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Citation

Lissa Paul's Renaissance-style intellectual activity is hard to categorize. Her work on late-eighteenth-century books for children looks at both its imaginative power and its commercial and national contribution. Her biography of Eliza Fenwick (teacher, Jacobin novelist, children's writer, serial emigrant), and her edition-in-progress of Fenwick's letters, led her to extensive historical work on Caribbean slave society and Canadian settler education, and to activism in reclaiming lost stories of the enslaved.

Detailed appraisal

In **children's literature** – a field too long ignored by most university English departments – Dr Paul has played a part in demolishing the once standard view that eighteenth-century stories for children were formulaic and transparently didactic, while young people's imagination remained uncatered-for till the golden age of Victorian children's literature. As co-author of *The Norton Anthology of Children's Literature: The Traditions in English*, 2005, and *Keywords for Children's Literature*, 2011, expanded in 2021, she has been and remains influential in radical critical re-appraisal. In *The Children's Book Business*, 2011, she examined the explosion of publishing and bookselling for children in the Romantic period, providing unique insights into the interplay of creative, commercial, and ideological aspects of society. In *Children's Literature and Culture of the First World War*, 2016, she explored the effect on the genre of very different cultural conditions. As an editor, 2002-9, of the journal *The Lion and the Unicorn*, she founded an annual poetry award and annual report on current children's poetry. Both continue to support Canadian writing and publishing of poems for children.

This strand in Dr Paul's research life is firmly embedded in close knowledge of the traditional canon of English Literature, and energetic involvement in current trends in education, critical thinking, and literary theory. Her prolific output of papers, articles and chapters on many topics, from feminist pedagogy to the work of Ted Hughes, bears witness to her engagement as a public intellectual. She considers today's books for children alongside those from the past, and situates them not in any silo but securely within their various historical and generic contexts, as well as in relation to literary theory, both feminist and other.

Dr Paul as **literary biographer** first attracted my own interest and admiration. Her subject – Eliza Fenwick, English author of several outstandingly original and delightful books for children, Jacobin novelist, friend and associate of Mary Wollstonecraft, educationist, and migrant or settler successively in Ireland, Barbados, the USA, and Upper Canada – presents unusually knotty problems to the biographer. Most challenging is the need to research in different countries and on different continents.

Dr Paul visited those places, made contacts, worked in the archives. The result, *Eliza Fenwick. Early Modern Feminist*, 2019, has garnered laurels for its immense amount of new and previously unavailable information, its lucid, gripping, and accessible narrative style, and for the way in which the author parallels her main story with another: that of her own searches and researches, failures and successes in tracking her subject's footsteps. This technique for bringing out the relatability of past to present has become a popular method for historical writing, but it is very hard to do really well. Lissa Paul serves as a model to others in this way as in others. She does not presume to pronounce on her subject's state of mind at crisis points in her life struggle, but conjures up Fenwick's personal, familial, moral and political dilemmas in such vivid detail as to provoke her reader to the full exercise of empathy.

Eliza Fenwick not only authored perhaps the finest of the radical novels of the 1790s; she also touches an unbeatable number of issues which are of pressing concern right now in the 2020s: displacement and migration and nationality change; education, especially for girls; race relations; nation-building; the historical near-invisibility of women's lives, work, and day-to-day struggle for survival for themselves and their families.

Seemingly without pause for breath, Dr Paul moved from biography to **editing Fenwick's letters** - fascinating and historically significant letters (many discovered by Paul's own research). Publication is due for 1 July 2023, with full annotation of Fenwick's governess-or-teacher's-eye view of life in an Irish great house, in the slave-holding society of Barbados (where some of her students had servants she assumed to be their unacknowledged mixed-race siblings, and where painful moral choices sprang up at every turn), and in Canadian colonial society. In "York", just as it was renamed Toronto, she formed enduring friendships with families of the great and the good, and ran one of the boarding-houses of the future Upper Canada College. In Niagara-on-the-Lake she and a friend founded and ran a highly successful girls' school, putting in practice some of the principles of the British radicals during Fenwick's youth in the 1790s.

The scholarly labour necessary to understand and explicate these successive milieus is awesome, but its results are valuable. Fenwick throws light on very early Canadian literature, which for most people suggests wilderness writers like Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill, but which also already included lively urban culture.

Researching in Barbados Dr Paul discovered another calling, that of **conservationist**. She was shocked to discover the fragility of the archives she needed to examine, and the absence of any plan or funds for ensuring their survival and safety. She became instrumental in securing the

digital preservation of the *Barbados Mercury Gazette* (1783-1848) and the *Barbadian* (1822-1861) through the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme. This action, benefiting future generations of international scholars, is paralleled by two interventions concerning historic sites in Niagara-on-the-Lake. Lissa Paul was instrumental, with various collaborators, in saving the house where Fenwick ran a seminary for young ladies, which is now open to the public. She and others have also succeeded in securing the future of the "Negro Burying Ground", with a memorial relief sculpture to replace the old sign-board, and a more appropriate name.

Her Fenwick research has brought Lissa Paul yet another role: **annalist of slavery**. Working collaboratively (for which she has a talent) she has helped to make a reality of the crowdsourcing project "Agents of Enslavement". This turns to good use the advertisements placed in the *Barbados Gazette* in an effort to hunt down absconding slaves. Volunteers are indexing the names of "owners" and also gathering together data (from fairly frequent mention of family members or locations, intended to aid the hunt for fugitives) about those enslaved people who had the courage and enterprise to choose resistance and escape.

This project makes available a whole new field of knowledge whose existence, even, was unnoticed a few years back. Amid increasing interest in the history of slavery, it is very unusual to find a way of enabling the voices of enslaved people to reach to us, though muffled by oppression and the lapse of time. Dr Paul was first drawn to this issue by Fenwick's *Visits to the Juvenile Library*, which features white children from the West Indies corrupted by their early reliance on slavery, and their enslaved nurse bent on self-education and self-improvement. Who could have foreseen finding this kind of relevance in a text of 1805 – and bringing that relevance to bear in the twenty-first century?

This thread in Lissa Paul's work is just one of those which demonstrate her ability to perceive and pursue the connections which make small particular facts open out to illuminate wide-reaching issues.