
**THE PROBLEM WITH
GREAT MEN**

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The Baillie Gifford Prize for Non-Fiction Lecture

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Some time before three o'clock on Tuesday, the 5th of May, 1840, the doors to the lecture room at 17 Edward Street, near leafy Portman Square were unlocked to members of the public. Those who arrived in their carriages; the gentleman in top hats and a handful of feminine company in closely fitted bonnets, were no ordinary citizens, but some of the most fashionable and esteemed personalities of the Victorian era. The titled elite, as well as acclaimed philosophers, writers and reformers gathered in the hall. The economist John Stuart Mill had turned out, as had Lady Byron, a mathematician and a committed abolitionist. The actor and stage manager, William Charles McCready took his seat, along with the author Elizabeth Gaskell, the theologian Frederick Denison Maurice, the clergyman and orator, Samuel Wilberforce, the poet Edward Fitzgerald, and the scientist, philosopher and Anglican priest, Dr William Whewell. For several weeks, an advert had run in the London newspapers, drawing readers' attention to a series of six lectures which were to be given during the month of May by the celebrated essayist, Thomas Carlyle. Three years earlier, Carlyle – a Scotsman and then a relative outsider to the literary circles of London – had established his name as a historian with the publication of his three-volume history of the French Revolution. He regarded his lecture series, entitled, *On Heroes and Hero Worship and the Heroic in Human History* as an opportunity to expand on many of the ideas he had explored in his earlier work.

On this occasion, Carlyle's objective was to define history and to explore the lives and personal qualities of those responsible for making it. From the outset he proposed a simple truth, that 'the history of the world is but the biography of great men'. On that day and on five subsequent afternoons, Carlyle took his audiences on a guided tour of the lives of several real and mythical figures; 'the divinity', Odin, 'the prophet' Mohammed, 'the poet', William Shakespeare and Dante Alighieri, 'the priest' Martin Luther and John Knox, 'the man of letters', Samuel Johnson, Robert Burns and Jean Jacques Rousseau, and 'the king', Oliver Cromwell and Napoleon Bonaparte. He explained that each of these personalities possessed natural characteristics and abilities

such as divine inspiration, superior intellect, sincerity, courage and vision, which encouraged men to listen to their ideas and to follow them. By these means, these heroes with their inherent talents were able to move the world forward. Carlyle insisted that it was necessary for men of his own age to recognise the genius of the hero. This would not only enable them to identify a true leader when he presents himself, but it would assist men in acknowledging and cultivating the qualities of the heroic in themselves. The Great Man was an inspiration to mankind, he was, as Carlyle put it, ‘as lightning out of Heaven; the rest of men waited for him like fuel, and then they too would flame’.

Thomas Carlyle understood his audience and wrote exclusively for them. This was not history for the masses or even knowledge to be consumed by them. Carlyle’s theories of greatness applied only to white, privileged men, though elite white women were also allowed to listen and to consider male heroism. His lecture series was not open to the majority of the population; the ordinary working man or woman would not have been in a position to abandon their employment for six afternoons in the month of May or to afford the one guinea (one pound and one shilling) subscription to the programme of talks. In the 1840s, labourers might earn a pound a week and skilled artisans such as cabinetmakers, jewellers, typesetters and carpenters were expected to keep their families on wages of no more than two pounds a week. For the Victorians, a guinea was a gentleman’s sum, a denomination used in horse racing and when paying one’s lawyer. Tradesmen were remunerated in pounds and shillings.

The following year, Carlyle and his publisher decided to make his ideas more widely accessible to those who were not able to attend his lecture series. The author transformed his notes into an extended essay which appeared in print at the price of 10 shillings and 6 pence. At such a cost, it was far beyond the means of the majority of the population, in more than just financial terms. At the time, roughly only 60% of men and 40% of women were literate, schooling had not yet been made compulsory, and public libraries would not appear for another 9 years. Bettering oneself was an exceptionally difficult challenge if you worked 6 days a week, for 10 to 12 hours a day at a factory, lived in two rooms of 8 feet by 10 feet which you shared with numerous other family members and had no access to clean water.

The Great Man Theory was born into a world of profound social injustice and inequality. It came off the printing presses in the same year that Annie Chapman, the illegitimate daughter of a trooper in the 2nd Life Guard drew her first breath of smoky, city air. It would have been sold at the booksellers around Fleet Street, near to the crumbling building where Polly Nichols' mother gave birth to her. It is unlikely that Kate Eddowes' father, a tin-worker imprisoned for going out on strike in 1843, had ever heard of it. The world of Great Man Theory regarded the destitute as lazy, women as physically and intellectually weaker than men, and the dark-skinned as inferior to the light-skinned. This was an era of cruel, exploitative colonialism, of public executions, of debtors prison, of the workhouse, and of excluding women from universities, the professions and the vote. A woman who had sex outside of marriage was considered morally compromised. A man who had sex with another man could be legally prosecuted. Those who governed Britain, those who made the laws and enforced them were, with the ironic exception of their young queen, all white men of privilege. The soil from which the Great Man Theory sprung, was the same ground into which the expendable lives of The Five, their parents, siblings and children were trodden.

Somehow, in the current age of fast fashion and superfast broadband, of digital downloads and live updates, history is seen as something static. It happened and is gone. History lies beyond us, something deposited on the landscape by long dead hands; the rows of white headstones that rise from the green and yellow fields of Northern France, the wartime pock-marks that scar the walls of Europe's great stone buildings. It drew borders along our maps and scattered fortresses, places of worship and houses of government across the land. Although our streets were trod by earlier feet and our dwellings contained lives that came before ours, history still does not appear real or present to most of us. We rarely think of it as a living part of our environment, or that we have inhaled its particles. We have also swallowed many of its so-called 'truths' without question; acquired them in books and through television. They have been passed to us as cultural, community or family norms, often through idle conversation, something in the newspaper, a statement overheard and then reaffirmed elsewhere. Most of us are uncertain from where or when we picked up certain fixed beliefs, they just became lodged in us. Like the understanding that the home is a woman's responsibility, that men

shouldn't display their emotions, and that accent reflects intelligence, so the concept of history as the story of important events and the great deeds of great men has also been absorbed.

The reason that Great Man Theory has persisted for all these years, is because he has faded into the background. History feels inactive and dead, and so we have left him standing, a rusting monolith, unmolested, unacknowledged, but continuing to cast a long shadow over how we view our history. Great Man's presence is felt at our national anniversary celebrations. Great Man is the reason we memorialise certain historic figures or turn their births and deaths into year-long commemorations. Great Man's influence in the public sphere has been to reduce the vast expanse of history into a handful of notable personalities and important dates. It gives the impression that history happened to someone else, to a chosen collection of individuals who Carlyle would define as 'heroes', Winston Churchill, the Duke of Wellington, Charles Dickens, Emmeline Pankhurst. In the world of Great Man, the only real history is about 'great deeds'; that which occurred on a battlefield, a palace or in the houses of parliament. It is about wars, dynastic power struggles, and the enactment of laws and rights, many of which often changed life only for a minority. Great Man presents a selective picture of our nation's history, a history constructed as a series of grand tableaux, without room for nuance. It is a single, linear narrative of our past, which is, with a few exceptions largely privileged, male and white. As we have never attempted to have a public conversation about the meaning or purpose of history in our society, it can hardly be surprising that so much of the nation was startled by the sound of Edward Colston's statue being thrown into Bristol Harbour. In the twenty-first century we have disconnected from our history, we have failed to ask basic questions as to its authorship and who owns the narrative and whether that story is reflective of all of us, or simply a continuation of an outdated Victorian ideal.

Change is not especially easy when both mainstream publishing and factual television, those who produce the bulk of 'history content' for public consumption still rely on the paradigm of Great Man to define the subject. With a handful of exceptions, the majority of history that is presented to us on our screens and on our shelves, is 'top down', its focus is on rulers, leaders, the monarchy, the aristocracy, wars, the church and the law. History has acquired a branding problem, and because we've



A statue of 17th-century slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol, toppled by Black Lives Matter protesters. © Ned Collyer.

been taught to think of it as boring and irrelevant, the commercial world has never been entirely confident that people will want to buy it, it requires recognisable names and national events to make it sell. Anniversaries, such as those commemorating the beginning or end of the first world war or women attaining the right to vote will produce a tide of books and documentaries on the subject. These will share space with the usual suspects, familiar from school lessons; Hitler, Henry VIII, Queen Victoria, Elizabeth I, the Second World War. Worse still, not only does commercial history reinforce the elitist concepts of Great Man, but it promotes a set of assumptions about gender which would not have been out of place among Carlyle's audience in 1840. Through marketing and focus group studies, it's been decided that Great Man history (which is about war and politics) is predominantly of male interest. Women prefer the histories of queens and mistresses, or historical novels and period drama. This bears out in the numbers. In 2016, *Slate Magazine* conducted a survey of popular history books published in the US and determined that 75.8% were written by men. It also revealed 71.7 % of historical biographies were written by men and about male subjects, while almost all biographies of female figures were written by women. Commentators from within the UK publishing industry concurred that the statistics were likely to be 'just as heavily gendered' here ('Popular history writing remains a male preserve, publishing study finds', *The Guardian*, 11 January 2016). Factual television programming, which is notorious for allocating 'serious history' to male historians and 'dress up history' to female historians, is equally culpable. As conservatism and outmoded notions of national identity are so bound up in our popular conception of history, it should also come as no surprise that so few historians of colour appear as the representatives of British history on screen.

The problem with perpetually giving people what they know, is not only that we never challenge biases and obsolete concepts, but that we never expand our knowledge. There is security and comfort in the familiar, and we have allowed popular history to become just this, an anthology of bedtime stories. But history, which should be regarded as an account of our human experience, is not a place of safety. It is at its best when it is potent, when it forces reflection, when it is unsettling, confrontational, or when it inspires wonder. History is about questing for answers and interrogating what is held to be truth. It is anything but

passive. Its arguments can force epiphanies or compel us to change the direction of our present circumstances. History can be activism. The last thing it should do is send us to sleep.

While I am not advocating an end to books and documentaries about monarchs or statesmen, or that school children should remain ignorant of the events of the Second World War, it is high time that we dismantle the limiting structures of Great Man history and explore alternative pathways to understanding our past. In doing this, we must be willing to embrace a completely different definition of history in the popular realm, one which is more suited to the twenty-first century, and not to a lecture hall in early Victorian London. History should be both dynamic and creative in its modern incarnation, it should enlighten and delight and not be coy about first appealing to the heart in an attempt to engage the mind.

The history we see on television and on the pages into which we escape, should invite us to explore somewhere foreign, yet with uncomfortably familiar resonances. Our fascination with the authoritarian regimes of Nazi-occupied Europe and Stalinist Russia should entice us to want to explore the parallels of the French Revolution, whose population also led lives against a backdrop of fear, denunciation and state-orchestrated mass murder. If we crave stories of French resistance fighters in 1941, why not tales of their ancestors in 1794, smuggling correspondence and squeezing the persecuted to safety through gaps in the Parisian city walls? Some of the most chilling first-hand accounts I've read of bloody political upheaval are those which describe the events of the Terror; the heavily pregnant Marquise de la Rochejaquelein attempting to cross Paris on foot in the middle of a massacre, the Scottish landscape gardener, Thomas Blaikie hiding in his rooms, watching in horror as Swiss guards are slaughtered outside his home, or the hundreds of last letters from condemned prisoners writing words of love to their wives, parents and unborn children. Their experiences are universal, their voices, painfully recognisable in the context of modern conflict.

Popular history should never permit us to get too comfortable with what we think we already know. It should eschew complacency and take us through the backdoor into a subject, rather than predictably entering through the great hall. Over the years, we have become intimately acquainted with the courts of Tudor monarchs. We have familiarised

ourselves with every corner of each palace, each lady in waiting and courtier, each doomed wife of Henry VIII, each jilted suitor of Elizabeth I, each scheming ambassador, each ambitious family member, each calculating advisor, each portrait, each horse, each glove, each pearl brooch. The place to which we have not ventured is through the window, beyond this gilded world and out into the streets of sixteenth century York or Norwich, or over the hills to the farms of Kent and Somerset. We have not come to know families of merchants or shoemakers, their troubled marriages or their failed aspirations. What was it like to be a musician, a thatcher, or the daughter of a tanner? What might these individuals who were not born to teethe on gold-handled coral rings expect of life? An entire nation of subjects have gone without names, lost behind a pile of books about their kings and queens. Similarly, we have allowed single personalities to lay claim to the entirety of the capital. We write about the London of Shakespeare, Samuel Pepys and Charles Dickens, summing up the diverse experience of millions through the eyes of three wealthy men. If we were bolder, we would untie ourselves from these mooring posts and push out into a turbulent river of voices, each one just as capable of carrying the tale of the city they inhabited.

The history of every location is a compendium of unique life stories. I awakened to this while writing my first work of nonfiction, *The Covent Garden Ladies*, about a notorious eighteenth-century guide to the capital's sex workers. In the course of researching this book, my perception of London, the city in which I live, shifted forever. I began to see ghosts. It was no longer possible to pass-by rows of houses in Fitzrovia or Mayfair without recalling the short biographies I had read in the *Harris's Lists* of those who had once inhabited these addresses. As I wove between pedestrians and kerbside rubbish bags, I could look at a door on Little Titchfield Street and see Mrs Quiller helping a 'ruined' girl up the stairs to give birth in secret. I could imagine the West Indian Miss Love, sitting in her window at 14 George Street waiting for her American paramour. I would know which shop on Monmouth Street had been a greengrocer in 1771 and that two doors down in 1765, a barrel-maker named Smith and his three children were burgled by a gang of housebreakers. A taxi ride down High Holborn would prompt a memory of something I had read about a family whose toy shop was set alight there 220 years earlier. The lost are reclaimed with each new piece of research, each life is placed like a pin on a map of my city. The London in my mind teems with spectres who



John and Annie Chapman, photographed at a studio on the Brompton Road, Knightsbridge, around the time of their wedding in May 1869.

walk alongside me. Now, I live perpetually among the dead. I not only see Polly Nichols in Trafalgar Square, but Mary Jane Kelly circling Piccadilly a carriage. I have peered into the windows of Annie Chapman's mother's house on Montpelier Place and seen her wedding photo on the mantle. I have watched Elizabeth Stride mount the stairs at 67 Gower Street and I have followed a young Catherine Eddowes across London Bridge on her way to the Dowgate School. When I alight at my underground station, I can see my slumbering neighbours who sought shelter there during the Blitz. I know the names of people who slept in my house in 1911. These were the individuals who shared my physical space before I arrived here, whose feet touched paving stones beneath mine. However brief, fraught or fortunate their time here, they have left us a legacy of stories to consider and explore, and yet Great Man history has conditioned us to believe that these lives are unworthy, that their personal or even collective experiences have nothing significant to say about our past.

There is an antidote to Great Man history, one which lies on the opposite end of the spectrum from it. Most of us have interacted with it in some form, whether through exploring our own genealogy, listening to the stories of older family members and friends, or by visiting historic sites, but few are aware of it as a legitimate branch of historical inquiry. I was once one of those people. It was not until the third year of my career as an undergraduate that I had heard the term social history used. While I found the epic of political history fascinating, it left me with too many unanswered questions about the things that truly interested me, namely, people, and their complicated and messy lives. When a tutor recommended that I read *Lawrence Stone's The Family, Sex and Marriage in England; 1500 – 1800*, my perspective on history and what it could be was suddenly blown open. The historian Mary Fulbrook describes Social History as 'history with the people put back in'. This is certainly one of the most concise definitions of it. Social history is the study of the lived experiences of inhabitants of earlier eras. It seeks to examine their world and periods of change through their unique perspectives. Social history is egalitarian; the evidence left behind by any individual regardless of rank, class, creed, colour or gender is used to help us understand the past. As it has been the primary tool through which women's voices and experiences have been recovered, it is hardly surprising that some critics have been hesitant to regard it as 'serious history'.

What social history offers us is not a wide-angle lens on the past, but a microscope. It allows us to define the small more clearly by examining the person rather than the event. Social history permits an intimacy between the past and the present. The people whose lives became entangled in a war, or the enactment of a law get to tell you how it impacted them personally. It examines how our ancestors understood their feelings of love, grief, friendship, shame, fear, loneliness and failure. It looks at the physical fabric of their lives; their homes, their clothes, their food and the systems and structures that ordered their daily existence. It tells us what they thought of their circumstances and how they viewed one another. Most importantly, it encourages us to consider how much of their values and their world we have inherited. Social history turns the traditional historical narrative on its head, so we can view events from the 'bottom up', rather than from the 'top down'. It puts the human experience front and centre, and for this reason it is one of the most accessible entry points to understanding the past.

Human beings are by nature self-interested creatures. My experience of teaching undergraduates and speaking about history to audiences across the globe has made me acutely aware of this. People are rapt by the concept of inhabiting a body in another era. What would they have smelt like? What would happen if they had a toothache? What sort of underwear would they have worn? Everyone wants to know what their lot would have been had they lived in Renaissance Italy or Victorian London, whether they would have died in childbirth or been sent to the workhouse or starved when an early winter destroyed the harvest. They are horrified and fascinated to learn about laws that allowed husbands to rape their wives and sent children to the gallows. This is the sort of history that grabs us by the lapels and yanks us forcibly into the past, yet recovering this type of rarefied information and piecing together the pictures it presents of life is not light work.

When I began my studies as a postgraduate, I remember a very eminent emeritus professor instructing me that it was not a good use of my time to go searching for information about the lives of ordinary people. I was told that everyman (never mind everywoman) didn't possess the learning, the time or the inclination to keep diaries or write memoirs, and therefore their lives were nearly impossible to trace in the historical record. At any rate, they did nothing exceptional. Best to leave that sort of thing to the genealogists and get on with serious

history. That was in 1993 and fortunately, a great deal has changed since then. The wide-scale digitisation of primary and secondary source material from libraries and archives throughout the world has entirely altered the landscape of possibilities for historical research. Millions of old newspapers, periodicals and rare books have made their way onto databases. Censuses, workhouse records, ships manifests, immigration records, birth, deaths and marriage registers, military records, slave registers, wills and probate information are available to historians as well as members of the general public. In addition to this, the Old Bailey Sessions Papers Online have brought centuries of trial transcripts to the internet, and the LSE has sponsored the digitisation of the nineteenth century social reformer, Charles Booth's enormous body of work on poverty in London. Technology and advanced search mechanisms have revolutionised our ability to access data about the past, and to drill for information about the disenfranchised in particular. It now renders the assertion that we cannot learn much about the lives of ordinary individuals as simply untenable.

Despite these digital strides forward, sceptics are still likely to question whether it is possible for those deprived of a voice to tell a story. My intention in writing *The Five* was to prove that it is. The greatest misconception is to believe that it is impossible to gain a purchase on a subject's life without a body of writing providing insights into their personality, motivations and inner musings. Historical biography can take a number of forms, and if we cling to this rigid definition, we deprive ourselves of the opportunity to learn about anyone who couldn't articulate their thoughts or whose letters were thrown onto the fire. The five victims of Jack the Ripper, a group of women who were born into hardship and sparsely educated fall into this category. Of all of them, only three have left us a handful of sentences written or spoken in their own words. My challenge was to construct a picture of their lives around this lacuna from a multitude of alternative sources.

There is a maxim among forensic scientists and those who work in criminal law that 'every contact leaves a trace', or in other words, people, in spite of their intentions will always leave behind evidence of themselves in the places they have been. As I was to learn when writing *The Five*, Dr Edmund Locard's exchange principle applies as much to the elusive individual being tracked through history as it does to a perpetrator of a crime. Much to my delight, I found that Polly Nichols,

Annie Chapman, Elizabeth Stride, Catherine Eddowes and Mary Jane Kelly scattered their imprints throughout an extraordinary range of documents. They appeared regularly in the censuses, betraying their addresses, their occupations, their ages and a range of details about their families and neighbourhoods. I was able to follow them in and out of the workhouses and to learn about their states of health, their children, where they slept on previous nights and if they had been in trouble with the law. I discovered registers of their marriages, and certificates recording the deaths of their children, parents, spouses and siblings. I found signatures and crosses on documents attesting to their levels of literacy. I uncovered information in army and hospital records about the postings and salaries of their loved ones, including personal physical information relating to Kate Eddowes' long term partner and Annie Chapman's father, with his blue eyes and brown hair. Newspaper interviews with relations, friends and employers yielded information about these women's pasts which I would later cross-reference with more reliable records. Then, there were the few truly remarkable discoveries; a logbook documenting Annie Chapman's time at Spelthorne Sanatorium, recovered from a closet in a protestant convent, and an account of how Polly Nichols came to find herself at Lambeth Workhouse. These fragments of information, some large and others no more than splinters were then laid down against a background of historical context. Context was the active ingredient in the restoration of their stories, it brought meaning and animation to the bare facts of their lives. While I may not have had the actual voices of Polly, Annie, Elizabeth, Kate and Mary Jane at my disposal, I had those of others just like them. This chorus of women, who had found themselves in similar circumstances at the same time, spoke on their behalf. Those who had passed the night in the same lodging houses, who had worked the same jobs, or who had also struggled with addiction and abusive partners lent their experiences. When placed within the framework of their era, the subjects of my research came to life in what seemed to be the most alchemical way; the individual fragments sealed together and took on the forms of five distinct human outlines.

Among the few words spoken by the five and captured by posterity are those belonging to Kate Eddowes. They were recorded on the night of the 29th of September 1888. This former ballad singer and daughter of a union firebrand, this woman who had attended a charity school in the shadow of St Paul's Cathedral and visited the Crystal Palace as a



Do Ho Suh. *Public Figures*, 1998. Stone and bronze. 111.81 x 82.44 x 108.27 inches, 284 x 209.4 x 275 cm
© Do Ho Suh, Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro.

girl, this person who had been a factory worker in the Midlands and had ran off with an Irish soldier to traverse the country from North to South, was arrested for drunken disorderliness that evening and taken down to Bishopsgate Police Station. The constable there asked her for name. Kate is said to have replied that her name was ‘nothing’ or ‘I am nobody’. There is something deeply disquieting about a person describing themselves as nothing. It implies they are devoid of both identity and value. A few hours after making that statement, Kate Eddowes’s prone body was discovered in Mitre Square. On that night, forty-six years of experiences lived under the reign of Queen Victoria, both the struggles and pleasures, the spectacles and memories were extinguished with her – albeit only temporarily.

The reason why Kate Eddowes’ story and the histories of so many like her have lain buried and forgotten is because we have agreed that they are nothing and nobody, Great Man Theory has told us so. Great Man Theory would have us believe that unless we have been born noble or descended from genius, then we and generations of our ancestors have contributed nothing worth remembering. Its principal fault is that it promotes the notion that there are the worthy, and then there is everyone else. Ultimately, it fails to recognise the inherent dignity of the human condition. Great Man Theory passes judgment, and history will never be considered accessible or interesting so long as it continues to squint down at us from atop its nineteenth century plinth. It is time to replace it with something better.

That which should go up in its stead is something which makes use of all our experiences and which seeks to create a balance of perspectives. Its focus needn’t be on the turning point, the great deed or the grand narrative, but on how those moments were lived, and what influence they still have on the world we know today. History should teach us something about ourselves, it should encourage us to examine our prejudices and to understand our communities. It should invest us with a sense of responsibility as citizens. It should stimulate us. It should make us curious, but most essentially, it should enable us to grow.

Hallie Rubenhold

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Hallie Rubenhold is a bestselling and award-winning social historian whose expertise lies in revealing stories of previously unknown women and episodes from history. Her books include *Lady Worsley's Whim*, dramatized by the BBC as *The Scandalous Lady W*, and *Covent Garden Ladies: The Extraordinary Story of Harris's List*. Her latest book, *The Five: The Untold Lives of the Women Killed by Jack the Ripper* has become an international bestseller. It won the Baillie Gifford Prize for Non-Fiction in 2019.



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When Kate Eddowes was arrested for drunken disorderliness on an East London street in September 1888, she was asked to give her name. ‘Nothing,’ she replied, as if to say: I am a nobody. A few hours after her release, Eddowes’s life ended at the hands of the man who came to be known as Jack the Ripper.

Why is it that the unidentified murderer became more famous than any of the women he killed? Rubenhold’s unforgettable book, *The Five*, paints a portrait of the lives of those five women who died in 1888: messy, complicated, much more nuanced than the popular conception of them as simply prostitutes. In effect, Rubenhold gives them back their stories.

In this essay, specially written for the Edinburgh International Book Festival, Rubenhold offers a powerful critique of the idea that history is only the story of ‘heroes’ – often wealthy, educated men. Instead, she argues, social history can be a form of activism, grabbing us by the lapels and taking us into the fascinating lives of our forebears regardless of rank, class, creed, colour or gender.

