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Chasing the Ghost of Melesina Trench: A film by Qina Liu in collaboration with Katharine Kittredge

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Abstract

Filmmaker Qina Liu has created a short documentary about Katharine Kittredge's decade-long quest to learn about the life and work of Anglo-Irish diarist and poet Melesina Trench. The story tells of remarkable coincidences, documents lost and found, and the emergence of Trench's descendants in the project's final chapter.

Keywords

early modern women's writing, diaries, bluestockings, Irish Quakers, poetry, science fiction, mourning, courtship, early modern gender roles, Lord Nelson, Emma Hamilton, microhistory

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Preface to Film:

I would like to pretend that intuition, or intelligence, or even pure, stubborn intransigence has been the force which has driven my work on Melesina Trench for the last twelve years. In fact, it has been serendipity which has played the largest role in this project.

Last year I gave a lecture at the American Society for Eighteenth Century Studies conference describing the roles which coincidence, technological glitches, and pure luck have played in my discovery, research, and publishing about the Anglo-Irish diarist and poet Melesina Trench (1768-1826). Anne Greenfield, *Aphra Behn Online*'s New Media editor asked if I could record the lecture for them to include in this spring's edition, and so I dutifully complied, using PowerPoint's "Record Narration" feature. Five months later, I received the reader's report which described my submission as "rather slow-moving" and requested "more images, or movement across images"; this left me at a bit of a loss, since recording a narrated slide show represented the extent of my technological proficiency.

This is where serendipity steps in, yet again.

For the last few years, I have devoted a considerable amount of my time to training my advanced students to do professional-level conference presentations. As a result, last June I found myself sharing a car ride back from the National Children's Literature Conference with Qina Liu, a journalism major from Buffalo. In the course of our seven hour ride we talked about everything under the sun—including my work on Melesina, and Qina's passion for documentary filmmaking. When the viewer's response made it clear that *ABO* was looking for a film rather than a lecture, I knew just where I could turn, and immediately sent an email to Qina.

The only problem was that I did not receive the viewer's report until the end of final exams, Qina would not be returning to campus until the third week of January, and the journal had given us a rock-solid submission deadline of February 15. In addition to having to work under this tight deadline, Qina also had to negotiate the problems of there being no existing footage of me, and no way to capture images of the research sites due to their being in England and New Haven and our having no funding for the project. She was remarkably resourceful in rising to these challenges; she shot hour after hour of film in Ithaca and then employed SKYPE, Garage Band, and YouTube to fill in the gaps. She found local settings which captured the spirit of the research: Cornell's Rare Book Room fills in for the archives, and the microfilm reader from the Rod Serling Archive makes a cameo appearance. She also insisted that I abandon my carefully-prepared script and speak spontaneously, which brings me to the final item in this preface:

Apparently, gratitude does not make for riveting film-making. I would not have been able to bring the project to this point—preparing a book-length manuscript—without the timely help of two venerable institutions: The Beinecke Library at Yale and the Chawton House Library in Hampshire, UK. Visiting fellowships from both of these institutions in the spring of 2012 reinvigorated my research and, literally, bought me the time to do the archival work which gave

me a better understanding of Melesina's life. The film focuses on my personal plans, disappointments, and epiphanies, but without the support of institutions, archivists, and fellow scholars, the project would have been over before it began. I hope you enjoy Qina's remarkable film, and that you will take the time to read the acknowledgements at the end.

Film:

[\[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=damr6T9asHY\]](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=damr6T9asHY)

