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John Walsh: Tales of the City

'So what if Amanda Foreman was snapped au naturel? You'd see more flesh at a duchess's dinner party'

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Poor Amanda Foreman. Ten years ago, she published her first book, a biography of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, won the Whitbread prize and picked up rave reviews – deservedly so; her subject was a fascinating woman whose reckless extravagance represented the peak of 18th-century aristocratic excess. I liked the detail that the duchess and her set pronounced words oddly, so that "balcony" was "ball-coe-knee". I liked Foreman's description of the duchess, a shocking gambler, undoing her necklace and flinging it on the table during a card game.

But, at some point during her launch week, the author encountered some plausible style writers at Tatler. Because she's strikingly pretty, Amanda is the kind of girl magazines court as a counterweight to the charming but intellectually 20-watt ladies who fill their pages. The style department suggested she pose with nothing on, her undraped form discreetly hidden by copies of her book. The picture was cover than those nude calendars featuring WI matrons holding farm implements. Ms Foreman was snapped looking shy and giggly, holding three books across her chest, while most of the initial print-run shielded her lower half. Sure, her shoulders were bare, but you'd see more flesh on display at a duchess's dinner-party.

She came in for criticism, mostly from misogynistic academics (one seriously assured me that she'd probably blown her chance of a history chair at Oxford), but it passed. She wrote more books, married, moved to the US, had children. And now she stands accused of single-handedly corrupting British biography.

"Much of the devaluing of the biographer's skill can be dated to 10 years ago," writes Kathryn Hughes (herself a fine biographer) in an article entitled "The Death of Life Writing". "By choosing to be photographed nude behind a pile of books and by allowing her own life story to become as important as the person she was writing about, Foreman did an accidental disservice to biography in general, and to young women biographers in particular", because her success "created unrealistic expectations" about the biography market and, post-Amanda, "photogenic young women are routinely commissioned to produce biographies of equally camera-ready subjects, regardless of whether they are equipped to do so." Too many books on royal mistresses, too much breathless froth, too many vapid society dames. Oh, and there's far too much Katie Price around these days.

This seems a heavy charge-sheet to lay at Ms Foreman's door. It doesn't matter whether she was snapped au naturel for a magazine (as part of a, you know, grossly unfair world-conquering publicity campaign); the book was good, and critically acclaimed and popular.

I suspect Ms Hughes disapproves of Ms Foreman because she wrote a serious biography about an 18th-century posh celebrity – a category Ms Hughes evidently despises. But Ms Hughes's last book was a major biography of Mrs Beeton who, if not quite a celebrity chef, has some claim to being the Delia Smith of her day. Is Ms Hughes guilty of choosing a "commercial" subject, in a search for a foodie readership, rather than a serious life of, say, Juliana of Norwich?

Kathryn Hughes also dislikes the way modern prize judges ignore scholarly, full-length, years-in-the-making books in favour of "crowd-pleasing" works that are (horrors!) "closer to journalism" and deal in one especially pungent corner of a life. I too admire the archive-haunted definitive life, such as Hermione Lee's on Edith Wharton or Claire Tomalin's on Thomas Hardy – but not, Ms Hughes, all the blooming time. Hurrah for the brief dip into history, the short-pitched raid into one year of a life. Remember what Lytton Strachey wrote of the Victorian age: "It is not by the direct method of a scrupulous narration that the explorer of the past can hope to depict that singular epoch. If he is wise, he will adopt a subtler strategy... He will row out over that great ocean of material, and lower down into it, here and there, a little bucket, which will bring up to the light of day some characteristic specimen, from those far depths, to be examined with a careful curiosity." And thank God Tatler never asked him to pose with nothing on.

Should you be near Trafalgar Square this week, drop in to the National Portrait Gallery and visit the exhibition of Wyndham Lewis portraits and drawings. The truculent, fascistic Lewis ("He had the eyes," Hemingway said after their first meeting, "of a disappointed rapist") was a portrait painter of genius. His pictures of writers and artists from the 1920s – Virginia Woolf,

TS Eliot, James Joyce, Ezra Pound – are wonderful. But one is especially interesting because of something that isn't shown. It's his painting of Edith Sitwell.

The high priestess of the literary avant-garde sits in an armchair in her study. Her mouth is pinched, her eyes cast down – and she has no hands. Why? It seems Lewis left the painting of Ms Sitwell's hands until the end and, while he was still at the drawing stage, he became inflamed with lust for his subject. Edith, unused to men attempting to invade her foundation garments, responded with horror and sent him packing. She never sat for him again, and he never tried to paint her hands from memory. According to her biographer Victoria Glendinning, it was the only sexual overture Edith ever received. So the portrait is an eloquent, rather tragic, image of frustration and not-quite-there-ness, two or three times over.

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