The Women of Bletchley Park: Decrypting Gender Equality

Transcript of Interview with Sarah Harding

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SH: My mum wasn't actually a code breaker, she was signals. I think Bletchley itself actually took a stand against sexism because it welcomed women. They were more accurate. They did the job better a lot of the time. My mum was a big rebel and she joined up without telling her parents. She really wanted to do something and not have this ordinary life. They said to her, when she was joining the Air Force, "Do you want to be a cook?" And she said no. They said, "Do you want to try Signals?" And she said, "Why not?" She was sent on various signals courses in Blackport and Scotland and she got quite cross because each time she was sent on another course and other people were put onto Air Force bases. But what she didn't realize was that she was very good, and very accurate, and very fast so after a year of training she suddenly arrived at Bletchley, and was signing the Official Secrets Act, and setting up the first signals hut. But it was her rebelliousness that in many ways got her into the Air Force. But she was a WAAF, not a Wren. But her stubbornness got her there. She thought it was fantastic because nobody minded whether you were male or female, whether you were working class or upper class. It was all about doing your job and the war effort. The hard thing for her was when she had to return to civilian life, which wasn't that way.

MG: We interviewed another woman who worked on paraphrasing messages, and she said that the most valuable education, working with people of all 'walks of life.'

SH: That was very unusual then. Unlike America, Britain was a very class-bound society. The war mixed people up, and the world changed a lot after that. And especially for woman. My mother was sent back to do the housework at home. Her mother called her back, and I think that she would have quite liked to have stayed. She was pretty unhappy after that. They paid her £3 a week to do the housework. They had no idea the importance of what she had been doing. It was secret, and I didn't know until the 1970s. She kept quiet.

MG: I think that that is one of the saddest parts about Bletchley. They weren't able to immediately use their amazing accomplishments to further their lives. They had to keep it secret.

SH: Yes. Although, I do wonder if she could have applied for jobs at GCHQ. She had lots of friends, though. I had all these 'auties,' who I later realized had worked at Bletchley with her. They had their secrets. They were very skilled and very bright, and they were expected to go back to their homes and to release their jobs for the boys coming home from the war. It was very tough on that generation of women.

MG: How did you come to directing this show and participating in it?

SH: It's what I do. I'm a director. It's actually a coincidence that I had this personal connection to the project. I had been working on a version of *Polyana* with this producer, and he asked me if I wanted to do it. I think he might have known that I had a Bletchley connection, but it was my drama background that brought me to the project. Once they knew, I was allowed to have a bit of input on the script. I'll tell that they wanted in one version of the script to have Susan tell her daughter what she was doing, and I said that she wouldn't have told her. They found it very difficult to believe in our world of sharing everything. And I said that she really would have kept the secret. I had a grand old time going out to Bletchley. My mum died last year, and the last thing that she knew was receiving my Christmas present to her of a brick from the Bletchley wall. And she also received a medal. And she realized that it was recognized at last. So it was a nice. She wasn't well (she had dementia), but she knew I was doing this program and it was like getting something back.

JW: Did you try to ensure that *The Bletchley Circle* upheld Bletchley Park's legacy?

SH: Yes. And I've given two talks now, one on *The Bletchley Circle* and one on my mother at Bletchley. And when she died there was an obituary that we wrote that got in the paper. My relationship continued after *The Bletchley Circle* to Bletchley through my mother, and throught giving talks there. She also wrote a diary about her time there. She just sat down and typed it all out in her sixties, and through reading it, I learned an awful lot about her. A copy of this and all of her photographs are in the Bletchley Archives. I have the original. We donated it because, as you know, historical research requires sources, and because everything was secret, there is very little information available. They wanted to interview my mum, but she was too ill. I didn't even know that she had written that out and put that in. They are piecing that story together, bit by bit. My mum was 92 when she died and 20 when she worked at Bletchley. There aren't very many Bletchley veterans left. That generation is genuinely dying out. So that great that everyone is speaking and putting their stories together.

MG: Why did the writers choose to have *The Bletchley Circle* start years after the war? Did you have input on this decision?

SH: I suppose that you'd have the film *The Enigma* and *The Imitation Game*, which told the story of Alan Turing. There is a very good play by a chap called Ian

SH: I remember when I did my episode I got a bit I talked to this chuck called Joe who was the head of computing at Bletchley and I said, "the script said they decoded Enigma machines and I said you can't decode it without having you know cracking you know the settings." All they have do is feed it into the Bombe and they get it out and no it's not like that so I sat there and I got very intense about trying to make it vaguely real so I kind of researched the stations of Malta and how they could have a link that *"Marta,"* the character, would have it set up so the person who sets up the machine you have to have you know the story about somebody using the name of

their dog or their boyfriend so I thought she had to have something you know something that connects to her and they have to find it and I was exasperated by my producer because I wanted to be very accurate and you know people don't know if you're being accurate or not but it mattered to me so they indulged me a bit and they we had a kind of long shot and there's a bit in the bunker in my episodes they go down and they find a machine and they crack the code and all that. And when I just said to my editor well we have all these stages in. The producer said "Sarah doesn't need to be this long!" You know this is a drama and not a *documentary* and they were right dramatically. And it all made sense but I was very anxious to get the detail right and maybe getting cutting it down because I knew it was all there I don't know if it made sense to you but I wanted to see these women's brains working; I wanted to dramatize their brains not just them giggling and having fun. The seriousness as well.

MG: I think it captured that well. Definitely so. And I definitely agree with Anna Maxwell Martin conflicting personalities that she had or that she was forced to have with her husband, her children, and her friends.

SH: Yes, that was very strong. I didn't work with Anna because the last ones didn't have her and I think that was one of the reasons that iTV didn't do cause Anna Maxwell Martin's character was so strong. They didn't give me another single character that roundedness; she was a girl about town. And that marriage was very rich and in a way, it was a shame that that couple left the show and I didn't really have time to explore and none of the others were really in marriages in the same way. And I think that if the marriages had gone on they would have been in could explored other things. Actually, they were a bit melodramatic with that Patty Hill woman nearly being hanged and the sex-slaves. Just had a slight of a thought on what you think. Did you think something was lost?

MG: I mean as a viewer when you love a show you'd always love it to continue on, right?

SH: But I think it would have gone bad. It was in transition. She's a big star, and they wanted to use their money on something else. At least it left people wanting more.

MG: Yes, definitely so. It accomplished that. It was interesting because we were originally going to do our project on Alan Turing, but in the National History Day circles it is a fairly common topic but then we thought the women at Bletchley, relative to Turing, have gotten fair less exposure and recognition we felt. It was really interesting to discover how many different types of women and different strengths that they had and all various jobs like pretty much anybody that could do something very well and was very adept at it was used in some way which was quite amazing.

SH: My mum had no qualifications; she left school at fourteen but as I said she was a really good musician and I think that here meant she could really pick out the signals, and she was a bright, but uneducated, woman, so as you said they discovered the skills in the training. It didn't matter where you were from, your skills were used. I think she did find it …….. the whole class system of England was just not there, and men and women were mixed equally. There were two thirds women to one third men. I mean a lot of it's administrative and kind of secretarial but they all had to keep secret I mean it was extraordinary. They kept silent. They had a great time I mean she talks a lot they just had a ball, she said there was all this singing in the offices mess and all sorta of. Although my mom who ended up at twenty-one as a sergeant in charge of a watch, did say that a lot of the girls got pregnant. There was American Air Force bases, it was a very heady time. And she was aware of having to look after these girls and stop them going out to look at the moon with the Americans at the dances and things like that. She was thinking about getting them all home safely. So there was quite a lot of freedom and anarchy and wild behavior there because

you would in water. It was a completely different world for most of these women. Lots of female friendships. Each person couldn't talk but they never talked about work, so they'd sing silly songs or play tennis so in a way they had to find other things to do. So the real fun side of it. And my mum was always playing the piano and singing and being gleeful and all that while in between had spare jobs. I don't know how you in America whether it is just how strong class was people knowing their place, in England, in the forties and how it took. In my generation, the idea of being a TV director was pretty unusual for my generation but it would have been unthinkable before. We have ceased the time since.

MUMBLING PEOPLE

MG: I believe in America for class system in varies very much regionally

SH: Really?

MG: Yah. I believe much more on the east coast was or is much more feeling of class between people.

SH: I have always felt- it may not be true-but I have always felt that Americans valued money- if you are rich you can go anywhere the self-made person with money. Money was the equivalent of class. They look at your shoes in the restaurant and going to work out if you're going to tip them more and you are treated accordingly not by where you come from but how much money you got in your pocket is my impression.

MG: Mine is all just postulating but that's my guess. We were also wondering what your opinion was on not just effects of Bletchley Park in yes proving having shortened WWII but as an inspirational place and how its legacy affects people now and you people.

SH: That's a good [question]. It's amazing how everyone in England has heard of it, when you think nobody knew anything about it; it has caught people's imagination; it has caught women's imagination. When mum died last January, I just said to Bletchley, "Can you help me put an obituary in the paper?" And I had no idea, I had radio and TV; her funeral was televised on the local news. She was[n't (!!!)] important, but what that meant, well, apart from making my dad incredibly proud, was that Bletchley had caught people's imagination, and they wanted the story, they wanted to know that in this local town near Bristol there was somebody who had been part of that. So all I wanted to do was to put a bit in the paper and it was only local news; it was just a small cog, but it has captured the imagination, and that people of that generation want to know; they want role models of women; they want that many; they want to know. And a lot of historically stories from women; history is being told more by the woman's point of view, and old queens or especially medieval princes and queens are being shown how powerful they were. And more composers and artists are being discovered, and you do feel there's been a strange conspiracy of silencphony because, well, there's so much there that women have done that we didn't know about, wasn't written about, wasn't told. And the great thing about Bletchley is by the time people knew about Bletchley Park, seventies, I guess it was Turing, but people were very aware of the role of women in history, so it came at a time when people were telling stories and realizing the importance of women's roles there. So I think women feel it's not just the Battle of Britain and the war. I'm acting working on something at the moment, a bit of music theatre which is comparing the heroism of women on the radar stations, the quiet heroism, with the Battle of Britain pilots who were visibly heroes and different kinds of heroism. I'm still exploring the material, and this is not Bletchley because it's 1940 but it's still the same idea the secret women radar operators nobody knew about because of the visible men; they were the

invisible heroines, and then coming to the surface, and I don't know about you but I think that's inspirational.

MG: Yes.

JW: Yes, certainly. Would you say that your mom working at Bletchley Park and the traits that she learned there at Bletchley Park, that carried on to you and changed your life today like going on and becoming a film director?

SH: I'll tell you the big influence, which is a bit sad, my mum was never really happy that domesticity. She once told me she didn't really want to have children, and when she talked about Bletchley a real light came in her eyes, and so it was the time of her life. And I suppose I thought if domesticity doesn't make you happy, I'm going to do something else with my life, she also talked to her dad as well so she was a wife, mother, and daughter in one house, and I think she found it a bit much. And I looked at it and thought she's not happy; this isn't the way to go, so I decided I was going to be this mad thing about a director, but I have been lucky enough to got two children, I got two girls myself and a lovely home and I am what they call "have it all." Cause I though why not go for it? I think mum found that quite difficult, but I had the opportunities, and she felt once she had children, people expected her to stop working and look after them and our generation has thought why not have both, why not go for it. So the legacy for me was domesticity doesn't make you happy. Get the work sorted. Then I have found happiness in both but that was unexpected.

MG: We found one interesting thing was that during 1930s and 40s in British universities, it was very, very difficult for women as well, so the fact that Bletchley Park really sought out traits in people, not just black and white you must be educated, no it was…

SH: Have you got something we need and we'll take you from anywhere? Because some of the male codebreakers were quite working and a lot of it was Cambridge and Oxford but not all if you had the talent; you have to use talent and Britain was very bad at that at one point and you I don't think women could even get Cambridge degrees.

MG: No Cambridge one thing that they did have was that the female population at some point during the 30s was required to be kept under ten percent; they had that become a law.

SH: And I think you could take the exams but you couldn't have a full degree. It was so far behind America. They didn't want to educate women because women would take over men's jobs; that was the theory and wouldn't be able to find husbands. I don't think I was the first generation. The first generation where we had grants to universities they positively wanted to attract women. So it has changed; it's a big change between my mom's generations and mine and it was the war and that experience that did it.

MG: Another interesting aspect…

SH: I've got to go and Skype my daughter so just a couple of questions if you don't mind then I've got to go and talk to her.

MG: Alright, we'll make it quit. We also found interesting with this year's theme being taking a stand that can be a very loud and proud very worldly visible military action, or it can be putting your head down and working and not getting appreciation until many years later so its really quite variant in that.

SH: Yah, yah, yah. Sounds as though you're thinking very subtly about it. All the deep things in this. It sounds as if it's going to be very exciting your project.

Harding, Sarah. Personal Interview. 12 Mar 2017.

Sarah Harding is one of the producers of the television series “The Bletchley Circle,” which is a fictionalization of the lives of five women ten years after they worked at Bletchley Park; we contacted her after examining the feedback that we received at the East Puget Sound Regional Competition and self-evaluating, in which we discovered that our “The Bletchley Circle” connection was the weakest part of our project. She provided us with an enlightening perspective that let us see how her team’s artistic choices enhanced the story that they were telling, and how it illuminated a part of the story that was left out in the narratives of many other dramatizations. This is a secondary source because Sarah Harding did not work at Bletchley Park, and she helped create a secondary source on the codebreaking center.