correspondences written by the Ambassadors in the Embassy at Constantinople, Sir Stratford Canning (1846) and Henry Wellesley, 1st Earl Cowley (1847) to give some idea of the political concerns they were dealing with around the time of these journals and, therefore, what urgent issues might have been included in the despatches Gutch carried.

I knew my letter-writing grandfather very well and had a strong connection with him. I still use his Shorter Oxford Dictionary which he left me because he knew that I would write. There is, of course, a much less direct connection with George; I know him only through his words on paper, but by reading his journals I've become strangely fond of him. He was in his energetic early-twenties when these journals were written; he's bouncy, bright, insouciant, inexperienced but having fun on these travels after years of study.[15] You can almost hear his companion, Mr Gutch, who was thirty-eight and had already lost his four-year-old son and had an ailing wife at home, sighing at times as George sets off for a twelve-mile gallop into the countryside, or insists on yet another hunt, through rough country, while he, himself, wants only to read, think, draw or quietly add to his beetle collection.

George is middle-class with Victorian values and can be thoughtless and xenophobic. He doesn't curb what he writes because he's writing not for publication but as a reminder of his travels, perhaps to show the children he's yet to have or his parents and brothers and sisters, so what you get in these journals is uncensored, aside from the self-censorship we all employ when we write. His descriptions range from succinct one-liners on a day's activities to pages full of detail, and if he finds a town 'dirty' and/or 'mean', that is exactly what he writes. He exhibits casual discrimination based on social class, religion, race, gender, for instance describing a judge's daughter who is to be married as 'ugly and old – a pretty little girl there' and he notes his 'disgust' at 'two great moustachioed fellows' kissing one another. A town with a large population of Jews is described as 'very dirty and poverty stricken'. He is also not above theft for which, all these generations later, I apologise wholeheartedly, as what was taken and never returned was a skull from the Tower of Skulls in Niš, Serbia.

The importance of 'class' in these journals should not be underestimated. It is hugely important to both George and Mr Gutch to be seen as 'gentlemen'. The British class system is apparent in much of the journal, in George's aspirations to be thought well of, in his judgements of others, and in the Foreign Office notes which accompany the text[16]. The two weddings he attends in Serbia are completely categorised by class, George professing himself disgusted at the lower-class wedding shenanigans, whereas he is charmed by the middle-class wedding he attends. Classism and

racism combine in some of George's more odious descriptions such as where he describes 'a Moorish visaged Gypsy'.

George is exuberantly and unashamedly British in his dress and manners so that Captain Spencer, the travel writer they meet, mocks him, saying 'Mr. Davies exhibited a most imposing exterior to the astonished Servians; his costume being the English hunting dress – scarlet jacket, top-boots and cap.' We do not know exactly what the Serbians he met made of him, except by his own record of meetings with them. He does note, unsurprisingly, that some of the locals thought the English 'arrogant'. He hunts avidly, a common pastime in those days, and shoots anything that moves; at one point, for instance, he writes 'shot a bee-eater, dove and two small birds' and offers the larks he has shot to Mr Gutch for breakfast one morning. But he is intensely interested in local customs and in the opinions of the people he meets; he is enthusiastic about the otherness of travel, for instance he is captivated by the clothes people wear, often describes them, and enjoys dressing up. He throws himself into new experiences. His descriptions of the landscapes and mountains are both charming and lyrical. He conveys a vivid sense of what it was like to travel across a fragmented and sometimes dangerous Europe in the 1840s while being, in other ways, the Englishman abroad.

His experiences were extraordinary, for example, on the 17th July 1846 and the 6th of October 1847, he tells of listening to Strauss and his orchestra in Vienna. He quotes Byron,[17] to him almost a contemporary, when describing thunderstorms in the mountains. He rides post horses across Serbia for hour after hour, misses a steamer and has to race to reconnect with it, meets a princess on a steamer and converses with her, cuts himself on a gun he has loaded for fear of robbers, and has cause to deal with a drunken postillion, but he also engagingly tells of making apple cakes for his companions, gets sick from the chemicals he uses to dye his moustaches, tells us how sad he feels when he receives no letters from home, and riffs on puns for the word 'leveret' when he fails to catch a hare on a hunting trip.

The first journal was written in a small brown leather notebook (4½ inches by 2 inches, approx.) with a pencil holder attached, in 1846. It was lodged with Cousin Barbara and, on a visit to her in July 2013, I photographed each page on my phone and used the photographs later to transcribe the handwriting[18]. I had been

slowly transcribing it, a few pages at a time, when my sister, Alison, told me that Aunty Joan had shown her another journal written in 1847, describing a similar journey. I photographed that journal too, on a visit to see Joan in October 2014, and set to work transcribing it also. This journal is written in both pencil and ink in a black embossed pocketbook with pencil holder attached (5¾ inches by 3¾ inches, approx.) with a metal clasp. It has two watercolours of the messenger houses – the one they stayed in and the new one being built – and some simple line drawings of other buildings and landscapes. After my aunt's death in October 2017, I was given it to keep.

*My Own Journals and Poems*

In 2017, having finished the first rough transcription of the journals, I began to think about making the same journey as my great-great-grandfather with the intention of writing a journal as I travelled the same route as him, and writing poems when I returned. I applied for an Arts Council England / British Council Artists' International Development Fund for help with travel to Hungary and Serbia and was lucky enough to receive it. The Artists' International Development Fund fosters relationships between writers and artists in the UK and those in other countries. I contacted The Petőfi Institute in Hungary, and the British Council arranged an introduction to Imre, a PhD student and lecturer at Debrecen University, Hungary where I subsequently did a reading at the university. Before travelling to Serbia I worked with Serbian poet, Ivanka Radmanović, on translations into Serbian of parts of the journals together with some of my poems and was invited to read at the 55th Belgrade International Writers' Assembly, September 19th to 23rd, 2018 which included readings in Belgrade, Malo Crniće and Veliko Gradište. Ivanka arranged additional readings for me in Vrbas, Pančevo and Niš. On 9th September 2018 I flew to Budapest with my wife, Lesley, and arrived home on 2nd October 2018. I took with me the 1847 journal which I was privileged to show to audiences at some of the readings. The journal I wrote during those three weeks is long and detailed and when planning this work, I decided to include sections of it where there seemed to me to be a point of interest between my journal and George's journals.

As I finished the fine details of the transcriptions of the journals and transcribed my own handwritten journals, all sorts of ideas began to take shape in my head: correspondences between then and now, progress and the lack of it. How our lives are measured, now as then, by the simple requirements of sleep and food and the turning wheel of day and night. How humanity takes itself forward in time but makes the same mistakes over and over and how imprisoned we are by our own moment in history. How what seems like progress for one generation – trains, steamers, etc – can become in time an ecological disaster for the generations to come. How we are all to some degree unreliable narrators, through forgetfulness but also through misunderstanding of other cultures or languages or deliberate misrepresentations of them. How the policies of earlier generations create the seedbeds for war and genocide. How complex political relationships can be. How personal responsibility, thoughtfulness and kindness may incrementally shape what is to come. How ideas of gender and power are used and misused. How sexuality is powerfully frightening to some people. How conformity relates to repression. How difference is dangerous. How religion, of all kinds, can be used as a tool of power and control. How colonialism and authoritarianism are used and misused. How uncertainty rides with us, because we are living creatures, and how facing that can be both uncomfortable and liberating. The idea of messages and messengers gradually became clearer. What do we take from the past? Can we improve?

I have given the Good Housewife, whose cockerel was murdered by Edmund Spencer, a list of concerns which she, and I of course, consider have not yet been adequately addressed in modern society. Considerations of feminist theory, gender inequality, discrimination, objectification, oppression, stereotyping, cultural imperialism and patriarchy lie at the heart of what I've been thinking about as I've navigated these journeys. There are many other concerns, of course. Some have shifted in the 175 years since George's journals were written, some remain constant. War and genocide remain with us. Dictators still rise to power and cling to it. Poverty and lack of social mobility still prevent people from fulfilling their dreams. The place of women in society is still fragile and unequal.

Our planet, our home, is now under threat; George spends much of his free time trying to shoot animals while we are faced

with multiple extinctions. George benefits from the innovations of the beginning of the industrial revolution, powered by fossil fuels, while we, in continuing to use them, are facing global warming, extremes of temperature, floods, famines. George is familiar with quarantine and pandemics while we have been overtaken by the sudden appearance of Covid as a global emergency with lockdowns, quarantines and the development and rollout of new vaccines. For George communications are in their infancy – letters take weeks and get lost, despatches take months to arrive – while we are blessed (and cursed) with instant communications both personal and governmental. For George 'who we know' is important in getting on, and for us? I'll leave you to answer that question.

George and I share a little bit of our DNA – perhaps we also share something about the way we experience the world. His use of language, his sense of humour, his curiosity and fascination with otherness, his ability to be both open and closed at the same time, his joy in the physical world – all this feels familiar. He experiences that world through the prism and privilege of his gender. I do also, through mine, and through being lesbian in a mainly heterosexual world. How much is George aware of his privilege which comes from gender, class, wealth and education? How much am I aware of my own privileges? His youth, and my age, surely also affect our ways of looking. All of us, when we write, show our prejudices, whatever they are, and this comes through in a travel journal which is ostensibly about 'visits to places' as it does in more formal explorations of self.

For all of us it's hard to step outside our current lives. We try, perhaps in a piecemeal fashion, to get some perspective on the wider picture. George certainly can't 'see' Empire, with its ideas of borders and dominance, with white English men at the top of the tree, although he debates politics with his friends at Alexnitza who probably introduce him to some new ways of thinking.

It's a complex set of subjects and themes. The messages knock against each other in the messenger house. There are ambivalences and contradictions. My parallel journey and the writing of a journal about it, which like George's, does not comment overtly, or not very much, on the underlying thoughts of the writer was a deliberate act of equivalence. Where writing appears that is slant, it may offer views of other mountains, 'wild translations', hints at other messages.

Progress with the manuscript, after my return from Hungary and Serbia, was slowed by a period of ill health and by the Covid pandemic. We had booked a further trip, from London to Hungary, stopping in most of the places George visited en route. The start date for that trip was to have been the 15th May 2020, but on that day I was instead booked in to hospital for a biopsy preparatory to further treatment. Sick, and in full lockdown from Covid, we had to cancel that journey.

Poems, journals, letters, messenger regulations and other testimony, both imaginary and actual, sit side by side with each other here. All the writers are dealing with uncertainties of one kind or another as we all do in living our lives. I am interested in what they say, and don't say, to each other, how their, and my, testimonies rub up against each other. When I was a schoolchild, I didn't relate to the history books that were used to teach us: dry lists of wars and skirmishes, treaties, third party discussions of political decisions and their repercussions, which I couldn't connect with the pain and loss, the joy, the steady satisfaction, the multitude of emotions which must surely, I thought, lie underneath the words. Those history books seemed remote and disconnected from humanity – was that part of their purpose? The word 'progress' also was mysterious to me. As a post-war baby-boomer I was raised on the comforting notion that society moves forward in a trajectory of constant improvement, but I had a sneaking suspicion, even then, that things could and did reverse, politically, socially and catastrophically quickly and that gains in freedom and liberty could be as easily taken away as given.

The Balkans War of 1991 to 1999, with its horrors of ethnic cleansing, the suffering of refugees and the seventy-eight days of NATO bombing of Serbia are still, of course, raw and recent wounds in the memories of the people of the region. Some of the physical scars on the buildings of Belgrade have been left as witness to the bombing. I wondered if I could or should write anything about it, and finally decided that where people had talked to me about their experience of the war or what came after, I would, with humility, include some of what was said.

In Hungary the Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, has shifted the political scene towards right-wing national conservatism and auth-

oritarianism and has pursued anti-democratic reforms. His attempts to rewrite history include denying Hungarian responsibility for the murder of Jewish people in Hungary during the Second World War. I have included, in my journals, a description of a protest against a nationalistic monument which was erected covertly shortly before my trip to Hungary, and which we were witness to on our visit. In June 2021 Hungary's parliament passed legislation that bans, amid strong criticism from human rights groups and opposition parties, the dissemination of content in schools deemed to promote homosexuality and gender change. The new legislation wrongly conflates paedophilia with LGBTQ issues. Orbán has become increasingly extreme on social policy, railing against LGBTQ people and immigrants.

It has become clear to me, during the writing of this book, just how many of my – it should be acknowledged – comfortably-off 19th century relatives spent time living and working or simply fossicking about in Europe,[19] and what a natural thing it was for them to travel joyfully and extensively, to set down roots for a bit, to learn languages, to trade, to learn about other cultures, to look outwards. During the time it took to write this book the UK chose to leave Europe, chose Brexit and to listen to Little Englanders,[20] and I record here my anger at the politicians who enabled the whole debacle and who peddled lies to achieve it.

The welcome I was given from the people I met in Hungary and Serbia, and their many kindnesses during my travels, were extraordinary. I made many good, lifelong friends and I hope that this journey will be the first of many.



## *Whispers and Shadows*

As Eavan Boland says of her poem 'Quarantine', 'the past is a place of whispers and shadows' ((UCTV), 2010). In transcribing these handwritten journals, I began to listen to some of those whispers.

While struggling with George's sometimes cryptic handwriting, place names which had changed, translations of the interjected German phrases (inaccurate German, impossible handwriting), the politics of the time, the social mores, I found I also wanted to know more about the people whose names are sometimes spelt phonetically, to learn about things we have mostly forgotten

like quarantine[21] officers, types of sword, items of clothing, post horses and posting. I desperately wanted to know about people mentioned in passing – well known to George but who cannot now be found in the historical documents I've consulted. I wanted to better understand the society at home and abroad and look at the historical and political context of Serbia and other European countries of the time. I wanted to look at archives to see why things happened as they did. I wanted to know what diplomatic papers Mr Gutch might have been carrying. I wanted to look in from the outside to try to understand these men whose frames of reference were of their time, gender and class.

I haven't been able to find out everything – many things remain a mystery – life was as complicated then as now, but I hope you will enjoy these journals and my investigations of them, the poems and prose pieces, the whispers and shadows, the unsettled places where birds, disturbed, stretch out their wings before taking flight out of open water.

# *PART 1*

## *Before Setting out, some letters of a private nature on politics and health*

*To his brother William from Sir Stratford Canning*[22]
British Embassy at Constantinople [Istanbul],
2nd December 1845

…I am told you would like to know a little more of my goings on and so you shall. I must begin, however, by observing that my goings on are often very much like standings still. At this moment for instance, though I have long wished to be amongst you all once more, and to rejoin my more especial belongings, it is to no purpose that I spur with both heels, use horse language, and vip, and vip, and vip ; the old hack will have its own way, sometimes with a start, then with a kick, not always unaccompanied with a plunge that bespatters one with mud, and not unfrequently with a dead stop. Not so with the mails and steamers. On they go, whizzing and whisking their paddles, or rattling their legs, and snorting out loads of paper, instructions, reports, remarks, notes, letters, journals, reviews, petitions, and Heaven knows what besides. In comes the never-ceasing drift, under the doors, through the windows, down the chimneys there is no possibility of keeping it out. I shovel it, attachés shovel it, the dragomans shovel it, but the heap never disappears, and all we can do by shovelling together is to save ourselves from being choked by the accumulation. Where it all comes from and what it's all about is sometimes a puzzle to me as well as to you; but you may be sure that it is more pleasant to read about it than to deal with […

…] Our new Embassy house, or palace as it is called here, is rising rapidly above the ashes of the old one, and I have extorted a few thousand pounds from the Porte[23] for the purchase of a row of Turkish houses, the removal of which will open the garden on one entire side to a fine terrace-view of Constantinople and its Golden Horn.[24]

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