

“Hor Nam is Frances”: A Book Collector Writing her Life

Paper delivered at *The Idea of A Life, 1500-1700*,

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The poster for the conference "The Idea of a Life, 1500-1700" is set against a light blue background. On the left is a detailed anatomical engraving of a human torso, showing internal organs like the heart and lungs. On the right is a black and white illustration of a multi-story stone building with a prominent tower and arched windows. The central text is arranged in a structured layout. At the top, the title "The Idea of a Life, 1500-1700" is in a large, serif font. Below it, in smaller text, is "A ONE-DAY CONFERENCE ORGANISED BY THE CENTRE FOR EARLY MODERN STUDIES, OXFORD UNIVERSITY". The date and time, "Friday 17 June 2016 • 9am-7pm", and the location, "MBI Al Jeffer Auditorium • Corpus Christi College", are listed next. The main body of the poster contains a grid of session titles and speakers. At the bottom, pricing information and contact details are provided.

The Idea of a Life, 1500-1700
A ONE-DAY CONFERENCE ORGANISED BY THE
CENTRE FOR EARLY MODERN STUDIES, OXFORD UNIVERSITY
Friday 17 June 2016 • 9am-7pm
MBI Al Jeffer Auditorium • Corpus Christi College

'Sketch of Descartes' Niall Ó Súilleabháin	'Innocent & Heretic in the Archives' Lutz Preuss
'The Wood Life' Hester L. Bailey	'A Book Collector Writing Her Life' Lori Humphrey Newcomb
'Real Lives and Excessivity' Evan Dowling	'Counting Experiences? Early Modern Science Writing' Olivia Smith
'Individual & Family Life in the Diary of Vittoria Colonna' Loren Cooley	'A Hidden Romance in Elizabethan Life' Mimi Tobi
'Finding Lives in Legal Records' Lutz Preuss	'German Autobiography' Petra Fin Wong
'The Death of Richard Hooker, Tutor to the Elizabethan Emperors' John J. Hall	'Devil's Ducks Among the Ravens' Zoeve Swisher

£35 standard • £20 student/unwaged
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Questions to adam.smith@balliol.ox.ac.uk

Abstract: The notes Frances Wolfreton left in her almanacs constitute emergent life-writing: they are clearly specific, personal, and written as a record. Their relationship to Wolfreton’s other book inscriptions might bring the latter, too, into the remit of life writing. In the distinct practices of her almanac notes and her book inscriptions, Wolfreton makes use of paratext with a deliberation that suggests that printedness itself may spur readers to write some version of a self, hacking *mise-en-page* to generate a structure for a life.

Frances Wolfreston (1607-77) is arguably the best-known non-aristocratic woman book collector in early modern England, having left behind many volumes that she consistently inscribed on “Frances Wolfreston hor bouke.” Her collection caused a sensation among collectors and Shakespeareans when it was auctioned by Sotheby’s in 1856, a sensation reprised by Paul Morgan’s 1989 article for the library, which traced some 95 of her volumes to modern collections. Long before systematic scholarship of women readers, these scholars found her remarkable for preferring and preserving literary works in small formats, including such early Shakespeare imprints as the unique copy of the 1593 edition of Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*. They also noted that her systematic writing of her name on the title page or head-title of her books (or the first extant leaf in the hard-case used books she sometimes acquired) suggested a self-perception as a collector, albeit not a connoisseur of condition.

Wolfreston has been less often considered as a reader, since she did not systematically annotate her books, apart from a few phrases of comment on individual texts that are now attracting attention on Twitter. Certainly she has never been considered as a life-writer. To consider her in the latter role is newly possible, however, since 2011, when the Bodleian acquired the almanacs she annotated in the last dozen years of her life with major life events in her family

and household: the birthdates and christenings of new babies, many of them named Frances, and sometimes the deaths of those children or mothers; marriages, visits, the education of her youngest son for the clergy. The acquisition is a volume of twenty almanacs for the years 1666 to 1710, bound retrospectively, more or less in order. The majority of the almanacs are “Poor Robin’s Almanac,” a series started by royalist author William Winstanley at the Restoration that irresistibly merged legitimate almanac information and parodic versions on facing pages. In the Bodleian volume, the first dozen almanacs, up to 1677, are used by Frances through the year of her death, at which point her eldest son writes “here end my mother’s Poor Robins” and the next year’s is carefully marked “not my mother’s here mine begins.”

Such annotations, Adam Smyth has argued, may be considered a skeletal form of life writing, especially if they are part of an “accumulative, ongoing, deliberate practice” by which early modern individuals extracted data from such almanac notes into connected personal accounts that are closer to the modern notion of life-writing (“Diaries” 445). However, no evidence in the Wolfreton record, as we now have it, indicates that she produced more elaborate journals, memoranda, or memoirs, and nothing in the almanacs suggested that she intended to do so. That her son, an antiquarian, preserved these volumes may suggest that they were definitive records.

Otherwise, however, the notes in the almanacs satisfy most of the qualities that Adam has attributed to early modern life-writing: they are clearly specific, personal, and written as a record. Indeed, I would propose that their relationship to Wolfreton's other book inscriptions might bring the latter, too, into the remit of life writing. Adam has suggested that the practice of life-writing might draw less on ideologies of selfhood than on print-based disciplines of textual production and recording. So too, in the two very distinct practices of her almanac notes and her book inscriptions, Wolfreton responds to graphic features as sites of 'writable identity' (*Autobiography* 24). These practices are idiosyncratic, not especially invested in the acts of transferal and compression into narrative that Adam has uncovered, and yet at a deeper level they confirm that printedness itself is spurring readers to write some version of a self; if not an accounting, then another kind of mark, but one that hacks *mise-en-page* to generate a structure for that self.

Smyth notes that "The overall impression annotated almanacs impart is of readers continually being one step ahead of the game: of readers improvising with print; using books in ways not always explicitly endorsed in the texts themselves" (41). Those impromptu practices counter the sort of humanist reading practice analyzed so famously by Lisa Jardine and Tony Grafton, in that they emerge

from the space of the page rather than from imagined rhetorical conversation. Wolfreston does not study for action, although her sons did; she seems to have had no formal education but with sixteen younger siblings, probably taught some of them to read.

Wolfreston wished both to mark her books, and to preserve them, and that dual wish became not an accounting but a vocation. She saw that simply to mark a name or an event on a printed page was to assert oneself as a reader, and when she was an especially aware reader, she conceived herself as a reader who might invite others into the act of reading—into, in fact, a kind of librarian. In my remaining time, I'll re-introduce “Frances” and discuss a few instances of that awareness, in the almanac and elsewhere in her collection as it is reconstructed. I should add that my work here is deeply indebted to Sarah Lindenbaum, who spotted the almanac volume in a Bodleian newsletter while working as a rare book librarian at Illinois.

Frances Wolfreston was born Frances Middlemore in Kings Norton in 1607. She was the eldest of 22 children, not all of whom lived, and her 1631 marriage into the Wolfreston family, with an ancient name and substantial holdings, must have been accomplished through both families' ties to the Egertons (see Alison Wiggins on the Egerton family copy of Chaucer, now at the Folger Shakespeare

Library). Her husband, also called Francis, sometimes spelled Francisse, was five years younger, and seems to have been a bit of a nonentity. Still, they did raise six children to adulthood, including two sons who went to Oxford and Cambridge, respectively, and became published authors. Their estate near Tamworth in Staffordshire has been described as remote, but in fact Tamworth was a market town on prime routes between Lichfield and Birmingham. Frances lived at Statfold Hall until Francis died in 1665, then moved into Tamworth. Apparently, it was at Statfold that Frances's books resided for most of the two centuries from her death until the 1856 Sotheby's auction.

I. Life writing in the almanacs.

Unlike most annotated almanacs that have interested scholars, the Wolfreton volume is sorts not blanks, so not interleaved; rather, travels, illnesses, births, and deaths, are noted concisely in the white space around the monthly listings: name, event, date and sometimes hour. Wolfreton makes equal use of Poor Robin's sincere left-hand pages and the parodic right-hand pages. There is little in the way of categorizing or weighing events other than the carefully-observed discipline of chronology: a death, a marriage, a dog's whelping may all be listed anywhere on the calendrical pages (significantly, the few undated entries appear on the margins of the prognostication pages, which are otherwise unused and indeed unworn). There is no

reaction to the almanac text, although Poor Robin almanacs were known for mildly satirizing prognostications, for royalism, and for jocular references to pop culture figures who also figured in Frances's preferred readings. There is little formal accounting. Yet the scattered notes add up to the life of a social reader simply by inserting, amongst the other forms of exchange (visits, marriages and births, gifts, money spent fixing what certain nephews spoiled), a few references to books and *their* exchange. One mention is of a playbook purchased in Dec 1675; the other is the loan of "boucks" of "plaies" recorded in 1670. These references mirror Wolfreton's more "deliberate" and systematic practice of signing her books; indeed the quite unpredictable survival of the books (and the Sotheby's catalog that helps us trace them) is what allowed the unsigned volume almanacs to be identified as hers. One must recognize Wolfreton's thick italic hand from her other, many, signed books to identify her as the owner of this almanac. The references to the exchange of books also stand out from the other almanac entries in that neither date nor hour is specified. These are memoranda of a reading life that is less punctual, more continuous, than the monthly circuit of life events.

Although Wolfreton never could have guessed that we would be reading her almanac 400 years later, these two references enact just

the sort of perpetual library that Wolfreston's will imagined offering to her descendants:

And I give my son Stanford all my phisicke books, and all my godly books, and all the rest conditionally if any of his brothers or sisters would have them any tyme to read, and when they have done they shall returned them to their places againe, and he shall carefully keepe them together.

Much as the almanac's life record incorporates Wolfreston's exchanging of books, her book inscriptions may constitute an alternate life record. Wolfreston's signature exists in about 200 books traced to date, half of them literary and many from genres whom were discouraged from reading: jestbooks, drama, romance fiction. That Wolfreston wrote her name in her books systematically (as or after she accumulated them, we do not know) thus stands as another "ongoing, deliberate practice." These signatures, together with newly-discovered annotations among her Wolfreston's many books, aver that reading was integral to her life, and that books were essential to her identity. This is astonishing: all the evidence in and about Wolfreston's collection confirms that this early modern woman read for pleasure and was known in her family and community as doing so, indeed perhaps earned a kind of expertise in reading.

II. Life writing in the books.

As of 1990, Paul Morgan, Johan Gerritsen, and Arnold Hunt had identified about 120 extant books signed by Wolfreton. Since then, more have moved into public collections; Lindenbaum has been enumerating these systematically and the total is now up to 200. Specific copies have been written about by scholars and librarians, including me, Jason Moschella, Brooke Palmieri, Alison Wiggins, and Sarah Werner. For Wolfreton have written her name so carefully in so many books is a strong statement, even without the apparatus of a book plate or shelfmark as seen in aristocratic libraries. Beyond that, Wolfreton records judgments on the quality of certain books, mostly playbooks, a topic I consider elsewhere. For today, I'll mention the acquisition notes recorded in certain books. While the Egerton Chaucer, "from my motherilaw," is unique in constructing a genealogy of female readership, other gifts are recorded. At Princeton, an edition of Du Bartas was 'bot of soldars' (<https://blogs.princeton.edu/rarebooks/page/3/>). Lindenbaum has uncovered two such notes in previously unrecorded copies: Lady Mary Wroth's *Urania* (1613), now in the Illinois State University Library, was 'bot at London,' perhaps in 1657. The University Illinois RBML copy of Feltham's *Resolves* says "I brot from Wolf with a meny more." Collectively, these acquisition notes gather an informal genealogy for her library,

parallel to the genealogical milestones noted in the almanac entries. (In some cases, her notes are accompanied by the signatures of later descendants.)

Strikingly, most of the books in which Wolfreton wrote acquisition notes were secular. They thus offer insight into new forms of lifewriting being improvised on a secular and administrative model, motivated by the graphic prompts of the almanac rather than by devotional or conduct-book codes of self-discipline. Wolfreton did not write a biobibliography, but she did write an idea of a life, and specifically, in writing her life in her books, she wrote an idea of a *life in books*. It is unusual for a woman of this period to make her life across books, at least secular books. Her will also links her family's lives across books, a family of readers tied through this genealogy of books. She becomes not just a reader and collector, but a teacher of reading and a teacher of collecting, a librarian *avant la letter*. And this identity, although written in her own hand, was written around print, and in response to print.

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