

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

Sara Sheridan, *Where Are The Women?*

2020

[17:18]

Sara Sheridan:

Hello, my name is Sara Sheridan, I am a writer and an activist. And today I am going to talk about a couple of my projects.

In 2016, TV historian Bettany Hughes conducted a survey of archive material in England and concluded that only 0.5% of our historical resources are female. Now, I knew that figure was low. I have spent years in archives and other collections muttering, 'where are the women' under my breath. But I didn't know the level of material was that low.

Bettany's study was one of the reasons I decided to write a book, and it is called *Where Are The Women?* It is an imagined guidebook to Scotland, and the country it conjures re-genders our landscape, and thus our history, towards the story of women, rather than men. I first gave this talk in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh. I love that gallery. I go in and find myself surrounded by images of women, most of whom are named. Our environment beyond those walls, both our built environment and our landscape, contains far fewer women, and the majority of those represented are nameless.

In Edinburgh, we have only three named statues of women in the city centre, all royal. One is of Queen Victoria on top of the National Gallery on the Mound. 15% of the UK's statues are female and almost all of those are to Victoria. She loved a statue! There are two of Mary, Queen of Scots; One on the Scott Monument on Princes Street and one on the façade of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. By contrast, we have far more named animals represented in the same space and countless numbers of named men. In a recent survey by Historic Environment Scotland, it was revealed that there are more plaques in Scotland to objects than there are to the achievements of women.

So, when I started writing *Where Are The Women?* I wasn't absolutely sure if I could find enough women who would merit monuments. I didn't know if it was possible to cover the country in female history in the same way as male. In the end, I turned up around 5,000 biographies, and 1,200 of them ended up in the book and I am still researching amazing female stories. People send them to me now. The news I come back with from this is good: our Grannies and Great Grannies are amazing. We have simply forgotten their achievements. They were scientists, diplomats, artists, writers, warriors, musicians in all eras, as well as victims. Witches, and women who suffered because of the Highland Clearances, Jacobite women who were raped by the Duke of Cumberland's men as part of his campaign to suppress the Highland counties after Culloden.

There are also some real baddies. Swindlers and murderers and my favourite baddie, the Duchess of Sutherland, who was a key architect of the Highland Clearances and who is mentioned in a memorial on a urinal in a pub in Patrick, where many of the displaced Highlanders ended up. 'Pay your respects here', it says.

In the book, I wanted to create a female version of the world around us. A Scotland where the cave on Staffa is named after Malvina, rather than Fingal. Where Arthur's Seat isn't Arthur's but belongs to Saint Triduana, where you arrive into Dundee at 'Slessor Station' and the Victorian monument on Stirling's Abbey Craig interprets national identity not as a male warrior but through the pioneering women who ran hospitals during the First World War. The West Highland Way ends at Fort Mary, the old Lady of Hoy is a prominent Orkney landmark and St Andrew Square in Edinburgh proudly displays statues of the suffragettes rather than a late-eighteenth century column and phallic symbol on which Lord Dundas, a proponent of the slave trade who was impeached for financial impropriety, is erected.

In commemorating women, I imagined many different kinds of monument. The traditional statue, but also places of pilgrimage for public engagement. Festivals and light installations, murals, parks, altars, benches, cairns, fountains and bells. And perfume. And I want to talk a little bit more about perfume now because for me and for many readers, I found, perfume is the most evocative sense. A whiff of a smell from our childhood can transport us back to where we came from; a grandmother's front room or a mother dressed up to go out. It is an immediate form of memory, a time machine of sorts, and so it seemed to me a creative and relevant way to memorialise the myriad achievements of our foremothers, so I did.

In real life, in 2016, I co-launched a perfume company with my daughter, called Reek. Reek was all about commemorating women, when the book was only a twinkle in my eye. It was the genesis, if you like, of me becoming a very smelly feminist. It started with one scent, in memory of the Jacobite women. We chose the Jacobites because they have such great stories and there is so much about where modern Scotland comes from. Jacobitism versus Hanoverianism is the key political debate of the enlightenment era in Edinburgh, not even a mile from where I live.

Because the Jacobites lost that argument, we don't commemorate them. In fact, just about the only place they are commemorated is in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. They have a whole room of Stuart portraits upstairs. My favourite Jacobite woman is Lady Winifred Maxwell. When the Old Pretender lost the 1715 uprising, Winifred's husband, the Earl of Nithsdale was condemned to death, and held in the Tower of London. Winifred pleaded for his life but got nowhere with King George. She decided to save her husband anyway. So, she visited him on his last night in the tower with several of her ladies. The women smuggled in a dress and then, leaving one by one, they smuggled out the Earl of Nithsdale in drag. Just an extra woman. He had a beard, and it is said he made it out of the building by holding a handkerchief up to his face, pretending to cry at the fate of the poor man in the prison cell. Winifred, in a feat of heroism comparable to women working behind Nazi lines in the Second World War, in my view, stayed in his cell, pretending to talk to him while he set out, initially to London and then to the south coast of England and the safety of France. And she did it, she got away. She followed him, they went to Italy and she remains the only woman, as far as I am aware, to orchestrate a successful jail break from the Tower of London. She was extraordinary, and she is uncommemorated.

The Hanoverian press hated the Jacobite women. Like the tabloids today, they did not pull their punches when they felt women had stepped out of line and they called them all kinds of horrible names. The perfume we mixed is called 'Damn Rebel Bitches', which they were called. If you are interested in finding out more about the Jacobite women, I'd recommend Maggie Craig's book of the same name. And, of course I put up statues to them and told some of their stories in *Where Are The Women?* too. Now, the reason I wanted to make that scent is because scent is a silent rebellion, and silent rebellion is something at which women can excel. By spraying on the scent we can commemorate the real history and take on the mantle of the 'Damn Rebel Bitches'. You could

become part of their story. You could channel their spirit. And you knew, but no-one else needed to know, that you were doing that. So for me, it was important therefore that the smell was genuine.

So how do you mix a scent that captures history? I drove our perfumer, the award-winning independent, Sarah McCartney crazy. The scent had to not smell of an actual Jacobite woman, but be kind of redolent of their life. So, Sarah chose in the end blood orange because the new trade of marmalade making was up and coming in women's lives at the time, malt, because women were brewers, clary sage, which was a flower used in women's medicine at the time, pink peppercorns, which were a very expensive luxury in the kitchen in the era and hazelnut, a big part of the Highland diet.

We mixed a hundred bottles and launched in August 2016. We were told we might sell our initial hundred by the end of Christmas but we sold the lot in the first month. It turned out there were a lot of 'Damn Rebel Bitches' out there. And I think, like me, that many women are bored to tears with being sold products that represent us as young, sexy and smelling of some kind of flower. It is an old fashioned notion that art outgrew more than a century ago. And you see that actually in the Gallery on the walls. Women's bodies are sanitised in early portraiture, the vogue for hairless Georgian and Victorian nudes who look like statues moving in the early twentieth century to actual representations of women's bodies, the way we really are.

Modern day marketing images are very far behind on this curve. After 'Bitches', a scent in solidarity with the witches followed. Scotland had the worst witch hunts in Europe, 2,500 people per million of population died, rather than 500 per million in most countries. And, again, there is no real monument to what these women suffered. Although a campaign to do that and to pardon the women who were convicted of this has been launched since. We wanted to make that scent smell of outdoors, of burning and of healing, and in fact the witches scent became beauty editor's pick in *Elle UK* and in *Grazia* and was also featured in *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*. The beauty press was really interested in what we did at Reek, not only because of the compelling history but because of the images that we created to tell that story.

Many of the historic portraits in galleries are essentially a form of advertising for an influential family or for a political cause. It is kind of branding, particularly early ones, and all of the ones upstairs that I mentioned before, all of the ones of the Stuarts in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh would fall into that category.

And image continues to be important so when we came to make images for Reek, we did so with a feminist objective. Traditional marketing materials for perfume feature predominantly size 6-8 Photoshopped young white women, and we use those women as well as models, but our remit was a lot wider. So, our oldest model was 80, our largest model was a size 22. We celebrated all kinds of beauty at Reek and we didn't retouch the images at all.

Now, the Internet hates this. if you don't retouch images of skin, and perfume images are all about skin, what you are doing is classified as pornography. So doing it was crazy, it was mad. We knew our images would be blocked and we did it anyway. So, added to that our keywords were reclaiming the provinces of witches and bitches, and so you can imagine how much of a stir our images made amongst bots and trolls. And by the end of Reek's life we were shadow blocked on Facebook, basically for not using images of young, white women and then Photoshopping them to unrealistic levels.

However, for us, it was really important to make that stand. We started a blog called 'Bitches Unite' which is a pan-feminist platform that gave our models a voice, along with a whole load of other

women. We interviewed our models about what it is like to be photographed, what their interests and passions were, their favourite political campaigns. The truth is, for centuries, as evidenced by many of the portraits and almost all the built environment around us, it's OK to show images of women, but not specific women, and not women with a voice. As Professor Mary Beard said in her book, *Women & Power*: 'Western society is extremely accomplished at silencing women'.

Coming back to my book, *Where Are The Women?* was inspired by a project in the *New Yorker* by all-around feminist shero, Rebecca Solnit. In 2016, as we were launching *Reek*, Rebecca remapped the New York subway, all roughly 40-odd stops that are really named after men, and she renamed them after women instead. So, in the introduction to her project, Solnit points out that New York's most prominent statue is a nameless woman - the Statue of Liberty. This symbol in female form is like so many around the world, and in Edinburgh too, representing justice or peace. The statue of Gladstone in Edinburgh, in the West End on Coates Crescent actually shows more women than men. Gladstone himself sits atop six full-sized images of virtues that are represented in female form. But the women have no words, no real names, they are faceless, nameless symbols. So I was inspired by what Rebecca did, and my book owes everything to her. It's just that I got ridiculously ambitious and repeated the project for a whole country. Beware being inspired by writers, especially if you like writing books - you end up with a huge workload.

One of the main comments made by readers of *Where Are The Women?* after it came out last May was that stories in the book both inspired them and made them angry. Why had we not heard of so many of these women before? And, worse, why hadn't we noticed the extent to which the world around us is gendered? Not only in pay gaps and societal norms but in the actual world - the hills, the woods, the street names, parks, and the answer to this is the essence of misogyny. It's the water we swim in. We don't even notice it, and that's why misogyny still exists, why it is so successful. Once we notice it, in fact, we start making an argument for change. There are big differences in the way we remember women and men and commemorate their achievements. Those differences are literally built into the world around us and they form our views of what is possible for ourselves, our daughters and our granddaughters. That's why there is a sense in which a key challenge facing equality activists and indeed the mission of present-day feminism is to normalise difference.

Women are 50% of the population but we are still considered a minority. Recently, Caroline Criado-Perez' book, *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*, has outlined a hundred ways in which our society does this. From car crash test dummies being set to the norm of an average man, resulting in car safety being less effective at protecting female bodies, to the degree that women are 17% more likely to die in a car crash, to the way medicines are tested, which result in over 43% higher death rates for women suffering from heart disease. This is not notional. This is life and death. We have to challenge the dominant cultural narrative which is male, and normalise 50% of the population - us. Not only our physical beings, which will help with the car crashes, but women's history of great achievement in education, science, and in the arts and leadership. And we also have to stop being so heteronormative. It's everywhere.

One of the most important and interesting things I learned while researching the book was the proximity of our history. I stopped thinking of history as a set of dates and started thinking of it in generations. The suffragettes were three mothers ago. The pioneers of women's higher education were five mothers ago. Female anti-slavery campaigners were seven mothers ago. And the Jacobites, my favourites, were 12 mothers ago. Our history is not prim and proper like a Jane Austen adaptation. We come from fighters, women who stood up for what they believed in. We are their daughters, and their sons. And we have two duties: the first is to commemorate them properly, however we do that. Whether you want to secretly smell like a Jacobite woman; we recently sold

some perfume to female MPs at Westminster. Who could blame them for wanting to stage a silent, smelly rebellion in that chamber?

And the second is to continue to make change, because societies that don't make changes as they are required to, die. Our foremothers knew this. They campaigned militantly for the vote. They changed the laws around rape within marriage and domestic violence, and they secured women's right to education. They were amazing, and we need to tell their stories. And as they changed the world for their daughters and sons, we need to change the world for ours. You switched this on to hear about art, I think, but art is only a reflection of our lives. We have been landed a huge legacy, some of the stories of which are told on the walls of art galleries. We need to live up to that legacy. That's our duty.