



The Scrapbook History Podcast

Episode 3

Making scrapbooks:

why did an interwar police detective scrapbook?

Cherish Watton:

Welcome back to the Scrapbook History Podcast with me, your host and scrapbook scholar, Cherish Watton. Throughout this podcast, we are exploring the history of scrapbooking in 20th century Britain. In today's episode, specifically, we will be looking what it means to actually make a scrapbook. We'll be thinking about why certain scrapbookers made scrapbooks in the first place, and why they spent their time clipping, cutting, copying, and pasting an array of items onto the blank pages of a book.

Today, scrapbooking is big business. Go down any aisle in hobby shops here in the UK, and you'll find a wealth of colorful scrapbook templates, stickers, glue, ink, stamps, ribbon, and other decorative items to help you adorn the pages of your scrapbook. In the US, there are entire stores dedicated to scrapbooking, which exist alongside scrapbook classes, catalogs, online tutorials, podcasts, scrap sessions, and parties. You can buy books now on how to create scrapbooks, or go on social media to find inspiration for your own scrapbooking templates and patterns. In short, there is an abundance of advice for both new and seasoned scrapbookers.

However, this wealth of advice has not always been the case, nor were the ready-made scrapbook templates we see now, which really only emerged at the end of the 20th century. For the early part of the century, much of the advice given to potential scrapbookers was published in newspapers; and more often than not, was aimed at women and children, even though these were not the only groups of people who made scrapbooks, as we'll begin to see in this episode.

On the 25th of June, 1910, the Hampshire Telegraph gave some of its younger readers and their parents advice on how to spend a rainy day as part of its Children's Hour series. "Another suggestion for rainy weather is the scrapbook, the scrapbook that is all your own make. Buy large sheets of manilla paper, and cut them into half sheets. Sew these together with heavy cord, and bend, or with a soft cover of brown linen. You can collect all the pictures that you think

are pretty and paste them into this book, which is quite large enough to hold the larger sized magazine pictures."

"You can put in with them bits of verse or stories or jokes; or if you like, you can try to illustrate the stories yourself with such pictures as you see and think fitting. No little boy or girl should be without a rainy day book like this. I know a little boy who is making a paper city in one of these scrapbooks. He collects pictures of houses and his city is growing rapidly into a metropolis with factories and shops and parks; in fact, everything that it ought to have to make it a real city."

Making a scrapbook seemed a perfect, cheap, and accessible activity for younger children cooped up inside because of the rain. Instead of exploring the outside world on a rainy day, they could create their own fantastical creations in the pages of their scrapbooks, such as their very own city landscape. Unsurprisingly, printed advice columns such as these often encouraged children to use their newspapers when creating their scrapbooks. If children continued to cut and paste from these publications, they could put pressure on their parents to keep buying the same newspapers. Clever, hey? Journalists were certainly strategic in trying to encourage a young, loyal readership of their newspapers.

Continuing this trend throughout the 20th century, publications such as these would go on to run competitions, encouraging children to gradually accumulate clippings on a specific theme over the course of several weeks and months. Spoiler alert, we'll be exploring more of that in a later episode.

Despite what newspapers salespeople might prefer, the great thing about homemade scrapbooks is that they can be made with very few purchases. Readers were invited to not only find clippings from newspapers in the home, but to make their own scrapbook from scratch, courtesy of paper, linen, and cord. A scrapbooking practice also shows that bits of fabric, advertising trade cards, strings, photographs, and colored scraps of paper were used as creative material instead of, or alongside newspapers.

The responsibility was placed on young people to decide how to personalize a scrapbook, as seen in the article, with phrases such as, "You can collect. You can put in then bits of verse or stories and jokes as you see and think fitting." The repeated focus on you shows how young people were encouraged to mold the scrapbooks from whatever remnants of everyday life they found around them, and make them their own.

Of course, in addition to blank pages and lots of material, scrapbooking also needed and adhesive to paste items onto the pages in the days before Sellotape. But even that could be homemade. Another article published in 1915 in the Falkirk Herald, described how scrapbookers could make glue at home for a trifling cost. "Mix a tablespoon of flour smoothly with rather more than a tea cup full of cold water. Stir it constantly by the side of the fire until it thickens.

Then add a small half teaspoonful, 25 drops, of oil of cloves. If kept covered and frequently stirred while cooling, not much skin will form on the surface."

The glue, just like the scrapbook, could be made with items commonly found in the home. The world was the scrapbooker's oyster. Almost anything could be saved, courtesy of paper and some homemade paste, alongside a healthy penchant for spotting and clipping and preserving. Soon, products such as Sellotape, invented in 1937, began to enter the market alongside glue sticks in 1969, which gave scrapbookers new tools for creating their collections.

At the same time that these tools bore the hallmarks of technology, innovation, and invention, more and more commercially produced scrapbooks and albums also became available. One of my favourite of these commercial items is something I discovered a few years ago called "The Whopper" series of scrapbooks. These books are about A3 size, full of sugar paper pages; and seemed to have been used mostly by scrapbookers in the 1920s and 1930s.

The covers play with the idea of making a scrapbook, showing colored line drawings of scissors, pictures, and paste pots, spotlighting the very items required to make a scrapbook. One bright front cover shows young girls pasting photographs onto pages, which are three to four times bigger than they are, blurring the boundaries between scrapbooking and scrap screens. Whopper scrapbooks were used by one of the first female conservative politicians, Florence Horsbrugh, to chart her political ascendancy, after becoming elected to the House of Commons in interwar Britain.

I bought my own anonymous Whopper scrapbook last year, which was full of clippings on the Royal family in the 1930s. And I found another one online, dedicated to a bank of snippets on film styles of the day. The Whopper scrapbook was cheaply available, and could be adapted to the collecting interests of their creator, whether film fanatic or Tory politician.

Often we don't know much about how scrapbooks were put together. We are rarely afforded the luxury of a note which tells us how often someone placed the items in the scrapbook, or if they scrapbooked with anyone else, or where they might have scrapbooked. We don't know why they placed certain clip-ins next to each other. And we rarely know why they put the scrapbooks together in the first place.

Some of these questions, we just have to accept we'll never know the answer to; and we have to carry out what Patrizia DiBello describes as "a flirtatious readings of these creations, working with and embracing their unknowability; in some, doing the best we can to make deductions."

However, in some cases we are lucky enough to find that other archival material exists, as is the case with a scrapbook made by a detective. His scrapbooks survive in the collections of Bishopsgate Institute in East London, after being

given by his family. He was a scrapbooker who wrote himself into history by presenting himself as the next Sherlock Holmes. To find out more about the story behind Bishopsgate's scrapbooking detective, I spoke to historian Dr. Eloise Moss.

Thank you so much for taking time out of your research to speak to me today about your work on scrap booking. From my own perspective, I found it enormously helpful, because there's just so little written on 20th century scrapbooking. And both your recent chapter and your article have really helped me a lot, so it's great that I can get to talk to you today about it.

Eloise Moss: Thank you. Well, thanks so much for having me. I do agree that scrapbooks, I think, are such an unusual resource, that not many people are entirely sure what to do with them when they're confronted by one, especially historians and students. They only come along every so often, so yeah, it's really exciting to chat about them.

Cherish Watton: Yeah, absolutely. It is brilliant to welcome you along today, Eloise. I wondered if you could talk to us today about your scrapbooking detective.

Eloise Moss: Sure thing. So, the detective in question is Frederick Porter Wensley. He started out life as a police officer in London's East End during the late 1880s. He was in fact, a police officer at the time of the Jack the Ripper murders during 1888. And then, he progressed to achieve the status of detective. He was in fact, one of the Big Four at Scotland Yard, the Big Four detectives, very famously.

By the 1920s and 1930s, his career ended as a detective in the mid 1930s. But at that point, he shifted and became quite a popular author of his own biography, called *Detective Days: 40 Years a Detective*. And then, he also became a sort of regular newspaper contributor about his sensational experiences hunting down the most famous thieves and murderers of interwar London. So, he's quite a character. He very much styles himself, particularly by the end of his career, as a modern Sherlock Holmes. And he even uses that language in some of his articles. And he's also seen as just really one of the foremost detectives of his era.

Cherish Watton: He does sound quite a character, most certainly. How did you come across Frederick as part of your own research?

Eloise Moss: I was, in typical fashion, reaching the end of my PhD research, which was on a history of burglary in London from the 1860s to the 1960s. And I was really just trying to chase up a few final archival references to burglary at the Bishopgate Library and Archives in London, when the archivist, Stef Dickers, who is just a brilliant archivist.

Cherish Watton: Absolutely

Eloise Moss:

He's wonderful. He told me about this scrapbook that had come into his possession in the archives of Detective Frederick Porter Wensley, and would I like to look at this scrapbook and his notebooks from that era? So I started off looking through the notebooks, and there were very typical policeman's notebooks and just a few short lines, and thought, "Oh, this isn't really going to help."

And then I got delivered of these two huge brown volumes. Opened the first page, and saw this incredible resource that started out with a few pages that had some of Detective Porter Wensley's family history that he'd recorded; so scenes of him as part of a cricket team, scenes of his children and him during the war. And then, as you moved through, suddenly it was lots of newspaper cuttings. In fact, almost every single newspaper cutting of his own career and his involvement in pursuing London's criminals from the 1890s or thereabouts, through to the 1930s; because his involvement in the Jack the Ripper case wasn't recorded from the 1880s.

So the newspaper cuttings that start to feature him as the investigating officer begin in the 1890s. And through this, you are able to track the ascendancy of his career from police officer to detective through the pages of the popular press, as his name becomes increasingly well known. And particularly, by the 1920s and 1930s, the format of the tabloid press changes as well. It becomes much more like the format of the tabloid press that we're familiar with today. So very visual, short, catchy headline, illustrations or photographs of the criminals involved, juxtaposed against this image of Porter Wensley's face, which has a very distinctive profile. And he's seen as the sort of... He's described as a hawk-eyed sort of investigating officer; and he's increasingly posed in ways that make him look quite hawkish in demeanor, looking down on the villains that he's captured in these press articles.

So, I was reaching the end really, of this final piece of research on histories of burglary in London. So, in the first instance, I could see the odd cutting in the scrapbook that spoke to these themes of burglary that I was interested in. But then, I sort of sat back for a moment and looked at the scrapbook as a whole, and started to think more about the man himself, and the narrative of his life that he was constructing through these pages; which are both a mixture of his family history, and are very much a sort of celebration of his career, and a way of telling his story through the press, and organizing those scraps of press reports into a narrative of him as this world's foremost detective in this period.

What I then realized, because I started to read his autobiography, was that there was a relationship between the two documents, the scrapbook and the autobiography. So most of the time when we think of people writing an autobiography, we think they've just sat down with their memories, and they've jotted down everything they can remember about their lives. Wensley didn't have to do that because he had this scrapbook there full of press reports on his career.

And what you start to notice is there's an inter-textual relationship between the two documents. So he's actually borrowing the language of the press, and he's almost building on the image the press created of him as a celebrity detective to then tell his autobiography. And in that sense, it became apparent to me that this scrapbook was not just a recorded history of a single police officer. It was a recorded history of the process of a making of a celebrity in this period, and of retelling an ideal story of the relationship between detective and citizen in London at a really crucial moment, the advent of modern policing, and him weighing in that. It was just this really multi-layered document. It was an amazing find.

Cherish Watton: It sounds like such a gold mine to find right at the end of your PhD. It sounds absolutely wonderful, bringing together all those themes that you'd come across already in your research, and then offering so much more, that very personal narrative. And to be able to then compare that with the published autobiography, and actually look at that conversation. Because quite often, we have a scrapbook that survives with very little extra providence, so it's wonderful that you are able to bring those two into direct conversation with each other.

Eloise Moss: Yeah. I was really lucky to have the two documents. I must have met at the time, because I was literally in the last few weeks of finishing up the PhD. I was like, "Oh no." Because it was apparent there was way too much to write about, and my PhD was already pretty much at a state that I wanted it to stay at by that point. And it was apparent that... I think most scrapbooks, they are so rich. They are individual articles or boo- length projects in and of themselves to talk about. And I was just a bit like, "What do I do?"

But then I realized afterwards that I could develop it into a distinctive article. And in the end, I got an article and a chapter out of it; because also in the process of writing about Wensley and writing about the scrapbooks, I realized that there's a relative porosity of scholarship or of advice on how to analyze a scrapbook or what scrapbooks are, particularly in a UK context. There's a lot more in American context, so yeah.

Cherish Watton: Yeah. I think that's why your chapter is so invaluable, because it does bring together that American scholarship, but actually categorizes the scrapbooks, and then gives some pointers of methodologies. But we'll come back onto that I think a little bit later. But no, it's really interesting that you were able to get so much from the scrapbook. Talk us through some of the actual arrangements of the articles and the photographs on the page, and some of the things that you were able to bring out from reading the visual sides of the scrapbook.

Eloise Moss: Yeah. So, I kind of borrowed from the way in which we read the newspaper page in many respects, as I started to try and understand how the scrapbook had been edited and compiled. So, there's a very famous historian called Judith Walkowitz, who looks at press reports in the Victorian period when she's studying the Jack the Ripper murders. And what she noticed, was that the way

editors of newspapers juxtaposed different stories together creates what she calls a "proliferation of meaning" on the newspaper page.

And what she means by that is, let's say if you have a burglary report next to a report on insurance, your natural instinct is going to be, to think, "Ooh. Maybe crimes like burglary are increasing. I should probably buy insurance." And there's a commercial relationship there. And equally, if you get a murder on a page, or a sort of a trial of a murder, surrounded by lots of other reports of murderers who've been found guilty, you're probably going to think that undecided trial is someone who's guilty.

So, I started looking at the way Wensley had constructed the different scraps he'd taken about his career on a single page, as having a relationship to each other; so saying something individually, but also, if you put them in context with the other scraps on the page, saying something collectively as well. And what you increasingly noticed about the way he'd organized them was that at the start, it was chronological; so just chasing the buildup of his reputation from police officer to detective. But then once he was an established detective, he started to group them, so there were clearly scraps that spoke to the advent of modern forensic science and those techniques, juxtaposed with his own opinion pieces on why he felt those techniques were perhaps not the most valuable, or perhaps potentially not as valuable as having a detective's nose for something dodgy going on.

And then, there were other where it was clearly a big coup for him to have solved that case; so the real celebrity criminals of the era. So there was a burglar called the Spider, who was juxtaposed pretty near to another article that was about him capturing a family group of burglars headed by a woman, and with images of the stash of both loots that he'd discovered and also the weapons and technologies they'd used to commit those crimes.

And what became even more interesting as I went through, was he had started to take photographs and stick those in alongside certain articles as well. What I realized was that he must have taken photographs from Scotland Yard's crime files, because they were photographs of criminals on arrival at Scotland Yard; so the classic face forward, face to one side photographs; and also photographs from inside the evidence store as well, so images of when the police had actually captured lots of guns and other methods of committing crimes. And he pasted them alongside the newspaper reports of the same events, almost as if he was inserting a personal memory; something that he could touch and be reminded of being inside Scotland Yard, that was only something he would have access to, alongside those newspaper reports. And it gave it this different aspect of him proving an authentic connection to those cases. And again, I think that was a process of him almost reassuring himself about his role in history, as he began to register that in fact, he could appropriate his life to a commercial purpose after his retirement, and make himself this celebrity detective.

But I think it, being less cynical, I also think it was him touching the part of the past that he was involved with, because those layers where he'd put in the crime scene photographs with the newspapers, and then at the front and the back of the scrapbook, where he'd inserted clippings of his family and family photos and of his sons, there was something personal and something public, that all came together in this scrapbook.

Cherish Watton: It's a really interesting combination then, of that as you say, the public newspaper records and then the way that professional police records are then being used to record his own personal memory; because we wouldn't necessarily think those professional records would be those repositories of memories. And then, how the family are implicated in that process is really interesting. Do you get a sense if he would have showed this scrapbook to anyone? Do you get a sense if he was showing it to other family members or perhaps other people he worked with? I know that can be quite hard to actually know, but what do you think?

Eloise Moss: In this case, it's not too hard to know that; because his daughter actually added some annotations onto the end of the scrapbook. So, in the final, in the second scrapbook, and it's oddly poignant as a historian; there are actually at the end, there are a few pages blank and then his obituaries, and some handwritten scribbles by his daughter about his life. And then, you begin to recognize her handwriting has cropped up elsewhere.

Now, what we can't know, is whether she discovered them after the fact and then inserted the obituaries; but at the same time, because the obituaries were collated at the time of his death and then pasted into the scrapbook, what I tend to assume is that she was indeed aware of the scrapbooks' existence, and almost felt it was her duty to finish those scrapbooks off and his life story.

Also, there are a number of cuttings about him being in the cricket team, as I've mentioned, or about his son's lives, one of whom tragically died during the first World War. And I would think that that is both something he kept for personal reasons and to maintain for his family history.

So, the scrapbooks themselves were eventually donated by his descendants to the Bishopsgate Institute. And one has to assume he would have known they would have been passed down. I suppose when we think of diaries, we always kind of assume they're personal documents; but where any document exists, there is a risk of someone finding them and reading them. And Wensley's scrapbooks, they're huge. So that would've been...

Cherish Watton: Hard to miss.

Eloise Moss: Exactly. They're not something you could have hidden under your bed.

Cherish Watton: No.

Eloise Moss:

In any kind of way. So I think we have to assume that were shared around the family, but might have actually been his hobby to a certain extent; because they're so full of him and his work until the point of his death.

The other thing was that there is a photograph album from his family life that's also included in that collection. And therefore, it seems like as a family culture, keeping photographs, taking photographs, archiving their family history, was something that became increasingly important to them.

Again, this is fascinating, because Wensley's from an extremely poor background. He's very much upper working class when he joins the police force. And then, he ascends to a position of relative wealth and power for his time. And one of the things that I noticed reading through studies of scrapbooking in America, is that scrapbooks provide a way for people from particularly impoverished or marginalized communities to organize bits of the past that they come into contact with, into a narrative, and again, put themselves in history; knowing that they're not likely to be written into history by historians, academics, and scholars of the age. And so, scrapbooks provide a kind of agency and a way of inserting yourself into the past, and creating something to hand down, where you might not otherwise have a great deal of material wealth. So I think there's a couple of things going on there.

Cherish Watton:

Absolutely. And the way that you're obviously relying on, in Wensley's case, the newspapers to construct that history as well. He obviously does then go on to write his autobiography; but in a way, that's the first draft of his history. He is borrowing those words from journalists and assimilating them into his own narrative. So obviously, you've talked about how very celebratory the scrapbooks were in showing his career progression, and particularly his intimate knowledge of the East End, and how that allowed him to solve different crimes. Is there any embarrassing episodes that he might have left out because they didn't conform to this narrative that he was trying to present in his scrapbooks?

Eloise Moss:

Yeah, absolutely so. Well, I realized because I thought that it would be helpful to go back to the original newspaper archives, and find out what he'd cut out essentially, when he created these cuttings and juxtaposed them alongside each other. What had he cut out on the newspaper page that the editor of the newspaper had included? And so, thanks to the large scale digitization of newspapers, which did not exist when I was an undergrad and has just transformed everything, I was able to type in just Frederick Porter Wensley and search.

And in doing that, I actually realised that there was a case where he got beaten up and failed to capture the criminal; and this had been recorded when he was a younger detective. And his name had been in the newspapers for that, and he had not included that scrap in his scrapbook. And I kind of can sympathize with that. It's not something you would necessarily want to remember. And obviously, he's not writing or creating this for historians, he's writing it for posterity.

But I think it says something about his character, possibly not something super flattering about his character, in fact; he really didn't want to have that aspect of his career recorded. And it also again, says something about the ownership he was able to take over his life and memory; one that perhaps he might have felt had been hijacked by the press at that point.

And again, it's really interesting, because he particularly by the interwar period, the relationship between the press and the police and how much police are leaking different forms of information to the press for money, for bribes, or to help catch crime, is under increased scrutiny. Particularly, there are fears when Wensley publishes his autobiography, that he may have broken the Official Secrets Act in certain instances. But subsequent investigations show he comes close to breaking the Official Secrets Act, but he doesn't go all the way. And this is discussed in the Houses of Parliament very carefully. So, there are things that he leaves out due to embarrassment; and then there are that he very carefully navigates around, in order not to completely break with his institutional origins, even though he's retired. And has to be very careful.

Cherish Watton: Mm. And I guess, through putting together the scrapbook is essentially a performance of an ideal police detective that he wants to show, even though at the beginning of his career, like everyone, he makes mistakes. He didn't want that to be in the narrative. He just wanted to have, I guess, be presented as this police hero essentially, in his scrapbook.

Eloise Moss: Absolutely. If we think about the 1920s and 1930s, and also the 1880s and 1890s when he started out, these were two golden ages of crime fiction and detective fiction. So, at the start of the period in the 1880s, 1890s, you have the advent of Sherlock Holmes, who then becomes this dominant character for the rest of the 20th century. And then, in the 1920s and 1930s, you have the rise of crime fiction authors like Agatha Christie, and these very famous detectives, fictional detectives, but famous fictional detectives. And their presence in modern literature and later theater and cinema, has a huge impact on policing and police relationships with the public. Because increasingly, the public expect police and particularly detectives, to have this kind of level of genius in solving murders, and to be able to track down every little piece of evidence and create connections where none seemingly exist.

And I think that this is something that Wensley picks up on, and then becomes very astute about. So really, he was inserting himself into the pantheon of other great detectives at this time. And I think in doing so, he was also trying to recover the reputation of the modern detective forced to a certain extent, and say that, "Okay. You've got fictional detectives. You've got Sherlock Holmes, you've got Quero, you've got Miss Marple; but the modern detective force is also something to be respected, whilst at the same time he retained this criticism that too much technology would actually detract from the skills of the current generation of police and detectives.

So he's also trying to be what we'd call now, an influencer, over policing and detectives. He's also trying to keep an arm in, with giving his opinion about the evolution of modern policing. He's sort of... He's someone who I imagine did not cope well with retirement. I just don't think it was right for him to retire. He's so fascinated by crime.

Cherish Watton: Mm. And I guess a way of keeping that up is by continuing his scrapbook. And I think it does culminate in a newspaper actually writing that he is like the modern day Sherlock Holmes, which must have been a great moment, when he's been trying to build up to this over the two scrapbooks.

Eloise Moss: Yeah. So, the tagline for his articles becomes like the real life Sherlock Holmes. And I don't know whether... Because part of me wonders if he suggested that, but part of me also thinks maybe that's a very astute editor as well. And yes, he would have been absolutely delighted to have been given that reputation.

Cherish Watton: It's hard for me not to gush too much about Eloise's work. She's one of only a handful of scholars who has written on 20th century British scrapbooking, in an article on Wesley's scrapbooks, published in *Social History* in 2015. I'll link to it in the show notes. More recently, she's also published a chapter in an edited collection entitled *Approaching Historical Sources in Their Contexts*, which I'd recommend you read if you are interested in finding out more about how to work with scrapbooks. Again, I'll add it to the show notes.

The survival of Wesley's autobiography, as well as later inscriptions and additions by family members shows how we have to be a bit like a detective ourselves to unpack the meanings lying at the heart of these volumes. And even with these extra puzzle pieces, there is still an element of unknowability, which we have to recognize. We have to follow Eloise's wise words here, and avoid being seduced by the seemingly intimate genre of the scrapbook.

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