

Helen Rappaport  
with the portrait of  
Mary Seacole which  
she discovered

Photograph:  
Mark Bassett

# Real people, real lives

Writer Helen Rappaport reveals her love of Russia, all things Victorian and the landscape of the Medway marshes in conversation with Sylvia Vetta

**H**istorian Helen Rappaport has two great passions, Russia and the Victorians. Her interest in Russia led her in many directions, via a career in TV and films, translating Chekhov and finally to writing biographies such as her latest book, *Conspirator: Lenin in Exile*.

Despite the hard subjects she tackles, at the heart of all her endeavours lies a romantic passion for a country and a language that Helen finds totally beguiling.

As a historian, she says she is intrigued by "the incredible Russian capacity for enduring, for suffering. This came through to me very strongly while I was writing *Ekaterinburg*."

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Helen's bestseller is the poignant story of the last two weeks in the lives of the Romanovs. Later this year, she will feature in a National Geographic documentary for Channel 5 about the murder of the Romanovs.

Her next book, *Beautiful For Ever*, is already much anticipated and has taken her back to the Victorian era. In it she reveals the career of Madame Rachel of New Bond Street — a notorious con artist and blackmailer. And no, it is not fiction. "Real people and real lives never cease to fascinate me," she said.

Helen is not only a compelling writer but also a fine speaker and she will launch *Beautiful For Ever* at the Oxford Literary Festival on March 23 and, if you miss that, she will be talking about it again at the Kennington Free Literary Festival on April 24.

Would Russia, or her passion for the Victorian era, rule Helen's choice of item she would most like to find washed up on the beach of our desert island?

"I must have a visual reminder of my roots. Growing up in Kent, my younger twin brothers and I were allowed to wander freely in the haunting landscape of the Medway marshes and along the sea wall to a place called Sharp's Green. At every prospect, there was something to remind me of Dickens, my favourite author then and now.

"My brother Peter is a photographer and graphic artist, so one of his pictures of that evocative view would bring back memories of my childhood, of Victorian life and literature and of a world, now lost, but which was once safe for children to play in," she said.

"My love of Russia and all things Russian springs from a rather corny but true first-love experience when I made my first serious book purchase as a teenager, using five shillings pocket money. It was The Penguin Classics' edition of Chekhov's short stories, which included the exquisite *The Lady with the Little Dog*. You could say that reading that story was a transformative experience. I still have that now very dog-eared copy. I treasure it and cannot imagine being without it.

"It is part of who I am, because my love of Russia began with Chekhov. I graduated to *Doctor Zhivago*, a wonderfully poetic and moving work of literature, but not an easy read aged 15! Thereafter, I read and consumed everything and anything I could find by Russians and about Russia.

"So when my head teacher at Chatham Grammar School for Girls asked if anyone in the fifth form was interested in studying Russian in the lower sixth, I was an eager volunteer.

"I just fell in love with the language. I shall be eternally grateful to my school for setting up a class of one, especially for me. I consider myself hugely lucky to be able to speak such a melodic and beautiful language.

"The wonderful liberal education I received provided me with opportunities that are vanishing from schools today," Helen said.

"Russian Special Studies was an obvious choice at university. My love of Russian drama led me onto the stage in a student performance of Chekhov's *The Seagull*. And, unfortunately, I was bitten by the bug. For the next 20 years I was diverted into a career as an actress.

"Fortunately, I always kept my Russian alive and built up a reputation as a literal translator in the theatre which, over the years, brought

**Helen Rappaport and the Burne Jones windows at Christ Church, Oxford**

**Photograph: Antony Moore**

**Below, Helen's Aunt Lily, one of the first women pilots**



*'To the horror of her mother, grease-smeared Lily spent her youth wandering about Hendon aerodrome in overalls, learning the intricacies of aircraft construction.'*

the opportunity to translate all seven of Chekhov's plays."

In 2005, Helen was historical consultant on a Channel 4 documentary *The Real Angel of the Crimea* about the Jamaican nurse, Mary Seacole, whose portrait she had discovered.

"The story begins with a dealer buying what he thought was an undistinguished Victorian print at a boot sale in Burford," Helen explained. "He noticed the signature 'A C Challen' on the back and thought it rather odd. After removing the backing board, he discovered the painting of Mary Seacole hidden inside.

"The painting was put up for sale at a small auction at Shipston-on-Stour, in 2002, where it was purchased by a dealer in prints and paintings. He had no idea who the subject was but, because Mary was depicted wearing medals, he contacted a friend of a friend in the Order and Medals Research Society who, in turn, knowing of my specialist interest in Mary Seacole, e-mailed me and asked if I could authenticate the sitter. He sent me a copy of the portrait — and as soon as I saw it, I knew it was Mary."

Helen did not want the painting to disappear abroad or into a private collection, so she took a risk and decided to purchase it.

"After a long and nail-biting period of six months, I finally got the dealer in Shipston to agree to sell the painting to me, but had to borrow the money from the bank.

"Within a couple of weeks of acquiring the painting, I took it to the National Portrait Gallery for tests and authentication — they could tell me nothing about the artist, who was unknown to them, but they did confirm from pigment tests that the portrait was indeed

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painted in 1869 and, therefore, contemporaneous and not posthumous.

“I never brought the painting back home — it remained on loan to the National Portrait Gallery for the next three years until I sold it to them in January last year, ensuring it will remain in the national collection.”

The sale provided her with the financial security she needed to continue her career as a writer.

Helen said: “If I could take the portrait to the desert island, it would remind me of Mary Seacole’s humanity, compassion and indomitable spirit.

“I will need some inspiration alone on the island. And here was a woman who crossed all the classic divides of her time — race, gender and social class and never ever let anyone put her down. I love the way she bucked the system and did it her own way. I admire feisty women. There is one in my own family whom I would also like to celebrate.”

Helen showed me a photograph of her Aunt Lily in an early aeroplane that looked as if it was made from paper and matchsticks!

“Aunt Lily was probably the first woman to fly an aircraft, according to her obituary. This photograph was taken in Hendon in 1909, when she was just 18. Unfortunately, she did not apply to the RAEC club for her pilot’s licence, so there is no official record.

“The first British woman, in the records, was Edith Maud Cook, in the Pyrenees in 1910. The first two American women to fly also did so that year, but my aunt was clearly flying before this date. Either way, Lily Irvine was certainly the youngest of the first women to fly.

“She married the American aviator James Martin who taught her to fly at Hendon. Her 1959 obituary read: *‘To the horror of her mother, grease-smear’d Lily spent her youth wandering about Hendon aerodrome in overalls, learning the intricacies of aircraft construction.’*

“Her husband James was an aircraft designer and Lily later flew his flying boats in Canada and the USA. The obituary says that she even gave ‘stunt exhibitions,” Helen added.

It seemed to me that Helen’s literary interests are fired by feisty women and cruel men. After Stalin and Lenin, I wondered about her latest protagonist, Madame Rachel.

Helen said: “If I was not a historian, I think I would have made a good detective. I am passionate about winking out the truth and love the thrill of the chase. Madame Rachel’s is a compelling story — which is why I love writing history.

“Tracking her down has taken me almost entirely to untouched primary sources. Mind you her legend must have persisted into the 1940s, because Sir John Gielgud once considered staging a play about her. He thought Margaret Rutherford would be ideal for the role! That would have been terrible casting — Madame Rachel was far more sinister!

“I am looking forward to concentrating on the Victorians for a while. In 2011, I shall be bringing out *Memorial*, about the death of Prince Albert — a close-up look at the circumstances of his death and its impact on the monarchy and British society.

“As a passionate Victorianist I love the Pre-Raphaelites, the Arts and Crafts Movement, and the Gothic Revival. If I had to pick one example local to me here in Oxford, I think it



**Helen Rappaport with her cherished copy of the Penguin Classics’ edition of Chekhov’s short stories**

would be the wonderful Burne Jones windows in Christ Church Cathedral. They could even be rather practical when constructing a shelter, the most sophisticated hut imaginable.”

Unfortunately, Helen can take only one of her items onto the desert island, so will it be the Burne Jones window, the nostalgic photographs, the portrait of Mary Seacole, or the book?

“I have two collecting habits, Victorian and Russian books. It all began with that first collection of Chekhov’s incredibly observant and poignant stories about life’s little tragedies,” she said.

“But the Christ Church window features a real woman, Alice Liddell. Perhaps I could take the Victorian windows to light up the Russian book? But if it has to be one or the other, I suppose it must be the book.”

## Helen Rappaport’s journey to our desert island

**B**orn in Bromley, south London, Helen studied Russian at Leeds University but rejected suggestions of a career in the Foreign Office and opted for the acting profession. After appearing on British TV and in films until the late 1980’s she abandoned acting and embraced her second love — history — and with it the insecurities of a writer’s life.

She began by contributing to biographical and historical reference works for publishers such as Cassell, Reader’s Digest, and Oxford University Press. In 2002 she was Russian consultant to the National Theatre’s Tom Stoppard trilogy, *The Coast of Utopia*.

Between 1999 and 2003 she wrote three books back-to-back for a leading US reference publisher: *Joseph Stalin: A Biographical Companion*, the

award-winning *An Encyclopedia of Women Social Reformers* and *Queen Victoria: A Biographical Companion*. Her first trade title was *No Place for Ladies: The Untold Story of Women in the Crimean War* (Aurum Press, 2007).

In 2003, she discovered the lost and now iconic portrait of Mary Seacole that hangs in the National Portrait Gallery.

In 2008, she published *Ekaterinburg: The Last Days of the Romanovs* (Hutchinson), which has become a best-seller in the USA. The paperback of *Conspirator: Lenin in Exile*, is published on April 1 and Helen’s *Beautiful for Ever: Madame Rachel of Bond Street, Cosmetician, Con-Artist and Blackmailer*, will be published by Long Barn Books on March 15.

Helen lives in north Oxford. She has two daughters and three grandchildren.