

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Melissa Chim, a librarian from Excelsior University who regular listeners will recall from her previous episode about Margaret Guenther and her impact on the Episcopalian church. This time she's back to tell us about Hannah Cullwick, an 1800s maid of all work in the UK.

[Listen to Melissa's episode on Margaret Guenther and the Episcopalian Church](#) or [read the transcript](#).

MC: She was born in May of 1833, so just about the middle of the Victorian era, and she died in 1909, so about nine years or so after the end of Victoria's reign. She was born in a working-class family. Her mom was a ladies' maid and her father was a stableman, so class-wise she kind of stayed in the same class. She worked as a maid of all work. She had some more jobs before that. She worked as a pot girl in an inn, a nursery maid, other kinds of maids. She left behind 17 diaries, and in her diaries she describes herself as tall and weighing 11 stone, which is just right around 154 pounds, so you can imagine she was pretty tall, she was strong, she was athletic, and she was very unique for her time. She had no children, she was able to read and write. Like I said, she left behind 17 diaries, and she was actually proud of her work. She was proud to be a laborer, performing physical labor, and actually working as a maid.

AT: And so you mentioned her 17 diaries, which is sort of why we're here to talk about her today, and I have to say this is the first time that I've had a conversation about what I would consider an ordinary woman. And this actually reflects the famous quote that I end every episode with, the idea that well-behaved women seldom make history is often used as a rallying cry to encourage women to misbehave, whatever that may mean. But the original context was actually historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich lamenting that women who just go about their lives typically aren't considered noteworthy. So how does Hannah fit into that paradigm?

MC: Yeah, so she definitely does fit in into that idea because she wasn't really destructive in the sense of maybe other women destruct things. She was actually very proud of her work, like she was good at it too. She was good at cleaning, and she held a job until her death pretty much. And what makes her really unique and what makes her stand out is how she was able to leave us with primary sources, with these diaries. Maids from that time normally weren't known for writing and contributing to literature, but she was actually very dedicated to her writing. They're so valuable as primary sources, they really give a window into this area of marginalized history that historians don't really get a chance to explore too often. So even though she was very ordinary in the sense that she could give us a window into basically what life would be like for someone in that class, in that job and in that social position. So her ordinariness, I think makes her very extraordinary in that sense, and she gives us such a great window. Her diaries are so great for historians just to dig in and to really see what she was thinking, what she was writing about, what a normal day for her would be.

AT: Well I think there's this sort of catch-22 where there are all these barriers in place. So I would imagine a lot of these maids weren't necessarily literate, they maybe didn't have the money, the time, the energy to keep a diary. They were probably told by society that they weren't important, and you have to consider yourself important on some level to commit resources to documenting your own life. And I think there's this idea around hidden histories that because we don't have the documentation, people must not be worth knowing about. And obviously that ignores all of these reasons that we don't have those documents in the first place. And even if they were created, who considered them important enough to save? And a lot of people would not have considered a maid's diary worth saving.

MC: Right, that's very true. A lot of people would not consider that a piece of literature or something that was worth saving. They wouldn't consider her voice something very important. They wouldn't probably have considered her very educated or knowledgeable beyond actually cleaning and keeping a home. But she really does give us the interesting window too, because we could imagine too that certainly the women and the

families that were employing her probably did not think that her voice was worth knowing either. Her husband, and I know we'll probably talk about her very unconventional marriage soon, he was the one that really encouraged her to keep a diary. And he did it for selfish reasons. He had this fixation on working class women. And there is a quote from her diary where she even says like, "oh, I'm sure no one is reading this. I'm glad my husband is reading this, but I know nobody else is either."

AT: Oh, yeah, we're gonna come back to him. There's some things going on there. But before we get into that side of things, could you give us a little more historical context for the UK at this time, and what her life was like in that environment?

MC: Yeah, absolutely. So she was part of a very interesting time for women at the stage of the Victorian era, there were a lot of innovations, gas lighting was a big one. And so with the use of gas lighting and technology like that, there was this new emphasis on cleanliness and dirt. So the Victorians had a really big thing with dirt. If you were dirty and unclean, that meant that you were probably a bad person. And if you are a bad person, you were most likely poor, too. So if you were middle class, the worst thing your house could be was probably dirty. There was also a brand of soap around at the same time, too. I forgot what the name was offhand. But it had such a strong caustic smell, that if you smelled of this soap, it actually gave a hint into your class, too. And of course, around this whole thing of cleanliness, of course, the people performing the cleaning weren't that important. It was most likely women, women like Hannah. So that labor was supposed to be invisible. And it was being clean was just supposed to happen. You weren't supposed to show the actual labor involved. And so what Hannah did was she was the maid of all work. And so in this time, that was basically the lowest rung of being a servant that you can be. Basically, most of the time, you were only the servant employed in that home. Usually, maids of all work worked for middle class families that might only be able to afford one servant working for them versus these upper class houses that might have a full full staff. So basically, if you were maid of all work, you were responsible for all of the work in a Victorian home. So cleaning, most likely cooking, too, all of these things you were responsible for. You woke up probably before the sun came up and you went to bed probably close to midnight. You were paid low wages. You had little personal freedom. You might have the day off, have some time to go to church on Sunday. Maybe if during a holiday you were lucky enough where the family went to another person's house for dinner, you might get off Christmas if someone was traveling for that way. That was really the only time you would have that personal freedom. You really had no rights. You had no safety net, no legal recourse. If your employer fired or kept your wages for whatever reason, you really didn't have the time or the resources to actually sue them or to get to get any kind of justice in that way, too.

AT: All right, now back to the husband, because look, we're not here to kink shame anyone, but I have to say their situation does feel problematic.

MC: It does. Yeah, that's a good word for it, I think.

AT: Yeah, please explain.

MC: Okay, so her husband was named Arthur Mundy. He was a barrister, so he was considered middle class, maybe lower upper class. They met in 1854, and Mundy actually kept a lot of diaries himself, too. He describes that he was attracted to her "peasant physical features." He liked that she was muscular and had rough hands. She worked in labor, but also she cleaned up nice. She had some ladylike grace. She was intelligent. If you put her in the fashion of the time, she could probably pass for a middle class woman. So he definitely had this fixation with working class women. Another thing that's mentioned a lot on their diaries is that he enjoyed seeing her "in her dirt." He actually liked for her to come home, come to visit right after she completed work for the day. 12 hours or even more of cleaning and scrubbing. Of course, her clothes would be dirty, so she would

come home from work with her clothes dirty. So he liked to see her that way and then transform after a quick bath and a quick change of clothes. Then all of a sudden she's respectable, so he really had that fixation on that. Here's the really problematic part. They kind of went into this master-slave relationship. I read that she had worn this band on her wrist. She had injured her wrist working, and she wore this band. After her wrist healed, she turned it into a sleeve band to show that she was his slave, to wear that as a little secret sign. She wore a little padlock necklace, and he was the only one that held the key. She actually writes that she was dismissed from her employers because she was serving dinner and she didn't remove the slave band. Of course, her employer was like, "oh no, this is disgusting. Why are you wearing this?" She refused to take it off, and she was dismissed. Probably the most grating thing to hear as a modern reader is that she refers to him as "Massa," so M-A-S-S-A, very similar to what you might see in the South at this time too. I don't know if she was saying that based on her accent from her area in England or if she was actually conjuring up those images of slaves from the South. It's a lot.

AT: Wow. Okay, so there's obviously a lot of fetishizing going on here, and it makes me wonder because you said that he was the one who encouraged her to keep these diaries. When you're talking about the way that she's describing her attitudes and everything, was he reading her diaries? Was she writing for him, and if so, could that have impacted the way that she's presenting her attitudes around her work?

MC: Right, that is a great question. I don't know if he read the entirety of her diaries, but I believe he must have read some of it. When you're looking through the diary, sometimes she refers to him in the third person, which makes me think maybe those sections were just for her, and she was just recording something she came across. Some of these other sections, though, I think they were definitely written for him. For example, she would sometimes write a diary of all the tasks that she did in one day, and so it's basically, like this one entry she wrote. She basically listed what she did. She wrote, "lighted the fire, swept the bedroom and dusted the other rooms, cleaned three pairs of boots, got breakfast stuff and made the beds and emptied the sobs, cleaned and washed up, put the linen for the wash, cleaned the brass rods and the bedroom windows and the sills, put up clean curtains, cleaned away and then went upstairs and cleaned the bedrooms on my knees, got tea, cleaned away and washed up in the scullery, went out on errands and got supper ready. Mr. Cleveland was expected but didn't come till after. I took a note to Mr. Brewer for the missus and then had supper, cleaned away and washed up and to bed at 11." That section makes me think that she wrote it specifically for him to read, so he had an idea of what she was doing all day, but there are other sections that I think where she refers to him in the third person that I think she was writing just for herself.

AT: I just find it really interesting that, not to say that a maid couldn't or shouldn't be proud of her abilities and her work that she's done, but it does really feel like if you are in a relationship with someone who is very much fetishizing that work and your status and your position, it does seem like there would be reasons for her to exaggerate, shall we say. Like, "oh yeah, this life is so great" if you're writing for that particular audience.

MC: That's very true, yeah, and it's interesting too because especially when you see those sections of everything she was doing, you can't tell if she was seeing all these things because she's proud of, like, "look at all this work that I've accomplished" or is it to show, "oh look how hard I'm working and I must be, I must have gotten so dirty and so exhausted" and that's something maybe her husband wanted to hear. Yeah, so I think she is in a sense a little bit of an unreliable narrator. I think overall her diaries have so much weight, especially for historians who are interested in looking at primary sources from this time, but also you have to consider she could be an unreliable narrator in the sense that she could exaggerate things, what things would she exaggerate because she knows that's what her husband wanted to hear.

AT: Well and obviously they were into a form of roleplay, so in addition to the master-slave situation, you had

put in the notes when we were talking before the episode that Mundy took numerous photographs of her in different costumes such as slave, chimney sweep, high-class lady, etc. So it does seem like the diaries could be an extension of that role playing even if it is based in reality.

MC: I think so definitely, especially when we see these photographs that he took of her when she was dressed up as a slave or as a chimney sweep, they would really go all out in the sense that she would actually put on, I guess she was maybe using coal dust or something to make her skin look darker. And so when she was a high class lady of course she has her hair done and she's wearing all of these clothes, these very fancy clothes that she wouldn't wear on a normal day of work. So it definitely raises the question of how much time was devoted to this also because I imagine making her skin darker and changing her clothes, all that takes time. And so I imagine too that when you think about the diaries, how much of her free time was she devoting to writing these diaries? Because if you're running a household from six in the morning until 11 o'clock at night and then writing these diaries for an hour or two before bed, that does take a lot of time. That is a lot of time to devote yourself to this fantasy relationship with your husband.

AT: Well, especially because it doesn't seem like he was actually supporting her at all. So keep in mind he's a barrister, right, and she doesn't live with him. But the kink aside, I would be very deeply resentful if in this time a husband who was of a higher class who could certainly afford to support her financially just didn't and pushed her to keep doing all that labor outside the home. I'd be pissed.

MC: Yeah, I think I would be too. He definitely had the means to support her. And also in this period, with the Victorian family, with industrialization and people working outside of the home more often, it would have been very much expected for him to take care of her financially and for her to not have to work outside the home. She would ideally devote herself to caring for her own home, having children and supporting him. So I think there might have been a level of resentment. I think other women too, if they were in that position, there would be a lot of resentment, I would think of having to work outside the home, and also basically almost being enslaved to her husband in the sense of this fantasy role playing and then very much almost being enslaved too by her employers of having little to no rights legally against her employers. For example, when she was dismissed for not taking off her slave band, it's not like she was going to get back wages. If they fired her, she was gone on the spot, she might have time to pick up some of her things downstairs and then that was it. So in a way, she was in a very vulnerable position. And even though we get that impression that she loved her time with her husband and she loved having her independence too of being outside the home and living with her employers, she was very much in a very vulnerable position that I think a lot of women would be working their way to get out of versus actually celebrating it.

AT: I could just be putting my modern biases on this, but it doesn't feel like she was independent, right? It was the difference between she's living with her husband versus she's living with an employer. Either way, she's not out on her own, she's not making enough money to really do anything to change her circumstances if that's what she wanted. And I think part of the issue with the form of BDSM that we're seeing here, and I'm hesitant to call it that because modern BDSM has a lot more concern with things like consent. I'm just really torn here because I don't want to assume that she wasn't into this, but the simple fact is that even in contemporary BDSM situations, I think that there are a lot of psychological concerns depending on an individual's situation and taking someone who is already quite marginalized compared to the partner that they are engaging with. And if you want to hear about this topic from someone who is actually in the BDSM community and is a person of color, definitely check out Kat Blaque on YouTube. She has a lot of great videos on these kinds of subjects, but in this instance, I think the fact that she was already so vulnerable, she was already very marginalized, and he's essentially fetishizing her marginalization. And then the documentation that we do have, there is a good chance that even if she wasn't writing for him in all instances, there was always the chance that he could have

read what she was writing. So it feels a bit icky from a consent standpoint, put it that way.

MC: Right. Yeah. No, I definitely agree with you about that too, because let's just say in a perfect world that she was having a great time. She loved what she was doing. She wouldn't change anything about her life at all. Still at the end of the day, if she got fired and didn't have any money, she would be out on the street. She would be either homeless or she would be sent to a workhouse. And that was just not a reality for her husband. I think even working as a barrister, he also came from a bit of money most likely too. So he was always in this middle to upper class world. And so the fear of the workhouse was just not a fear he would understand. So even if she was having the time of her life and very, very happy, still that specter of the workhouse, homelessness, even prostitution was always there for her in a way, and for other working class women too, in a way that he would just never understand. And if anything, he might've even liked the fact that she was working so hard and in a moment she could be destitute and that dichotomy of destitute versus high class lady, that was something he seemed to really enjoy. But the real life consequences of that, he probably had no empathy or understanding or anything regarding that.

AT: I think he probably did understand that he did hold that actual power. And I think that actually gets at what was making me uncomfortable is that there is a difference between "we are playing and we are playing with power dynamics" and "no, this actually could destroy my life." Like the difference between play power and real power. And so the person who already has all the real life power then also wanting to play out these dynamics, that feels iffy, to say the least.

MC: Yeah, that is very true. I wonder too, if Hannah would be similar to a lot of victims in this sense that she was like, "oh, well, I can't really control if the man who employs me abuses me or anything like this, but with my husband, we're just playing. And so I'm in control." And it's like, "no, not really, you're not." Cause like I mentioned, there was that if he got very mad at her and just kicked her out and left her alone, still that specter of the workhouse of prostitution, homelessness is always there. So I think Hannah, even in her mind, she thought she may have had a lot of power. I think it's very obvious though, looking back that she didn't really have any.

AT: And when we're talking about, even if she did genuinely like her work, which I do find to be a bit of a stretch, just given the nature of how exhausting it must have been, not just the work that she was doing, but that she was putting in such long days and had very little time off even in a given week. But even if we assume that she was fine with that in her younger years, if anyone was paying attention and doing the math, when you were giving her birth and death dates, she was born in 1833, died in 1909. So she lived to her 70s. And you said that she was working basically right up until her death. And this is the kind of work that prematurely ages people, right? It's such intensive physical labor that even if she was genuinely, "yeah, I'm a super maid, woo!" rock on, go for it. And even if she was feeling like that in say her 30s or even her 40s, I can't imagine that's genuinely something that she wanted to be doing still in her 60s and 70s.

MC: Oh, exactly. By then I could imagine she must've had back problems. She probably had all the aches and pains that come with age. And you would think in a kind of perfect end to all this, she would think, oh, no, she had her fun working for outside employers. And then maybe there came a time where her husband would say, "you know what, let me take care of you, move in with me full time. We can live out our golden years together and you won't have to lift a finger anymore. Maybe you can dust if that still brings you joy, but oh, I hired someone to do that." But no, that, that didn't happen. I haven't read any evidence that they lived with each other full time, even as they both aged. He had such a fixation on working class women. I know he was speaking to and had met similar women before he met Hannah. I don't know if, when they were together, if maybe he was doing the same with other women, but yeah, when she died, I don't think she was living with

him. I think she was still living in probably with her employer. If not, maybe she had a small room to herself, but the idea of this being a Cinderella fairytale where in the end she was just living in comfort, that's just not true.

AT: Does she ever talk in her diaries about that physical toll? Because, obviously there's the dirt kink and its correlation to Victorian ideas around dirt equals immorality and all of that and the power dynamics of class. But going back to the whole, is she writing for herself or is she writing for him? Is she honest about the physical toll and the parts that he probably would have a harder time fetishizing?

MC: She doesn't speak that much to the physical toll, but there is a couple of passages that I think show where she was coming from and her own feelings. So when she actually turned 30, her diary, and she read, "I am 30 years old this month, though I don't feel any different than I ever did except in feeling lower in heart, I think, for I've been a servant now 20 years or more. Always the lowest kind, but I think different about now a good deal than I did 10 years ago before I knew Massa. He has taught me, though it's been difficult to learn thoroughly, the beauty in being nothing but a common drudge and to bear being despised by others what don't have to work the same way." So that's very sad to read, isn't it? When she says that she doesn't feel much different except she feels lower in heart. That sounds very sad, like she was very sad, and then she kind of justifies it by saying like, "oh no, actually it's in this degradation that I found my true love with my husband." And it doesn't sound very convincing, I don't think. When she mentioned the beauty in being nothing but common drudge and to bear being despised by others what don't have to work the same way, I don't think anyone, a healthy person, would think, "oh yes, I feel so happy and I see the beauty in what I do even though people abuse me and think I'm the lowest common denominator in the house."

AT: Yeah, that really reinforces this perception that, again, I am putting a 21st century feminist lens on everything we're talking about and I freely own that, but the fact that she says, "I didn't feel this way 10 years ago until I met him and he reframed my life." And of course he's not coming from a lived perspective, he's probably never cleaned a thing in his damn life. (MC: Right, exactly.) And that very much feels like someone who was very unhappy with her life if, just doing the math, she's been working since she was 10 and she only started looking at it positively when this desirable-in-some-way man comes along and fetishizes her life and so she's able to look at it through that lens. That doesn't feel like it's coming from her, that feels like it's coming from him.

MC: Yeah, that does. There's that kind of worshipfulness also in the diary that seems very strange. She loves to degradate herself but she kind of worships and upholds her husband, and that does sound like it's coming from him. I don't know how much of that is actually what she truly believes in her heart or what kind of role that she's playing. And there's another entry that I thought was interesting when she actually mentions that she's been tired of writing but her husband has been encouraging her and maybe not necessarily forcing her, but I imagine if she asked for a break he probably won't give her one. Her very last entry which was in 1873, so when she was in her 40s or so and another 40 years or so until she died, she wrote, "this is the last day of the month and Massa only wishes me to write to the end. I am glad of it somehow for I got so thoroughly tired of writing what I think to most people must be very tiresome and certainly this interesting. I hardly think I should care to read one lady's diary of 20 years standing though of course therein would be more buried than a servant's can possibly be. And so I told M that by making me write for so many years he has quite tired me of it and yet for some things I am more glad that he's not tired of reading it."

AT: So he is definitely reading this.

MC: He is, yeah, he's definitely reading it. I'm not sure if he read every single thing or just the parts that would interest him but I would imagine, yeah he probably read the majority of it.

AT: So when she says things like, this is another quote, "I like the life I lead working here and just going to M when I can of a Sunday and a chance time to clean of a weekday when I can get leave now and then oftener of course if I could better even I think than a married life for I never could make up my mind to that. It's too much like being a woman. So let it be only I don't wish the world to see me anything else nor a servant but M's love I couldn't do without." That feels like rationalizing.

MC: That really does. I thought the same thing. I don't think any other woman of that time would agree that oh yes, working 12 maybe even 16 hours a day and then only having a couple of leisure hours here and there where you can go and be with your husband is ideal for me. I don't think any other woman would agree to that. And this is interesting too when she says that she can never make up her mind to that, that she couldn't really decide whether she wanted to live a traditional married life or if she liked things the way they are. I thought that part was interesting that she was kind of dismissing her own concerns, saying "oh yeah I'm just that was just me being a silly woman that I couldn't really make up my mind to what I really want," when in actuality it was probably her husband who was dictating a lot of what was happening, probably when they could see each other too. And I imagine too that if she wanted to take off any extra time from her employer, she would most likely be fired and I don't think her husband would have taken her in with open arms saying, "oh, you never have to work again." I don't think that would happen.

AT: I also think it's very convenient for him to basically have a kink partner not even every Sunday from that quote that I read. But he's spending most of his week without a wife around. I assume he has his own maid because I can't imagine he's actually doing any of his own cleaning as previously mentioned. (MC: Oh exactly.) I'm sure he had her doing cleaning while she was there because that's part of his kink but that actually would again enrage me if she is spending six and a half days because I believe a lot of servants only got like a half day on Sunday so she's working six and a half days, very long days, very exhausting work and then the time that is meant to be her break, she is basically giving to this guy who is fetishizing that. But he's living over here in his spacious home, presumably with his own maid, which you have to wonder what her life was like. And this all just seems very convenient for him. And even if she was into it which I still think is a pretty big if to what extent she **genuinely** enjoyed it versus this may have been the one bright spot that she saw in her week, which is very sad in and of itself. Did he ever take her out on a date? Is there any documentation about, "oh he took me to a party and introduced me as his wife and we actually did normal couple things"? Or was she just in a very literal sense his dirty little secret?

MC: Oh, that is a great question. There are a couple mentions in the diary of her going to the theater and seeing a show I believe but it wasn't clear whether that was actually on a date and they went as husband and wife. I think she may have gone out with the friends. I think if he wanted to he could take her out and show her off as his wife but I don't think he did very often. There was another section of the diary that I read very briefly where after she was cleaning his house, he was having people over. And so he wanted her to get cleaned up and to introduce her and she didn't really want that. She was like, "oh even if I cleaned myself up, I wouldn't be able to relate to these women. I couldn't hold a conversation with them. They would see right through me that I wasn't this educated middle-class woman who's skilled at entertaining and things like that." So it makes you wonder too how much of that was coming from her in the sense that she just had enough of rich people all day and she did not want to see them in her time off, and how much of that was maybe him thinking that she was his dirty little secret that maybe he could clean up every once in a while. But I don't think they really hosted any parties together or really went on on holidays and and summer vacation. If he had a summer home I doubt he took her there other than to maybe clean it. But yeah, there wasn't a lot of evidence I saw in the diaries of them doing normal married couple things. It seems like the fantasy had taken over their entire lives and it wasn't just a little part that came here or there that was basically their entire relationship.

AT: I do think this is also getting back to what we were discussing earlier about he does actually hold the power not just in the roleplay, but in the context that if he had given her the opportunity to have his financial support, maybe she still cleans his house but that's still probably a lot less work than what she was doing. She would have had time to do things like educate herself. Clearly she is literate and I don't know if she speaks to this in the diaries but I would assume that the only thing standing between her and reading either novels or newspapers or perhaps learning something artistic like singing or playing the piano, the kind of thing that Victorian ladies did to impress other Victorian ladies. She could have developed those skills if she had been given the chance because if I'm calculating this correctly from the entry on her 30th birthday, she refers to "10 years ago 'fore I knew Massa." So she met him when she was in her 20s. She still had plenty of time in her life that she could have self-educated, learned new skills, that sort of thing if he had actually given her the opportunity. But instead he appears to have deliberately withheld that from her to keep her as a fetish object.

MC: I think that is very true. It is almost like a reverse Pygmalion scenario, I think, in the sense that he finds this diamond in the rough and he was like, "no this is my diamond. She can't shine for anyone else and actually I don't even want her to shine. I want her to have some coal dust on her." I think that was definitely their situation. And I'd like to think in an alternate life, like let's say if Hannah actually, when she was 10, instead of going into service, if she was actually able to go to school, there was an opportunity for girls at her station to move up into the middle classes through school. So if she proved to be a very talented pupil, what might have happened was she would have been promoted to a student, almost monitor. So there would be a teacher up in the front of the room and there would be dozens of children. And so for every small group of kids there would be a student monitor. So the teacher was teaching this monitor and then the monitor was teaching the younger students. So if Hannah was very talented, maybe when she was 10 or a little bit older she could start teaching the really young kids who are maybe 3 or 4 and then as she moved up eventually she might have even become a teacher herself. She had the talent to. She's literate, she can read and write. If she had gone to school, I think that would have definitely been an avenue for her and her life probably would have looked very very different than it did.

AT: I do find it very telling that that last diary entry was when she was around 40 and as we said she lived into her 70s. And I would also be curious if his fetishization of her increased or decreased over the years, because it would have been reflective of the toll of the work which he seems very interested in to put it mildly. So I don't know, I just find that very telling that we have nothing in her own words when she definitely would have been tired. She would have been worn down from having done this work for, at that point 30 years. She's been doing this since she was 10 or younger (MC: Yeah.) I can't imagine even someone who takes pride in their work wanting to continue doing that in a body that has already been doing it for that long.

MC: Oh exactly, because there is a very big difference in how her body would have been in her 20s versus her 40s. It's one thing to take on all this physical labor when you're 20. She probably still had nice beautiful skin. She probably had long hair and and looked healthy. But after 20 plus years of doing that work, I imagine in her 40s, she might have had arthritis. Maybe she wasn't standing quite as straight as she would have. Of course all this time, she wouldn't have access really to things like skincare or hair products or anything else that a middle-class woman probably would have had. So I would imagine she probably looked very different towards this section of her life. And I could imagine that might have taken a toll on her marriage too. I think you could easily make the argument that that he objectified these working-class girls while they were still girls and young. But by the time they they got more matronly looking and maybe the effects of all their labor were really starting to show on their body, I would imagine his treatment of them would have been a lot different

AT: And even in the way that she phrases it is essentially that he is "letting" her stop doing it. You can say, "well she stood up to him and said 'I don't want to do this anymore,'" but it was still his choice.

MC: That's very true. Yeah, it sounds like she, especially at that point, was just getting tired. She was tired of writing. She was probably tired of doing that work that she needed to do for survival. But there is that aspect of disparaging herself too in the sense of, "oh my husband is so kind. He just loves reading what I write so much that even though I don't want to do it, he just keeps encouraging me because it makes him so happy and I feel so appreciated the way he does that." But to our eyes reading that it's like, oh wow he doesn't seem to have much respect at all for what she wants to do.

AT: So she stops writing the diaries at 40 but we know that she continues working basically until she dies in her 70s and we know that they stayed married that whole time?

MC: Yes, there was no evidence that they had gotten divorced. However by that time they weren't living together, like we were talking about before, but towards the end of that marriage they weren't living together full time. It wasn't like she had some kind of retirement, that was not the case. So we can imagine that by then, she was doing what she had to do to survive. I don't know if by then that they still kept up their schedule of visiting each other. The historical record goes silent on that from what I could see. So by the time the diary ends, we don't really know what the status of their marriage was. They just never lived together for an extended period of time like a traditional married couple. I don't know if maybe his interest in her waned a little bit too. I think she would frame that as, oh she was just so independent she could come and go as she please. But old age was not a comfortable time for Victorian women. If you had no husband and no home you were basically working hand to mouth to survive. So I think her old age was probably something that was very difficult for her.

AT: I would argue with again this idea that she was independent. As you said she could come and go as she pleased, but she couldn't. She couldn't come and go from the employer that she had to maintain because he wouldn't support her. So she's stuck there six and a half days a week. And then she can't come and go from his house because she's not allowed to stay with him. I just don't see any interpretation of this where, yes she is earning her own money, but she's not earning enough money to change her circumstances if she wants to. She's not earning enough money to retire eventually. And I think you do see this in contemporary relationships as well, where women in particular want to feel empowered in their relationships. So they describe situations that are frankly very unhealthy, but they are presenting it through this rationalization where they can pretend that they have power that they really don't.

MC: Yeah, I think that's definitely true, and I think that's absolutely true in the case of Hannah too. She was in such a vulnerable position and she was just taking any bit of happiness, any bit of power that would come her way. But I would imagine if things turned out differently from her, she had never met this husband, I would like to think her her life would have turned out so much differently. And I think that's definitely a issue that we see with women throughout history too, and you're given the set of circumstances and they're so constrained, they're so tight, so you try to make the best of it any way you can. And sometimes you have to do these great rationalizations in your mind just so like you can actually make it through the day and to actually have a moment of happiness and of clarity. And I could imagine too, if any of her peers, not lashed out at her but said to her, "actually this doesn't feel right," I think her first reaction would be, "oh you're just jealous because I found this this great love." There was actually an entry to where she describes seeing his face in a fire, I guess she was cleaning, putting together the fireplace or something and she saw his face in there and she's like, "oh that's going to be my husband" and when she saw him and realized, she knew that that was going to be her husband. And that just sounds like something a teenage girl would think of too, not a grown woman necessarily, rationalizing her choices. Bt that would be like a teen girl romanticizing like, "oh that's going to be what my future husband is going to look like." And so she probably felt like, "oh the universe is giving me such a good fate," when to other outsiders, it doesn't feel that way at all.

AT: I think you could definitely argue that women of her class of this time probably had a lot of practical maturity forced upon them at a young age, but probably didn't have a lot of emotional maturity in a lot of instances. Because again if she's been working six and a half days a week since she was 10, that doesn't leave you a lot of time for socializing. I hated high school and I hated middle school even more, but one of the arguments for sending kids to school is that they learn to socialize. They learn hopefully emotional maturity from interacting with other people on a regular basis. And she just wouldn't have had that. The only people that she would have been interacting with are the people that she worked for and potentially a couple of other servants, not even necessarily a lot of other servants. Because if you look at that list of all the things that she was doing, a lot of maids of all work at this time might have been the only servant or one of a small handful of servants in the household. So there isn't even that whole *Upstairs Downstairs*, there's this whole society of servants in the household. There wouldn't necessarily have even been that for her to interact with. So it does make a lot of sense to me that she wouldn't have had that emotional maturity. She wouldn't have had necessarily experience in courtship, shall we say, and that feels like just one more way that she would have been a vulnerable young woman that this creep came in and took advantage of.

MC: Right, exactly. She wouldn't have had that much socialization at all especially if she was the only one working in a household as the maid. Also even if she had siblings, I'm not sure if she did, but even if she did, she went away to work at 10, so she wasn't really around for her siblings to grow up. She might have helped her mother when they were little. But other than that, she was basically out on her own working. And she was definitely not having her relationship with the women of the household. If there were children as young as her, the adults would have been very clear that "no, this is not someone you speak to, that you play with. This person is here to support the household. You are not friends, you're not equals." Usually Victorian servants were not expected to speak unless they were spoken to. Ideally they wouldn't have even made eye contact with their employers. They were supposed to be invisible until they were called upon and even then they were supposed to just do what they were supposed to do, like bring in tea and then leave. They were not supposed to make any kind of mark or presentation at all. So from a very young age she was taught that she was supposed to be seen and not heard not even seen. She was supposed to get what she had to get done and that was it. And so she didn't really have that time or that freedom to have probably many friends. Like you mentioned too, there weren't any other male servants there that she could develop a crush on or have some sort of courtship. I think her marriage probably came as a big surprise to her in the sense that she maybe thought that she would never have the actual opportunity to marry just because the way her work life was.

AT: I do think there is a strong correlation between being objectified as a servant, in terms of what you were saying about basically "this is not a human person, this is just an automaton essentially who is here to serve us." She's not a person she is being objectified as a servant and you have to assume that that made it easier for him to objectify her as a kink object.

MC: Oh definitely, definitely. She even writes in her diary that up until the time of her 30s, she felt absolutely objectified, that she felt degraded, that she wasn't a worthwhile person. And then here is this man who is actually probably rich and well-dressed saying to her, "no, actually, you are an object and that's a good thing you should be happy that you're an object." And so she internalizes that and and says, "oh yeah actually. It is pretty great to be an object." And that was really the only sense of self-esteem that she could get.

AT: So it's like a false empowerment. (MC: Yeah. Oh, exactly.) Now this is all really interesting obviously, but it's also a very, very different topic than we talked about last time with Margaret Guenther and the Episcopalian church. (MC: That's very true!) So what was it about Hannah that made you want to talk about her today?

MC: History, what we've usually seen is written from like the top down. So a lot of historians will write about

royalty and statesmen and people like that. But hers is very much a history from the bottom up. Her diaries show a perspective that's usually overlooked, that usually doesn't survive at all and it gives a really clear window into what lower class women in Victorian society went through. It also shows a lot about Hannah as a person, how her self-worth, the very little self-worth that she had was tied to her job and was tied to her marriage, how she was trying to navigate these these really strict Victorian mores from her her position as a very lower class person. And I think the fun thing about being a historian is finding these primary sources and being introduced to all these people that you don't necessarily get a chance to know. And so I think my research into Hannah was very similar into my research into Margaret Guenther only in the sense of, these women weren't famous. They made a pretty big mark in their society in their own individual way but they weren't famous. There's not a ton of books written about them, no movies or anything like that. Their time periods didn't look very kindly on them in some ways. And so I think seeing that aspect of women's history from two very different people shows us a lot of similarities about the experience of actually being a woman, of being female in the Western world.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.