

The personal letter as a source for the history of women in Ireland, 1750-1830.

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university and it is entirely my own work.

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I am grateful to my sister Mary for moral support and for assistance in the early task of transcribing many of the original letters upon which my work depended. My husband Matt Delaney's role in this endeavour, like the population of eighteenth-century Ireland, impacted on everything and is impossible to quantify exactly. Our children kindly feigned interest in several years' worth of dinner conversations beginning with the words 'Did you know that in the eighteenth century ...?' I recall my father Thaddeus Maxwell from whom I learned historical perspective and dedicate this work to my mother, Kathleen Maxwell. It is her lifetime of commitment to family and community that has been my inspiration.

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Editorial note

When quoting from original material conventional abbreviations have been silently expanded and spellings modernised except in cases where a point is being made about orthography.

Introduction

The historiography of women in eighteenth-century Ireland has arrived at a key point. In fewer than fifty years it has come close to centre stage on a strengthening foundation of social history. Biography, with its restricted relevance, and surveys, with their necessary effacement of detail, have now begun to be joined by focussed work on some women in smaller groups, with a tight chronological or geographical setting permitting the gravitational pull of the groups to be assessed. Scholarship in England that revealed nuance and contingency to be the key descriptors of women's has been echoed in Ireland. The question is, where will the work go from here? Decades ago, early historians of Irish women queried the failure to follow where most of the surviving records led – to the history of the domestic life of wealthy women. Work has begun in this area, and there is more to do, but the record is so fragmentary that there may be a limit to how much more richness remains to be discovered from a surface reading of the documentary evidence. However, if we do not limit ourselves to a study of the surfaces, new vistas open up. If the history of the letter, and of the use of the letter, are studied in their social contexts, with reference to women's distinctive epistolary practices, further insight will be forthcoming about women's changing experiences in the period. The eighteenth century is a vital period in Irish women's history. No less a word than revolution can describe the change that can be observed in their lives. It is a revolution which has not been fully articulated and it is one which may be principally observed in the private domestic setting.

Literacy is a key driver of social change. Changes in educational philosophy in seventeenth-century Ireland were embodied in the increasing number of women who were able to leave their mark on the record, beginning with the wealthiest women from the second half of that century and increasing in number and social diversity in the eighteenth century. Even as the debate raged over whether women in general should be educated, and if so to what end, increasing numbers of girls were quietly being afforded their right to be literate; however, it was not this alone which radicalised them. Then, as now, information technology was the catalyst, being in effect as 'utterly transformative' as the acquisition of literacy with its social and psychological consequences.¹ Epistolary technology takes its place beside the printing press and modern communications technology as a landscape-changing social and intellectual practice. It is not just the

¹ Carolyn Steedman, 'Poetical maids and cooks who wrote', *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 39 (2005), pp. 1-27 at p. 3.

cognitive act of women composing a record of their thoughts that changed society, although it contributed to this as it changed their self-awareness, their understanding of the world around them and their engagement with their world; it is when they entered in large numbers into public consciousness through their letter-writing that they imprinted a specifically feminine sensibility on an evolving society. They both experienced and shaped this revolution.

The personal letter, at least in the English-speaking world, could be said to have been invented by women; their seventeenth- and eighteenth-century contemporaries acknowledged their particular skill in this activity,² and it was they who explored and developed most fully the private, introspective and flexible uses to which the letter could be put. Women may have been educated in the expectation that they would read their bibles and write pious moral lessons for their children, and so many of them did. What many of them also did, was enthusiastically adopt and adapt the new – to them - social technology with huge implications for themselves and their society, and for historians. They began, in the eighteenth century, to leave records in ever greater quantities so that not only may women be assumed to have inhabited a distinct area of culture and to have had a distinctive world view, but their letters permit the historian to discern this activity for the first time. Furthermore, by engaging in letter-writing, women created something previously unknown to history - a wide virtual community of women which allowed them to act beyond the significant physical restrictions controlling their activities, and which gave them a distinct identity. This thesis proposes that the personal letter acts as a magnifying glass permitting more women to be discerned in the shadow of the exceptional few who came onto the scene after 1750. The developments of this later period did not however spring into being fully formed out of an unchanged and unchanging society; the seedbed for changes in the lives of Irish women had been in preparation over a century before the institution of national education in 1831.

Within a short time of its emergence, women's history in Ireland was under interrogation. In 2009, gender historians queried 'the intellectual rationale for most studies of Irish women's history [which] is the dearth of information on the subject', asking if there was 'a danger that this approach will begin to produce stories that "seem predictable and repetitious – more information-gathering to prove a point that has already

² Rebecca Earle, ed., *Epistolary selves: letters and letter writers, 1600-1945* (Aldershot, 1999), p. 6.

been made?”³ Historians of women in the 1990s had anticipated this question, and their answers still stand. The question was rebutted by Margaret MacCurtain’s demand in 1992 for ‘a broader historical base which will permit the inclusion of women into mainstream history’. Maria Luddy and Cliona Murphy, referring to studies of marginalised women, welcomed this kind of particularism as ‘the keynote to the beginning of the inclusion of women in Irish historiography’; a decade later, and in a different context, Roy Foster wrote of ‘how alternative histories of Ireland can be arrived at through individual, microscopic studies’.⁴ This thesis contends that, far from being ‘repetitious’, far from making a point which has been already made, there are elements of women’s history that have not yet been elucidated at all and that these elements are of such significance that neither social nor gender history may be contemplated without first contemplating them. The omission from Irish history of the study of private family life has long been recognised. The 1992 ‘agenda’, by MacCurtain and others, for the development of women’s history included a long list of topics which belong under this rubric, very few of which had been touched upon two decades later. In a review article written at the same time, David Fitzpatrick reiterated the desiderata - and expanded them - and posed questions about the possible reasons for the omissions. He noted the recent historiological trends in which ‘Catholicism, poverty, wage labour and political struggle are emphasised almost to the exclusion of Protestantism, prosperity, family life, and social integration’, and suggested that these omissions expressed ‘prevalent ideology’ as much as ‘personal choice’.⁵ Over a decade later, Mary O’Dowd drew attention to the continued absence from Irish history of the private lives of women and their personal relationships.⁶

There have been two major strands in women’s history in the last decades: the first strand examines ‘women surviving’, that is, women who carved out their own lives despite the difficulties and obstacles represented by religion, poverty, health, the law and other factors. The other strand examines the ‘women in the gallery’, a phrase used in one of a number of studies which have sought to prove that women were more publicly active

³ Maryann Gialanella Valiulis, ed., *Gender and power in Irish history* (Dublin, 2009), pp. 12-13. Editor’s introduction, quoting Joan Scott, ed., *Feminism and history* (Oxford, 1996).

⁴ Margaret MacCurtain, Mary O’Dowd, and Maria Luddy, ‘An agenda for women’s history, 1500-1900’, *Irish Historical Studies*, 28, (May 1992), pp. 1-37; Maria Luddy and Cliona Murphy, eds., *Women surviving: studies in Irish women’s history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries* (Dublin, 1990); Roy Foster, *The Irish story: telling tales and making it up in Ireland* (London, 2001) quoted in Leeann Lane, ‘Ireland: identities and cultural traditions’ in Mary McAuliffe, Katherine O’Donnell and Leeann Lane, eds., *Palgrave advances in Irish history* (Basingstoke, 2009).

⁵ David Fitzpatrick, ‘Women, gender and the writing of Irish history’, *Irish Historical Studies*, 27, (May 1991), pp. 267-273 at p. 269.

⁶ Mary O’Dowd, *A history of women in Ireland, 1500-1800* (Harlow, 2005), p. 3.

and had more behind-the-scenes political influence than had hitherto been acknowledged.⁷ There are two overlapping agendas represented by these two strands of investigation, nationalism and feminism, and the work they inspire has undoubtedly produced a fuller re-imagining of women's place in Irish history than had been contemplated less than half a century ago. However, the continued focus on the ways and means by which some women did engage in activities and spaces previously assumed to have been male-only preserves has not only the effect of silencing the majority but privileges a male world-view. It valorises the obviously public life in comparison with the more strictly private one. It is not to be wondered at that individual women sought access to the rights and power accorded to men of their class, and the courage of these independent thinkers is not to be ignored. But to focus on this to the exclusion of all else is to 'treat the masculine role as the human norm', and by validating male forms of agency and leadership, 'female passivity and dependence' are implied.⁸ There are ethical implications to the continued ignoring of the majority of women whose apparent lack of dissatisfaction with their domestic lot appears to deny them a role in emancipatory history. The attraction for the feminist historian of a focus on women who pushed against, or negotiated their way around, their culture's discriminatory boundaries is hardly surprising. Whether as prostitutes and beggars, or political and educational pioneers, marginalised or exceptional women can be understood to have been working successfully a system which had been designed to prevent their having agency. By identifying their strategic thinking and intellectual courage, historians can repudiate the outdated and 'conventional emphasis on passive suffering under institutional constraints'.⁹ Very recently a third strand of research has been added to the two strands mentioned, encouraged by a consistent tradition of scholarship on gentry society, economics (including marital economics) and material culture. Elite women have begun to attract focussed scholarship, both to their private lives and to their social and political involvement which cannot help but alter the understanding of the society in which they lived, and perhaps indicates a future direction for research because of the gaps which

⁷ Luddy and Murphy, *Women surviving*; Mary O'Dowd, 'The women in the gallery: women in eighteenth-century Irish politics', in Sabine Wichert, ed., *From the United Irishmen to the Act of Union* (Dublin, 2004), pp. 35-47.

⁸ Mary Cullen, 'The potential of gender history' in Maryann Gialenella Valiulis ed., *Gender and power in Irish history* (Dublin, 2009), p. 20. A language which reflects the contemporary male view of historical women continues to be used by historians of women. Examples include 'Difficult women' and *Unmanageable revolutionaries*, the titles respectively of a CFP from the University of York, 28 Nov 2015 and a book on Irish nationalism by Margaret Ward in 1983.

⁹ Fitzpatrick, 'Women, gender', p. 268.

remain. This newly-confident approach to Ascendancy and other wealthy women establishes the outlines of many women's lives – access to education, marriage and divorce, childrearing – and sets the scene for a deeper investigation their experiences. The records which survive will not change what is known of the principal parameters within which most wealthy women lived their lives, but the personal letter permits a deeper scrutiny the details.

This kind of study has a very broad reach. Given the size of Irish society and the way it operated, insight into one group's experience necessarily informs the study of another group. It has been noted that there had never been a complete separation among the 'sorts' in Irish society and to assume there was would have the same stultifying effect on social history as the now-dismissed separate spheres model had on women's history. Assuming a complete separation of the ethnic and economic 'sorts' imposes 'a static model on dynamic relationships' and thereby distorts reality.¹⁰ This thesis aligns itself with the aforementioned imperative to 'repudiate the emphasis on passive suffering', but eschews the extraordinary woman in favour of women who were fairly ordinary, in the sense that their interests and ambitions were entirely focussed on their domestic lives. It also identifies itself with Cliona Murphy's rejection of the idea that all of the history of women must lead to the feminist movement as its culmination; it is, in the words of Amanda Foreman, 'a rich history that should be appreciated for its own sake rather than for its anticipated terminus'.¹¹ Even when the subject of study is the evolution of female liberties, the family cannot be excluded from consideration. Women who became exceptional were the product of their evolving familial contexts and, seen in this light, as Patricia Branca wrote in the 1970s, far from being a 'stumbling block', the family may be seen as a 'stepping stone' toward female emancipation.¹² However, to assume that eighteenth-century women wanted (or should have wanted) what their twenty-first century descendants assume as rights suggests a mistaken belief that the earlier culture was merely an immature version of the culture that replaced it, rather than a different one. In all cultures, historical and modern, 'women are judged, gain worth, judge themselves,

¹⁰ Linda Kerber, 'Separate spheres, female worlds, a woman's place: the rhetoric of women's history', *The Journal of American History*, 75 (1988), p. 38 quoted in Rachel Wilson, *Elite women in ascendancy Ireland, 1690-1745: imitation and emulation* (Suffolk, 2015), p. 2. Irish Historical Monograph Series. Series editors Marie Therese Flanagan, Eunan O' Halpin and David Hayton.

¹¹ Pre-publication publicity website for Amanda Foreman's forthcoming book 'The world made by women'. <http://www.dramandaforeman.com/books-by-amanda-foreman/the-world-made-women/> accessed 17 July 2016.

¹² Cliona Murphy, 'Women's history, feminist history or gender history', *The Irish Review* 12, (Spring 1992), p. 23. Patricia Branca, *Women in Europe since 1750* (London, 1978), p. 45 n1.

and find fulfilment according to culturally established standards of womanhood'.¹³ Eighteenth-century women were conditioned from childhood to consider the family home to be their area of responsibility and authority; they judged themselves and were judged according to how they succeeded in this arena.¹⁴ It is by the light of this fact that the private life of eighteenth-century Irish women will be examined.

Mary O'Dowd lamented, as recently as 2005, that the study of the history of women was still at source-discovery stage; secondary analysis awaited both the completion of this work and the slow development of a socio-historical infrastructure from which the nascent discipline could forge its outlines.¹⁵ Source discovery in this context meant not only revealing the extent of relevant resources which existed – which was more than had been assumed – it also meant reading well-known sources again for the previously ignored information they contained pertinent to the history of women. One would be rash to suppose that this activity, which began in earnest only in the final decades of the twentieth century, could so swiftly come to an end, and that continuing on this path would lead only to repetitious information gathering, not least because of the changes in focus and interpretative emphasis in use by successive generations of historians. The source-discovery motivation is at work in this present thesis, expressed principally in its insistence on focusing on the records of 'ordinary' women of the letter-writing class. Insofar as they have been evaluated to date, women's letters have mostly been found to have value only by traditional 'great man/exceptional woman' standards. Those women whose letters have been the subject of publication have been the socially prominent, such as Mary Delany or the Lennox sisters, the artistically acclaimed, such as Maria Edgeworth, or those who have attracted attention through their association with the affairs of public men, including Martha McTier and Mary O'Connell. The sources for this thesis, in contrast, include the letters of women for whom domestic life was pre-eminent among their concerns and whose personal relationships are interesting in themselves, without having any notable public significance. The reason is this: if we read the letters of Arabella Denny to Lady Elizabeth Caldwell, which were published because of Lady Arabella's prominence, we are struck by the fact that many of these published letters are

¹³ Gül Özyegin, 'Calling the tune: domestic workers' earnings in intra-household gender relations in Turkey' in Antoinette Fauve-Chamoux, ed., *Domestic service and the formation of European identity: understanding the globalization of domestic work, 16th to 21st centuries* (Oxford, 2004), p. 333.

¹⁴ Wilson, *Elite women*, pp. 62-4.

¹⁵ O'Dowd, *A history of women*, p. 3.

far from as interesting, generally speaking, as the many letters from other women in the Caldwell family papers.¹⁶ We shall not discover new history unless we highlight new resources, and privileging the type of source rather than the author may be a fruitful direction to take. This approach has been proved to be productive of new insight. Recent scholarship in England and elsewhere has shown that getting away from an exclusive concentration on the words on the page, and understanding thoroughly how the letter as a genre and letter-writing as a practice worked, leads to a greater appreciation of the letter's flexibility and potential.

Three thematic chapters in this thesis showcase the personal letter as a unique resource, demonstrating how it throws light on areas of women's history otherwise inaccessible. These will be preceded by a chapter which deals specifically with the letter as a genre and as a historical source, and which will consider the emerging methodology by which letters are now being interpreted. The three thematic chapters will address the principal elements of the family – the marital relationship, children, and the relationship between employer and servant - using the letter as a lens. The purpose in this approach is twofold: to take the opportunity provided by a database of almost two thousand personal letters to flag notable areas of fresh insight; and to identify access points, new in terms of nature and quality, into private life, produced by using a particular interpretive methodology when reading personal letters. The selected experiences and relationships are not meant to be definitive; others might be equally productive of new knowledge. However these three have been selected because they reflect three developments of great significance which happened in the period under discussion and which are only visible because of female literacy and because of the way women wrote letters; servants begin to appear in letters, children begin to write letters, and married couples begin to write letters of a distinct type to each other.

Letters as a genre and as a historical source

The letter has long been interesting and frustrating to both historians and literary critics. The frustrations arise partly from issues such as corroboration and representativeness, but also from a 'difficulty in understanding both the self-understandings and the modes of self-expression of ordinary individuals' which results from a 'lack of a systematic

¹⁶ Rosemary Raughter, 'My Dear Lady C: letters of Lady Arabella Denny to Lady Caldwell 1754-1777', *Analecta Hibernica*, 41 (2009), pp. 133-200.

approach to dealing with personal correspondence'.¹⁷ The end of the last century saw a number of publications that looked at ways to plot a new route of enquiry, to take the reader beyond the content of the letter to consider other aspects of it which helped mitigate the perceived difficulties. The most recent approach to the analysis of letters combines literary studies with material culture and social science; along with the textual element, the approach here is to question every characteristic element of the physical letter from spacing and seals to the extent to which the practice gained meaning from its social environment.¹⁸ Key among these interpretative approaches was the recognition of the letter as a cohesive artefact, rather than a separate medium and message, and letter writing as a social practice; in both approaches letters are rooted deeply in the historical environment from which they sprang. Situating the act of writing within cultural beliefs, values and practices gives it meaning and significance.¹⁹ Chapter three will look at the evolution in historians' attitudes to the letter, under the influence of linguistic analysis, for example in the use of rhetoric, or the register in which married couples addressed one another over the decades. This chapter will also look at the way in which historians of non-traditional letter writers – such as poor emigrants - have found ways to handle their texts in a respectful and insightful way. It was this work that showed that the maintenance of a relationship, and the articulation of one's identity within that relationship, is the most important purpose of a letter.

Children's letters

The opportunity which personal letters provide to view previously little-discussed children's experiences is most unusual. Children's active and passive engagement with letter-writing was highly complex yet they have not been used much in the history of childhood. This was partly because so few remain, but partly for reasons of source evaluation – children's letters are undeniably heavily mediated. The controlling hand of the instructor is clearly to be seen in the pencil guide-lines, the formal phrasing and corrected spelling. Therefore the historian cannot easily acquire insight into children's

¹⁷ David Gerber, 'The immigrant letter between positivism and populism; American historians' use of personal correspondence', in Rebecca Earle, ed., *Epistolary selves: letters and letter writers, 1600-1945* (Aldershot, 1999), pp. 37-55. Warwick Studies in the Humanities. General editor Peter Mack.

¹⁸ Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: approaches to a form* (Ohio, 1982) p. 4; James Daybell, *The material letter in early-modern England: manuscript letters and the culture and practices of letter-writing, 1512-1635* (Hampshire, 2012), p. 13.

¹⁹ David Barton and Nigel Hall, eds., *Letter-writing as social practice* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 1999).

experience of the meaning and value of the practice. Furthermore, the content, even if unmediated, has been assumed to speak only to the young authors' biography, with little wider relevance. However, letters contain more than is conveyed by the text and we can see how children's use of the letter went well beyond the instructions given to them in the schoolroom, becoming significant media for identity construction and emotional management.

Education and childrearing were inextricably bound together and each depended upon the enabling technology of epistolary practice, when parents were obliged to be apart from their children. To observe this, four separate strands of the process will be followed to permit closer examination. Chapter four will begin with children's accounts of their educational experiences, adopting a conventional, evidential approach to reading their letters. Many practical details can be gleaned in this way; we find which books were being read, for example, and we develop a sense of the loose timetabling of events. We find that the presence of a governess did not imply the non-involvement of parents, nor did it mean the rejection of formal schooling by the family. But we discover more than this: a young author's account of her other activities, ostensibly unrelated to the schoolroom, reveals the central place occupied by education in her social life. We see that education sometimes took place outside the schoolroom, and sometimes in social settings; and that it was not always provided by adults. We discover that education was expected to be – and was – open-ended and self-directed, and we witness children accepting and internalising their culture's attitude to the primacy of education. Letter-writing was also used by children in the process of identity formation. This process combined formal education and socialisation as a young person's identity was shaped by her or his relationships and intellectual milieu. When presenting themselves in a letter – expressing opinions, recounting actions – children engaged in self-analysis, choosing which elements of their culture and its language to 'appropriate' and present to others as their own preferred self-image.²⁰ Having made their choice, they secured it by expressing it to a person whose opinion was important to them and by having this person reflect it back to them. Finally this chapter will look at how children used the physical letter in their emotional lives, a subject impossible to access via historical sources otherwise, and of vital consequence in understanding changing standards in emotional self-expression, with obvious implications for the evolution of interpersonal relationships. It is in studying this

²⁰ Willemijn Ruberg, *Conventional correspondence: epistolary culture of the Dutch elite, 1770-1850* translated by Maria Sherwood-Smith (Leiden and Boston, 2011), p. 5.

subject that we understand how little the difficulties presented by the content of children's letters matter and how great is the potential of the epistolary genre as a guide to pre- and non-literary activity. The extraordinarily self-referential characteristic of the epistolary genre means that other people's engagement in it becomes part of many writers' narratives, giving the historian a rounded view of the practice and of the individuals. The enthusiasm of very young, even pre-literate, children to become involved in writing letters, and especially their reactions to the physical letter itself, confirm that content-sharing was not the dominant value that a letter had for young writers.

Letters about servants

Servants are even less well represented in Irish society than children and, to the extent that they may be discerned in personal letters, it is most often in letters written between employers. Thus the approach to the genre is different in this case than in the case of children or married couples. While it seems likely that more servants engaged in letter-writing than has been imagined, they did not leave behind sufficient records to allow the historian to enter with any freedom into their world view. Thus the use of letters, in maintaining relationships and creating and expressing identity, has little application here. Nevertheless it is possible to manipulate employers' records to reveal something of the lives of their employees. Chapter five will bolster the evidence from letters with evidence found in domestic account books. Such records are excellent for demographic and financial information, and important deductions can be made from them. However, letters are superior for the present purpose because of their greater narrative length and expressive language. The ways in which employers' letters may be used in the history of service have been influenced by the impact that insights from the science of psychology have had on the interpretation of historical materials. Thus, for example, the recurrent motif in letters of the 'servant problem', that is, the employer complaining about her servants, can be read to reveal something of the servant's understanding of her position relative to her employer. A close look at this relationship reveals that it was not as one-sided as the existence of an undemocratic society might lead us to imagine. The access points to this are surprising – the employers' complaints about their servants convey employer attitudes; they also reveal servant attitudes, partly when servants' direct speech is reported, but principally through the understanding that the complained-of behaviour is a form of communication on the servants' part. Employers' complaints reveal their servants becoming more modern in their understanding of their rights and opportunities

in an evolving labour market in which their skills were at a premium. Chapter five also endeavours to gain an insight into the servants' own experience of working life by questioning whether the traditional association of a stigma attaching to the social and professional position of a servant is likely to reflect the servant's own view of circumstances, or is it, like the so-called 'servant problem', a view from the top down? Furthermore it will be seen that servants could assert themselves by exploiting the unwritten contracts which made their employers responsible for their welfare, a circumstance that made service and attractive employment. Finally this chapter will look at the question of servants as cultural conduits to consider their role in the modernization of Irish culture and to what extent modern Irish culture is a product of Ascendancy Ireland.

Marriage and being married

Chapter six will examine women's letters that are related to the subject of marriage. The married woman, of all women, is the most studied of eighteenth-century women, though usually in relation to the transfer of wealth between generations. However, women's own experience of marriage has been relatively little canvassed. A woman entering marriage in the eighteenth century ceased to exist as a separate legal entity. This stark fact may be partly to blame for the apparent aversion on the part of some historians of women to investigating the lives of those – the majority of women – who lived with this fact, in favour of looking at women who lived outside of the family, or those who were actively involved in changing the law. Marriage remained the defining experience for women; even those who did not enter into the state were described in those terms. Considerable changes occurred in relation to marriage throughout the eighteenth century in Ireland and Britain; for example the well-being of individuals became an increasingly significant consideration as very youthful marriage began to be frowned upon, and women had greater input into the choice of marriage partner. There has also been a historiological move away from the belief that women lived lives such as outlined in published sermons and conduct literature, treating their husbands with deference and obedience, or indeed of husbands expecting to be so treated. Formal instruments, such as marriage settlements, are necessarily inflexible guides to changes in the institution of marriage because their specific purpose – the protection of property - continued to be important over the centuries; they were unconcerned with 'the observation of contemporary nuances' which, Anthony Malcomson suggests, is a necessary precursor to the writing of history. This

thesis will touch on the changing attitudes to marriage as revealed in personal letters, to indicate how slow and non-linear the progress of change was. Attention will be given also to other specifically female experiences in relation to the contemplation of marriage which have rarely previously been considered to any significant degree. For example, for some women the married state promised, or rather threatened, changes in the level of their responsibilities about which they were apprehensive; this is indicative of the distinction which society made between an unmarried adult woman and a married woman, regardless of her age.

Another issue which will be probed is the extraordinary change in the tone of letters of married couples that is immediately apparent to the reader of personal letters penned in the earliest decades of the nineteenth century. Unknown in fictional literature, and heralding a profound change in individuals' expectations from married life, the rhetoric of the marital relationship, conveyed uniquely in their personal letters, reveal a change in what society understood marriage to be.

Conclusion

The low survival rate of so many of the records of women, of servants and of children necessarily places great restrictions on what may be discovered about them. However, personal letters add immeasurably to the understanding of how individuals experienced their lives, and this is an approach which will open up new directions in social history. In each of the three thematic chapters, the intention is both to showcase the way in which the letter, sometimes uniquely, produces insight into the world view of women, and to add to the detail of what is already known in these areas.

Chapter 1 Introduction to the sources

The personal letter is particularly difficult to use for reasons which will be addressed more fully in a later chapter. A principal issue is the question of representation, even within an already restricted cohort of people who wrote letters. David Fitzpatrick, in his work on Irish emigrants' letters, has described the difficulty:

The process by which letters survive is a form of 'vernacular publication' almost as selective and purposive as the creation of a 'canon of literature'. It is therefore unlikely that the residue is representative in style, content or genesis as those which have disappeared. It follows that any attempt to assemble a representative sample of all correspondence from surviving records would be futile, since the underlying 'population' is defined by preservers rather than readers or writers.¹

However futile the effort, some attempt must be made address the issue of representation. Aggregate studies can be balanced by making the individual visible; individuals cannot hope to be representative of all who engaged in an historical activity, but a careful choice of surviving records can add depth of understanding to a study of the contexts in which the authors lived. However, deploying a pre-designed template to eliminate, unread, some of the collections of eighteenth-century women's letters that survive seems antithetical to one of methodological positions of this thesis. This thesis argues that these kinds of materials have already endured a heavy burden of disadvantage; late access to literacy for women, poor rate of survival for women's records, and the exclusion of women from involvement in activities of interest to the conventional historical narrative, which limited interest in publishing their records. Modern digital humanities tools provide the potential to redress the situation by making it possible to contemplate a large scale publication of women's records without the need to make too many choices about what to exclude. Large-scale electronic publication would inspire and support multiple analytic approaches that would permit the female experience to be discerned in every constituent of history of the period and by many disciplinary students. One of the ambitions of this thesis is to visualise the research opportunities offered by large-scale digital humanities projects that would permit ease of access to large amounts of dispersed materials. Until now such projects in Ireland have mostly been designed

¹ David Fitzpatrick, *Oceans of consolation: personal accounts of Irish migration to Australia* (New York, 1994), p. 28.

following traditional ideas about what constitutes a significant theme.² A continuation of this approach, and undoubtedly a very welcome one within the ‘exceptional women’ strand of discovery, would be the digitisation of all of Maria Edgeworth’s correspondence or the totality of Mary Shackleton’s letters. An indication of where the future might lead is the online publication of over two hundred original letters of Bess of Hardwick, a member of the minor English gentry of the sixteenth century; the originals of the letters exist in over nineteen repositories. However, this thesis would eschew a focus on one single individual.³ What is proposed here is a new departure, one that simply focusses on the sources to see what they tell us about a larger number of women who have left no other mark on the history books. This ambition was inspired by projects such as Early Modern Letters Online and Women’s Early Modern Letters Online; these are union catalogues bringing together the records of many thousands of letters, the originals of which are spread over many repositories.

In choosing letters to be included in this thesis, the temptation to homogenize the material was resisted. This was in order to showcase the potential of the genre and to argue for the necessity to create an aggregated source based only on date and the gender of the author and/or recipient (‘women’s letters’ as referred to in this thesis means letters written by a woman or to a woman). A holistic approach to collections was not taken; female authors were specifically sought, although men writing to or receiving letters from a woman were also read. Neither the author nor any specific topic was favoured; ‘exceptional’ women were not privileged, nor was evidence of political or literary activity. Nevertheless, while we wish for maximum diversity, we may achieve diversity only within set parameters. Certain features unite these letters, the accomplished literacy of most of their authors being the obvious one. What is missing from the database because of this fact is not just the voices of illiterate people, but the voices of other literate communities: it is clear, both from survivals and from other references, that the servant-producing class wrote letters, but they have not survived in great quantity.

The authors in this database are therefore mostly gentry; this is not a negative circumstance in that it puts pressure on the definition of that word. As an inclusive social history develops in Ireland, loose divisive terminology must be dispensed with. Class descriptions, and titles, can sometimes efface the real differences in life experience among the people so described. As an example, one might consider the word ‘genteel’, which is

² For example the 1641 project (www.tcd/1641) and the many 1916-related digital projects.

³ <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/> accessed 20 June 2016.

of surprisingly little value in trying to pin someone to a social graph. Thomasine Howard, whose husband was worth £40,000 when he died, described the society at Bristol, in the first half of the eighteenth century, as divided into 'rich citizens' and other 'quality' among whom 'a little genteel woman' such as herself did not feel at home. John Caldwell, in the 1740s, described the Earl of Charlemont's sister as neither pretty nor 'genteel'.⁴ Bishop Syngé sought a 'genteel' person to be his butler; Toby Barnard has indicated that upper servants considered this word applicable to themselves.⁵ The word gentry is also not to be understood as synonymous with great wealth, nor can it be understood to convey something specific as to how individuals experienced their day-to-day living or their relationships with other social classes. The Earl of Kingston and his children's governess, Mary Wollstonecraft, could both be described as 'gentry'. The social situation in Ireland was distinctive; the boundaries around the social classes or 'sorts' were elastic. The elite were not held in high regard just because of their inherited status; the 'middling sorts' were populated by the younger sons of the gentry and by richer Catholics; and disconcertingly penurious Protestants threw the whole scheme into disarray. Women's experiences in particular prevent over-simplification of any generalisations. Sir James Caldwell gave Mary Wortley Montagu a thousand guineas which he had 'lying by him', while his wife at home in Fermanagh had to send her servant to 'hunt a guinea all the way to Belleek' to pay a pressing charge. Judith Odell, sister of Sir Richard Musgrave, did not share her famous brother's anti-Catholicism; in contrast she was quite scathing about it. Dorothy Clutterbuck, a deserted wife, had nothing that she could 'depend on' as she said, but she did have a wealthy brother in Austin Cooper. Mrs Clutterbuck's social standing was not just affected by her family origins and what resources she should have had access to if her husband had been a steady family man, but also by her relationship to a significant male figure. The impoverished sisters of landed gentlemen occupied a particular niche among the gentry, one which Barnard called an 'ill-defined category' when referring to Letitia Bushe whose 'dependence cancelled her inherited rank' but whose circle of friends included Mary Delany and Jonathan Swift.⁶ Barnard enlarged on the subject of social

⁴ Letter from Thomasine Howard neé Langston to her husband Hugh, while she was in Bath, 30 July [?1714]. NLI MS 38,600/9. Letter from John Caldwell of Fermanagh to his mother Lady Ann, [c. 1745]. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B3/5/17.

⁵ Marie-Louise Legg ed., *The Syngé letters: Bishop Edward Syngé to his daughter Alicia, Roscommon to Dublin, 1714-1752* (Dublin, 1996), p. 115. Toby Barnard, *A new anatomy of Ireland: the Irish Protestants, 1649-1770* (New Haven and London, 2003), p. 300.

⁶ Barnard, *A new anatomy*, p. 301. S. J. Connolly, 'A woman's life in mid-eighteenth-century Ireland: the case of Letitia Bushe', *The Historical Journal*, 43, (2000), pp. 433-51.

description, writing that ‘the peculiarities of the social structure evolving in early modern Ireland may be hidden behind an inappropriate English vocabulary of description’. Rachel Wilson further emphasises the gendered experience of mixing ranks. She writes of the easing of hierarchical divisions at the top of the social triangle in the early years of the century where ladies who were ‘genteel’ yet of varying backgrounds socialised together.⁷ Marie-Louise Coolahan’s work on female linguistic self-presentation also speaks of a heterogeneous social make-up within which ‘the daily necessity of fraternizing with others (among the social groups) ensured cross cultural exposure which unsettled group categorizations’.⁸ The point is an important one because if one assumes strict social boundaries then the relevance of the study of one group to the history of another is underestimated.

The thesis is based on a database of material designed to capture diversity, which was achieved by making pragmatic common-sense decisions. The selection was governed by qualitative not quantitative principles, the research question taking precedence over the method used to answer it. The argument being made in favour of the use of the epistolary genre in this manner in Ireland is being presented here for the first time and therefore to advocate for it, it was not considered advisable to adhere closely to a pedantic approach to selection. It was felt that a multiplicity of individual cases would better allow for conclusions to be drawn: this approach also reflects the exceptional losses within the record which are counter-indicators to a quantitative approach. The primary characteristic prompting the inclusion of a run of letters in this database was the involvement of a woman in the correspondence datable to between 1750 and 1830, and it was deemed necessary that there should be a reasonable number of letters in each cluster. Illustrative material was drawn from earlier in the century. It was a matter of principle to seek out women who have made no significant appearance in the pages of history, both to make the point regarding the potential of their under-used personal records, and to increase the likelihood of finding domesticity to the forefront of the subjects being written about. Thus it was decided to avoid socially-exalted women such as the Lennox sisters, as being domestically unrepresentative; public personalities such as Arabella Denny were also not included except for their less well-known correspondents. Those known to have been closely involved in politics were also less desirable and such a person as Martha McTier is represented here solely in the guise of foster mother to her nephew. Mary O’Connell

⁷ Barnard, *ibid*, p.8. Rachel Wilson, *Elite women*, pp. 102-3.

⁸ Marie-Louise Coolahan, *Women, writing and language in early-modern Ireland* (Oxford, 2010), pp. 2-3.

might be thought to have been deselected for a similar reason, except that she does not express herself frequently on the subject of politics. It was decided that the key desideratum would be the letters of married couples; married couples wrote more consistently, and it is also in the letters of married couples that both sides of a correspondence most frequently survives. Furthermore it was to be expected that, given their shared domestic interests, it was likely that these letters would best illustrate the domestic relationships which were to be the focus of this thesis. They were thought likely to be the most significant source for information about servants and children. Furthermore, married couples used epistolary technology in specific ways which are interesting in a consideration of the practice itself. Some level of diversity was achieved through seeking out certain letters such as those of Judith Odell, widowed with adult children and thus experiencing a different stage of life. It is difficult to find letters between young women; thus the Pike letters to Mary Shackleton were included, although Shackleton's own outgoing correspondence was not, on the grounds of her exceptional literary experience.

The letters of children, which must have existed in large quantities, only begin to appear in the record in the early nineteenth century. Many adult letters refer to the receipt of a child's letter, or they make it clear that quite young individuals desired to be involved in what was obviously an important domestic process. Therefore the second selection criterion related to children and it was decided to approach this from as many angles as possible, to indicate the potential for new insight. Reflected among the collections used are letters about children, as well as letters to and from them. The question of the age at which childhood ceased has its own literature, which refers frequently to circumstantial contingency. Using the late-teens as a cut-off point means that out of the dataset of over a thousand letters, fewer than one-tenth was written by children to their parents. This fraction is echoed within specific collections of letters; in the case of the letters of Daniel and Mary O'Connell and the D'Altons, children's letters amount to about one-eighth of the total quantity, giving a total of roughly forty letters in the O'Connell collection and ten items within the D'Alton papers. In the Wicklow papers there are almost forty letters from Isabella Forward and her siblings to their parents, and in the La Touche collection there are thirty letters from children to parents. Both of these collections include letters from youthful siblings writing to one another. Also valuable for research into continuing parent-child relationships are the Bellew letters from Olivia to her adult son Michael, and the almost fifty letters from Judith Odell to her adult children, especially to her daughter

Bel. There are ten letters from an elderly servant to the Clements children, which have been used as illustrations in the chapter on servants.⁹ It is noticeable, within the historical record generally, that children's letters rarely survive for the eighteenth century. The 221 letters from Bishop Edward Synge to his daughter are one of the eighteenth century's great survivals; the loss of Alicia Synge's replies throw into relief the extent of the loss to social history of the failure of this kind of material to survive more generally.¹⁰ Most letters referred to in chapter four are of nineteenth-century date.

The database has a reasonably wide nationwide distribution as it includes letters written from Fermanagh and Belfast, Cavan, Wicklow, Kerry, Tipperary and Waterford, with Dublin serving as a geographical lynchpin, as most authors spent time there. The use of published editions proved interesting; a comparison in editing styles suggests how important it will be to have a free-text searchable online publication of a wide range of materials. The editing and, significantly, indexing of the Synge letters is the gold standard. The O'Connell and Edgeworth material have been edited based on unduly restrictive assumptions about the subjects and epistolary practices deemed interesting to historians. The McTier letters fall between these extremes in that the text has not been abridged but a fuller index would have opened the collection up more effectively.

The collections in the database

The **Bellew** papers in the National Library of Ireland (NLI) relate to a Catholic gentry family who had homes in Co Galway and Co Louth. The collection is not large; it covers a long period, from 1640 to 1912; the descriptive list runs to only 44 pages and many of the descriptions refer only to single items.¹¹ The Bellews were improving landlords and among the gentry families described by Arthur Young as being 'as liberal in their ideas as any people in Europe'. This collection was identified as desirable principally because

⁹ Wicklow papers NLI 38, 603-9. The O'Connell letters in the NLI are published in Maurice R. O'Connell, ed., *The correspondence of Daniel O'Connell*, vol 1-2, 1792-1814, 1815-1823 (Shannon, 1972). The letters of the Catholic lawyer and land agent, John D'Alton, and his family are TCD MS 2327; there are others in the NLI. The La Touche letters are TCD MS 11272. The Bellew letters are NLI MS 27, 236 and others; the 'Granny Bell' letters to the Clements children are in TCD MS 7338.

¹⁰ Legg, *The Synge Letters*. Intriguingly, these they were not unique in their affectionate tone, pedagogic purpose or in being a widowed Bishop's letters to his children. In the Caldwell letters in John Rylands Library, the few remaining letters from Bishop Josias Hort to his children, written at exactly the same time as Synge was writing, some possibly written while Hort was in Synge's house, are similar in tone to the Synge letters: JRL Bagshawe Muniments JRL B3/30/104-44.

¹¹ National Library of Ireland, collection list number 33: Bellew of Mount Bellew papers http://www.nli.ie/pdfs/mss%20lists/033_Bellew.pdf accessed 15 August 2016. Christopher 'Kit' Bellew (1762-1826) was married in 1794 to Olivia Emilia, daughter of Anthony Nugent 4th Lord Riveston of Pallas; their son Michael Dillon Bellew married Helena Dillon of Eddistown, Co Kildare.

of the Bellevs' religion; since social diversity was not achievable, it was felt that religious diversity should be sought out. The particular value in this collection is that two married couples are represented, of two different generations – Christopher and Olivia, and Michael and Helena. In the nineteen letters of Christopher to Olivia, one sees not only the shared spousal authority that has been discussed by Rachel Wilson but also the lack of strict domestic demarcation;¹² Christopher was clearly in a position to give his wife accounts of the servants, of the housework, and of their son's clothing requirements (in this he is similar to David La Touche); Olivia's twenty-eight letters to her adult son on the other hand show that she was *au fait* with all the family business and financial concerns, and with farming practice; it was she who undertook the renovation and extension of the house after her husband's death. Her concerns stretched to taking care of her son's dogs and horses when he was away. Her letters to Michael are good material for studying parental relationships with adult children; a comparison between how the two parents each wrote to their son lies outside the scope of this thesis but will form a strand of future research. There are thirty-four letters from Helena to her husband Michael; one of the key features of these is the distinctive use made by Helena Dillon of a concept epistolary space. Epistolary space, like modern virtual platforms, facilitates behaviours which perhaps cannot take place anywhere else. Helena Dillon used it to speak more frankly to her husband than he might have been comfortable with face to face.

The **Clements** papers in Trinity College form part of a large family collection of twenty-six archival boxes and over twenty volumes, covering the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, of the family from Ashfield, Co Cavan, and Mohill, Co Leitrim.¹³ There are related papers in the National Library and further material remains in private hands. Given Nathaniel Clements' (b. 1705) stature in mid-eighteenth Irish society, the papers have been much studied, but their value for social history or for women's history has yet to be evaluated.¹⁴ This collection was identified for investigation for this present work because of the Austin Cooper material contained within it.¹⁵ Cooper is a fascinating

¹² Wilson, Rachel, *Elite women*. p. 71.

¹³ See TCD online library catalogue:

<https://manuscripts.catalogue.tcd.ie/CalmView/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=IE+TCD+MS+S+7258-7360&npos=7> accessed 13 July 2016.

¹⁴ For a full introduction to this family see Anthony Malcomson, *The Clements archive* (IMC, 2010).

¹⁵ Antiquary Austin Cooper (1759-1830) was one of fourteen children of William Cooper, the registrar of Cashel and his wife Jane née Wayland, of Killenure Castle, Co. Tipperary. He was appointed to a number of positions during his life including chief clerk to the Deputy Vice-Treasurer and military clerk to the Commissioners of the Exchequer; he was also agent for a number of estates including that of the Clements family, which accounts for the presence of his letters among their papers. He was a considerable property owner, a member of the Dublin Society, a bibliophile and a member of the Royal Society of Antiquaries.

subject in himself, given his meteoric rise from the shallow pools of the humbler gentry; he was interesting to this thesis because of his female relatives. Among the Clements family papers are thirteen letters from Dorothy Clutterbuck in Clonmel to her brother Austin Cooper and in the person of Dorothy, even more so than her brother, may be observed the extent to which the word ‘gentry’ is an inefficient descriptor.¹⁶ These letters are useful reminders of the existence of poor Protestants who did not enjoy the advantages of being part of the Ascendancy. One of the attractions of these letters is their orality, common with women whose education was less well attended to than that of their brothers. Dorothea’s accent can be discerned through her unorthodox spelling: ‘let something be settled’ she wrote, ‘not to lave us in the miserable way we are’. The other value attaching to them arises from the fact that hers was a broken marriage, and through the letters the reader is permitted to see behind the assumption of victimhood represented by the deserted wife of an alcoholic, philandering spendthrift. Mrs Clutterbuck’s use of rhetoric is rich material for ‘against the grain’ reading of letters. What is revealed is that even a woman in such a powerless position felt entitled to engage in the conversation about family money and, despite her rhetorical ‘throat-clearing’, there is no sense in the letters that Dorothy Clutterbuck feared a refusal of her requests for support. There are nine letters from Austin Cooper’s aunt, Elizabeth Cooper, who also sought assistance from her nephew, when her son has failed to pay her jointure.¹⁷ She, though more literate in the conventional sense than Dorothy Clutterbuck, employed much of the same rhetoric. She used the word ‘friend’ frequently to describe her nephew and referred to the need for clothing for herself and the grandchild for whom she was responsible.¹⁸ One of the other sections of Clements correspondence used in this study includes letters from governesses, as well as an even rarer element, a run of ten letters from a servant, Mrs Bell.¹⁹ ‘Granny’ Bell, an older woman, a grandmother, though still working, was probably a cook or housekeeper in Ashfield Lodge. Dating from 1827-32, the letters were written to Henry Theophilus (b.1820) and Selina (b.1814), the children of Henry Theophilus Clements and his wife Catherine née Beresford. Mrs Bell’s letters are a significant addition to the corpus of texts by servants. Similar to Dorothy Clutterbuck’s letters, they are prime examples of

In 1756/7 Dorothy Cooper (b. 1752) married Lawrence Clutterbuck (d. 1803) of Bannixtown, Co Tipperary: they had at least six children.

¹⁶ TCD MS 7311. Fifty-seven letters from the Clutterbuck family, mostly to Austin Cooper. 1798-1804.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Cooper née Nugent, the wife of Samuel Cooper (1729-97) of Beamore, Co Meath.

¹⁸ Letter from Eliza Cooper to her nephew Austin, 2 December 1799. Clements Papers TD MS 7310/4.

¹⁹ Letters of Mrs Bell to members of the Clements family, 1828-32, n.d. TCD MS 7338/2-4, 6, 8-9, 10-11, 14-15.

the orality which characterised letters written by individuals whose training in literacy was probably brief and yet who mastered the art of writing effective letters. The unorthodox orthography of these letters only heightens their narrative power and religious allusion. The letters reveal not alone the deep affection which existed between the family and Mrs Bell, but also of Mrs Bell's 'presence' in the minds of a wide circle: she was mentioned by all three of the female friends of Selina Clements whose letters are included in that section of the papers.

The **Courtown** collection in the Library of Trinity College is one of the larger estate collections held there, comprising 126 archives boxes, 250 volumes, as well as maps, genealogical material, deeds and photographs. The letters used in the present work represent a tiny fragment of the family papers, comprising 100 individual items to and from Charlotte Montagu Scott and James Stopford, who became the 4th Earl of Courtown.²⁰ All the letters are written to or from Charlotte and James, and sixty-five of them were written to one another; the other correspondents are the couple's mothers, brother and sisters. The key reasons these letters were selected for the project is the fact that they represent both sides of a married relationship, and as such, were excellent comparators for two other collections used, the O'Connells and the D'Altons. Equally important is the fact that the Stopford letter-writers, along with the D'Altons, are the youngest of the adult authors in the database, being in their early twenties when their letters begin; Charlotte Scott was twenty-one, Catherine D'Alton possibly twenty-three. The Scott-Stopford letters are unusual in that the correspondence survives from the couple's courtship period (the D'Altons were married before the earliest surviving letter was written). Twice as many of James' letters survive, in comparison with those written by Charlotte, particularly from the time after their marriage.²¹ Another attractive

²⁰ TCD MS 11183/V/119a-b: Correspondence of Viscount and Viscountess Stopford, 1821-25, 2 vols. Lady Charlotte Albina Montagu Scott (1799-1828) was the second of seven children and the first of four daughter of Charles Montagu Scott, the 4th Duke of Buccleuch and his wife Harriett née Townsend, daughter of the first Viscount Sydney. Lady Charlotte married, on 4 July 1822, her cousin James Thomas Stopford (1794-1858) the third but eldest surviving son of the third Earl of Courtown and his wife Mary née Scott (the sister of the Duke of Buccleuch, Charlotte's father). James, known as Viscount Stopford from 1810-1835, represented County Wexford in the House of Commons as a Conservative. In 1835 he succeeded his father and entered the House of Lords. Lady Charlotte had two children: James, born in 1823 who succeeded his father as 5th Earl, and Edward, born in 1824, who died young. After Charlotte's early death the 4th Earl married Dora Pennefather, with whom he had three sons.

²¹ We could theorise about why this might be. Perhaps, as in the case of Jane Austen and Emily Dickenson, letters were destroyed which portrayed the author in a light unbecoming to Victorian standards of femininity.

characteristic of this collection is that it permits us to hear Lady Charlotte talking to more than one person. Being the letters of a young person in courtship and early marriage, the bulk of the letters tend to dwell on this aspect of her life, which is important in itself. What she wrote to her sister reveals a mature, intelligent and informed young woman, whose sympathy was activated by the poverty she found in Ireland.²² Her letters to her mother reveal her keen interest in politics as she described the visit of George IV to Ireland in 1821. Lady Charlotte expressed her disgust at the activities of the royal mistress Lady Conygham (whom she criticised in specifically gendered terms, calling her fat and condemning the dirtiness and poor hospitality at Slane Castle).

The **D'Alton** letters in Trinity College are part of a larger body of surviving papers, some of which are in the National Library and in the library in Chicago University.²³ The TCD material consists entirely of letters, 279 in all, written between Catherine D'Alton and her husband John while the latter was away on the assize circuit in Roscommon between the years 1818 and 1853. They have been bound together in fascicles by John D'Alton. Mrs Phillips, Catherine's mother, was an heiress with a reasonable income. The Phillips family maintained two houses: one, Mount Talbot, Co Roscommon, which was where Catherine's parents spent most of their time, the other being Catherine's father's substantial estate at Clonmore. They were Catholic landed gentry who had held on to their lands. When Clonmore was sold by the Encumbered Estates Commission in 1853, it amounted to 5,300 acres, returning over £1,300 per year. John's father William D'Alton had a small estate at Bessville, Co Westmeath, where John was born; he was a member of the Church of Ireland. John's mother, Eliza, was from another Catholic gentry family, the Leynes of Ashbrook, Co Roscommon. She converted to Protestantism when she married William D'Alton, but returned to Catholicism (and had John re-baptised) when William died in 1797. The house at Summerhill in Dublin, in which John and Catherine D'Alton spent most of their married life, was then a good address. Most of their neighbours were either in the legal profession or gentry with a smattering of minor nobility. Catherine and John had six children who lived to at least

²² Her empathy with the poor contrasts with Bishop's Synge conception of them as intrinsically different from his 'sort'. On one occasion, when pregnant, Charlotte 'could not help feeling half ashamed' when she saw a poor local woman, also pregnant, who had to continue 'toiling as usual' despite that. Letter from Charlotte Stopford to her husband James, undated [c. 1823]. TCD MS 111183/V/119a-b/64.

²³ TCD MS 2327. The material in the NLI includes correspondence with John D'Alton's mother; the Chicago material includes an unpublished autobiography. The biographical information here is courtesy of a family descendant. Catherine Phillips (c.1795-1859) of Clonmore, Co Mayo married, in 1818, John D'Alton (1792-1867) historian, genealogist and barrister. D'Alton was a graduate of Trinity College; it is not known where Catherine received her obviously sound education.

young adulthood; their first child, a girl, died as an infant. The D'Alton letters were selected as providing both sides of a married correspondence. The heavy emphasis on domesticity became the most fruitful theme suggested by this collection as was the tone with which these, the youngest authors in the database, spoke to one another. John D'Alton, like Daniel O'Connell, was obliged to be away from his family regularly, for some of the same reasons, although not to the same extent. However, John D'Alton was genuinely a home-loving man and did not have an active political career to keep him away from home for long. The distinctive value of these letters is threefold; firstly they refer to the couple's physical attraction for one another, in which detail they are similar to the Courtown letters. Secondly, Catherine's assumption of almost-equality with her husband, albeit couched in rhetorical gestures of deference, is notable. Thirdly, as is also the case with the O'Connell letters, the D'Alton collection is rich in letters about children.

One of the most significant epistolary collections relevant to the study of eighteenth-century Ireland is the letters from **Martha McTier** to her younger brother, medical doctor William Drennan (1754-1820).²⁴ These materials are central to any study of the political and intellectual atmosphere of the period, and Martha McTier was an exceptional woman in her own right. Mrs McTier's letter-writing practice, like Maria Edgeworth's, has itself begun to be studied for the evidence it contains of how letter-writing permitted a greater degree of female contribution to the public sphere than had previously been appreciated.²⁵ In this thesis they have been consulted in relation to childrearing and childhood experience because many letters are about Martha's beloved nephew, Tom Drennan, of whom she was foster mother between 1803 and 1807. Out of a total of 1,500 letters surviving, over 190 refer at length to Tom. While fostering children was not unusual, it is rare that the arrangement has been detailed to this extent. Because she was a devoted foster mother, as well as a loving sister to the child's father, Martha describes her nephew's life in minute detail; the nature of the relationship among those

²⁴ Martha McTier (1742-1837) née Drennan; intellectual, radical, philanthropist, writer and Belfast Presbyterian; known principally through her letters to her brother. Jean Agnew, ed., *The Drennan-McTier letters*, 3 vols (Dublin, 1998-9).

²⁵ Catriona Kenny, "'Womanish epistles?': Martha McTier, female epistolarity and late-eighteenth-century Irish radicalism", *Women's History Review*, 13 (2004), pp. 649-67. This is apart from their undoubted value as an access point to social history and the domestic world which was the 'bedrock' of Martha and William's lives: Maria Luddy, Introduction to Jean Agnew, ed., *The Drennan-McTier letters, 1776-1820*, vol 1 (Dublin 1998), p. xxix.

involved has resulted in an unparalleled level of detail of early male childhood existence being recorded.²⁶

The correspondence between Daniel **O'Connell**, his wife Mary O'Connell and their children could support several works focussed on family, personal relationships and the use of letters, apart from the political history and biographical studies for which they have hitherto most been used.²⁷ The O'Connell correspondence was published and edited in the manner usual in the 1970s, cutting out much personal matter because 'a large part of O'Connell's letters to his wife ... consist of expressions of love and affection to an extent which makes tiresome reading'. Of the surviving 660 letters, dating from 1800 to Mary's death in 1836, a fifth were not published, and those that were published were pruned 'of more tedious repetition'. However, the potential for distortion inherent in this decision was anticipated; the first volume of published letters includes an essay on this specific element of the correspondence which reflects on the importance of his family to O'Connell's private and professional life.²⁸ Mary O'Connell's reputation has been enhanced, firstly by Helen Mulvey's essay, and subsequently by the scholarship of Erin Bishop whose reading of the family correspondence culminated in an insightful biography of the person whom Mulvey described as being 'a more complicated, interesting and forceful woman than any of O'Connell's biographers have suggested'. The O'Connell letters she wrote are 'rich in the special human-interest of a middle-aged married couple grappling in realistic ways with one another's faults and virtues'.²⁹ However, their crowning glory is the richness of the material relating to the experience of being parents and to the experience of childhood. In terms of the former, the letters show Daniel and Mary learning to be parents. In this regard, Daniel may sometimes be seen as the more eighteenth-century in his view of his children and allowing Mary to guide him towards a more modern view which took greater note of a child's youth and

²⁶ The results are very insightful in regards to child management and education. For example there is a detail of how the little boy, in company, should indicate that he needs help going to the bathroom. It also confirms the priority given to reading compared with writing and counting, which Martha thought much less of. *Ibid*, pp. 32, 80.

²⁷ Daniel O'Connell (1775-1847) politician, married his distant cousin Mary O'Connell (1778-1836) in 1802. They had seven surviving children. Their correspondence is in the NLI and has been published: Maurice R. O'Connell ed., *The correspondence of Daniel O'Connell* vol 1, 1792-1814 and vol 2, 1815-1923. (Dublin, 1972).

²⁸ Helen F. Mulvey, 'The correspondence of Daniel and Mary O'Connell' in O'Connell ed., *Correspondence*, vol 1, pp. xix-xxx.

²⁹ Erin Bishop, *The world of Mary O'Connell* (Dublin, 1999); Erin Bishop, *My darling Danny: letters from Mary O'Connell to her son Daniel, 1830-1832* (Cork, 1998).

personality. In terms of children, one of the arguments in this present work was that the O'Connell children made particularly interesting use of the practice of writing letters.

The **Odell** letters in the NLI were first identified for use in this work partly because the principal author, Judith Odell, was a widow with adult children, and thus her experience was removed from the kind of domesticity reflected in other collections. She also wrote separately to her brother, her son and daughter, and to a family friend, permitting something of a different register to be noted, which in turn gave some insight into the value which the process of writing letters had for the author.³⁰ The Musgrave family were 'minor West Waterford gentry'.³¹ The best known member of the family was Judith's oldest sibling, Sir Richard Musgrave, whose 'instant history' of the 1798 Rebellion – 'the best of the contemporary histories of the Irish rebellion' - was too 'astringent' for many Protestants and its sectarianism 'politically unwelcome'. It has been suggested that Waterford's low Protestant numbers may have allowed paranoia to develop among that small community and that the Whiteboy agitation in Tipperary in the 1780s 'resonated' among the Musgrave clan who were numerous among the subscribers to a reprinting of Temple's *History of the General Rebellion in Ireland*.³² However, Judith Musgrave appears to have been uneasy at her brother's 'philippics' against Catholics and was scathing of his praise for England. Describing a drive through the devastated Irish countryside in 1799 she caustically remarked of the villages that 'none escaped without something to remember the friendship of England, for this unhappy country, so boasted of by Sir Richard'. More remarkable was the fact that, when she lived abroad, she had audiences with two Popes, Pius VI and VII, the latter 'a most amiable interesting man' who gave her gifts of books. She gave him a volume of Tiraboschi which

³⁰ There are thirteen letters from Judith Odell to her son Richard, c. 1800-1810, and thirty-four to her daughter Bel, c. 1800-1808. NLI MS 10,172. There is also a small collection of Odell letters among the Graves papers in Trinity College Library: two letters from Mrs Odell to Anne, the wife of Dr Robert Graves and sixteen letters to Mrs Perceval's daughter Helena Perceval who in 1806 married barrister John Crosbie Graves (1776-1835). TCD MS 10047/24/1-21.

³¹ Judith Odell was born Judith Musgrave (c. 1753), the third daughter among six children of Christopher Musgrave (d. 1787) of Tourin near Cappoquin, and his wife Susannah, daughter of James Ussher of Ballyntaylor, near Dungarvan. Christopher Musgrave was a tenant and agent to the duke of Devonshire and agent also to the nearby Grandison estates. The Odell family, originally from Yorkshire, were resident in Ireland, mostly in Co Limerick, from at least the middle of the seventeenth century. John Odell (c. 1750-1783), Judith's husband, was the elder of two sons and three children of Richard Odell of Mount Odell, Co Waterford, Sheriff of Waterford 1749, and his wife Isabella Radcliffe daughter of the vicar of Ardmore. John Odell and Judith Musgrave, who married in 1772, had four sons and a daughter. Their daughter Isabella (Bel) married, in September 1799, Major Jaspas Grant of the 41st Foot, Lieutenant Governor of Carlisle and Governor of Upper Canada. Judith, widowed after a decade of marriage, raised her family partially on the continent.

³² David Dickson, Introduction to S. W. Myers and D. E. McKnight eds., *Richard Musgrave's memoirs of the different rebellions*, (4th ed., 1995), p. i.

she had abridged. In response to the idea that she might convert to Catholicism she wrote to a friend: 'I admire the patience and temperance of the saints and love the Pope and many of his clergy, but I find all Christian religions tending to the same purpose, so that I cannot feel any reason for quitting one for the other'.³³ Toby Barnard has suggested that gender disrupts any simplistic interpretation of social distinctions; Judith Odell's letters suggest that gender may disrupt political distinctions also.

The estate papers of the **Caldwell** family of Castle Caldwell, Co Fermanagh, is a major resource for eighteenth-century Irish history. The papers form part of a larger collection, the Bagshawe muniments, in the John Rylands University Library in Manchester. The Caldwell material occupies nine pages of the published guide to the Bagshawe muniments, and individual members of the Caldwell family appear elsewhere as correspondents in the Bagshawe papers. The papers have been used for an introduction to the family written in 1980 and for an examination into agricultural activity in Ireland.³⁴ The publication of the letters of Lady Arabella Denny to Lady Elizabeth Caldwell, drawn this author's attention to the collection, prompted the question about what the otherwise-unknown Elizabeth Caldwell's own letters might be like.³⁵ The answer confirmed the strength of this thesis' main proposition – that something is lost if the letters of exceptional women continue to be privileged for exposure. Elizabeth Caldwell's letters were every bit as valuable as Lady Arabella's for studying the working of the family, and are the kinds of material which should be given wider exposure. An even greater discovery are the letters of Elizabeth's mother-in-law, Lady Ann Caldwell, whom Rev Philip Skelton described as being of 'most exalted spirit and worth'³⁶; a formidable individual, estate manager, part agent for her son-in-law, and proto-banker, Lady Ann

³³ Letters from Judith Odell to Helen Perceval, 22 July 1799 and 18 May 1802. TCD MS 10047/24/1, 4.

³⁴ The Caldwell papers are section B3 of the Bagshawe muniments: F. Taylor, *Hand-list of the Bagshawe muniments deposited in the John Rylands Library* (Manchester, 1955). The list is also available online <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/rd/d7e6eff2-905a-4f78-ad3e-041703b48ca2> accessed 23 July 2016. John B. Cunningham, *Castle Caldwell and its families* (Monaghan, 1980); Mervyn Busted, 'The practice of improvement in the Irish context; the Castle Caldwell estate in County Fermanagh in the second half of the eighteenth century', *Irish Geography*, 33 (2000), pp. 15-36. The author thanks Dr David Dickson for the introduction to the Caldwell papers.

³⁵ Rosemary Raughter, "'My dear lady C": letters of Arabella Denny to Lady Caldwell, 1754-77', in *Analecta Hibernica*, 41 (2009), pp. 133-200.

³⁶ Quoted in Thomas U. Saldeir ed., 'The diary of Anne Cooke', *Journal of the County Kildare Archaeological Society*, 8 (July 1917), p. 104n. Lady Ann Caldwell who died in 1769 may reasonably be assumed to have been born around the turn of the century based on the date of her marriage, 1719. She married Sir John Caldwell (d. 1744) owner of an estate of over two thousand acres on a wooded peninsula stretching into Lough Erne, Co Fermanagh. They had six sons and two daughters. Lady Ann's daughter-in-law Lady Elizabeth née Hort (1729-1778), daughter of Josiah Hort (d. 1751), archbishop of Tuam, married Sir James Caldwell in 1753.

wrote to her son James about raising a militia in the aftermath of the rebellion in Scotland in 1745 saying: ‘I do not design to quit my children and castle let what will happen but defend them if I can get any assistance with my life’.³⁷ Almost ninety of Lady Ann Caldwell’s letters are included in the database. The handwriting and often phonetic spelling do not impinge in any way on the impression these letters make. Her daughter-in-law, Lady Elizabeth Caldwell, was a prudent woman, in contrast to her less careful husband Sir James, and was described as ‘one of the best-natured, best minded creatures in the world’.³⁸ Sir James Caldwell spent much time away from the family estate; he involved himself in the political, social and economic affairs of Britain and Ireland, and in the pursuit of these interests, the advancement of his family he had a very active and expensive social life. Thus Lady Elizabeth, like her Lady Ann before her, was an ‘incorporated wife’ and managed alone in Fermanagh.³⁹ As a hint of what this kind of life meant, one may consider the diary entry of Sir James’ cousin Anne Weldon née Cooke in which she declared in 1772, after ten years of marriage, that she had never spent more than fifteen weeks at one time with her husband.⁴⁰ Lady Elizabeth and Sir James Caldwell had about eight children, not all of whom survived childhood; one at least was lost to the inoculation process. Every activity, both outside and inside the house, is covered by these records. Lady Elizabeth Caldwell’s letters within the collection amount to over 350 items. These include 79 letters between herself and her husband; 39 letters from Arabella Denny, the first of which dates from the year after Lady Elizabeth got married; there are 46 letters from Lady Elizabeth Aylmer, a friend of Lady Elizabeth’s from the time before either woman was married.⁴¹ Apart from letters from family, there are over forty other named authors of letters to Lady Elizabeth. It would be difficult to overstate the significance of this collection for social, agricultural, domestic, and epistolary history.

The **Forward** letters in the NLI are part of the papers of the Earls of Wicklow.⁴² Thirty-six of the children’s letters from this estate collection were selected for inclusion

³⁷ Letter from Lady Ann Caldwell to her son James, 10 November 1745. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B3/13/1. The intended word could be ‘castle’ or ‘cattle’ as it appears to read ‘calle’.

³⁸ Raughter, ‘Letters of Arabella Denny’, p. 141; Sadleir, ‘Cook diary’, p. 107n.

³⁹ Rachel Wilson, *Elite women*, p. 75.

⁴⁰ Sadleir, ‘Cook diary’, p. 460.

⁴¹ Lady Elizabeth Aylmer was the daughter of Dorothy Sanderson and her husband Fenton Cole from Silver Hill, Co Fermanagh. In 1764 Elizabeth Cole married Sir FitzGerald Aylmer (1736-1794) the 6th baronet Aylemer from Donadea, Co Kildare, M.P.; they had three or four sons and two daughters. Elizabeth’s will was proved in 1797.

⁴² NLI MS 38,603/1, 9-10, 12. Isabella Forward (1791-1840) was the oldest daughter of the 3rd Earl of Wicklow. Her father William Howard (1761-1818) being the second son of the first earl and not expected to inherit, had taken the name Forward upon inheriting from his maternal relatives of Castle Forward in

in the database. It is only in the early years of the nineteenth century that children's letters begin to appear in the record; they are so rare that any attempt to apply a selection process would be difficult to rationalise. The principal author among the Forward children was Isabella. Her letters were written, under the supervision of her governess, partly as an exercise in letter-writing and partly to give an account of the author's daily activity to her absent mother. Each of the children who were able, wrote and were replied to individually. There were set writing days, and there was probably a different day assigned for each child. These letters were not accidental survivors; the worn folds have been repaired with stamp paper and 'From Isabella' is written on the outside to prevent their being destroyed when weeding other letters. These letters are useful in showing the workings of a home-based education, and also in showing how letter-writing was used by Isabella in her identity-creation as she chose what way to present herself to her parents. The 221 mid-eighteenth-century letters of Bishop Edward **Synge** to his daughter Alicia have revolutionised the way historians understand the inner workings of the historical family in Ireland.⁴³ They have been used in social-historical studies where they are found invaluable in such areas as inter-class attitudes, the lives of servants, the reading habits of young women, and medical practice;⁴⁴ they also contain much which has yet to be analysed regarding the experience of a young teenager gender construction and social attitudes towards women. Alicia Synge, as an individual, has yet to be extricated from her father's shadow although, given the self-referential nature of the epistolary genre, clues to her personality and opinions may be found in comments she wrote to her father which he quoted back to her. Initially consulted for this thesis because of the gender and youth of the recipient, it was expected that evidence of child rearing and childhood experiences would be discovered. This was the case, but since the entire desired end of Synge's actions

Donegal. Upon the death, without issue in 1815, of his nephew the second earl, William inherited and resumed the family name of Howard. In 1787 he married Eleanor Caulfeild (1762 - 1807) grand-daughter of the 3rd viscount Charlemont. They had eight children, five daughters, and three sons. Isabella married in 1815 William Meade Smyth of Barbaville in Co Westmeath.

⁴³ Edward Synge (1691-1762) Bishop of Elphin married Jane Curtis (d. 1737) of Roscrea in 1720. They had six children all of whom had died by 1746 except the youngest child Alicia (1733-1807). Synge lived part of the year in Elphin, Co Roscommon and wrote to Alicia, who stayed in their house in Kevin Street, in Dublin with her cousin Jane Synge and their governess, Blanche Jourdan (1705 - c. 1780). Alicia married Joshua Cooper of Markree Castle in Sligo in 1758. These letters are published: Marie-Louise Legg ed., *The Synge letters: Bishop Edward Synge to his daughter Alicia, Roscommon to Dublin, 17146-1752* (Dublin 1996).

⁴⁴ O'Dowd, Mary, *A History of women*, p. 217; Barnard, *A new anatomy*; Toby Barnard, *Making the grand figure: lives and possessions in Ireland, 1641-1770* (New Haven and London, 2004); Margaret Preston and Margaret Ó hÓgartaigh eds., *Gender and medicine in Ireland, 1700-1950* (Syracuse, 2012).

was to produce a ‘woman’, that is, a married adult female, and since managing a large domestic establishment was one of the skills Alicia had to learn, this correspondence reveals itself to be a rich resource for the history of domestic service.

The **La Touche** family, whose correspondence is in Trinity College Library, were originally French Huguenots who set up in cloth manufacture and banking in Dublin. The collection comprises about 700 pieces of correspondence, from 1791-1845.⁴⁵ They include letters from the family of Anne Tottenham (b. 1777) who married John David La Touche in 1799.⁴⁶ The letters to Anne from her husband, over 200 of them, were specifically chosen because not only was the marriage unhappy and the couple effectively separated for years, but the female half of the correspondence is missing as in the case of the Synge letters. Letters are a unique literary genre, in that their content is not decided upon only by the writer but takes the reader into account, and something of an absent partner’s world view and of the relationship between the two parties may be established despite the survival of only one side of the correspondence. The La Touche collection is also noteworthy for the presence of youthful sibling correspondence, which is used in the section on children. Unused, but of potential interest, are the letters which refer to incidences of mental illness in the family. The largest portion of the letters in the collection are of those of John David’s brother Charles, who suffered a period of mental illness and was institutionalised for some time before converting to Catholicism, marrying in France and running a boarding house. One of Anne’s Tottenham’s sisters, Mary Anne, also appears to have suffered mental illness.

Quaker **Margaret Pike née Christy** (1762-1853) was the daughter of Joseph and Hannah (née Thompson) of Castletown, Co Carlow. She lived in Stramore, Co Down. She had a sister, Hannah, and at least four brothers: Joseph, James and two boys called John, the first of whom died within a week of birth. Only Margaret and James, who were both born in the same year, survived into middle and old age. On 25 July 1781, Margaret married William Pike (1755-1833) of Moyallen, Co Armagh, a linen merchant; they had

⁴⁵ TCD MS 11272. Some transcriptions are attached to the online catalogue description <http://marloc.library.tcd.ie/CalmView/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=IE+TCD+MS+11272&ndpos=1> accessed 23 July 2016.

⁴⁶ John David La Touche (1772-1838) was one of the six sons and eleven children of David La Touche (b.1729) the first Governor of the Bank of Ireland and head of the ‘Marlay’ branch of the family, which house was named after his wife Elizabeth Marlay whom he married in 1761. Anne Caroline Tottenham was the daughter of Charles Tottenham of New Ross, Co Wexford, (brother of Nicholas Loftus Tottenham of Glenfarne, Co Leitrim), who in 1766 married Frances Boswell, daughter and heiress of Robert Boswell of Ballycurry, County Wicklow. Anne Tottenham was the niece and god-daughter of Lady Ely, wife of Charles Tottenham the Earl of Ely.

no children. Mrs Pike served as clerk of Women's Yearly Meeting in 1799. Over fifty of the letters from Margaret Christy to Mary Shackleton were used in this database, although that does not exhaust the Pike material in the NLI. Margaret's maternal cousin, Thomas Chandler, married Mary Shackleton's sister Deborah, and ten letters from Margaret to Tommy and Debby, from the Quaker Historical Library, have been consulted. Mrs Pike will be referred to by her married name throughout.

The Baronetcy of Abbeyleix in Queen's County (Co Laois), was created in 1698 for Reverend Sir Thomas **Vesey** (1672/3-1730) Bishop of Killaloe (1713–1714) and Bishop of Ossory (1714–1730). He married his cousin Mary (c.1679-1746), only daughter and heiress, being the only surviving of four children, of Denny Muschamp (c.1637–1699) (originally from a Surrey family), muster-master-general of Ireland. Thomas Vesey gained a considerable estate upon his marriage to Mary Muschamp in 1698; it was then that he was created a baronet. He was thereafter ordained. The Veseys devoted much energy and money to embellishing both house and grounds at Abbeyleix. They also spent long periods in London and at Bath. Their daughter Elizabeth (c.1715-1791) was a literary hostess.

In what follows, a few minor items will be referred to which do not belong among any of these named collections. In round numbers, upwards of 2000 letters were consulted for this work.

Chapter 2 Literary review

In the mid-1970s Margaret MacCurtain and Donnchadh Ó Corráin raised the women's history flag on the rampart of Irish historiography.¹ MacCurtain, in an interview in *History Ireland*, said that one of the reasons that women's history took off when it did was because the 'tools of social history, particularly economic history, began to be widely used at that time and these were the best tools for researching women's history'.² While that early work undoubtedly made an immediate intellectual impact, and, in retrospect, it is recognised as having been an important catalyst, nevertheless it was over a decade before the next specialist works began to appear.³ A flurry of publishing activity in the 1990s entrenched this strand of research which each year saw an increasing number of additions to the bibliography; yet, despite the waxing and waning of trends and methodologies, certain areas remain privileged and others are untouched.

A brief survey of general studies, since the 1970s, of women's lives in Ireland will provide useful context for a more focussed discussion on the literature pertaining to three different domestic themes to be examined in this thesis. Mary O'Dowd and Margaret MacCurtain's edited collection of essays in *Women in early-modern Ireland* included an imaginative range of subjects (although not Anglican women) and a reasonably gender-balanced list of contributors.⁴ It gave some attention specifically to the eighteenth century – in essays on republicanism and Protestant minorities - and to elements of the private domestic life of women, neither of which characteristics have been to the forefront in subsequent histories. 'An agenda for Irish women's history', which appeared the following year, showed how much was still to do and drew particular attention to the question of family life and personal relationships.⁵ Subsequent publications up to the mid-2000s almost all followed a tendency to pay little attention to the eighteenth century, to domestic life, to non-Catholics or to the prosperous. An example was another collection of articles edited by Maryann Gialanella Valiulis and Mary O'Dowd, *Women and Irish*

¹ Margaret MacCurtain and Donnchadh Ó Corráin eds., *Women in Irish society: the historical dimension* (Dublin, 1974).

² Thomas O' Loughlin 'Sister act', *History Ireland*, 2, (Spring 1994), pp. 52-5 at p. 53.

³ Mona Hearn, 'Domestic servants in Dublin 1880-1920', (unpublished PhD thesis, TCD (1984)); Art Cosgrove, ed., *Marriage in Ireland* (Dublin 1985).

⁴ Mary O'Dowd and Margaret MacCurtain eds., *Women in early-modern Ireland* (Edinburgh, 1991).

⁵ Margaret MacCurtain, Mary O'Dowd and Maria Luddy, 'An agenda for women's history, 1500-1900', *Irish Historical Studies*, 28 (1992), pp. 15-17.

history, none of which dealt with family and over half which were pre-1700.⁶ Two works by Alan Hayes and Diane Urquhart, one of which proposes itself as a ‘core text’ for the study of women’s history in Ireland, started in the nineteenth century.⁷ This, the authors say, is because of a ‘relative scarcity of primary source and published material on the medieval and early modern period plus the fact that it was in the nineteenth century that women began to witness a significant change in their social position’.⁸ This assertion must be balanced by the statement of several other historians that ‘new roles and possibly new attitudes to women emerge more clearly in the eighteenth century ... women are visible in the eighteenth century in a way that they were not previously and their voices can be heard through their own writing’.⁹

More recent publications have acted on this prompt and build on a diversity of primary sources, including personal records, and new methodologies and more tightly focussed lines of enquiry which are proving fruitful.¹⁰ In terms of core texts, and acknowledging the need for access to women’s own voices, the *Field Day anthology* of writing by and about women provides the materials for a cultural history of women by gathering together contemporary attitudes and beliefs pertaining to women and men.¹¹ Mary O’Dowd’s *A history of women in Ireland, 1500-1800* (2005) is an important work which reinforces the foundations for the subject in Ireland. This work was proposed as a core text to ground and inspire further specialist study, and serves this purpose effectively by illuminating the varieties of female experience within traditional historical narratives of economy, religion and politics.¹²

O’Dowd articulated a circumstance which, although still being addressed, presents difficulties for historians of women: that is the lack of a history of the family upon which they may build their work. In the absence of a robust socio-historical architecture, O’Dowd turned to the archives and found that the range of sources for the

⁶ Maryann Gialanella Valiulis, and Mary O’ Dowd eds., *Women and Irish history: essays in honour of Margaret MacCurtain* (Dublin and Colorado, 1997).

⁷ Alan Hayes and Diane Urquhart eds., *The Irish women’s history reader* (London and New York, 2001). Alan Hayes and Diane Urquhart, *Irish women’s history* with foreword by Margaret MacCurtain (Dublin, 2004).

⁸ Hayes and Urquhart, *Reader*, p. 2.

⁹ MacCurtain, O’Dowd and Luddy, ‘Agenda’, p. 13.

¹⁰ Examples are Connolly, ‘A woman’s life’; Ruth Thorpe, *Women, architecture and building in the East, c. 1790- 1840* (Dublin, 2013).

¹¹ Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, Margaret MacCurtain, Siobhán Kilfeather, Angela Bourke, Maria Luddy, Mary O’Dowd. Geraldine Meaney and Clair Wills, eds., *The Field Day anthology of Irish writing* volumes 4 and 5: *Irish women's writing and traditions* (Cork, 2005).

¹² Mary O’Dowd, *A history of women in Ireland, 1500-1800* (Harlow, 2005).

pre-nineteenth century era was more extensive than had been imagined. Although long known to historians, the gender dimension of these sources had often gone unnoticed. This archival focus on women enabled O'Dowd to identify the significance of women's engagement with some of the most important developments in early modern Ireland.¹³ The author concentrated on the societal change wrought by capitalism, industrialisation, colonialism, Protestantism, and the Enlightenment, an approach which also addressed the issue of periodisation. The reader is reminded that 'turning points in English history are not necessarily Irish ones or that, if they are, their emphasis and meaning were often significantly altered'.¹⁴ O'Dowd accepts that historians of Irish women may use English historiography, given the transnational identity of wealthy Irish Protestants, while acknowledging distinctions from English or Scottish middle classes. Insofar as family life is dealt with separately, it is under the rubric of 'economy', a not unreasonable approach, in that the family was the central economic unit. However, a study of the internal operations of the family, and of the family within society, remains a glaring omission from Irish historiography. O'Dowd acknowledged the continuing lack of research into 'marriage and the private life of women and their personal relations with their husbands, children and families'.¹⁵ What is required now, building on O'Dowd's work, is a further line of study akin to that represented by Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford's study of early modern English women.¹⁶ This mirrors O'Dowd in her revelation of women's experiences within the traditional patterns of historiographic endeavour; but they also look at the variety brought to female experience by different stages in female life – from childhood to old age – which would have made a considerable difference, for example in terms of respect and authority within the family. Furthermore they examine the existence of a specific female culture under the rubrics of space, speech (although not letters) and friendship. They try to reconstruct what day-to-day experience of marriage was like from the woman's point of view, using a combination of prescriptive literature, personal records, court records and records of popular culture such as proverbs.¹⁷

¹³ O'Dowd, *A history of women*, p. 3.

¹⁴ Lynn Botelho review of Mary O'Dowd, *A history of women in Ireland, 1500-1800*, H-Albion H-Net reviews November 2005 url <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10967> The issue of periodisation, and the recognition of the need allow the sources to direct the research questions were both highlighted in Luddy and Murphy, eds., *Women surviving*.

¹⁵ O'Dowd (2005), *A history of women*, p. 4.

¹⁶ Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in early-modern England*.

¹⁷ Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in early-modern England*, p. 126.

The preponderance of published works on women's lives in Ireland in recent years has focussed on Catholic religious life, institutional education, crime against and by women, emigration and politics (both suffrage and in terms of biography). The chronological focus is overwhelmingly on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the involvement of male historians, a positive feature of a number of the earliest works, has not continued. This may have been positively affected by the numbers of male scholars becoming interested in the history of childhood. O'Dowd's ambitious 2005 study covered three centuries and endeavoured to do justice to all social strata and ethnicities. In 2015 Rachel Wilson's work on elite women has taken its lead from the decades of work on elite English and, more recently, Scottish women and applauds their dispensing with the blunt methodological instrument that was the 'separate spheres' theory, while asking 'and what of Ireland'.¹⁸ Admiring as she is of the biographies and overviews, which have kept the subject of women to the forefront since the 1990s, Wilson perceived a need for a work which would 'deal with more subjects than a case study in a tighter timeframe than that employed by current surveys'. Using mostly women's own records as her sources, Wilson was particularly interested in the extent to which Irish women were influenced by their neighbours in England. She found this influence to be considerable, as Ascendancy women followed English innovations to bolster their families' 'right to rule' position within Ireland, and to prepare their children to move easily in society on both sides of the Irish Sea. As did Toby Barnard, in *Making the grand figure*, Wilson shows that Ascendancy Irish families participated in an Atlantic-wide consumer revolution and created a culture well informed by the latest of European and English high culture.¹⁹ However, the differences she found were significant also, including a high level of female political involvement, that was accepted by men to a degree unheard of in England. Covering all the established parameters of a wealthy adult woman's life inside and outside the home, from marriage and childbirth to politics and philanthropy, Wilson has definitively demonstrated that in eighteenth-century Ireland, as has been stated for decades in scholarship about England,²⁰ the patriarchal system allowed for the creation

¹⁸ Rachel Wilson, *Elite women in Ascendancy Ireland, 1690-1745: imitation and innovation* (Suffolk, 2015).

¹⁹ Patrick Griffin, 'The "baubles" of the Ascendancy'. Review of Barnard's *Making the grand figure* H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. April 2007 <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13027> accessed 23 July 2016.

²⁰ Margaret J. M. Ezell, *The patriarch's wife: literary evidence and the history of the family* (Chapel Hill and London, 1987).

of a group of ‘powerful and prominent’ women who were a force to be reckoned at home and abroad.

New approaches to reading letters

Two distinct strands may be followed in the literature about epistolary activity. Firstly there is the strand which, observing letter-writing against the backdrop of the wider society in which it was embedded, has determined that there was much more being communicated between correspondents than that which was contained written on the paper. More recently there have been epistolary network-mapping projects which look at letter writing as a form of publication, and recognised the extent to which the dissemination of ideas was facilitated by the postal system. Both of these approaches are relevant to the ambitions of this thesis.

Letter writing as social practice is the title of a collection of essays edited in the late 1990s by David Barton and Nigel Hall, both experts in the area of language and literacy. This work brought together specialists from several disciplines to identify and interpret the clues to social history which may be found by understanding the cultural uses of letter writing. In the words of one reviewer, ‘letters are contextually performative, and their content and form require equally serious scholarly scrutiny’.²¹

The first strand may be divided into two, represented by the work of two historians: David Fitzpatrick who looked at the letter-writing practices of nineteenth-century Irish emigrants to Australia, and Christopher Daybell who has published on the uses of letter writing by women, in early modern England.²² Fitzpatrick’s work harked back to the fact that one of the earliest attempts to include the letters of the poor in any historical narrative was based on the letters of Polish emigrants to America.²³ This and other similar studies, ignored the individual authors and their epistolary idiosyncrasies in favour of the great migratory event of which they were a part. Fitzpatrick’s work asked what did it mean that almost illiterate individuals clung to a practice which was so new and difficult for them. Thus, for Fitzpatrick, the ‘religious platitudes, hearsay information

²¹ Liz Stanley, Review essay, *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 21 (2006), pp. 97-103.

²² David Fitzpatrick, *Oceans of consolation*. James Daybell, ‘Female literacy and the social conventions of women’s letter-writing in England, 1540-1603’, in *Early-modern women’s letter writing, 1450-1700* ed., James Daybell (Basingstoke, 2001). In *Early Modern Literature in History* series. General editor Cedric C Brown. James Daybell, *The material letter: manuscript letters and the culture and practices of letter-writing in early modern England, 1580-1635* (Basingstoke, 2012) James Daybell, ‘New directions in the study of early modern correspondence’; introduction to a special issue of in *Lives and Letters*, vol 4 (Autumn 2012).

²³ Florian Znaniecki and William I. Thomas, *The Polish peasant in Europe and America* (1918–20) was based on the personal records of poor emigrants.

... news of family affairs and greetings to a long list of relatives and friends', edited out in other works as being meaningless, demanded to be scrutinised for the insight they give to the role and function of the letter in the lives of the individual authors, and into the societies from which they came. These 'epistolary ethics' as they have come to be called, are understood to be guides to a larger understanding of the interpersonal purposes of letters, and this kind of mundane detail takes on a significance it previously lacked.²⁴ It confirmed that the greatest function of a letter is not to share information but to maintain relationships. Fitzpatrick's process was one whereby the statistical approach, used by the early exploiters of the genre, is deployed on the elements previously edited out as dross. He assumed that they were important to the authors and he interested himself in why this might be; he added to this biographical and social contextualisation, characteristic of the work of family historians; he questioned the psychology of letter-writing, the commitment to writing under circumstances of poor literacy, considerable expense, the time-lag and the logistical difficulties of the postal system, and found information about the significance to the emigrant of maintaining intra-familial contact. Thus he made up for what appears to be lacking in the letter, that is, self-reflection and verifiable hard factual evidence on the practicalities of emigration, with evidence on the emotional cost to the emigrants, and the traditions and value system of the society from which they emerged.

James Daybell's work took this approach specifically with reference to letter-writing in early modern England. His work revealed the sophisticated and strategic use women made of the technology for their own ends. These ends were sometimes pragmatic, as in the search for patronage, or personal, as in identity construction through self-representation. One of Daybell's most recent works is as editor of a collection of articles that illustrates new approaches to the study of letters which have emerged since the turn of the century. Chief among these developments are rhetorical and linguistic analysis, and the study of the letter as a technology of the self, its relationship to early modern subjectivities and the construction of emotions. There has also been an 'archival turn' within literary and historical studies' which requires that everything else apart from the text – physicality, watermarks, transcription practice – be examined for meaning.²⁵

²⁴ David Gerber, 'Epistolary ethics: personal correspondence and the culture of emigration in the nineteenth century', *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 19 (Summer 2000), pp. 2-23.

²⁵ Daybell, 'New directions'. A better term would link this approach to codicological practice which it resembles.

Daybell's own work draws on a number of changes which have come into the study of women's written records. Firstly, collapsing of the boundaries of what was understood to be a literary text allowed into consideration the kinds of records women have most frequently left behind, which includes letters and diaries, as well as literary and religious commonplace, and domestic records. This has encouraged a consideration of female intellectual activity and the dissemination, and potential for impact of female ideas, by sharing their unpublished writing. Daybell, like historian Susan Whyman, also insisted on subverting negative interpretative practices based on what appears to be illiteracy. As Daybell has remarked, even an apparently poorly-written letter is the result of 'a process demanding diverse other skills: organization and persuasiveness, linguistic and verbal dexterity, rhetorical and social adroitness, as well as technical and legal expertise'. The writer of such a letter had to be at ease with epistolary conventions, equipment and language. This included a least a rudimentary knowledge of sentence structure and composition (but not spelling) and a mastery of the material artefacts – pen, ink, paper and seals.²⁶ Both Fitzpatrick and Daybell's work have informed this thesis' approach to women's letters in Ireland. Their use of 'against the grain' reading, and their reinterpretation of what was once dismissed as illiterate, have yet to be applied to any great extent to the subject here.

The second distinct strand in the study of letter-writing has been in the mapping of epistolary activity, enabled by developments in digital humanities. The impulse behind these activities is to visualise the extent of the personal networks which were made possible by the development of a reliable postal system.²⁷ This in turn permits speculation about the dissemination of ideas, and the role in this of private correspondence, where before research concentrated on the publishing industry. This has exciting possibilities for the history of women, some of whom may now be understood to have played a greater role in discourse formation than previously had seemed possible. The impact of this kind of aggregation of information is reflected in the mission statement of the Early Modern Letters Online project (EMLO). This acknowledges that bringing resources together in

²⁶ Daybell, ed., *Early-modern women's letter writing*, p. 5. Susan E. Whyman, *The pen and the people: English letter writers, 1660-1800* (Oxford, 2009), p. 10.

²⁷ There are a number of intellectual-network-mapping projects ongoing for example 'Mapping the Republic of Letters' at Stanford <<http://republicofletters.stanford.edu/>> ; 'The Victorian Women Writers Letters Project' <<http://edocs.lib.sfu.ca/projects/VWWLP/>>; and the Elizabeth Montagu project <http://www.elizabethmontaguleters.co.uk/home>. The outlines of this strand of enquiry can be comprehended by reference to the papers presented at a conference in March 2016 in the University of York entitled 'Epistolary Cultures – letters and letter-writing in Early Modern Europe' <<https://www.york.ac.uk/crems/events/events/2015-16/epistolarycultures/>> accessed 9 May 2016

one space ‘not only increases access to and awareness of them, but allows disparate and connected correspondences to be cross-searched, combined, analysed and visualized’. Within that resource is another ‘hub’ – WEMLO - provides access specifically to information about early-modern women’s letters.²⁸

The study of the history of children

There is no well-developed narrative structure about the history of children for eighteenth-century Ireland into which to integrate what is to be found in children’s letters. This is despite the fact that it is at the end of this period that literacy first began to be offered to young children, who thereby began to become visible in the form of their own records and in the increasing numbers of female records which begin to survive. The literature on childhood experiences in eighteenth-century Ireland, is small and yet, if an analogy with the history of women is applicable, the move from an initial literature about victimhood, to in-depth enquiries about personal experience, self-expression, identity construction, and self-assertion cannot be too far in the future. Historians of Irish childhood have to adopt a mostly qualitative approach to children’s history, as evidence for a quantitative reconstruction of their lives has not survived. Various types of primary sources survive which, in different ways, capture something of the experience of childhood within the middle-class family home: letters to children; letters from them and about them; and diaries and memoirs. The records of formal schooling, contained in school exercises copies, can also be. Domestic account books are relevant to children’s material experiences but are always at a double remove, being an adult’s record of an adult decision made on behalf of a child. The paucity of first-hand records is a great obstacle to insight into childhood experience. A doctoral dissertation completed in recent years covers the sources available for the study of the child across an extensive range of subjects from attitudes to childbirth to leisure and education. The author published an article based on her research which admitted that ‘no unknown manuscript sources’ were discovered during the research and acknowledges the disparity between records available in Britain and France and those available in Ireland. This article refers fleetingly to the value of personal records in exploring the ‘actuality of life as a child’ and continues then

²⁸ http://emlo.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/blog/?page_id=907 accessed 20 June 2016.
<http://blogs.plymouth.ac.uk/wemlo/> accessed 20 June 2016.

to concentrate on the institutional educational records which make up the bulk of the surviving original material.²⁹

One of the contexts in which children may be observed is education. Early scholarship on the subject concerned itself with institutional history, sometimes based on particular schools or on initiatives such as the Charter Schools. Much of the emphasis has been on nineteenth-century developments subsequent to the establishment of the national school system in 1831,³⁰ and most recent work has been on the twentieth century. The title of a recent collection of essays suggests that it covers a wide date range, but instead it moves quickly from Tudor and Stuart Ireland to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, omitting eighteenth-century developments.³¹ In terms of education for poor Catholics, the hedge schools and their work continue to attract attention, despite a dearth of records. Recent books which purport to be about Irish education in the eighteenth century, tend to concentrate, apart from brief references to hedge schools, on the urban-based endowed schools and educational commissions.³² The sources for this policy- and institution-based approach, the government commissions into education and the pamphlets written by the teachers, educationalists, clergy, feminists and politicians, cannot tell us much about how those who were taught experienced schooling.³³

Part of the obstacle to the study of home-based education, which was such a feature in many children's lives in the eighteenth century, is the lack of literature on family itself; nor has there been much work on women as mothers and as early-years educators. The institution of the family and the mother's role within it were perceived throughout the eighteenth century as being of profound significance for civil society.³⁴ From the perspective taken by this thesis, that education is to be considered as a cultural activity, the most relevant work to date is the unpublished doctoral thesis of John Logan. He began by noting that education within the household has been neglected by historians

²⁹ Gabrielle Ashford, 'Childhood: studies in the history of children in eighteenth century Ireland', (unpublished PhD thesis, St Patrick's College Drumcondra, Department of History, 2012), embargoed indefinitely. The author acknowledges Dr Ashford's generosity in permitting a sight of the table of contents. Gabrielle Ashford, 'Sources for a study of childhood in eighteenth-century Ireland', *Irish Archives*, (2013), pp. 3-15.

³⁰ Norman Atkinson, *Irish Education: a history of educational institutions* (Dublin, 1969).

³¹ Maria Luddy and James Smith eds., *Children, childhood and Irish society, 1500 to the present* (Dublin, 2014).

³² Deirdre Raftery and Karin Fischer eds., *Educating Ireland: schooling and social change, 1700-2000* (Kildare, 2014).

³³ Jane McDermid, *The schooling of girls in Britain and Ireland, 1800-1900* (New York and London, 2012). p.2.

³⁴ McDermid, *Schooling of girls*, pp. 1, 12.

compared with the attention given to institutional education and policy provision. This is partly because of the availability of records and partly because the history of education had been taken over by a nationalist narrative wherein policies were the most important element. This began to change in the 1960s and 1970s under the influence of historians including Louis Cullen whose ‘broadening of the context within which education has been examined has led to its examination in relation to aspects of society such as politicisation, commercialisation and the development of a distinctive mentality’.³⁵ More recently these ‘aspects of society’ have included gender issues; for example Logan points that maids and governesses looked after young children and older girls, while tutors looked after older boys. Logan’s extension of his scrutiny of educational provision, to include what was delivered by ‘a wide range of educators, including family members’ was influenced by the work of American historian Bernard Bailyn, who was among the few to break ‘the historiographical concentration on institutional schooling’. To quote Logan, Bailyn’s view of education was ‘broader than most, and describing it as a life-long cultural process which might be found within any arena of social and economic life, he made a case for the study of any agency through which culture was transmitted’.³⁶ Thus the discipline was widened to embrace the informal and spontaneous encounters between household members, neighbours, strangers and friends.

Mary O’Dowd also emphasised the diversity of ways by which one might be educated, from governesses to self-directed reading.³⁷ She used the Tighe and Edgeworth families as examples where parents not only undertook teaching work themselves but recognised that what they were engaged on was a social experiment. In a rare survival of educational material from an English domestic setting, one can visualise the experience, for both mother and children, of the kind of observational experimental approach. The unique ‘nursery library’ of Jane Johnston (1708-59), a vicar’s wife from Lincolnshire, leaves no doubt as to the standard and method of education that the careful, well-educated mother such as Honora Edgeworth could devise.³⁸ Mrs Johnston constructed her library twenty years before *Emile* was written and over forty years before Edgeworth’s *Practical*

³⁵ John Logan, John Logan, ‘Schooling and the promotion of literacy in nineteenth-century Ireland’ (Unpublished PhD thesis, Department of Modern History, NUI Cork, 1992), pp. 1, 18.

³⁶ Bernard Bailyn, *Education in the formation of American society*, (New York, 1960) quoted in Logan, ‘Schooling and the promotion of literacy’, p. 21.

³⁷ O’Dowd, *A history of women*, pp. 216-17.

³⁸ Andrea Immel, Review of Jill Shefrin, Opening the Nursery Door in *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly*, 25 (Winter), 2000.

education was published.³⁹ The idea of a community-wide approach to delivering education is enlarged upon in a work on England edited by Mary Hilton and Jill Shefrin. Education, they agree, far from being a merely political, institutional or instructive process, was a cultural activity and ‘fluid and various were the social and discursive practices by which ideas were transmitted to the young’.⁴⁰ The Hilton and Shefrin work also drew attention to a new ‘revolution’ in the history of education in the 1970s, which noted just how many of the eighteenth-century published theorists were themselves female. It aimed to show how this permitted the affixing of the ‘imprint of specifically feminine thought and female morality on public consciousness’.⁴¹ This is not irrelevant in the study of Irish education given the number of Irish imprints of English educational works, which attests to the existence of an Irish audience for this material.⁴² Meaney, O’Dowd and Whelan’s *Reading women* traces the likely literary influences upon Irish middle-class thinking about female education and women’s role in society.⁴³ One of the aims of this book is to trace the dissemination in Ireland of published discussion on the education of women. The assumption is that such materials, originally published in England, were made available in Ireland because there was an appetite for them. This also explains why historians of Ireland can propose certain assumptions based on the circumstances in England. While not the same, the cultures were deeply entwined. Although there are references to Catholic readership, it is clear that the principal consumers of radical literature sympathetic to women, and advocates for female education were middle-class Protestants of the kind whose letters form the basis of this thesis.

The other context in which children have been studied has been in relation to poverty and neglect. For many years Joseph Robbins’ study of charity children was the only published voice, and illness, abandonment, ill-treatment and murder remain the focus of much scholarship.⁴⁴ The child in the family home has been brought to notice,

³⁹ Honora Edgeworth and Richard Lowell Edgeworth, *Practical education: or, the history of Harry and Lucy*, vol 2 (Lichfield, 1780).

⁴⁰ Mary Hilton and Jill Shefrin eds., *Educating the child in enlightenment Britain: beliefs, cultures, practices* (Surrey and Burlington, 2009), p. 1

⁴¹ Mary Hilton, *Women and the shaping of the nation’s young: education and public doctrine in Britain, 1750-1850* (Aldershot and Burlington VT, 2007), p. 223.

⁴² Hester Chapone’s *Letters on the improvement of the mind. Addressed to a Lady* was reprinted five times in Dublin between 1773 and 1786; O’Dowd, *A history of women*, p. 218.

⁴³ O’Dowd, *A history of Women*, p. 216; Gerardine Meaney, Mary O’Dowd and Bernadette Whelan, *Reading the Irish woman: studies in cultural encounter and exchange, 1714-1960*, vol 2 of *Reappraisals in Irish History*. General editors Enda Delaney and Maria Luddy (Liverpool, 2013).

⁴⁴ Joseph Robbins, *A study of charity children in Ireland, 1700-1900* (Dublin, 1980).

principally in the form of the twentieth-century memoir, although recently approaches have begun to be made to the earlier period through visual and material culture.⁴⁵ A two-day conference on children's history brought together new research and an inventive approach to material, artistic and photographic records; this served not only as a counterbalance to the focus on the later period but to the focus on dysfunction.⁴⁶ It is encouraging to see the development of this strand of Irish history, linking as it does the so-called public and private spheres, the family and the role of women, apart from its importance in bringing childhood experience more firmly into view.

In terms of the publication of primary sources about children there are few. One such are the letters of Martha McTier to her younger brother William Drennan; included are many letters about Martha's beloved nephew, Tom, of whom she was foster mother for a number of years.⁴⁷ Published over half a century ago, Mary O'Neill's work belies its age in its nuanced appreciation of the complexity of the situation, for the child and for the adults, in this informal arrangement. The author was particularly observant on the mechanics of gender identity creation in a small boy and the seemingly different attitude to 'manliness' on the parts of the child's father and aunt, which might possibly be accounted for by the difference in age; Martha, twelve years older than her brother, was inclined to let the her nephew have considerable independence, to protect and encourage his 'frankness'; his father on the other hand (whom Martha called 'timid') said 'it is time enough for Tom to be manly ten years hence'. Martha McTier also let Tom get away with boisterous behaviour, clearly understanding it to be a normal and desirable male way of being. She recorded that she admired her nephew's style of running 'like a man, not like a girl shaking her arms'. The toddler was encouraged to spend hours with soldiers on sentry duty to make him 'manly and fearless' and he had so much independence that he become lost on more than one occasion. Tom's rough behaviour, including spitting at his aunt, threatening to whip her bottom, and calling his older relatives 'bold jades' was all happily reported to his parents.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ See for example Anne MacClelland and Alice Mauger, *Growing pains: childhood illness in Ireland, 1750-1950* (Sallins, 2013); Sarah-Anne Buckley, *The cruelty man: child welfare, the NSPCC and the state in Ireland, 1886-1956* (Manchester, 2013). A glance at the titles in Irish History Online <http://www.irishhistoryonline.ie/> confirms the preponderance of interest in memoirs of poverty.

⁴⁶ Twenty years a-growing: an international conference on the history of Irish childhood from the medieval to the modern age, St Patrick's College Drumcondra, 9-10 June 2014.

⁴⁷ Mary McNeill, *Little Tom Drennan: portrait of a Georgian childhood* (Dublin, 1962). There are 1,500 letters surviving letters between Martha McTier and William Drennan of which McNeill quotes over 190 referring at length to Tom Drennan.

⁴⁸ McNeill, *Tom Drennan* pp. 16-17, 27, 40,43, 86-7

The other type of primary source for Irish childhood experience is the memoir and diary. Dorothea Herbert's *Retrospections*, unreliable as it may be in some regards, gives a superb account of a riotous and racketsy childhood, reminding us that, in its pre-Victorian meaning, the word 'genteel' encompassed considerable behavioural latitude. Despite the rarity of memoirs of eighteenth-century childhood, Herbert's contribution to this area of knowledge has been overshadowed by her account of her formal education, her evidence of her literary talents, what little she records of agrarian unrest, and her testimony to the experience of mental illness. And the diaries of Mary Shackleton, unique generically and in extent, await public dissemination. She too is better known for her literary endeavours and political records, although some attention was paid in the 1990s to the significance of her more personal records.⁴⁹ As a 'perfect storm' of advantage – a gifted writer, from an egalitarian religious community and with a pedagogue as a father - her experiences cannot have been replicated widely.

The lives of children as presented in this thesis are perhaps best contextualised within the literature of the history of letter-writing itself. Many of the conventions about reading women's letters can be applied to children's letters to good effect: for example, the meaning of the changing levels of formality and the performative and rhetorical aspects of the letter. In this context, the work of most relevance to the present thesis, is by Willimijn Ruberg. Ruberg has published on the letter, both in Ireland and the Netherlands, with particular interest in young authors and with particular focus on the eighteenth century.⁵⁰ Her specific interest was in the letter's use as a pedagogic and socialising tool, recognising also that education is best approached through cultural history and showing that behavioural and formal academic education went hand in hand in home-based education practices. Ruberg looked at Edward Synge's letters to his daughter as an example of how letters were used overtly to instruct a child in emotionology, in the reserved eighteenth-century style. However, the author, by emphasising that Synge was following the Enlightenment path of reason, when urging his daughter to be restrained in her emotions, fails to take into account the other discourse at

⁴⁹ Kevin O'Neill, 'Almost a gentlewoman; gender and adolescence in the diary of Mary Shackleton' in Mary O'Dowd and Sabine Wichert eds., *Chattel, servant or citizen: women's status in church and state* (Belfast, 1995); K. O'Neill, 'Mary Shackleton Leadbeater; peaceful rebel' in Daire Keogh and Nicholas Furlong eds., *The women of 1798*, (Dublin 1998); Barbara Hughes, *Between literature and history: the diaries and memoirs of Mary Leadbeater and Dorothea Herbert*, vol 13 of *Reimagining Ireland*. General editor Eamonn Maher (Bern, 2010).

⁵⁰ Willemijn Ruberg, 'Epistolary and emotional education: the letters of an Irish father to his daughter, 1747-52', *Paedagogica Historica*, 44, (Feb-Apr 2008), pp. 207-18. Ruberg, *Conventional correspondence*.

work which was Synge's understanding of the causes of illness: Synge believed that strong feelings were a threat to his daughter's physical health.

The study of the history of servants

The historiography of Irish women has left the subject of service in the eighteenth- and early-nineteenth centuries largely undisturbed. In *The Irish women's history reader*, covering the principal publications from 1978 to 2001, the only article even to touch on women in the workforce in the eighteenth century makes no reference to domestic service, which had been expanding since the seventeenth century.⁵¹ The necessity of examining the subject was established in MacCurtain, O'Dowd and Luddy's 'Agenda', both implicitly, as part of family life which was high on their list of desiderata, and explicitly, in that it is specifically mentioned both as an element of the managerial function of the mistresses of gentry houses and as an economic opportunity for poor rural women.⁵² Work on the subject in Britain began in the early years of the twentieth century by examining the so-called 'servant problem' which was an employer-centric, androcentric look at service in aristocratic houses.⁵³ Insofar as servants themselves were considered, it was as 'a low income and dependant group' with little control over their destiny.⁵⁴ By the 1980s, research was revolutionised by the realisation that the greater number of employers were artisanal and lower-class rather than gentry-level and that servants were overwhelmingly female. The former brought the servant into the foreground and established that the experience of service was varied, contingent on circumstances; the latter realisation brought the subject more forcefully to the attention of historians of women. Given the cultural similarities between Ireland and England, despite differing patterns of economic growth and urbanisation, work in England has much to contribute in mapping the expanding contours of the subject in Ireland.

Although the presence of servants has always been of keen concern to Irish demographers it was only in the 1980s that social historians began work on the subject.

⁵¹ Mary Cullen, *History of women and history of men: the politics of women's history* (1994) quoted in Hayes and Urquhart, *Irish women's history reader*, p.18. Louis Cullen twenty years earlier referred to the modernising effect on rural Ireland of the availability of waged employment for the lower class. Louis M. Cullen, *The emergence of modern Ireland, 1600-1900* (London, 1981), p. 16.

⁵² MacCurtain, O'Dowd and Luddy, 'An agenda for women's history', pp. 15–17.

⁵³ Dorothy Marshall, 'The domestic servant of the eighteenth century', *Economica*, 25 (April 1929), pp. 15-40. J. Jean Hecht, *The domestic servant class in eighteenth-century England*, (London, 1956).

⁵⁴ Hill, Bridget, *Servants: English domestics in the eighteenth century* (Oxford, 1996).

, p. 10; D. A. Kent, 'Ubiquitous but invisible: female domestic servants in mid-eighteenth century London', *History Workshop Journal*, 28 (Autumn, 1989), pp. 111-128. P. H. Lindert, 'English occupations, 1670-1811', *Journal of Economic History*, 40 (1980), p. 709 quoted in Kent, 'Ubiquitous but invisible', p. 112.

From the beginning they interested themselves in what could be deduced from the relationship between employer and employee. Mona Hearn's 1990 work on domestic service in Dublin at the end of the nineteenth century drew attention to the complexities of the service relationship and the strength of the interdependency within it. The servant was seen to have had more room for manoeuvre, in terms of self-assertion and self-determination, than was hitherto assumed to have been possible within such an unequal relationship.⁵⁵ Hearn suggested that this came from the 'emotional and economic bonds' that servants formed with their employers and from their ability 'to disrupt the household by withdrawing their labour permanently'.⁵⁶ She identified these traits and actions as evidence of confident strategising on the part of women, despite the repressive social culture they experienced. Hearn's work, concentrated on the end of the nineteenth century, was based on account books and, more crucially, the recollections of individuals who had been in service in the early part of the twentieth century. Her work was pioneering, but attitudes discovered in the twentieth century cannot be assumed to have applied to the earlier period.

This thesis assumes that service relationships in Ireland were as functional as they were in any other country; they must be studied as part of family history and the history of women, and not only in terms of class or colonial fall-out. In the absence of a robust historiography of the eighteenth-century Irish family, there is a danger that the subject will remain informed by the history of the service at a period in the twentieth century when both class and ethnic divisions would have been much more a part of public discourse than would have been the case a century and a half previously. Missing from Hearn's work was any reference to the part the employer played in maintaining the relationship. This is in keeping with the spirit of the book in which her essay appeared, dedicated as it was to the kinds of women who, up to that point, were not appearing in standard histories: that is, poor women. Their employers were also not appearing, and have still not appeared, to the detriment of a deeper understanding of the subject. It is not simply self-determination and assertion on the part of the servants which must be sought if one is to excavate the reality of service relationships; also to be considered is the impact

⁵⁵ Mona Hearn, 'Life for domestic servants in Dublin, 1880-1920' in Luddy and Murphy eds., *Women surviving*. This was based on Hearn's 1984 PhD thesis. Joanna Bourke, *Husbandry to housewifery: women, economic change and housework in Ireland, 1890-1914* (Oxford, 1993).

⁵⁶ Hearn, 'Domestic servants', pp. 11, 169.

of the employers' personality and her or his self-regulation in a cultural context that was unlike that which came into being later in the period.

Despite the fact that the need for further work in the area was noted from the 1970s, little was written until Mary O'Dowd's essay in 2000. This was expanded upon in her later survey, in which she provided a thorough summary of the subject, touching on most of the evidential elements of the issue that it may be possible to investigate thoroughly given the available records; among these are the recruitment process, the length of service, wage rates and remittances.⁵⁷ Noting that an expansion in the industry began in the seventeenth century due to the building of large estate houses, O'Dowd has taken a new look at newspaper advertisements and domestic account books to lay down some of the parameters of the industry, with an emphasis on the servants' experience, from the eighteenth century. Her reworking of the subject shows that what was the case in Britain can be revealed to have been the case in some instances in Ireland: rights-aware servants, in negotiation with their employers over conditions, including regular pay increases, and strategising to maximise their economic opportunities, indicating how modern the service relationship was becoming in the eighteenth century. O'Dowd drew attention to ways in which a service position could be viewed positively by individuals hoping to improve their circumstances or marriage prospects, or assisting their families by the operation of chain employment. This is in keeping with British scholarship which calls into question the assumption that service was a stigmatised occupation. The question of stigma is important in the reimagining of the lived experience of some poor women who, rather than being trapped in degrading positions, viewed their prospects positively and were able to affect their circumstances by their personalities and skills and by their relationship with an employer who was rarely an unmitigated tyrant. Between the appearance of the two O'Dowd publications, Toby Barnard included servants in *A new anatomy* (2003), which began with an attempted quantification of the size of the servant population: the possibility that from 1750 and the end of the century between 10 and 15 per cent of a population between two and four millions were servants has clear social and economic implications.⁵⁸ Barnard's treatment of the subject, presenting a wide-ranging combination of general observations and individual illustrations, firmly established both

⁵⁷ Mary O'Dowd, 'Women and paid work in Ireland, 1500-1800' in Bernadette Whelan ed., *Women and paid work in Ireland, 1500-1930* (Dublin, 2000); O'Dowd, *A history of women*, pp. 133-8.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 297. Kent, Steedman, Hill and Meldrum all suggest that between 7 and 13 percent of the population of England were servants. Up to three quarters of those in the 15-24 age bracket may have been.

the complexity of the subject and how integrated, vertically and horizontally. Service was as a socio-cultural constituent. As well as 'hard' numerical information, Barnard dealt with issues of contingency and compromise inherent in the industry which mean it cannot be appreciated solely by reference to positional authority or Protestant ideals of social reformation. Barnard, like O'Dowd, drew attention to the unique physical proximity of groups 'diverged in culture and creed' brought together by live-in service arrangements: 'Servants lived alongside Protestant householders in an intimacy unmatched by any other Catholics ... whom the employers routinely met. Except in the most splendid houses, it was impossible to segregate servants from those whom they served'. The potential of the service industry as a social and cultural nexus, allowing the transfer across class and ethnic boundaries of standards of demeanour and material culture, was also noted.⁵⁹

In Britain the study of service has been broadened in the search for records of the servants' own voices, looking for their attitudes and motivations.⁶⁰ Some of the debates along the way have included questioning the idea that the occupation of servant in Britain was despised and personally restrictive, describing it instead in terms of an economically attractive life-cycle choice. The stereotypical servant – the long-term family retainer and the single woman prevented from marrying by her employer - was replaced in the literature, or at least was now accompanied by, 15- to 25-year-olds for whom service was a life-cycle career option, and who usually stayed in a place between one and three years before leaving, often of their own volition. Their low-paid positions, when augmented by the monetary value of bed and board, and their protection from cost-of-living fluctuations, began to be compared favourably with other female, and some male, employments.⁶¹ Voices dissenting from this more positive view called to mind the insecurity of the employment, the lack of options for women, the exploitation of pauper children, the vulnerability of unprovided-for illness and old age, and sexual predation.⁶² None of these ills, of course, was called into being solely by the circumstances of domestic service⁶³ and it is yet to be determined if the social origins of the employer bore a relationship to the negative life experiences of servants.

⁵⁹ Toby Barnard, *A new anatomy*, pp. 299-300.

⁶⁰ For example Tim Meldrum, *Domestic service and gender: life and work in the London household, 1660-1750* (Harlow, 2000) which concentrates on servant testimonies in London court cases.

⁶¹ Several English historians refer to this characteristic of service including Hecht, Kent and Meldrum.

⁶² James Kelly interprets the prominence of servants among those accused of infanticide as evidence of sexual exploitation by employers and fellow servants. James Kelly, 'A most inhuman and barbarous piece of villainy': an exploration of the crime of rape in eighteenth-century Ireland', *Eighteenth Century Ireland*, 10 (1995), pp. 78-107.

⁶³ Hill, *Servants*, p. 94; Meldrum, *Domestic service and gender*, pp. 124-126.

Dorothy Marshall, writing in the 1920s, was the first professional historian to treat of service in Britain. She made the observation, enlarged upon seventy years later by Bridget Hill, that service was not ‘a monolithic phenomenon unchanging over time’ and that much of what was thought to be true about service would have to be revised if more information could be gathered about women’s experiences and, specifically, what went on in the home of the less-well-off employer. This is relevant to the situation in Ireland. One of the reasons why this is an important concept is to examine critically the idea that all servants were poor Catholic employees of much wealthier Protestants. The Catholic gentry employed servants, as did poor Protestant families; some of the servants were even-poorer Protestants and some were less-poor Catholics.

Jean Hecht wrote almost entirely about the servants of the British aristocracy, but, despite the limits of the sources, his description, in 1956, of service as a cultural nexus was the first appearance of this theory, and was important enough to be referred to in most subsequent treatments of the subject. His theories about how the experience of domestic life in a family wealthier than her own might affect a servant could apply as much to the pauper servant in a tradesman’s house as to a tenant’s daughter training as a bishop’s housemaid. Hecht pointed to tea, snuff and sugar as ‘excellent examples of cultural transmission’ as they all entered the wider culture via the houses of the wealthy, but social commentators were soon grumbling about their presence in the houses of the poor. Hecht underlined the broader implications, perhaps a little flippantly: ‘a new attitude to church or state’, or regard for human and animal life, ‘was as likely to be passed on as a new way of cocking a hat’.⁶⁴ Those who emulated what they saw may have been emulated in turn by their family and friends who had otherwise no close contact with the gentry; in this way, servants linked the social strata in a manner of considerable significance in any study of a society, particularly one like Ireland with its coincidental ethnic, religious and social divisions. It was even more likely to have operated in this manner in Ireland which was, as noted by Louis Cullen:

a much more classless society than those rural societies where a high degree of economic development had left stratification entrenched for decades. Because so many sons of landlords had become gentlemen farmers, and because so many gentlemen farmers had, in turn, been reduced to the level of

⁶⁴ Hecht, *The domestic servant class*, pp. 221, 227.

large farmers, a vague identification with the upper classes reached far down the scale in the countryside.⁶⁵

Hecht was also sensitive to the deeper meaning of the barrage of complaints directed by employers at their servants, which, he said, gives ‘the impression that as a group servants were very far from identifying their interests with those of their employers’.⁶⁶ This failure to prioritise ‘family’ concerns was something employers found difficult to comprehend. Possibly because he was American, Hecht admired this self-interest and identified it as a driving force towards the eventual, albeit very slow, eradication of feudalism from social relations. More recent scholars do not take employers’ complaints as descriptive; they have come in for serious re-examination under the influence of literary criticism and insight from the study of psychology. Such a re-examination is represented by the work of Carolynn Steedman. Apart from her interest in restoring balance to a history of the working class, which has hitherto ignored the (usually-female) domestic servant, Steedman asserts that the service relationship was a major means for thinkers to conceptualise and rationalise social organisation; servants, like slaves, ‘were a rich resource for thinking about the social order’ for the thinking person trying to work through thoughts on self, the ‘other’, on liberty, on civil evolution, and thus on the modernisation of society.⁶⁷ Steedman also discusses the symbolic significance of the servants’ role as representative of lower-class communities, evident in the fact that they were the only representatives of their communities to appear in eighteenth-century drama; they represented all of the lower strata to the upper, which assigns to them an important role in the definition of class attitudes and in assisting society’s conceptualisation of itself. Echoing Hecht, Steedman has observed how frequently personal letters contain stories and complaints about exasperating or stupid servants. However, she speaks of this as an activity meant to ‘celebrate [the correspondents’] own perceptiveness, social and psychological’, linking the correspondents in an elevated world-view which required, for its elevated position to be made visible, something less elevated as a comparator. She wrote: ‘the immense effort of legal, political, and philosophical thinking devoted to the question of service in the eighteenth century is some measure of the anxiety of the

⁶⁵ Cullen, *Emergence of modern Ireland*, p. 106.

⁶⁶ Hecht, *The domestic servant class*, p. 78.

⁶⁷ Carolyn Steedman, *Labors lost: domestic service and the making of modern England* (Cambridge, 2009), p. 13.

employing classes, one that was perhaps managed by [employers] through a ... ritualized moaning about their household servants'.⁶⁸

Irish historians of domestic service do not have the wealth of eighteenth-century records that are available to British and French historians, such as court records, so the operations of the industry here cannot be easily delineated. This has thrown the weight very much on to personal records in the form of account books. The letter has not yet been introduced to the research, despite Barnard's recognition of its potential in this regard. Its potential, when realised, will have a dual impact; in the first place it will expand on Hearn's recognition of the complexity of the relationship between employer and employee, balancing assumptions based exclusively on the relative social positions of both parties and on the prescriptive literature. Even if only approaching the subject through the records of the employer, the reader will be able to discern some of the behavioural details of servants' lives, their reactions to their employers, their room to manoeuvre, sometimes even their words. Secondly it will contribute to an understanding of the service relationship as a normal, functional relationship for the period. In the absence of this approach, the history of the service industry in Ireland may remain coloured by the recollections of a much more recent cohort of workers for whom the lack of regulation and the class distinction bulked much larger. Related to this is the question of the servant as a cultural nexus and the significance this will have for an examination of social evolution, the history of the Irish family and the role of the eighteenth-century gentry in it.

The study of the history of marriage in Ireland

Among the earliest notices of Irish marriage is the collection of essays edited by Art Cosgrove in 1985.⁶⁹ The essays range widely in terms of chronology (beginning in the eighth century), with relatively little notice taken of the eighteenth century apart from the law and demography; in the essay on pre-famine marriage, the principal emphasis is on poor Catholic experience.⁷⁰ This did, however, look at the experience of marriage, rather than just the legal and financial scaffolding, suggesting that, from the start, there was an understanding that the lived reality was likely to have differed from the theoretical and

⁶⁸ Carolyn Steedman, 'Servants and their relationship to the unconscious', *Journal of British Studies*, 42 (July 2003), pp. 316–50.

⁶⁹ Art Cosgrove ed., *Marriage in Ireland* (Dublin, 1985).

⁷⁰ S.J. Connolly, 'Marriage in pre-Famine Ireland', *ibid.*, pp. 78–98.

the prescriptive male-oriented ideal. Insofar as Mary O'Dowd touched on marriage in her 2005 overview, it was in the section on 'ideas and laws', which covers misogynistic literature, science and medicine, religious teachings of both confessions, and conduct books. Also discussed were the laws relating to marriage. Here the author focussed almost entirely on efforts made by the English state to use marriage laws to further colonial expansion by undermining male Catholic property rights. The most thorough handling of the subject in Ireland until recently - Anthony Malcomson's *Pursuit of the heiress* - examined marriage through the lens of the financial arrangements attending upper-class marriage and in terms of the relationship of married women to their families' property.⁷¹ The families studied were aristocratic although the use of that word may be a little misleading; Ireland had very few aristocrats in the sense that the word might be used in England. Certainly the families Malcomson dealt with were gentry, but their bank balances varied enormously, and the conclusions the author drew are by no means inapplicable to families who would never have described themselves as aristocratic. Malcomson's stated purpose was to 'inquire to what extent [marriage] was ... an agent of dynastic aggrandisement' and to correct the stereotypical view of the widow as a drain on a family's wealth. He also engaged with the question of the 'rise of the affective family', and showed how financial records could be used to make conjectures about other life experiences of the individuals named in them. Specifically he countered Laurence Stone's proposal of an eighteenth-century improvement in respect for women, with a subsequently greater egalitarian marital status, by showing that this is not reflected in the conventional financial instruments. Malcomson's belief was that, if there was a change from calculated to affective marriages over the eighteenth century, it can only have been one of degree and it is more likely that enhanced respect developed in tandem with strict settlement, which had originated in the middle of the seventeenth century. He went so far as to conclude that the purpose of the strict settlement system 'was to pre-empt sentiment'.⁷² Although Malcomson declared himself firmly on the side-lines in the debate about the fact or the date of the rise of the affective family, he suggested that the difficulty in pinning down this supposedly new phenomenon existed 'simply because it had always been there, as a factor of varying importance ... in the choosing of marriage partners'. The other major study of marriage in Ireland also looks at marriage in relation to the law,

⁷¹ A.T.W. Malcomson, *Pursuit of the heiress: aristocratic marriage in Ireland, 1740-1840* (Ulster Historical Foundation, 2006).

⁷² Malcomson, *Pursuit*, p. 213.

finance and property. Deborah Wilson's *Women, marriage and property in Ireland* followed O'Dowd in discussing the way in which property law was used as an instrument of colonisation. Wilson however moved away from the historiographical trend of seeing married women as only conduits or consumers of family assets. She follows S.J. Connolly, mentioned above, in seeking to look inside the actual experience of marriage. An important aspect of Wilson's work has been to consider what family financial arrangements tell us about the relationship of women to the family estate, and consequently what they may suggest about the position of women in the structure of the Irish landed family. Existing historiography has considered women only in relation to the assets they brought to their marriages and the resources they claimed when widowed. Wilson proposed that the relationship of a woman to her family's estate impacted on her position within the family: although women were marginalised in terms of property-holding and inheritance, a variety of family contingencies produced more complex experiences in relation to property for individual women than their legal and social status might suggest. Circumstances such as the existence of a male heir, or an instance of madness could give greater authority to a married woman (albeit with male opposition). Also considered was the elevated importance of informal financial networks, the nature of which may have facilitated the involvement of women, who could then add to their income by charging interest on family loans. A wealthy widow could have had as much control as a patriarch over financially-straitened family members.⁷³ The picture that emerges is one of considerable diversity and proves that the experience women had of property within their families was more complex than existing historiography on women in Irish landed families suggests.

Rachel Wilson, in her work on Ascendancy women, has produced a thorough treatment of marriage and, although in many ways what she says has long been said of England, it is imperative to determine to what extent circumstances were the same in Ireland. As Deborah Wilson does, Rebecca Wilson acknowledges the need for women's own voices be adduced in evidence and illustration. Wilson's study takes the subject of marriage beyond the conception of it as a tool of financial or colonial activity to show that even from the earliest years of the eighteenth century contingency affected the operation of authority, whether at the matchmaking stage or in the relationship of the marital partners. She has also followed the lead of authors such as Amanda Vickery and

⁷³ Deborah Wilson, *Women, marriage and property in wealthy landed families in Ireland, 1750-1850* (PhD thesis, QUB 2004), pp. 214, 239. Now published by Manchester University Press.

Kate Barclay in showing how the cultural understanding of a marital couple as domestic ‘allies’, and the effect on a woman’s social reputation of her skill as a domestic manager, subvert the idea of a completely dependent married woman. She insists on a sense of purpose and self-fulfillment arising out of meeting the responsibilities that came with married life. Wilson, locates considerable female power and responsibility in estate-management in which women acted as supporters or deputies for their husbands. Joanne Bailey in her work *Unquiet lives* did something similar by reference to English court records relating to marriage breakdown, which she studied specifically for references to the material life of marriage, that is the day-to-day work it demanded of both parties and the physical contexts in which it operated.⁷⁴ It was not the primary accusations – of adultery for example – which Bailey found most useful but the secondary complaints that reveal what was considered to be normal, especially in relation to what kind of behaviour was tolerated, and what efforts at mediation were attempted before the law was invoked. Bailey has written that, culturally, wives and husbands were widely seen as one another’s ‘helpmeets’; that running a household, upon which both male and female reputation rested, demanded the work of both spouses, the financial contribution of both, and resulted in a degree of co-dependency the existence of which breaks down the crude assignment of gendered roles within household management.⁷⁵ She has also suggested that the public reputation of both marriage partners was important to them and may have restricted the full expression of patriarchal power, for example in relation to the man’s freedom in relation to family finances or violence against his wife. Work which may elucidate something similar in an Irish context is begun in a research project directed by Mary O’Dowd and Maria Luddy into ‘Marriage in Ireland, 1660-1920’. It is proposed to investigate ‘the logistics of marriage among the social classes below the level of wealthy landowning families’ and to that end is investigating church and state regulation, the choice of partners and the attitude to marriage breakdown in the period.⁷⁶

English authors using other sources have pointed the way for future approaches to the subject in Ireland. Chris Rouston brings a literary historian’s perspective to the subject with compelling effect, especially considering the lack of other official sources

⁷⁴ Joanne Bailey, *Unquiet Lives: marriage and marriage breakdown in England, 1660-1800*, (Cambridge, 2003). Bailey is also the author of books specifically on the family and on parenting in the long eighteenth century.

⁷⁵ Bailey, *Unquiet lives*, pp. 84, 203.

⁷⁶ [http://pure.qub.ac.uk/portal/en/projects/marriage-in-ireland-16601925\(cc19d1eb-2378-4f60-8f41-e1fbb12a7c87\).html](http://pure.qub.ac.uk/portal/en/projects/marriage-in-ireland-16601925(cc19d1eb-2378-4f60-8f41-e1fbb12a7c87).html) accessed 20 June 2016.

for Ireland.⁷⁷ Before referring to individual literary works to support the theory, the author tracked the changes to be observed in the language used in conduct manuals; as the seventeenth century gave way to the eighteenth, language from the Bible, from politics, and from nature, was superseded by the language of contract law. Mutuality and individual rights took the place of hierarchy. The conduct manuals, regardless of changing language, present marriage as an undifferentiated experience, whereas literature, by showing that individuals had different stories - whether involving violence or immorality for example – showed that this was a façade. In so it doing opened the experience up to more vigorous discussion and provided some of the language for the discourse. What this approach might bring to the Irish landscape is an emphasis on individual experience to permit an assessment of the female and male understanding and experience of their different roles in marriage.

While this thesis argues that personal records must be brought into play to determine attitudes to marriage, the work by James Kelly on the abduction and rape of heiresses gives a context against which to set the resulting evidence of inter-gender relationships.⁷⁸ Basing his work on newspaper reports and surviving calendars of court records destroyed in 1922, Kelly posited an economic imperative for the forcible marriage of heiresses, supported by a centuries - long tradition of extreme male violence against women and a cultural acceptance of spousal abuse. A woman's honour was a central feature of the prevailing value system and a woman tainted by rape was perceived not to have the same value on the marriage market as she had previously had. Such convictions were firmly held and applied without much deviation. Thus a rape victim, and most abductees would have been such, was perceived to be only slightly less compromised than a courtesan. The fact that organised religion refused to dissolve forced marriages and that many families insisted that their daughters should make the best of the new circumstances, is indicative of an attitude to women and to marriage against which any records of positive personal experiences must be set. Mary O'Dowd's work on ideas about women, highlighting medical, religious, legal and philosophical underpinnings of female subordination and Mendelson and Crawford's examination of the popular cultural

⁷⁷ Chris Rouston, *Narrating marriage in eighteenth-century England and France* (Surrey and Burlington, 2010).

⁷⁸ James Kelly, 'The abduction of women of fortune in eighteenth-century Ireland' in *Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, 9 (1994), pp. 7-43. Kelly, "'Most inhuman and barbarous piece of villainy'".

residue, in proverbs, jokes and anecdotes, show that the culture was saturated with these attitudes.⁷⁹

Conclusion

Although highlighted by late-twentieth-century pioneers of women's history in Ireland, the family and relationships within marriage have received little scholarly attention. Insofar as there has been work on women, it has tended, until recently, to ignore those whose personal records are the most numerous, the wealthy (to varying degrees) and the Protestant experience. Recent work has begun on these women mostly touching on marriage and material culture. Some studies have taken broad chronological ranges, with the reasonable expectation of tracking changes, while at the same time trying to include all the various constituencies of women in early-modern Ireland (elite and poor, married and single, Anglo-Irish and Irish-Irish, Catholic and Protestant). These may inspire more tightly focussed specialist studies which will unpack some of the detail necessarily elided in broad sweeps. Children are increasingly being studied. The absence of a family history into which to contextualise this strand of scholarship means that they have been most studied in the context of education and the history of child neglect. As in the case for the study of female experience, there has been a concentration on the modern period with a noticeable lack of engagement with the eighteenth century. The history of servants has yet to receive a thorough investigation; Toby Barnard and Mary O'Dowd have between them mapped out outlines of what it may be hoped will be a many-pronged future investigation. While Ireland lacks many of the sources which make these social and domestic-based subjects easier to examine in Britain, it is a reasonable assumption that the personal records of women, such as are represented in this thesis, will allow considerable progress to be made across all fronts for eighteenth-century Ireland.

⁷⁹ O'Dowd, *A history of women*, pp. 242-62. Mendleson and Crawford, *Women in early-modern England*, pp. 58-71.

Chapter 3 Evaluation of the letter

Critical appreciation of the personal letter has been transformed over the last century. Previously understood either as literary performance or literary ephemera, in both cases the content or the author were the key attractions. A new methodology has been designed for revealing another value of letters, a methodology informed by literary criticism, social science, material culture and human psychology, adding immeasurably to the letter's potential as a source. The letters of even the most private author, even the 'unlettered' author, may now be called upon to answer questions about the society they came from. By considering letter-writing as a social practice, we are invited to read letters for signs of the environment they come from, thus expanding their relevance beyond the biographical. Furthermore, scholars now consider how the materiality of the letter carried social meaning. Literary criticism (for example, appreciation of the uses of rhetoric) and psychological insight (for example issues of identity creation) further recalibrate the lens through which letters may be scrutinised.¹ This new critical methodology has not yet been used much in relation to the letters of eighteenth-century Irish women. Mary O'Dowd's summary, of the history of the female use of literacy in Ireland, begins with seventeenth-century aristocratic women. The few formal letters, memoirs and commonplace or recipe books which survive attest to a rare and interesting, but nevertheless restricted, use of literacy. The author acknowledges the fact that most women's writing in the eighteenth century was in the form of letters, and assumes that women, though not mentioned, participated in the 'marked increase in literacy' in that century, as referred to by Toby Barnard.² However a mistake is made in prolonging the view that letter-writing, like musical performance, was for display only. O'Dowd states that 'letters were written to be read out loud on social occasions and the style of writing was given a great deal of thought ... The ideal letter was a mixture of family news and literary comments on books being read'.³ This activity is linked to the movement of a small number of women into print, thus turning attention away from the woman in her private domestic life. This view of the use of letters is misleading in confining it to the area of the formal acquisition of a polite

¹ As was suggested would be the case in MacCurtain *et al*, 'Agenda', 1992.

² Toby Barnard, 'Reading in eighteenth-century Ireland: public and private pleasures', in Cunningham and Kennedy eds., *The experience of reading: Irish historical perspectives*, pp. 60-77 quoted in O'Dowd, *A history of women*, p. 210.

³ O'Dowd, *A history of women*, p. 227.

education by women. It perceives literacy as an ornament rather than an instrument. The epistolary manuals promoted a certain kind of writing, such as O'Dowd describes, and there is evidence that writers were aware of the standards required. They were discomfited by their inability to write a better letter, and the embarrassment tends to centre on the subjects of the letter, the 'worthless chat' as Margaret Pike called it. While most of Pike letters are unadorned, she self-consciously constructed a graceful 'literary' opening to one of them, deploying an extended military metaphor which shows her awareness of the 'performance' aspect of letter-writing.⁴ However it is unique among her letters. Another Quaker, Elizabeth Carleton, when writing to Richard Shackleton, apologised that her letters were not up to an expected standard, specifically in consisting only of disconnected parts; were he not so like a brother, she said she would be ashamed to send him, in her 'simple' manner, such 'incorrect' pieces.⁵ It would appear that apologizing for the prosaicness of the letter, like apologizing for bad spelling, was a way of showing one's acquaintance with a standard one did not genuinely aspire to. It is unlikely to have shaped female practice.

This chapter will consider some of the criticisms traditionally levelled at the letter as a historical source. Some of these characteristics, which will be mentioned below, are insurmountable obstacles within certain lines of enquiry, while others may be shown to have hidden advantages. Overall, the balance of opinion will be restored in favour of the letter by reference to some of the ways in which letters are proved to be uniquely valuable. Further, this chapter will propose that an examination of the engagement of women, specifically, in letter-writing itself may be fruitful. Considering the practice as a 'social document', as furniture and fashion are now considered to be,⁶ it will be proposed that women's epistolary practice, in the second half of the eighteenth century, bears evidence of an older and more widespread activity than has hitherto been suggested, and this may be used to propose a greater role for them in the social revolution which was ongoing through the eighteenth century.

The issue of fictional epistolarity

The use of letters by fiction writers will be addressed briefly. The cross-fertilisation between literary critics' and historians' approaches to reading personal texts makes it

⁴ Letter from Margaret Pike to Debby Shackleton, 12mo 11th 1780. Christy letters6 , Quaker Historical Library.

⁵ Letter from Margaret Pike to Mary Shackleton, 11mo 15th 1783. NLI MS 5987 pp. 47 - 54. Letter from Elizabeth Carleton to Richard Shackleton, n.d. NLI Microfilm P1094.

⁶ Barnard, Toby, 'Art, architecture, artefact and ascendancy', *Bullán*, 1 (1994), pp. 17-34 at p. 18.

necessary to consider defining what exactly is meant by the phrase ‘private letter’; if both ‘fictional’ and ‘real’ letters are interpretable texts, what are the unique characteristics of the latter and what meaning do these characteristics convey? It seems important, in an appreciation of the letter as a record type, to note that there has been a tight entangling of fictional and what in comparison may be referred to as ‘prosaic’ letters in the literature of the eighteenth-century letter.⁷ Upon first approach to the literature one finds that a significant number of works with the words ‘letters’ and ‘eighteenth century’ in the title refer to, if not straightforwardly fictional letters, then to literary compositions in the form of letters, produced by literary stylists either for traditional publication or wide private dissemination. The potential for confusion is compounded by the fact that prosaic and fictional letters ‘all appear side by side’ in the studies of the letter form.⁸ There are several strands in this entanglement, and while it is not possible to disentangle them here, it may be useful to identify them. The entangling arises partly from the role the personal letter played in the history of the magazine; a great number of articles in early magazines were cast in the form of letters from readers, although probably written by the magazines’ editors. The ‘literature of fact’ constitutes another branch of fictional epistolarity which adds to the confusion; in this genre the form of the letter was adopted by scientists, preachers and social moralists who, like novelists, wished to avail of the persuasive honesty implied by the form of the private letter. Prescriptive manuals were another hybrid product which, in teaching people how to write to achieve a particular effect, were in fact teaching them how to craft a self-conscious piece of literary fiction, suggesting that distinction among forms is often on shaky ground. The most relevant entanglement (to this thesis) comes from the fact that a great number of early novels were written in the form of collections of letters. Clearly the distinct meaning conveyed by the form of the letter was appreciated by the earliest fiction writers; it was understood to be an unrivalled vehicle for private thought, and its reputation for lack of artifice was used strategically as a plot device.

Literary critics and historians have converged on the understanding that all written sources ought to be approached as texts, rather than any of them being understood to be purely informational. This is not because they exhibit literary influences, or use literary strategies, but rather because they ‘are constituted by social and cultural processes of

⁷ ‘Prosaic’ has been chosen to avoid the contradiction inherent in identifying one literary composition as being ‘real’ and another not.

⁸ Earle, *Epistolary selves*, p. 1.

production and reception, [and] dialogue’, because ‘they do not simply record or describe their surrounding ... reality’, they ‘inscribe [and] rework’, it thereby revealing something more about the social environment from which the letter arose and the engagement of the author with it.⁹

Regardless of formal similarities, there are distinctions between fictional and prosaic letters which go to the very heart of an appreciation of the latter. Why do these distinctions matter? They matter because what is lost, if the distinctions are not maintained, is a key distinguishing characteristic of the prosaic letter. In 1993, Alan McKenzie made a plea for the more astute handling of the ‘real’ letter by critics ‘who want to assimilate everything into “discourse”’. He asked that the intentions and expectations of authors be foremost in the mind of the modern reader of these letters. ‘We need not call them “literature”’, he wrote, ‘and if we must call them “texts”, we ought to remain susceptible to their meanings and charitable to their values’; this seems a reasonable demand of all historical personal records.¹⁰ McKenzie refers to letters as ‘document texts’, specifically to distinguish them from ‘literary texts’ which are fair game for the literary critic, although he too was dealing only with the letters of ‘notable’ letter-writers. Despite the difficulty in defining what exactly a private personal letter may be understood to be - not least from its own anarchic form¹¹ - it is vital, if the full range of interpretive potential is to be appreciated, that it be agreed that there are boundaries between fictional letters and personal letters sent between correspondents with no pronounced literary aspirations. While it cannot be suggested that such letters are completely artless, they must be allowed to stand apart as a genre, and the historian must insist on being permitted to accept some statements, and practices, as reflecting a lived reality. Something other than form and content must be called upon to define the letter that is written not for display or, significantly, for consumption by large numbers of complete strangers.

That element is not easy to fix upon, given that everything that is a characteristic part of a letter may be missing and the artefact still correctly be described as a letter: there can be more than one author, and/or an amanuensis; the ‘author’ and the addressee may

⁹ Toby L. Ditz, ‘Formative ventures: eighteenth-century commercial letters and the articulation of experience’ in Earle, *Epistolary selves*, pp. 59-79.

¹⁰ McKenzie, Alan T., ed., *Sent as a gift: eight correspondences from the eighteenth century* (Athens and London, 1993), p. 13.

¹¹ Earle, *Epistolary selves*, p. 8. Also David Barton and Nigel Hall, eds., *Letter-writing as social practice*, (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 1999), p. 7.

be illiterate; the author may write assuming that persons other than the addressee will read the letter as a matter of course; the letter may exist only in later transcription; basic diplomatic elements - date, address, salutation, signature, direction - may be missing; the letter may have been handed to the addressee by the author, rather than having travelled any distance. The focus instead must be placed on the authors' motivation and relationship with the intended audience. These letters are written communications, personal but not necessarily private in the modern understanding, directed by a single person or a small number of persons, to another person or small number of persons, usually diverse in topic but principally referring to matters pertaining to the correspondents, their homes and their families and friends. Such letters will be innocent of ulterior literary motive. The question of literariness may be disputed – some individuals have richer language and fluency than others, and wider reading experience - but what must not be in any doubt is the motivation of the author. It may not always be spelled out, but it should be possible, from the content and context, to infer a desire or need for contact and/or the fulfilment of familial or cultural obligations. This is why the disentangling of fictional from prosaic letters matters. The chief functions of a letter are the maintenance of a relationship and as an exercise in identity creation within that relationship.¹² The duty and wish to maintain relationships, the methods and language used to do so, and the value the practice had in the authors' lives all have meaning for the historian.

Difficulties presented by the letter as a genre

There has been an understandable scholarly reticence in relying on letters as a principal source, as evidenced in the practice of protracted contextualisation and the use of controlling templates when selecting letters to support historical theses; such a process has not generally been applied to other sources. From the time in the nineteenth century when Leopold van Ranke sent the scholar back to the primary sources, historians have applied strict standards of source criticism to their primary materials. Historians, van Ranke said, had to test documents on the basis of their internal consistency, and their consistency with other documents originating at the same period; they had to query provenance, the motives of those who had written them, and the circumstances in which they were written. The results of such determinations decided the reliability of a source, and the records most used, and considered most reliable, were public or institutional

¹² Barton and Hall, *Social practice*, p. 1: Whyman, *The pen and the people*, pp. 114-15.

records.¹³ Such sources were produced in an orderly, systematic manner, under known circumstances and for the purpose of being a record, that is, for future reference to the events and facts being recorded. It was as though the record maker and the eventual historian were united in a common purpose. The ordinary personal letter has no generic standards; it is not produced in any systematic way in terms of quantity, frequency, length, subject matter, form, style, discursiveness or literacy.¹⁴ The motivations of the individual author, and the external circumstances that caused the letter to be written, and that can impact its form and content, are not easy to discern; the information contained within it cannot always be corroborated; and the rate and manner of a letter's survival are unknown quantities.

These and other limitations have resulted in the personal letter being restricted, in research terms, to a supporting role until historians began to cast their net of interest more widely and beyond the 'externally verifiable phenomena' of traditional historical pursuit. Despite difficulties in analysing and decoding personal records, the recent strengthening of interest in personal and popular texts, in textuality, narrativity, discourse and linguistic theory have made the letter an attractive target and historians began to develop ways to enhance its value, as will be discussed. To look briefly at some of the traditional criticisms of the personal letter, it is true that there are undoubtedly aspects which can be frustrating. Firstly, even the historian of domestic life may be disappointed by the absence of references to certain aspects of private life. It is true that letters tend to cover a wide range of subjects and rarely expand on any one of them; correspondents frequently used shorthand or oblique references which remain impenetrable to subsequent readers. It is the case that diverse external circumstances can affect the letter, which is not the case in other literary forms. Among the best examples of this is the custom of sharing of letters, which seems to compromise the unique value of a personal correspondence. Furthermore it is impossible to know how many letters were produced by an individual, or what fraction of the output of a cohort or a class that the survivors represent. Finally there is the manner in which letters have survived, which often represents a value judgement made by someone other than the author or recipient.

Domestic letters can prove to be disappointing sources even for the historian of domestic life. A woman writing to another woman had little need to detail the way she spent her day as there may have been few differences in the daily lives of the

¹³ Richard J. Evans, *In defence of history*, (London, 1998), p. 18.

¹⁴ Patricia Meyer Spacks, 'Forgotten genres', *Modern Language Studies*, 18 (Winter 1988), pp. 47-57.

correspondents. Letters were not records of private life, in the way that domestic account books were and diaries were sometimes meant to be. Letter-writing was only one of the many activities a person undertook; the production of the letter was an end in itself. The historian seeking information about other parts of the author's private life is using the letter for a purpose other than that for which it was created. Personal letters lack information on important subjects; the experience of childbirth for example is never commented on other than to refer to a woman's being 'ill', and it cannot be known if this was because such things were never discussed, or were not discussed in letters which might be read by others than the addressee. The extreme reticence with which the subject of menstruation is mentioned, for example, suggests the existence of a taboo on that subject, certainly in an inter-gender context. This is where the few references occurred in the thesis' database of letters: in both the context was health. Lady Elizabeth Caldwell, in 1778, as she began treatment for the disease which would end her life the same year, sent her husband a letter to discuss with a doctor. Although quite frank - in her description of phlegm and 'watery scurvy' - about the details of her digestive process, Lady Caldwell could only refer to her menstrual period as 'a certain event' when speaking to her husband of almost two decades.¹⁵ Bishop Syngé, who had little compunction about instructing his daughter in every area of her well-being, spoke to Alicia about menstruation only by letter to 'spare her confusion'. He acknowledged the fact that he himself could only speak of her 'disorder' in French, 'such is the force of custom', and though firmly of the belief that modesty in speaking of such things destroyed 'multitudes of women', Syngé still did not expect his daughter to answer his letter on the subject.¹⁶ Another significant loss of information results from the fact that surviving letters form a fragment of a larger body of material the extent of which cannot be known. Therefore we cannot make a precise determination about the representativeness of any particular letter or letter sequence.¹⁷ This is the case with individual writers and with the record as a whole. The loss impacts on a theme touched on later in this thesis: the extent and likely social impact of a female

¹⁵ Letters from Lady Elizabeth Caldwell to her husband James, undated [circa 1778] and 25 March 1778. John Rylands Library (JRL) Bagshawe muniments B3/29/70, 79.

¹⁶ Legg, *Syngé letters*, pp. 283-5; 450. It seems odd therefore, in the context of this extreme reticence, firstly that the bishop expected Alicia to allow her uncle Edward to speak to her on this matter and secondly, that the bishop was aware, possibly from the woman's husband, that his neighbour Mrs Cary's ill-health arose from having caught a cold 'at a critical time', *ibid* p. 395.

¹⁷ Donald Harman Akenson, 'Reading the texts of rural immigrants: letters from the Irish in Australia, New Zealand, and North America', *Canadian Papers in Rural History*, 7, (1990), p. 387 quoted in David Gerber, 'Acts of deceiving and withholding in immigrant letters: personal identity and self-presentation in personal correspondence', *Journal of Social History*, 39 (Winter, 2005), pp. 315-30.

letter-writing network. From the extant letters we can be confident that survival was the exception rather than the rule. Those records that have survived tell us that letter-writing was part of the normal activity of private middle class life; letter-writing is a self-referential genre, and authors chide recalcitrant correspondents, implying that they were the ones at odds with what was considered normal. Similarly, the absence of any comment by letter-writers which might suggest that they were unlike their peers in pursuing this activity, allows us to assume that what was true for those for whom there is evidence is likely to have had wider application. Bishop Syngge recorded daily writing twenty letters, of which only a very fraction survives. Mary Anne Dawson spent quite a while writing three letters in one day and that did not include notes which were delivered locally by hand;¹⁸ none of these survive. Margaret Pike recorded that at one point she was ten letters in debt and the one in which she recorded this fact was the fourth written that day.¹⁹ Lady Caldwell is represented in the database by nearly one hundred and fifty letters and she can be assumed, on internal evidence, to have written to at least five others in her immediate family, letters which do not survive. In the archival descriptive list of the Caldwell estate papers, four hundred incoming letters to Lady Elizabeth are mentioned and there are over forty named correspondents apart from her family. Not having her outgoing letters, not knowing to whom else she wrote, not knowing how many letters each correspondent originally wrote to her, all limit the conclusions which may be drawn about the extent, make-up and impact of her personal network. Nevertheless a wide network may nevertheless be inferred.

Unlike other literary forms, external circumstances affect the content, form and style of the letter, having an impact on what the subsequent reader may infer about letters generally. An obvious example is the impact on the content of the relationship between correspondents. The style and language of their letters will be affected if habitual correspondents met regularly or normally lived together. They could then use a shorthand to refer to subjects and situations well known to both parties, which leaves the historian unable to recover the details of what is being discussed. David Fitzpatrick refers to this as a ‘veil of intimacy’ and there are many examples evident in the database. In a letter of 1799 Christopher Bellew wrote to his wife Olivia about their young son: ‘Our little one you will treat as you promised me on which perhaps his fortunes here and hereafter may

¹⁸ Diary of Mary Anne Dawson, 1782 - 84. Clements Papers TCD MSS 7270-7270a.

¹⁹ Letter of Margaret Pike to Mary Shackleton, 2mo 7th 1784. NLI MS 5987 pp. 95-98.

depend'; this could refer to anything from religious instruction to physical discipline.²⁰ Other letters contain oblique references to events or people about whom the author considers it more appropriate to wait until the correspondents meet, to go into the full details. Bishop Synge cautioned his daughter to use initials only when referring to individuals, in case the letter should be read by a third party.²¹ External pressure could also change the form of the letter. Maria Edgeworth put short *aides memoires* in her letters so that, when she was in the company of the recipient again, she could thereby be reminded to tell stories she was not prepared to commit to writing. The form of the letter in this case thus became generically part diary, part promptbook.²²

The impact of external circumstances could be positive as well as negative. Martha McTier, as foster mother for her nephew Tom Drennan, was more enthusiastic for the arrangement than Tom's parents were and, keen to assure them that the little boy was better off with her in the 'charming weather in the country' near Belfast, she spared no detail of Tom's existence as proof of this.²³ The level of detail she gave about her young charge would be unusual between parents where both would have seen the child, or at least one another, with some frequency and where the responsibility for child care was undisputed. External circumstances could impede a would-be author's engagement in correspondence, since posting the letter required effort and/or money; a woman with little ready cash, and no regular access to the other modes of transmission, might not dare to encourage a correspondence which would have left her in need of expensive writing paper and being responsible for the unpredictable cost of incoming letters. Even in an asset-rich household like Castle Caldwell, the absence of ready money could cause embarrassment in the face of outgoings which could not be covered by credit. Lady Elizabeth Caldwell, in 1773, told her husband, who was in Dublin and who was insisting that she join him, that she could not afford to, that she had already had to barter tobacco for eggs and was 'so pinched that I have been 4 posts together I had no money to pay the postage and I was ashamed to borrow'.²⁴

²⁰ David Fitzpatrick, *Oceans of consolation*, p. 27: Letter from Christopher Bellew to his wife Olivia, 17 January 1799. NLI MS 27,104.

²¹ Letter from Bishop Synge to his daughter Alicia, 5 July 1751. Legg, *Synge letters*, p. 316.

²² Colvin ed., *Edgeworth letters*, pp. xxix, 297-8.

²³ McNeill, Mary, *Little Tom Drennan*, p. 71.

²⁴ Letter from Lady Elizabeth Caldwell to her husband James, 2 February 1773. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B3/29/58.

The survival of letters

The issue of representativeness and the reasons why surviving records escaped destruction must also be considered. Fitzpatrick, making clear the futility of trying to find evidence of representativeness among the surviving pre-World War I Irish-Australian emigrant letters, cites not alone the smallness of the fraction of the whole that they represent but the fact that it is impossible to account for the pattern of survival. Sentiment, benign neglect, and serendipity take equal place among reasons for the survival of particular letters. It cannot be doubted that some letters were destroyed as soon as they were read by the recipient as a matter of course; paper was excellent tinder after all. Bishop Synge destroyed all his wife's letters and his daughter's, and the fact that he suggested that Alicia keep his letters to her, because of their continuing pedagogic value, shows his expectation that Alicia would otherwise destroy them.

Other collections of letters have clearly survived in accordance with a third party's idea of what was important. We cannot identify what is the nature or degree of distortion introduced by family archiving practices that have secured the survival of extant records. These family archivists have 'authored' the canon themselves by privileging their own value system. Since women are known to have made distinctive use of letter-writing, considerable damage has been done to their records by their letters having been cherry-picked to illustrate male-world history. This was the case with Lady Mary Roche's letters to her brother. These show her to have been interested in public affairs generally, and they were kept for that specific reason. They were docketed by the family archivist as 'letters about the revolution in Ireland'. However, the political historian would be misled by that as there was none about the rebellion specifically, nor any written in that year. Lady Mary said little about the 'Union business', other than that it 'is to be explained in our House tomorrow' and, while her account of a challenge to a duel on the part of United Irishman Hamilton Rowan has great immediacy, her details vary from the accepted account.²⁵ The social historian on the other hand, who would rejoice in her epistolary style and her fondness for social information – previously disparaged as gossip – would lament at what had been destroyed on the grounds that it had no apparent application to political history. In the case of the Donoughmore family papers, it is clear that the impulse behind the family's archiving practice was strictly financial, to the detriment of the

²⁵ Letters from Lady Mary Roche to her brother Sir Thomas Frankland, 30 June 1799 and 18 October 1793. NLI MS 5391: James Kelly, *That damn'd thing called honour*, p. 203.

women's letters.²⁶ Most records associated with the business of maintaining the estate survive regardless of who was responsible for it. This ensured the survival of women's account books, landscaping records and grocery provisioning books. However, the absence of women's letters in the quantities that comparison with other collections would lead one to expect, despite the preservation of quite insignificant men's letters, points up the extent of the loss, and suggests a reason for it: men's letters were assumed always to be about estate-related business, and women's were assumed not to be.

The most likely explanation for the medium-term preservation of private records was their value as evidence touching on anything to do with money, inheritance and the law. The privileged position of such records in family archives (and of political records in national archives) tends to be detrimental to women's history because they usually had nothing officially to do with money; regardless of what authority they may have had within family discussions about finance, this role was not recorded in the account books and legal instruments. Nevertheless, even the few letters by women which survive do something to redress this imbalance; by their very existence, women's letters about money demonstrate that women were participants in family dialogue on the subject.²⁷ Despite the fact that the legal control of her dowry was a matter of settlement and in her cousin Christopher's hands, Julia Bellew gave Christopher clear instructions on how to prevent her intending father-in-law from getting his hands on it. Of her father-in-law she wrote, 'Old Mr. S[myth] is a good man, but had he the riches of the East he would spend it all. I would therefore wish to have Dean [Smyth] made independent of him before you give up one shilling of my fortune'.²⁸ Furthermore Bellew's cousin carefully drafted some of his letters in reply to her, which implies consideration of her opinions. Lady Ann Caldwell ran their family's Fermanagh estate during her husband's long illness and her son's absence; she acted in the manner of a banker, making the most of her family's finances, and undertook business for her son-in-law when he was abroad, suggesting at one point that 'perhaps I am not the most negligent agent you could meet with'.²⁹ She managed her daughter's fortune while Catherine was living with her uncle-in-law during

²⁶ Donoughmore Papers, TCD MS 11183.

²⁷ Rosemary O' Day, 'Tudor and Stuart women: their lives through their letters', in James Daybell, ed., *Early Modern women's letter writing 1450-1700* (Palgrave, 2001), pp?. In *Early Modern Literature in History* series; general editor Cedric C Brown

²⁸ Letter of Julia Bellew to her cousin Christopher D. Bellew, 18 January 1798. NLI MS 27,152.

²⁹ Letter from Lady Ann Caldwell to her son-in-law Samuel Bagshawe, 29 March 1758. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B2/3/282.

her husband's absence overseas, thus offering evidence of her son-in-law's reliance on Lady Ann's financial acumen. His respect for his mother-in-law is made clear by the care with which he too drafted and redrafted his letters to her.

New ways of reading letters

A very striking characteristic of letters, and a standard criticism of the genre, is the quantity and great variety of topics covered and the usual failure on the part of the authors to develop any one of them. This may be partly accounted for by the fact that, unlike an account book or a minute book (or a sermon in the form of a letter) with their single purpose, the personal letter had a number of functions, one of which - epistolary good manners - was achieved simply by the letter's existence. Letters such as those between friends like Margaret Pike and Mary Shackleton, which were written on average three times a year from the late 1780s, naturally touch on a wide range of subjects that will have arisen in the intervening months; variety would be of more value in this regard than an in-depth discussion of a few topics. The failure to develop topics may also be explained by the fact that individual letters were often written over a protracted period, and a line of thought, having been interrupted, might not be picked up again when the author returned hours or days later. A painfully good example of the frustration this causes is seen in one of the letters from Mrs Pike to Mary Shackleton. In a passage about the founding of some schools for girls in her locality Pike wrote, 'many mothers ... because their own stands in need of it, think the cultivation and enlargement of their daughters' minds would be a disadvantage rather than any benefit to them'. At that point she was interrupted and when she took her pen up again continued: 'So far I wrote some days ago but ... had to let it lie and now ... must hurry to get it finished'. Not another word on girls' education did she write.³⁰

There is a hidden benefit to this characteristic, as the habit of selecting women's letters for survival because they contain evidence of financial or political events, resulted in a record that ranges widely over other subjects. This was the case with the Odell letters which, according to a note preserved along with them, were kept as evidence of a family land dispute which has long since ceased to be of any interest. The letters of Dorothy Clutterbuck to her brother Austin Cooper are another excellent example. We know in this instance, because the author suggested it, that she usually only wrote to her brother when

³⁰ Letter from Margaret Pike, to Mary Shackleton, undated [circa 1787]. NLI microfilm P1094.

she needed money, and Cooper probably kept them only as financial records.³¹ In the most limited sense these letters can only answer the question of how Mrs Clutterbuck managed her finances in the absence of assistance from her husband and eldest son. A more sophisticated question would enquire into the rhetorical strategies Mrs Clutterbuck expected to work in her favour when asking her brother for financial assistance. We can see something of how this woman, without other resources, strategically presented herself to a more powerful brother. The existence of similar petitions to Austin Cooper, from his aunt Eliza Cooper, whose eldest son was also failing in his duty to provide for her, permits conclusions based on rhetorical strategies to be more solidly grounded.³² Men were regarded as having an obligation to look after their extended family, and these letters show women using the rhetoric of vulnerability and deferential rhetoric to activate their relations' sense of duty towards them.³³ Mrs Clutterbuck knew that family honour was likely to be affected if she was not enabled to maintain a reasonably respectable household. She drew attention to the poverty of her unprotected daughters who were 'very bare of clothes'; she referred to herself as a 'slave'; and she painted a picture of the public embarrassment of being known to the local tradespeople as having no money, resulting in her 'meeting with rebukes from those that I am in their debt which is very hurtful to me'.³⁴ The use by a female author of the rhetoric of female submission is seen by historians as the opposite of genuine submission; when understood as strategic language use, it is revealed as female self-assertion.³⁵ Clutterbuck uses the religious rhetoric of friendlessness and touches on some of the discourse about female rights by saying, in relation to her son's financial neglect, 'it is the poor girls and me that suffer the[y] are thought nothing and I am a slave'.³⁶ Austin Cooper's aunt Eliza also addressed him in terms she felt most likely to activate his head-of-family responsibilities when her son failed to pay her jointure. Eliza Cooper referred to her nephew as a friend to the friendless, she flattered his prudence and discretion, she gave assurances (as did Dorothy Clutterbuck and indeed Julia Bellew) of her strict economy, and raised the spectre of 'shameful rags'

³¹ 'My dear Austin will say no letter from Doro only when she wants money'; letter from Dorothy Clutterbuck to her brother Austin Cooper, 23 May [?1803]. Clements Papers TCD MS 7311/33.

³² Letters from Eliza Cooper to her nephew Austin Cooper, 1797-1806. Clements Papers TCD MS 7310/1-9.

³³ Rosemary O'Day, 'Tudor and Stuart women: their lives through their letters', in James Daybell ed., *Early-modern women's letter-writing, 1450-1700* (Palgrave, 2001), pp. 127 – 142.

³⁴ Letters from Dorothy Clutterbuck to her brother Austin Cooper. 22 October, 16 and 21 December 1802. TCD MS 7311/20, 24, 26.

³⁵ Daybell, *Early-modern women*, p. 9.

³⁶ Letter from Dorothea Clutterbuck to her brother Austin Cooper, 21 December 1802. Clements Papers TCD MS 7311/26.

should money not be forthcoming. Also to be considered is the role of the letter in bolstering these authors' sense of identity by allowing them to assert their relationships with a powerful relative.³⁷ Austin Cooper may have been more to his sister and aunt than simply a source of patronage and advice. He was a socially significant figure and gaining recognition of their plight from him may have been cathartic, acting as a means of release and self-justification.³⁸

Another perceived difficulty in relying on personal letters arises from the issue of letter-sharing. The custom of sharing letters has been understood to compromise the value of a text valued particularly for its private character. Clearly it is a serious consideration where a scholar wished to opine about what a specific person, interesting in herself, would say to another in private, or about whether a specific topic would ever be written about.³⁹ In the case of a person such as Maria Edgeworth this is a problem. Edgeworth felt she must, as she described it, 'look before I leap' or take care about what she wrote because her letters were likely to have a wide readership. The knowledge that more than one person might expect to read a letter meant instructions regarding what should and should not be said by the other correspondent are not unusual in letters. Judith Cramer, the author of a partial letter in the Caldwell papers, implied that it was written in secret because the author was rarely allowed to write. She said that she could not freely express herself and that everything she wrote or received was scrutinised critically by others, so much so that she asked her correspondent not to refer to the fact of her having written a letter.⁴⁰ Judith Odell, in a letter to her daughter Bel, commented on her son's 'deranged' behaviour but warned her daughter 'in your letter don't say a word of that for he may be sitting by when I was reading your letter and he is very suspicious'.⁴¹ Frances La Touche, whose daughter Mary Anne was ill, and may have had a mental illness, asked her correspondent to refer to what the doctor said about bleeding as a treatment. This was probably to encourage Mary Anne, who would be expected also to read the letter, to follow the recommended regimen.⁴²

³⁷ David A. Gerber, 'Epistolary ethics', pp. 2-23.

³⁸ James Daybell ed., *Early modern women*, p. 6.

³⁹ It can make survivors suspect also: Julia Bellew sent a letter to her cousin regarding payment of money to her. She enclosed a second letter which could safely be shown to a person who might enquire why the money was paid. Letter of Julia Bellew to her cousin Christopher 'Kit' Bellew, 23 December [n.d.]. NLI MS 27,152.

⁴⁰ Letter of Judith Cramer to [?the Miss Caldwells] of January 1783. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B3/13/96.

⁴¹ Letter of Judith Odell to her daughter Bel, 9 November (1800). NLI MS 10,172.

⁴² Letter from Frances Tottenahm to Miss Wren undated [1790s]. La Touche Papers TCD MS 11272/7. Miss Wren may have been a governess or a family friend.

Sharing, rather than being seen as a constraint, becomes worthy of being investigated as a social activity if one becomes interested in the extent to which letter-writing practice was a collaborative process. What exactly did sharing mean? It is clear, from references in letters themselves, that the custom of sharing encompassed a number of actions, apart altogether from illicit third-party reading which caused many authors to ask their correspondents to burn or lock up letters. Copying out letters to share, in part or in whole, was not unknown; using a scribe, as Lady Ann Caldwell did, was a form of sharing. Sharing included handing the letter over in its entirety to be read by someone in the addressee's home. There is a suggestion in Margaret Pike's letters that her husband would as a matter of course read any of her incoming letters. Pike, newly married, wondered if a friend had neglected to write to her because she was 'unwilling to have her writing exposed to the penetrating eyes of a man'; she said there was no need for anxiety, not because her husband would not read her letters but because he was 'no critic'.⁴³ Sharing also included a letter being sent, by its recipient, to a third party in a different location. One of Margaret Pike's letter to Mary Shackleton gives two examples of ways in which this might have happened. Pike's husband, setting out for Lurgan, 'begged so very earnestly' to be allowed take a recently-arrived letter from Shackleton with him, to show his own family and friends there, that Margaret said she felt 'obliged to give it, though much against my inclination as I had not got half satisfaction of it myself ... The Lurgan people are very careless of letters any ways, they seem to think them of no consequence'. She then mentioned a 'beautiful' letter of Betty Pim's, the presence of which in her house Pike could not account for. She supposed it came via Mary Shackleton and 'ought to be returned to thee yet am loath to do it till I hear something about it'.⁴⁴ Pike's letters also make it clear that in some cases courtesy might oblige the recipient to ask the author if she objected to her letters being shared. Mary Shackleton clearly asked Pike's permission to do this and, although Margaret left the decision to Mary, she indicated a certain level of discomfort: 'I don't know what to say about thy shewing or reading my letter they seldom contain anything worth communicating ... I desire thee on no account to shew my letters wholesale, and be very careful too how thou retells them'.⁴⁵ Margaret also assumed that, when Mary Shackleton asked her not to communicate the

⁴³ Letter from Margaret Pike to Mary Shackleton, 10mo 23rd 1781. NLI MS 5897 pp. 13-14.

⁴⁴ Letter of Margaret Pike to Mary Shackleton, 12mo 12th 1784. NLI MS 5987 p. 155.

⁴⁵ Letter of Margaret Pike to Mary Shackleton, 8mo 22nd 1783. NLI 5987 pp. 81-5.

contents of a letter about Shackleton's marriage proposal, the prohibition did not extend to Margaret's mother or sister-in-law.⁴⁶

Sometimes sharing implied the recipient reading aloud parts of the letter to others. All readers of historical letters are used to finding an author's instructions about how much of the letter may be read out. Maria Edgeworth used the phrase 'for the general use of the family' as distinct from 'for you', meaning the addressee's eyes only, so clearly the tradition of sharing is not to be understood as a blanket restriction on self-expression.⁴⁷ Even more interesting to the student of epistolarity is the use of the custom of sharing for strategic purposes. There is evidence in the D'Alton letters that it was generally accepted that a person, being proffered a letter to read, understood that they were to read only the page indicated rather than the whole thing. Keeping this in mind, an author could ensure that a physical location on the letter could be kept free in case sharing was necessary. In one letter to his wife, John D'Alton wrote that he would 'leave the under part for any communication to strangers', while he continued the private part of the letter in cross writing on the first page. On another occasion he instructed Catherine to write an apparently sincere but impossible-to-accept invitation to his aunt to come and stay with them. This part of the letter could then be shown to his aunt, to the couple's reputational credit, but without fear that they would have an unwanted guest. In a later letter Catherine referred to this stratagem saying, 'I wrote what you desired in the folding down for public inspection; is it not a shame for you to make me tell so many lies'. On another occasion John, wishing to compliment his hosts in as strong a manner as possible, asked Catherine to say something nice about them in her next letter, 'your respects to a family so praised by me etc etc as your judgment may suggest', which he could then read out to great effect.⁴⁸ Examining this use of letters reveals them to be uniquely valuable.

Other examples, in the database, of the creative use of the technology, includes Julia Bellew, who may have sent a decoy letter which could be shown to someone whom she did not wish to see the letter which enclosed the decoy. James Caldwell bribed his daughter Arabella to forge letters, from Lords Shelburne and Lanesborough, to replace originals which he had lost.⁴⁹ This usage introduces the concept of epistolary space.

⁴⁶ Letter from Margaret Pike to Mary Shackleton, 12mo 15th 1790. Ballitore Papers NLI P1094.

⁴⁷ Colvin, *Edgeworth letters*, p. 173.

⁴⁸ Letters between Catherine and John D'Alton, 3 September 1818, 16 September 1820 and 31 March 1823. TCD MS 2372/22, 66, 71.

⁴⁹ Letter from Julia Bellew to her cousin Christopher, 23 December [?1798]. Bellew Papers NLI MS 27,152. Letter from James Caldwell to his wife Elizabeth, March 1778. JRL Bagshawe muniments B3/29/71. Sir James paid careful attention to the material details of the forgery insisting on a specific kind of paper and

Epistolary space was a social forum brought into being not just by the custom and traditions of letter-writing but by changes in the postal system. It has been suggested that, once a reliable and private postal system was established, it altered people's imagination; knowing that epistolary space existed gave people a new way to think about communicating, altering what people felt they could say by changing the manner in which it could be said. In this it might be compared with changes to communication effected in the late twentieth century by the creation of virtual space through the widespread use of social media. Letters had always been written but the 'presence of an advertised pre-arranged system for this process, dependent on no-one else's cooperation, was necessary to make epistolary space have a concrete existence in the plans of individuals'.⁵⁰

In the database there are a number of examples of the specific use of epistolary space between married couples. Helena Bellew felt herself able to be very critical in her letters of her husband's behaviour in public, and to tell him what she felt he must do to bolster and protect his political reputation. She acknowledged her use of the letter to do this by saying to him, 'you will perhaps wonder that I have not expressed my feelings as forcibly when you are with me. The reason is obvious you would not bear to hear them from me.'⁵¹ David La Touche used letters to overcome the obstacles to communication in his marriage. His wife refused to let him speak to her on the subject of religion - his Methodism was not to her taste - and physically removed herself to her father's house. La Touche could still speak to her through letters of his opinions about their separation and about the company she was keeping. He also used letters to speak of religion saying 'you will not allow me to talk to you on this subject. Will you bear with me while I endeavour to explain myself in writing?'⁵² These few examples show how the technology permitted the individual to act at times and in places where they might otherwise be prevented. For the historian of women there is an obvious attraction in this; access to literacy, and the practice of letter writing, allowed women to project their views further into national social space than their physical and cultural restrictions permitted.

managing to get a correct 'cover' with Lord Lanesborough's seal. His bribe to his daughter was that she could have 'every master she desires and as often as she pleases and [for] her and Maryanne two tickets apiece in any of the Dublin schemes they choose'.

⁵⁰ James How, *Epistolary spaces: letter writing from the foundation of the post office to Richardson's Clarissa*. Studies in Early Modern English Literature. (Ashgate, 2003), p. 4.

⁵¹ Letter from Helena Bellew to her husband Michael, 18 September 1826. NLI MS 27,236.

⁵² Letter from Helena Bellew to her husband Michael, 18 September 1826. Bellew Papers NLI MS 27,236. Letter from John David La Touche to his wife Anne, 7 September 1801. La Touche Papers TCD MS 11272/39.

Another unique value of the letter is the particular value attaching to a series of letters wherein one individual addresses herself to more than one other. The register in which a person will write to another says a lot about the relationship; being able to see how this changes according to context allows glimpses of different collaborative relationships in action, providing a more three-dimensional view of the author. It is rare to be able to compare letters on the same subject to different people. One such opportunity, from the correspondence of Margaret Pike and Mary Shackleton on the subject of the former's engagement, shows subtle but important differences about the extent to which a young woman changed what she said depending on the reader (these letters will be discussed further). Another example is in the Odell correspondence which contains letters written by Judith Odell to both her sons and her daughter. She showed a different persona to each; for example, although she always used foreign language quotations, she did so much more frequently in her letters to her sons. The difference is particularly obvious when she revealed her attitude to marriage. It seems as though she had no difficulty in assuming, in her letters to her son, that a man must be hard-nosed and mercenary in making his choice, while in referring to her daughter marriage assumed that a woman should hope for and expect love and kindness. The complicated way in which Mrs Odell's letters served a psychological need for her is seen in one letter, which she admitted was a shorter, more 'comfortable' replacement for a long letter, written in 'so desponding a style' that she decided not to send it. This indicates that she used her correspondence to her daughter to express her feelings and perhaps thereby gain some comfort. However, she did not wish to alarm or upset Bel, so she changed the letter for a more cheerful one, still mentioning the fact of her low spirits (wanting her daughter's sympathy) but explaining them away by reference to gloomy weather.⁵³

There are other subtle ways in which one can discover the unique value of letters. Where drafts exist, the reader can come to an understanding of the nature of the relationship between two correspondents. The letters of Lady Ann Caldwell contain such an example. Lady Ann's letters to her son-in-law Colonel Samuel Bagshawe are distinct from those she wrote to her son Sir James in that there are elements of flattery in them. At one point Lady Ann said that the absence of Colonel Bagshawe in East India 'affected me more than my separation from all of my children', some of whom were at that moment

⁵³ Letter from Judith Odell to her daughter Bell, 31 March 1807. Ussher papers NLI MS 10,1720.

exposed to the dangers inherent in service in the navy or in European armies.⁵⁴ Lady Ann was a capable business woman and Bagshawe's considerable respect for her is seen in the care with which he drafted his letters to her, so the need served by her tone is not clear. He responded with flattery also, although less pronounced; perhaps it was simply an epistolary protocol distinctive of that particular family relationship.

Letters provide 'access to aspects of personal experience that is not well documented elsewhere'.⁵⁵ They permit insight into distinctly female culture and self-expression in allowing specific female use of certain subject choice - 'meta communication devices' - to be observed.⁵⁶ For example in this database, limited as it is, the use of references to food by women to express themselves is pronounced. This took a number of forms, most obviously when a writer mentioned that she missed her absent correspondent particularly at meal time. Letters themselves are described in terms of nourishment or in relation to sharing food. Maria Edgeworth described her absent family sitting at breakfast while receiving her letters – she calls them 'the dear breakfast table'; she (and others) referred to 'devouring' letters and describe letters as being 'delicious'. Thomasine Howard wrote to her son in London in the early years of the century saying she wished that he and his brother were with her 'at a dish of fish', that they 'could drink a little tea together' and that he could have some Shelton Abbey cherries. She sent him bottles of 'usquabath'. Catherine D'Alton described the efforts to which she went to find and preserve some mushrooms which her husband was fond of. She asked, 'do you ever miss my foot on yours at breakfast and dinner?' Her husband frequently described the meals he was given while away, on the assumption that this was information Catherine would want to have.⁵⁷

The evidence for the existence of a virtual community of women

In this final section of the chapter it will be proposed that, although women's letters only appear in abundant numbers in the record in the second half of the eighteenth century,

⁵⁴ Letter from Lady Ann Caldwell to her son-in-law Colonel Samuel Bagshawe, 20 October 1758. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B2/3/288. Bagshawe used the blank space on this letter to draft his reply to Lady Ann in which he describes in detail his feelings upon being passed over for preferment. 25 January 1759.

⁵⁵ Earle, *Epistolary selves*, p. 8.

⁵⁶ Aurelia Tamošiūnaitė. Review of Marina Dossena and Gabriella Del Lungo Camiciotti, eds., *Letter writing in late modern Europe* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: 2012), *Journal of Historical Sociolinguistics*, 1 (August 2015) pp. 277-80. DOI: [10.1515/jhsl-2015-0016](https://doi.org/10.1515/jhsl-2015-0016) accessed 9 July 2016.

⁵⁷ Colvin, *Edgeworth letters*, pp. 104, 188, 205. Letters from Thomasine Howard to her son William, 11 April, 12 July 10 August 1709. Wicklow Papers NLI MS 38,632/2. Letters from Catherine D'Alton to her husband John, 31 August and 4 September 1818. D'Alton letters TCD MS 2327/3, 4.

they contain within themselves evidence to suggest that the culture of female letter-writing had by then been in place for a considerable amount of time. Using this proposal as a starting point, it will be suggested that introducing the existence of a robust female social network will be valuable when estimating the contribution of women to the social revolution of the eighteenth century. It suggests that later eighteenth-century women were not just the beneficiaries of social change, which begins to be discernible in the early part of the 'long' century, but that they contributed to it, imprinting a feminine sensibility on their culture through their epistolary networking practice. These assumptions are based on evidence that indicates a significantly greater epistolary output, now lost, and an older and deeply embedded culture of writing which is attested to by letters themselves and by literary fiction's use of the female letter. That there was a culture of letter-writing, with its own rules of conduct, and that the practice was important in the lives of the participants are evident in the surviving letters themselves, due partly to the fact that the letter is a highly self-referential genre. Authors assured one another of their eagerness to receive letters and of their disappointment and anxiety when they did not. Letters frequently started with a reference to the receipt or non-receipt of an expected letter, or an apology, and sometimes an explanation, for the delay in the arrival of the present letter. Writers apologised for brevity; they assured their friends that the cost of postage should not be allowed to delay a letter (when the recipient had to pay the postage). There were frequent apologies for the poor appearance of a letter; an author might excuse this by reference to bad pens, poor light, weak ink, or absence of the correct kind of paper. An author writing two letters in one day, or threatening to stop writing as a sign of annoyance, confirms the importance of the practice to those involved. Margaret Pike, in writing to Mary Shackleton, used a number of phrases in her gracious apologies for her failure to write, all of which acknowledged that the principal message conveyed by her letters, even where the content was slight, was one of remembrance of the other party and either a polite or a genuinely affectionate display of interest in their wellbeing:

[You] should have heard from me long, long since: do not be angry with me for I am sufficiently displeased with myself and I am sure have had more reproaches bear from that quarter than my good natured cousin could find in her heart to load me with: ... If I had not now and then the satisfaction of hearing of thy welfare and knew also that thou would frequently hear some intelligence of us by other means I should

doubtless write oftener to thee tho' my letters were to contain little more than "I am in good health and hopes these will find thee in the same".⁵⁸

Julia Bellew could accept the fact that a relative did not write to her but objected to a greater failure in social etiquette: 'I am afraid Mary Nugent entirely forgets me. I could forgive her not writing but her never making any enquiry for me surprises me'.⁵⁹ Failure to write among close family members was an act laden with meaning. While withholding a response was itself a communicative act, a missing letter sent a different, potentially ominous, message. In both the Synge and the La Touche letters, parents warned their children that, every now and then, they would fail to write on an appointed day so that the young people would learn not to worry if ever an expected letter should miscarry. Synge specifically referred to the danger that the resulting distress might undermine his daughter's health, and Anne Tottenham's mother proposed an irregular communication between them 'lest we should be uneasy at not hearing'.⁶⁰

A distinct culture of female letter-writing was in place. This is not surprising; women partook of a distinct female culture generally, within national culture, which centred on spaces, responsibilities and activities. For example, material culture, whether in consumer spending or in proprietary knowledge of food or textiles, were part of female culture and the communication networks were the 'glue' that held it together.⁶¹ A substantial scholarly literature attests to there being a special relationship between women and epistolarity, both in terms of how they used it and the value it had for them.⁶² References to writing, in letters, show that women had particular rules and traditions around letter writing, around the time of their engagement and marriage, when significant new relationships had to be acknowledged by the sending of letters.⁶³ Teasing women for their particular style confirms that their style was recognisably distinctive. In Edgeworth's *Helen*, Mr Collingwood exclaimed that, 'I hate the sight of ladies' long cross-barred

⁵⁸ Letter from Margaret Pike to Mary Shackleton, 12mo 13th 1806. Shackleton Papers NLI MIC P1094.

⁵⁹ Letter from Julia Bellew to her cousin Michael, 13 June 1797. Bellew papers NLI MS 27,152.

⁶⁰ Letter from Edward Synge to his daughter Alicia, 16 May 1747. Legg, *Synge letters*, p. 23; letter from Frances Tottenham to her daughter Anne in Bath, 30 October 1791. La Touche Papers TCD MS 11272/4.

⁶¹ Mendelson and Crawford, *Early-modern women*, p. 218.

⁶² Earle, *Epistolary selves*, p. 6. Beebee, Thomas, *Epistolary fiction in Europe, 1500-1850* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 116.

⁶³ A newly-engaged woman would be expected to write to her fiancé's family. Eleanor La Touche wrote, and sent a gift, in response to the first letter she received from her prospective daughter-in-law, Anne Tottenham, shortly after her engagement. La Touche Papers TCD MS 11273/23, 33. Elizabeth Caldwell sent a formal letter to her husband's sister shortly after her wedding in December 1753. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B2/3/316

letters'. Writing to Mary Shackleton, Margaret Pike referred to three male comments about the length of their letters; her uncle jokingly referred to 'secrets on the eighteenth page' and to 'eighteen pages and a postscript' and another person suggested that Margaret's and Mary's letters needed an index.⁶⁴ It is not alone in historical letters themselves that this distinction is noted. The prevalence of epistolary fiction in the eighteenth century - so much of it produced and consumed by women - says something about the cultural conceptualisation of the private letter generally and its potential uses, particularly by women. Female writers were understood to use letters for more personal and introspective purposes than were associated with male letter-writing, and this recognition allowed it to be used strategically in fiction.⁶⁵

The author Charles Maturin could rely on his audience's familiarity, not only with fictional epistolarity generally, but with a distinctive female epistolary style. In *Woman: or, pour ou contre*, published in 1818, many letters are included. They were written in different styles, to reflect the character or personality of the writer. The heroine, Zaira, wrote one particular letter which was obviously meant to replicate a stereotypical woman's way of writing. Zaira's letter ranged over many subjects, was both serious and not-so-serious, and well informed; the author changed tack abruptly, put in comments about fashion at the least appropriate points and punctured gravity with unintentional self-centred humour. Another character, Madame St Maur, provided a parody of a woman's letter which 'contained that mixture of frivolity, worldliness, clear sense and strong affection, which really formed her character. There was the usual and due proportion of philosophical sentiments, and artificial flowers, and political terrors, and terrors about a sick lap-dog'. Maturin could be confident that his readers would understand the joke.⁶⁶

The existence of an epistolary culture and of women's distinct sub-culture within it, along with this kind of fictional use and the fact that women wrote and read so many epistolary novels, is significant. Regardless of the dearth of surviving records, it permits us to assume that women were habitual letter-writers by the early years of the eighteenth

⁶⁴ Letters from Margaret Pike to Mary Shackleton, 12mo 23rd 1783 and 2mo 7th 1784. Shackleton Papers NLI MS 5987 pp. 69-85, 95-8. The general understanding that women needed to have other women to communicate with is unmistakably evident in the importance Bishop Syngé ascribed to Blandine Jourdan's role in his daughter's life. Again and again he adjured Alicia to have to no secrets from her companion who should be considered Alicia's 'second self'. Legg, *Syngé letters*, p. 299, 428.

⁶⁵ Gabriella Del Lungo Camiciotti, 'Letters and letter-writing', p. 26. On the belief that men were understood to write carefully constructed texts of deep discourse while women wrote less artfully and of emotion see Beebee, *Epistolary fiction*, pp. 116-8.

⁶⁶ Charles Maturin, *Women; or pour et contre* with an introduction by Robert Lee Wolff (New York and London, 1979), pp. 195, 222.

century. The survival of quantities of women's letters in the archives coincides with the appearance of epistolary novels, but, for the latter to have been so successful, a long-standing tradition of female letter-writing must have been in place. This being the case we are permitted to conceive of the existence of a necessarily older and deeper female network, sufficiently well-established to have made a considerable contribution to the changes in society which took place over the eighteenth century. Letters did not begin to survive because women started to write but because more women were taking part in the activity. The quality of these early letters implies that more women were writing many more letters than has hitherto been assumed. Since early eighteenth-century letters are rare, and because many of those that do survive, in both appearance and language, give an impression of a merely functional literacy, there is a danger of underestimating how robust a social practice letter-writing had already become. The earliest Irish women's letters must be read, not in the tradition of prejudice against unorthodox spelling and orthography compared with later standards of literacy (or an educated male hand); rather they must be appreciated as the milestone they represent when the complexity of the process is allowed for.⁶⁷ To illustrate the difference between a prejudicial and a sympathetic reading of a woman's letter, and to act as evidence in support of the theory that there could well have been a robust female epistolary tradition in Ireland from the seventeenth century, an archetypal early letter is presented and analysed as an appendix to this thesis. The author was Mary Vesey and the letter was written, in 1713, to her husband Thomas, the Bishop of Ossory.⁶⁸ The catalogue description of Vesey's letter states that it is 'primarily of interest in illustrating how illiterate great ladies were in the early eighteenth century' while a sympathetic reading reveals it to be so much more.⁶⁹

The first consideration in this regard is the likely quantity of letters that women would have written. Toby Barnard has suggested that the number of Protestants who are discernible in the record amounts to five per cent of the total Protestant population, of whom only a small number may be examined in any detail.⁷⁰ The same is true of the middling Catholics. A moment's consideration about the likely original epistolary output

⁶⁷ This prejudice is seen in the introduction to the O'Connell letters wherein the editor disparages Mary O'Connell's 'untidy' handwriting and 'illogical' use of underlining in comparison with her husband's 'bold ... clear' hand, without reference to the different educational opportunities each party had. O'Connell, *Correspondence*, vol 1, p. vii.

⁶⁸ Mary Vesey née Muschamp (born circa 1679); Thomas Vesey (?1668-1730). De Vesce Papers MS NLI MS 38,876/1

⁶⁹ National Library of Ireland, collection list number 89: De Vesce papers, compiled by Anthony Malcomson with additional listings prepared by Niall Keogh. 2005.

⁷⁰ Barnard, *A new anatomy*, p. 20.

of this population alone, without reference to the letter writing of the majority, suggests huge numbers, and these numbers must figure in the background of any discussion about women and letter writing in Irish history. We may then call up a vision of early eighteenth-century female activity which can begin to account for the eruption of women onto the public scene later in the century. This argument and this evidence cannot make up entirely for the loss of the output of letter-writing women but it strongly suggests that examining the introduction and use of the practice itself, and mapping the network which resulted from it, will have a significant impact on eighteenth-century social history.

A linked-up community, whether public or private, virtual or physical, permits the exchange of ideas, information and experiences. It encourages the establishment of shared standards of behaviour and disseminates change; thus the existence, from the seventeenth century, of 'public opinion' - constituted to some extent by letter-writing by both men and women - is accepted as having revolutionised the functioning of state and society. Intellectual networks advanced the dissemination of literature and science. Many such networks – intellectual, mercantile, political - have begun to be scrutinised and mapped to understand how they worked and to envisage their impact. So too must the networks of women be mapped and scrutinised. If, as has been proposed by Clair Wills, the development of literacy and reading habits in Ireland in the late nineteenth and twentieth century, provide a clue to changing forms of women's experience and subjectivity, the search for similar clues in the preceding era will be readily agreed to.⁷¹ There was an acknowledged development of literacy skills in seventeenth-century elite families, where reading, if not writing, became more usual among women. As with all other markers of social evolution, it spread through society as a standard in forming young women. This expansion in access to literacy initiated a radical and qualitative change in society, as it became a multilateral facility for women. It had unforeseen consequences, as these newly-literate women and their daughters began to make their presence felt more widely. It is difficult to track when female literacy moved out of the aristocratic elite to the lower gentry and middling families. It is not known for example when governesses began to be the norm for families of middling classes. Swift's *On the education of ladies* laments the custom of girls of humble rank being handed over to governesses in the early years of the century while Rachel Wilson notes governesses being unusual in the early 1700s in

⁷¹ Clair Wills, 'Women domesticity and the family: recent feminist work in Irish cultural studies', *Cultural Studies*, 15 (2001), pp. 33-57.

Ireland.⁷² Governesses do not appear in fiction until the end of our period, by which time they were employed in thousands of homes, but theorising them only from that point is not necessary. Might it be more fruitful to question the appearance of magazines specifically aimed at female readership, a readership among the cohort who wrote letters, in the middle of the eighteenth century? Or to look further back, perhaps to a figure like Swift, and to theorise about the effect, on Irish society, of his dealings with female intelligentsia. He was a public, influential figure, and his patronising of female learning and admiration of female wit in the 1730s, surely had a wide social impact. One of the peaks in the number of publications about women's education, in the 1710s -1740s, seemed to link Swift, the Delanys and George Berkeley through personal acquaintance and/or subscription lists.⁷³

Printed literature was the principal medium through which women in Ireland encountered Enlightenment debates regarding women and their education. Many of these books and periodicals originated in England. There were seven Dublin editions, between 1775 and 1786, of Hester Chapone's *Letters on the improvement of the mind, addressed to a young lady*. This has been described by Norma Clarke as disseminating 'the bluestocking ideal more comprehensively than any other single production of the era'.⁷⁴ The readership was not confined to the Dublin market. It is reasonable to assume that a Dublin-based increase in levels of literacy for women would have an impact more widely, in a small world of which Dublin was the social centre. O'Dowd has said that girls from the midlands attended Samuel Whyte's Dublin school, and both Whyte and David Manson in Belfast used the Irish print market to promote their views on pedagogy.⁷⁵ Private houses across the country were centres of hospitality, conversation and exchange of ideas. This network of sociability promoted the creation, renewal and strengthening of social, political and familial links, according to Rachel Wilson, who writes of the supporting networks of correspondence which were crucial for women living at a remove in rural Ireland.⁷⁶

Epistolary dissemination of intellectual ideas is accepted as having existed between Dublin and London, by means of the literary salon, the influence of which was then extended into rural Ireland in the houses of individuals such as Lady Charleville in

⁷² Wilson, *Elite women*, p. 48n.

⁷³ Meany, O'Dowd and Whelan, *Reading the Irish woman*, p. 36.

⁷⁴ Quoted in Meany, O'Dowd and Whelan, *Reading the Irish woman*, p. 25.

⁷⁵ O'Dowd, *A history of women*, pp. 210-14.

⁷⁶ Wilson, *Elite women*, pp. 101, 126-7.

Co Offaly and Lady Granard and the Edgeworths in Longford.⁷⁷ It seems likely that ideas in relation to private domestic life, child-rearing, and lifestyle were disseminated in these circles. It is proposed that the use that women made of letter-writing nourished a virtual community wherein they could articulate and have reflected back to them their own mental world, in what may be thought of as a significant intelligence network. Considerable changes in the lives of women in the second half of the century – increased access to education, their appearance in print, their enhanced public profile - may be traced to the profound effect which access to, and personal use of, literacy had had on the lives and outlook of women earlier in the century. It can be no coincidence that the subjects which principally concerned this network of women, as evidenced in their letters, are the areas in which a revolution occurred between the 1720s and the 1820s. Family life was of principal concern to most women - marital relationships, master-servant relationships, children and childrearing - and changes in these areas of experience over the course of the century are remarkable.

Conclusion

The rewards of a post-modern approach to textual interpretation, the developing granularity of the historiological method, and ideological historians' tenacity in looking outside the historical canon for primary sources, have raised the profile of previously marginalised subjects and resulted in the development of increasingly sophisticated methods of analysing difficult records. What were previously perceived as the weaknesses of the letter, when evaluated by traditional source-critical standards, have been mitigated by the applications of new ways to analyse them. Language and physical form challenge content for significance; and the letter has begun to be studied, not alone as a text, but as a cultural artefact, reflecting its social origins and making its social contextualisation vital to the understanding of its meaning.

⁷⁷ Amy Prendergast, *Literary salons across Britain and Ireland in the long eighteenth century* (Palgrave, 2015).

Chapter 4 Children's use of letters

Of all the revelations to emerge from a close scrutiny of letters and letter-writing, those pertaining to children are especially dramatic. It is difficult otherwise to gain insight into a child's lived experience. When we think of the children's letters that are to be found among many collections of family papers, from the end of the period under scrutiny, we call to mind surprisingly skilled handwriting but stilted formal messages manifestly written under adult tutelage. Among the records which purport to refer to children, these would seem to be the least likely to reward further attention, outside a limited study of formal education. A reading of children's letter reveals that their engagement in this practice was a positive experience for them and was both intellectually and psychologically stimulating.

There are four strands to this chapter: the use of children's letters in gathering insight into students' engagement with their formal education. This informs the history of education itself as children can be observed learning society's attitudes to education, and the processes by which it was delivered are made more clear. We shall see how they imbibed their culture's attitude to self-directed and life-long learning, and that education was not the sole responsibility of the teacher or parent. Secondly, the use of letters as a pedagogic tool permits us to observe children being socialised; as with other social acts, letter-writing had rules, which are most clearly visible when being taught to the novice. Even more revealing, though previously unreported, is the insight into children's lives revealed when we look at children's specific use of letter-writing. Children, who began to learn write letters at an increasingly young age at the end of the 'long' century, adapted the epistolary technology they were introduced to in the schoolroom for personal purposes. They used it for identity construction; for managing their most important relationships; and for emotional management.

Finally, specific characteristics of the epistolary genre allow the historian access to the lives of even pre-literate children for whom the text meant nothing, but who swiftly learned the meaning inherent in the practice. For these children, the letter-as-artefact was imbued with great psychological power, a lesson they will have learned mostly from their mothers.

Letters as evidence of home-based education

A silent revolution in the history of British education since the 1970s revealed the many effects that the eighteenth-century shift in child-rearing theories had on society, noting in

passing the contribution of women, as early-years teachers, to the well-being of the nation. Research focus has moved the traditional emphasis from educational institutions and pedagogical theory, to a recognition of the fact that education, far from being a merely political, institutional or instructive process, was a cultural activity and that ‘fluid and various were the social and discursive practices by which ideas were transmitted to the young’.¹ As a result of these changing emphases, sources for the history of education have begun to be sought beyond traditional statistics and government documents, among the records of private lives, once considered trivial or ephemeral.²

The Forward letters, among the papers of the Earls of Wicklow, are excellent examples. These comprise thirty-six letters from the children of William Forward and his wife Eleanor to their parents, and to one another. The eldest daughter Isabella (1791-1840), and those of her siblings who could write, were expected to write regularly, on specified days, to their parents temporarily absent in Dublin. Isabella’s letters were written to her mother, unless her mother was indisposed, when the letters were directed to her father. Her earliest surviving letter was written in 1802 when she was eleven years old. Many of Isabella’s letters were written under the guidance of a governess, Miss Weyman, whose brief notes, on the outside of these letters, show something of her relationship with the children and with her employer. The Forward letters reveal there were no boundaries between what went on in the school room and parenting activities generally. Discussions about what was being read were recorded among reports about other behaviour and social activities and the amount of exercise that the children were taking. It is clear that Isabella’s parents were keenly interested in her progress and that the provision of an education for their daughter was not polite window-dressing. Despite the presence of a governess, they were involved in the education process themselves, as were other careful parents such as the Edgeworths and Tighes and of course Bishop Synge fifty years before.³ This can be deduced from Isabella’s telling her parents all about what she was learning and reading. The letters allow the historian to overhear the kind of question and answer session that would have been initiated between parent and child discussing a lesson delivered by the governess. Isabella wrote to her father: ‘I liked Lady Mary Wortley Montague’s travels very much but there was one thing that astonished me

¹ Hilton and Shefrin, eds., *Educating the child*, p. 1.

² Mary Hilton and Pam Hirsch, eds., *Practical visionaries: women, education and social progress, 1790-1930* (Harlow, 2000), p 2.

³ O’Dowd, *A History of women*, p. 216.

... it was how a bridge could move'. She described how Lady Mary said it happened and asked that when her father would write again '(for I hope you will write to me again)', he would explain how it could be.⁴ Most of Isabella Forward's letters were filled with detailed accounts of what she was learning; it is possible that she had been told to do this, as an exercise, but since she also asked her mother to tell her if it was agreeable to her that Isabella should 'mention any circumstances of history in my letters or not', it appears as though this was Isabella's own choice of subject matter. This kind of reporting reflects the central place which education had in family relationships. Writing letters and reporting on schoolwork were academic exercises, but they were also actions through which to extract and display obedience to parental orders. Isabella's letters also show how the function of education was understood in contemporary culture. It was intended to perfect a rational citizen, rather than as an activity with a narrow vocational end. Not only was she expected to be able to relate to her parents what she had read, Isabella was meant to be able to evaluate the content of her school books and to find practical and moral applications in her lessons for her own life. In commenting on cruel and ambitious Edward I's returning evil for evil she said, 'we are desired to return good for evil and be of a forgiving temper'. On another occasion, she reported that they were reading Robertson's *History* and she sympathised with 'poor' Queen Mary who was imprisoned and whom she pitied; she could not help feeling 'she almost deserved it, by her behaviour to her husband', although she did not believe Elizabeth to be right 'in beheading her as she did'.⁵ Later she wrote, 'I shall be very sorry when I come to the Carthaginians using Hannibal ungratefully after all the trouble he had and all he did for them'.⁶ Such responses to her reading materials show Isabella's imagination being stimulated and her moral compass under construction. Although girls suffered in being long denied any education and in being belatedly offered a restricted one, the inclusion of history among the disciplines deemed to be suitable for them to learn – precisely because it was thought to teach moral lessons⁷ – provided them with a key instrument for developing intellectual rigour.

⁴ Letter of Isabella Forward to her father, 25 October 1802. Wicklow Papers NLI MS 38,603/9.

⁵ William Robertson, *History of Scotland, 1542-1603* (London, 1759).

⁶ Letters of Isabella Forward to her father, 4 Sept and 25 November 1802. Wicklow Papers NLI MS 38,603/9

⁷ This was based on the teachings of Livy. For Thomas Arnold of Rugby, history remained relevant to the understanding of contemporary affairs. McDermid, *The schooling of girls in Britain and Ireland*, p. 71.

In the Synge letters from fifty years previously, the Bishop had urged his daughter, Alicia, to expect to be improved in her capacity to judge people's actions by learning to read literature carefully. He accepted that reading for diversion was enjoyable but implied that a maturing mind should expect to derive more from the experience: 'the design of every work of invention almost ... is to recommend virtue in one shape or another ... a good deal of useful instruction may be learned from [them]'.⁸ Bishop Synge, who encouraged his daughter's reading both 'useful' texts and works for simple amusement, also advised her to take a third way, combining utility and entertainment, by reading history.

Not only was academic instruction a constituent of the parent-child relationship, it was a constituent of extra-domestic social relations. A social occasion provided a significant opportunity for learning when, in November 1802, Isabella Forward visited a neighbour in Wicklow. As she reported: 'I got a very good lesson on botany from Mr Ussher, he got a red flower and dissected it and explained all its different parts, he showed it through his glass, which he lent me to examine flowers at home, he likewise showed us an orrery which showed the motion and distance of all the planets from the Sun very well, it showed the Earth's annual and diurnal motion very clearly'. Her sister Eleanor (Ellen) also enjoyed her visits to this family and hoped for permission to return 'to look at the prospects through the telescope'.⁹ The value of such experiences was not lost on the children's governess, Miss Weyman, who added a note to Isabella's letter: 'I think we received more information by our jaunt of pleasure than we could have acquired in one day by our lessons at home'. Enthused by a new science, Isabella pursued it of her own accord in asking her parents for a book on botany, revealing that not only was she expected to enjoy scientific discovery and to be proactive in engaging with the process of discovery, but she was learning the lesson that intellectual enquiry was a normal constituent of social interaction.¹⁰ The enthusiasm of a child for the subjects being taught in the schoolroom is reflected in a letter from Isabella's sister Eleanor who, possibly in answer to a question from her mother about her playthings, replied: 'All our paper people are very well and their houses are in very good repair but we have not played much with

⁸ Legg, *Synge letters*, pp. 145, 163.

⁹ Letter from Isabella Forward to her mother, 29 October 1802. Wicklow Papers NLI MS 38,603/9.

¹⁰ Joseph Wright of Derby's mid-18th-century paintings – for example *An experiment with a bird and an air pump* – showing scientific demonstrations carried out possibly in domestic situations, in the presence of children, reflect this overlap between sociability and education.

them we have been so taken up with the history of Scotland'.¹¹ In an earlier letter, Isabella asked her mother for permission for the younger children to stay up until half past nine to hear Miss Weyman reading this work to them. This gives an idea both of the lack of rigid timetabling and the children's engagement with a subject that might be considered tough going for a modern child. This proactive engagement, on the part of a child with an enquiring mind, in her own education can further be observed in the fact that it appears that Isabella Forward studied the *Iliad* with her governess because she herself had 'often wanted to hear the full account of the siege of Troy'.¹² They then used that text as a prompt for geography lessons to find all the locations mentioned by Homer. In the O'Connell letters similarly, seven-year-old Maurice, who was reportedly 'never without a book', asked for a history of England and of the Roman empire.¹³ Being able to make these choices reveals the process of socialisation as the child adopted the standards and traditions of her family. Letters recording these choices show a child's agency being encouraged when it aligned with the lesson being taught about their culture's validation of learning, and the individual's responsibility to pursue it. Seeing a child being carefully educated not for an activity but, as Mary Wollstonecraft advocated, 'a being advancing gradually towards perfection', supports Habermas' admiration of the newly developing bourgeois family for permitting 'the non-instrumental development of all faculties that marks a cultivated personality'.¹⁴ It is vastly different from Edward Synge's training of Alicia. The complete lack of reference to married life in the context of his minute preparation of his daughter for that role announces his understanding of adulthood as an event, rather than a process, and 'woman' as a job-description.

The eighteenth-century expectation that education was meant to be self-directed to some extent and to be of life-long duration is reflected in the letters of two adult women. Anne La Touche was in her sixties in 1840. Writing to her adult son, she lamented her inadequate education in:

that most interesting of all studies ... the beauties and wonders of nature. I have often in the course of my long life wished to acquire a knowledge of botany and mineralogy and geology which always

¹¹ Letter from Eleanor Forward to her mother, 17 September 1802. Wicklow Papers NLI MS 38,603/10.

¹² Letter from Isabella Forward to her mother 25 October 1802. Wicklow Papers NLI MS 38,603/9.

¹³ Letter from Mary O'Connell to her husband Daniel, 27 March 1810. O'Connell, *Correspondence*, vol 1, p. 278. Maurice was at school in the institution run by Mary Wollstonecraft's sisters on Hume St.

¹⁴ Jürgen Habermas quoted in Chris Rouston, *Narrating marriage*, p. 127. Wollstonecraft quoted in Hilton, *Women and the shaping of the nation's young*, p.11.

appeared to me to afford such an inexhaustable fund of amusement and instruction but it never happened to me to be in the way of any from whom I could acquire even the elements of any of them ... when a girl [?I] had some little knowledge of botany – which I lost in the after life and indeed from the time I was a mother all my time and thoughts were directed to my children and the desire of educating them well. ¹⁵

Judith Odell, in her fifties and living on the continent for reasons of economy at the start of the nineteenth century, was a highly educated woman with a good grasp of the classics, literature and languages. She continued her education when she went to live in Germany, although she said that she would delay her geographical studies until Napoleon ‘shall have made peace and disposed according to his will, of the portions within his grasp of this miserable spot where everything goes wrong’. She was a witty woman whose letter-writing style is an interesting combination of the literary and the familiar; her comments on new developments in science reflect this.¹⁶ Letters about education permit the reader to appreciate the role of mothers in providing a positive early experience. Mrs Odell’s daughter Bel, whose education included a governess and attendance at a school in England, learned from her mother’s attitude to and involvement in the educative process. A line from a letter from Judith Odell, when Bel was an adult, provides a sketch of what this experience may have been like. Mrs Odell asked Bel, ‘do you remember at Broadstairs when I used to begin reading Petrarch to you the moment you woke. At midday we read Ariosto...’. Mrs Odell’s adult son Christopher, who was travelling with her, also continued his education, employing dance and language masters. Her attitude to education is also seen in two letters to a young Miss Perceval, short notes of thanks or invitation, written in careful German, to help her young neighbour in her language

¹⁵ Letter from Anne La Touche to her son Charles, 17 April 1840. La Touche Papers TCD MS 11272/453. Biographical records show the frequency with which people who had had difficulty accessing education as children continued to self-educate in adult years. John Burnett, David Vincent, and David Mayall, eds., *Autobiography of the working class: an annotated critical bibliography* vol I, 1790-1900 (Brighton, 1984).

¹⁶ ‘All the books on chemistry to this present now are useless ... In short there are new fashions in every art and science as well as in dress. Physicians now think they have stopped the career of death on his pale horse by new treating of diseases and throwing out of their Library windows and out of their brains all the old systems of Galen, Hippocrates etc. King’s evil which is also called scrofula is now discovered to be as easily produced as a cold and is attendant on a change to low diet, on suffering by damp clothes, wet feet or damp rooms or beds. Consumption used to be sapped by bleeding and starvation. It is now found, and I join in the opinion, that when the functions grow so weak as to produce a general disorganization that nothing restores like animal food and good comfortable fare and bleeding is reckoned with reason to promote the views of the disorder in ending our days’. Letter from Judith Odell to her daughter Bel, 5 August (1807). Ussher Papers NLI MS 10,172.

studies.¹⁷ Olivia Bellew encouraged her married son Michael to take the opportunity of being in Bath in 1816 to ‘get a master to finish your astronomy ... you may not like the expense yet believe me it won’t be money thrown away’.¹⁸ Bishop Synge was impressed by his late wife’s impressive self-directed education: ‘The disagreeableness of her situation, with very fond parents, threw her into books ... [S]he has often surprised ... me with the fruits of her maiden studies’.¹⁹ Catherine D’Alton’s account matches this in describing an early morning moment of shared intimacy and education between mother and child. In 1827, when her son William was about six years old, she wrote to her husband, ‘Billy came to me himself this morning to teach him some of his new coloured books [and] he said his catechism and spelt a few words.’²⁰ Like Isabella Forward, Billy D’Alton used the language of education to direct his mother’s attention to him and win her praise.

Isabella Forward’s account of her visit to the Usshers and Mrs La Touche’s regret that she never happened ‘to be in the way’ of those from whom she could have acquired a knowledge of science, speaks of the ‘fluid’ manner in which education could be delivered and to the element of luck that could affect the breadth of a girl’s experience. This is also attested to in Dorothea Herbert’s memoir, in which she recalled basic literacy training having been being arranged for her, but additional instruction and reading materials being provided by guests in her home.²¹ The younger Forward sisters, like the younger Herbert girls, were also sent to school.²² There are a number of questions which could be asked about this tradition. Was an oldest daughter, like a first-born son, treated differently and given what was considered a more careful education entirely at home? Or perhaps younger daughters could more easily be sent away when they had sisters to accompany them. It could be something so simple as the attraction, to an increasingly busy mother, of being able to pay for assistance.

¹⁷ Letters from Judith Odell to Miss Percival, n.d. [possibly pre-799]. Graves Papers TCD MS 10047/24/19-20.

¹⁸ Letter from Olivia Bellew to her son Michael, 25 November 1816. NLI MS 27,210.

¹⁹ Letter from Bishop Synge to his daughter Alicia, 29 July 1751. Legg, *Synge letters*, p. 335.

²⁰ Letter from Olivia Bellew to her son Michael, 25 November 1816. Bellew papers NLI MS 27,210. Letter from Edward Synge to his daughter Alicia, 29 July 1751. Legg, *Synge letters*, p. 335. Letter from Judith Odell to her daughter Bel, 5 August 1807. Ussher Papers NLI MS 10,172. Letter from Catherine D’Alton to her husband John, September 1827. TCD MS 2327/140.

²¹ Dorothea Herbert *Retrospections 1770-1806* edited with introduction by Louis Cullen (Dublin, 2004), p. 89.

²² Some boys also experienced a mixed delivery of education including parents, home-based tutors, and local school. John Logan, ‘Governesses, tutors and parents: domestic education in Ireland, 1700-1880’, *Irish educational Studies*, 7, 1988, pp. 1-19 at p. 8.

Children not only received instruction from adults, but received it from each other. This reflected an intellectual environment wherein learning was in the air, and the impulse to learn and to teach being part of the ethos. It may also have been part of a child's construction and performance of their identity as an adult; by adopting adult behaviour, a young person may have sought recognition of their maturity. This is suggested in an example, which will be used below in the discussion about identity formation, in which an early-teenage La Touche boy lectured his only-slightly-younger sister on her reading habits. His uncle, Charles Tottenham, engaged in teaching, or at least encouraging learning in, his fourteen-year-old sister Anne. Tottenham asked her to write to him in French as 'it will improve us both[,] when I understand the language sufficiently I will correspond with you in it'.²³ Isabella Forward reported teaching her little sister Mary to read, and Daniel O'Connell's daughter Ellen not only performed the same task for her younger sisters and brothers but was at one point attempting to teach her mother, Mary, French. Daniel joked that he would write to his six-year-old son Dan when he, Daniel, 'got a certificate in due form from Ellen that [Dan] can read'; other letters confirm that seventeen-year-old Ellen did act as the governess' assistant.²⁴ This has obvious implications for the history of a gendered childhood: these young girls were being provided with what amounts to an apprenticeship for their future roles as teaching mothers.

Letters used in the socialisation of children

Children could not avoid learning the importance of letter writing, socially and personally. James Daybell has said that: 'in early modern culture letters were everywhere. The letter form in all its manifestations was instrumental in all aspects of modern life'.²⁵ In watching their parents write (or refuse to write), wait for, read, reread, share (or withhold), and discuss letters, children would see, explicitly, the workings of different relationships, how they impacted on life and how these relationships could be managed through obeying, or otherwise, the rules of the practice. Thus children were socialised within their earliest and closest family relationships partly by emulating their families' letter-writing practice. Letters were used to introduce them to their responsibilities in

²³ Letter from Charles Tottenham to his sister Anne, 10 November 1791. La Touche Papers TCD MS 11272/5.

²⁴ Letters between Daniel O'Connell and his wife Mary, 11 August 1817 and 27 February 1822. O'Connell, *Correspondence*, vol 2, pp. 163, 417.

²⁵ James Daybell, 'New directions in the study of early modern correspondence', *Lives and Letters*, 4, (Autumn 2012), p. 1.

wider society. Socialising children taught them that society exists, and that it had rules of engagement which impose changing and varied behavioural requirements upon them. It is a complex notion for a young mind. Letter-writing practice provided an opportunity for practical engagement with this intangible reality. The necessity to act in relation to this invisible, yet influential, network allowed the child to envisage wider society, mentally to position herself and her family in relation to it, to understand what behaviours were effective and acceptable, and to recognise who the arbiters were of behavioural standards. This provided the child with opportunities for choice of behaviour, for self-analysis and self-presentation, and for opportunities for self-assertion within society's regulations.²⁶

Among the best examples of the straightforward use of letters as social 'conduct literature' are in the Synge letters where the Bishop gave very explicit instructions to his daughter about how to respond to relatives, social superiors, friends, social inferiors and undesirable acquaintances. On one occasion he forbade Alicia to pay the expected visit to a newly married woman, which would suggest the Bishop approved of the marriage, although Alicia was not to go so far as to avoid places where the bride might be seen: 'Manage with as much dexterity as you can, so as neither to offend, nor appear an approver, and so make me pass for one'.²⁷ There were also less explicit ways in which letters were used to teach children about their society's codes of behaviour. In learning the formal lessons of epistolary literacy, the child was learning a necessary life skill; in learning to perform this skill to high standards she or he was being given a share in cultural capital which marked their status. These children were also being taught social regulations, making them more effective as adults. Like other social interactions, such as dining or paying social calls, letter-writing was subject to rules; children were exposed to the 'sociology' of texts, that is, the meaning conveyed by patterns of usage.²⁸ The existence of widely recognised rules in relation to writing letters has already been discussed; it is attested to by the fact that so many letters began with apologies and explanations for delayed letter-writing that often contain assurances that both writing and receiving letters was a great pleasure. Isabella Forward's letters frequently began with a

²⁶ Carole Steedman, *Past tenses: essays on writing autobiography and history*, (London, 1992) quoted in Earle, *Epistolary selves*, p. 21.

²⁷ Letters from Bishop Synge to his daughter Alicia, 25 July and 18 August 1750. Legg, *Synge letters*, pp. 222, 235.

²⁸ The unspoken debt incurred by paying the prolonged visits that were a feature of eighteenth-century life was part of the tissue of social obligations. Lady Arabella Denny said she accepts hospitality expecting to repay it 'with good measure' and 'keeping account in the friendly and not the merchant's style'. Raughter, 'Letters of Lady Arabella', p. 176.

reference to a letter received, and the pleasure it gave, which shows she has had lessons in protocol. The process may also be observed in her passing on greetings to other adults in her mother's circle. Her younger brother Francis did the same, taking care to put the recipients of his greetings in the correct order in which they should be mentioned, that is, father, grandmother, aunt, sisters and younger brother. There is interesting evidence of Isabella's being aware of her social responsibilities to her family's employees in a letter wherein she carefully reported on the household: 'Mrs Dunn is very obliging and dresses all our meat in the way she thinks we like it best ... John is just as attentive to us as if you were here ... Miss Weyman does all she can to make us pleasant'.²⁹ Socialisation continued as the child was instructed in the ways in which meaning was conveyed by the outward appearance of a letter. Bishop Syngé instructed his daughter in the etiquette of using franks; abusing franks was a practice engaged in by all, despite being against the law. The Bishop did not feel the need to address this latter fact directly but did so indirectly. He told Alicia that the public reputation of the person providing the frank had to be protected by the user paying attention to the appearance of the letter. '[M]ake the packet up neatly that the Lord Chancellor's name be not disgraced' he warned her; he further instructed her not to send two similarly franked letters together and to avoid using politicians' franks when the parliament was not sitting.³⁰

That outward appearance was of prime importance is apparent in the fact that when children wrote letters they were rarely permitted to write the address on the outside, where it would be seen by all.³¹ The necessity to write and the acquisition of a good writing style - hand and punctuation - were the most important lessons, followed by the spacing and the opening and closing formulae. Among the Purdon letters is one from a child, possibly to a governess, executed in exquisite penmanship and as empty of content as can be imagined.³² The lesson is further driven home by the inclusion, at the bottom of this letter, of the barest elements of a letter – salutation, one line of text, signing off – by an even younger child, who was being taught both the obligation to write and the necessity of being able to write a better hand before he would be permitted a sheet of paper of his own. The message about the importance of outward appearances was hammered home by

²⁹ Letter from Francis Forward to his mother Eleanor, 19 September 1805. NLI MS 38,603/10. Letter from Isabella Forward to her mother Eleanor, 3 September 1802. Wicklow Papers NLI MS 38,603/1.

³⁰ Letters of Edward Syngé to his daughter Alicia, 30 May 1750. Legg, *Syngé letters*, p. 183.

³¹ Adults did this too, in earlier years, when the likelihood of poor handwriting was greater. Mary Vescei (née Muschamp), in letter to her husband Thomas, 11 May 1713, either used her 'best hand' for writing the address on the outside, or delegated the duty. De Vescei Papers NLI MS 38,876/1.

³² Letter from Anna Maria Battersby to Miss Porter, 4 July 1816. Purdon Papers TCD MS 4824/4.

Synge who used every occasion he could to draw moral lessons for Alicia. On one occasion he commented on the quality of the paper that Alicia and he both used, which he said 'is not the best kind, tho' gilt round the edges. So ladies with fair outsides are not always the most valuable'.³³ It was not the only time the Bishop, who constantly lectured Alicia on womanly behaviour, linked the appearance of a letter with the outward appearance of a woman. His letters include a unique instruction about the culturally-significant and gender-specific message publically conveyed by the outward appearance of a letter. He remarked, when Alicia was fourteen years old, that: 'I think it may be time now to give your hand[writing] a little more of a female turn', and in a later letter went so far as to write in the style which he wished Alicia to copy (figure 2). The lesson is lost when the letters are consulted in the published edition; in the original manuscript the difference between the Bishop's own style and what he deemed a 'female turn' appears to be a less frequent joining up of parts of words.³⁴

A discussion of the use of the letter in socialisation contributes to the question of social and familial formality. James Daybell's study of early modern women's letters lays much emphasis on the meanings conveyed by a letter's outward appearance, whether in the placing of the different textual elements on the page or in the materials used. Formality in the appearance, layout and language, of familiar letters in the seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries, reflects the formality which characterised personal relationships. This formality was reducing over time, as evidenced in family letters.³⁵ Nevertheless, there remained some epistolary usages which flag the existence of social sensitivities. There is a number of letters in the dataset from the Caldwell family in Fermanagh, where the tone deployed changed register when the author wished to acknowledge the recipient's elevated position. Matriarch Lady Ann Caldwell, who could write effectively to family members, albeit with small regard for spelling, enlisted the assistance of Lady Arabella Denny's more sophisticated pen when she wished to write to her own social superior.³⁶ Lady Ann herself commanded similar epistolary respect within her family. In

³³ Letters from Edward Synge to his daughter Alicia. Legg, *Synge Letters*, pp. 25, 70.

³⁴ Letters from Edward Synge to his daughter Alicia, 28 July and 7 August 1747. Legg, *Synge letters*, pp. 63, 70. TCD MS Deposit Synge letters 25, 28.

³⁵ James Daybell, ed., *Early-modern women's letter writing, 1450-1700* (Hampshire, 2001), p. 6. An essay in this book further suggests that women's use of letters contributed to the reduction of formality in writing. Women were on the whole less literate than men and their relative unfamiliarity with written texts led them to rely on current spoken discourse when constructing sentences; Alison Truelove, 'Commanding communications: the fifteenth century letters of the Stonor women', *ibid*, p. 53.

³⁶ Lady Ann Caldwell's petition to Duchess of Bedford in the hand of Arabella Denny, 10 November 1759. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B3/5/29.

the early years of their relationship her son-in-law, Colonel Samuel Bagshawe, was sufficiently concerned to observe strict epistolary formality to draft and re-draft his letters to her. James, Lady Ann's eldest son and the head of the family, wrote informally, although respectfully, to his mother, whereas the youngest son, whose behaviour displeased her, wrote in a highly formal register when trying to regain his mother's good opinion. Both men addressed her as 'Honoured Madam' but while Charles worried that, 'from your ladyship's letter ... I may despair of ever regaining either your affection, friendship or opinion', James tone is more easy and affectionate; he promised her 'fiddling and wild fowl' which she liked.³⁷ Parents had to teach their children dual standards: that what was suitable, even preferable, for family use was not acceptable behaviour outside of the family. Bishops Synge and Hort (Lady Elizabeth Caldwell's father) commented when either they, or their children, used small pieces of paper upon which to write their letters, rather than the more formal large sheet. Synge commented critically on his daughter using black wax to seal gilt-edged paper but acknowledged that he did it himself when he had to preserve the more correct red wax for letters 'which should go with exact decorum'.³⁸ In this, as in the unauthorised use of franks, he was teaching her the accommodations one might arrive at among friends, in contrast to the niceties which must be observed in other circumstances. Isabella Forward's letters provide examples of the increasing informality with which letters were being written by the end of the eighteenth century and of this dual standard. It is interesting to note that she was being instructed in the old-fashioned style, when it came to the formal elements, particularly the opening paragraph and the signing off, but the body of the letter was subject to fewer restrictions. The layout at the start of her letters is stately and structured in appearance; there is a fairly generous space, over an inch, between the address and date line and the salutation, and there is an inch before the first sentence, which is indented to almost the middle of the page. The first lines of the body of the letter were so formal, and so unlike the remainder, that it may be assumed that the young author had some guidance. In one letter Isabella began: 'I am extremely obliged to you for the two letters which I received from you. We are very much obliged to you for the affectionate manner <in

³⁷ Letter of Colonel Samuel Bagshawe to his mother-in-law, Lady Ann Caldwell, 16 July 1751. B2/3/243; letter of Charles Caldwell to his mother Lady Ann, 24 November 1762. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B3/5/35; letter from James Caldwell to his mother Lady Ann, 24 September 1751. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B3/5/16.

³⁸ Letter from Edward Synge to his daughter Alicia, 4 September 1751. Legg, *Synge letters*, p. 361.

which> you write to us and I hope we shall always endeavour to deserve it'.³⁹ The remainder of the text seems more under Isabella's own control, at least in tone, and the ends of the letters are sometimes too tightly packed to leave room for a graceful, well-spaced-out signing off such as was required in more genuinely formal letters. This shows that, while the appearance of formality was necessary to prove that one knew how to write a letter correctly, natural self-expression was allowed and even preferred within families. Daniel O'Connell beseeched his daughters to 'chat' to him in their letters rather than being 'stiff', and his daughter Ellen, in fun, promised 'never to be either dutiful or affectionate again'⁴⁰. Ellen had clearly learned the 'correct' way to write a letter but had become sufficiently skilled to be able to recognise and make fun of its dated characteristics. O'Connell requested their governess to let the girls compose their own letters and to write in English 'for the sake of having their genuine expressions'.⁴¹ Such letters reflect the state of social and family relationships as eloquently as the formal family letters of the early eighteenth century.

It is also noteworthy that letters between siblings were, while not completely without formality, much less formal than letters to parents, and the siblings more frequently used humour. Charles Tottenham made fun of early-teenaged sister Anne's arch adoption of a formal style. He responded: 'how dare you have the impertinence in trying to impose on my understanding by assuring me of the inexpressible pleasure you have in congratulating me on this occasion, and the great affection you bear me'.⁴² In a later letter, Anne prompted Charles, who was remiss about writing to their mother; when Charles thanked her for the prompt and said that he had written and 'asked pardon in a dutiful manner'; clearly they shared an attitude to outmoded forms of politeness.⁴³ Among the Clements papers is a school exercise copy where two sisters may be seen undergoing instruction.⁴⁴ It is an interesting record of the uses of letters in education and for the

³⁹ Letter from Isabella Forward to her mother Eleanor, 17 September 1802. Wicklow Papers NLI MS 38,603/9

⁴⁰ Letter from Ellen O'Connell to her father Daniel, 22 June 1822. O'Connell, *Correspondence*, vol 1, p. 401.

⁴¹ Letter Daniel O'Connell to his wife Mary, 11 August 1816; letter from Ellen O'Connell to her father Daniel, 22 June 1822. O'Connell, *Correspondence*, vol 2, pp. 109, 401.

⁴² Letter from Charles Tottenham to his sister Anne, 3 [Feb] 1789. La Touche letters TCD MS 11272/4.

⁴³ Letter from Charles Tottenham to his sister Anne, 10 November (1791). La Touche Papers TCD MS 11272/5.

⁴⁴ Exercise book of Elizabeth (d.1835) and Lousia Molesworth, c. 1764. Clements papers TCD MS 7297. Elizabeth's daughter Louisa Stewart m. Henry John Clements. The accounting exercises in the book, in French and English, are couched in gender-specific terms, requiring the students to work out the cost of various household articles such as lace, coffee and raisins.

education of girls generally; it shows that the sisters were transcribing published letters in French to practise letter writing, handwriting and the French language all at once. The text - apparently letters to the queen of France - was not particularly suited to a young person (or a female person); the girls also had to transcribe a text in French about the education of girls and were required to learn how to address letters to the Pope and a cardinal prince. The manuscript provides an invaluable glimpse of the reaction of a child for whom the level of formality in these sample letters was risible, even in 1764. One of the girls mocked the pomposity of the text (and maybe relieved a little boredom) by inserting herself delightfully into what began as a transcription or translation of a letter to one Monseur Chavigny: 'in short to make you comprehend I would consent to do sums four hours every night with the disagreeable Mr Guyenet for to have the honour of seeing you ...'. Eleven-year-old Henry Clements, in France in the early 1830s, wrote to an older family employee, Mrs Bell, whom he addressed as Granny, and took childish delight in telling her that his father had eaten snails. The brief letter includes a small sketch of a man who is probably meant to be Henry's father.⁴⁵ For Henry, as for his grandmother Elizabeth Molesworth, and for Charles Tottenham, having mastered the medium, its rules and its physical demands were no longer a barrier to fluency; it became a simple tool for their self-expression and they, unsurprisingly, began to introduce themselves and their world-view as the subject of their written records.

Letters as an instrument of identity-formation

Scholarship on American the correspondence of poor emigrants addresses the complexity of using 'individualist literary forms' to understand the experiences of subordinate groups.⁴⁶ The growing interest in such documents' roles in 'affective bonding' or the stimulation of 'self-reflection, a necessary prerequisite for constructing ... personal identity' is enlightening, for present purposes, if the word 'child' or indeed 'woman' is substituted for the words 'poor emigrant'. All letters are evidence of relationships in action. Observing children acting within a relationship is invaluable to the history of childhood experience, because it was through her close relationships that a child found the material out of which she would construct her identity. Most children's letters in the dataset are to parents. This relationship may seen working, though not as a top-down

⁴⁵ Letter from Henry T. Clements (b. 1820) to 'Granny' Bell, 4 November 1831. Clements Papers TCD MS 7337/10.

⁴⁶ Bruce S. Elliott, David A. Gerber, Suzanne M. Sinke, eds., *Letters across borders: the epistolary practice of international migrants* (New York, 2006), pp. 18-19.

process of authoritarian instruction and youthful obedience. Instead, children's actions in the process can be discerned as they 'appropriate' instruments, made available by their culture, to express their identity.⁴⁷ As an illustration of this process we shall look at the evidence presented by the mature characteristics, both of language and subjects discussed, that are notable features of many children's letters. Adults were children's key role models in their search for their place in society. It is clear that children began at an early age, in the absence of an attractive adolescent culture, to imitate adult behaviour to distinguish themselves from their younger siblings. The behaviour most admired and the identity most revered were those of an adult. Generational boundaries were less distinct within families; transitions to adult life were not narrowly age-related, and children were understood to become adults the moment they took on an adult role, regardless of their age. As Tamara Harevan has noted, 'more intensive interaction among different age groups within family and community' occurred 'providing a greater sense of continuity and interdependence among people and among generations at various points in the life course'.⁴⁸ It was considered desirable, in the context of the need for continuing education, that children would spend time in adult company. Bishop Synge told Alicia that 'it is thought wise and edifying, to young persons especially to keep company wiser and older than themselves. And it is certainly right to converse for the most part with such'.⁴⁹

The letters of Quaker Margaret Pike make the integration of the generations clear. From her letters to Mary Shackleton it seems that there was a lot of interaction among the generations in terms of visiting, shared interests, and in writing letters. Many of Margaret's letters contain apologies from her mother for her failure to write to the much younger Mary Shackleton. Other letters contained dictated messages from Mrs Pike's mother Mrs Christy to Mary Shackleton, made possible by the fact that mother and daughter were sitting in the same room together.⁵⁰ Margaret herself sent her thanks, through Mary, to Mary's father Abraham Shackleton for poetry he had sent. Margaret frequently sent Mary reports about the actions and well-being of the older family

⁴⁷ Willemijn, Ruberg, *Conventional correspondence*, p. 5.

⁴⁸ Tamara Harevan, 'Ageing and generational relations: a historical and life-course perspective', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 20 (1994) 437-61 quoted in Joanne Bailey, *Parenting in England 1760-1830 emotion, identity, and generation* (Oxford, 2012), p. 169.

⁴⁹ Letter from Edward Synge to his daughter Alicia, 11 August 1749. Legg, *Synge*, p. 149. Mary McNeill also quotes English poet and literary critic Ann Taylor's (1782-1866) description of her home in Lavenham where separation of children and parents was unusual and 'parents and children formed happily but one circle'. McNeill, *Little Tom Drennan*, p. 107.

⁵⁰ There are several indications that letter-writing was not a solitary activity. Maria Edgeworth commented on the fact. So too did James Stopford. Courtown Papers TCD MS 11183/V/119a-b/7, 10.

members of the family and sent Mary messages from Margaret's grandfather. Margaret cited her mother's approval for her actions, even as a grown woman; her mother came with her temporarily (as did her brother and cousin) when Margaret removed to her new married home, and she happily depicted in her letters the close relationship that developed between her mother and her son-in-law, Margaret's husband William. In one letter Margaret excused the errors in the letter by saying, 'I write in the parlour, my mother and her son William [Margaret's husband] are here also, and they are seldom silent when together, she talks to us of being too fond of each other, but I fancy there is almost as much danger of herself'.⁵¹ In the letters between Anne La Touche and her sons, despite the fact that the boys were quite young, the bulk of the letters was taken up with accounts of the whereabouts and well-being of the senior members of the family. So much was this a characteristic of letters in some families that Charles Tottenham, Anne's brother, when writing to her as a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old girl, appears to be making fun of it. He wrote to her: 'You do not mention anything about your appetite, let me know if your legs swell and if your breathing is better', and 'tell me how you are if your legs swell your complexion returned, your breathing better and your appetite good'.⁵²

When children, in their letters, offered to their parents' evidence of their adherence to parental rules and their adoption of parental concerns, they showed not only that they had internalised the adults' instructions, but that parental approbation was important to the children. Isabella Forward was eager to inform her mother that she, Isabella, was adhering to maternal ground rules, and not only in writing letters and reporting on schoolwork. She had to assure her mother that none of her more enjoyable activities were interfering, in Mrs Forward's absence, with her studies; that she and her siblings did not stay up or out later than was usually allowed; and that they did not take any more wine or fruit when at a neighbour's house for dinner than Mrs Forward would have permitted had she been there. The fact that Isabella went to considerable efforts – even canvassing neighbourly opinion – to ensure that her behaviour, while awaiting parental imprimatur to accept an invitation, was correct indicates the extent to which she identified obedience as part of her identity and part of her relationship with her mother. By telling her mother this tale Isabella confirmed that her mother's good opinion was

⁵¹ Letter from Margaret Pike to Mary Shackleton, 12mo 22nd 1781. Ballitore Papers NLI MS 5987 pp. 15-18.

⁵² Letters from Charles Tottenham to his sister Anne, 10 November (1791) and 2 December 1792. La Touche papers TCD MS 11272/5, 11.

important to her. In this way letters function as a ‘technology of the self’ for a young writer who could establish and articulate her own identity through choosing behaviours designed to attract parental or other adult approval. Letters allowed her to choose how she represented her to others, thereby delineating her own image of herself. So much was obedience the channel through which pleasure was given and received that Eleanor Forward included in her letters reports on her younger brother Francis’ good behaviour to please her parents. She wrote, ‘he never cries when he is called to say his lessons but often comes without being sent for ... [He] does not wet his feet or sit in the grass because he says his papa desired him not [to]’.⁵³ Isabella used her parents’ expectations in regard to her education to guide her identity construction; she said as much when she wrote: ‘I find both pleasure and profit in reading, particularly when I think that you and Mamma will be pleased with my improvement’. That she was anxious to get the full credit she deserved for her academic achievements is evidenced by a note her governess Miss Weyman added to one of Isabella’s letters to her father: ‘Miss Forward is afraid that you Sir will think that the last letter was not of her own dictating but I can assure you she wrote it without the least assistance.’⁵⁴ The instructional models the Forward family provided for their daughter were found to be congenial to the young girl. Isabella responded to positive female images in the classical tradition that her family admired. She quoted a line from Homer to her mother in response to the news that Mrs Howard had just had a new baby: ‘So from her Babe when slumber seals his eye, the watchful mother wafts th’ envenomed fly’.⁵⁵ Eleven-year-old Isabella was offering to her parents evidence that she too admired the cultural norms that they respected, not only by learning the text but by introducing it into normal conversation in imitation of her parents’ conversational style. It also highlights the overlap between academic instruction and general behaviour; respect for education was part of the shared language Isabella and her parents used to communicate. The concern for the well-being of the family, the household and the estate was another shared language. Isabella reported on the harvest and sent messages from the farm steward to her father; she was ‘joyful’ at the news of her mother’s

⁵³ Letter of Eleanor Forward to her mother Eleanor, 17 September 1802. Wicklow Papers NLI MS 38,603/10. In comparison with the freedom afforded Tom Drennan by his aunt Martha McTier in the interests of keeping him fearless and independent, Francis Forward’s obedience marks a change in the amount of control to which children were beginning to be exposed.

⁵⁴ Letter from Isabella Forward to her father William, 25 October 1802. Wicklow Papers NLI 38,603/9

⁵⁵ Letters from Isabella Forward to her parents, 25 Oct 1802 and 5 Nov 1802. Wicklow Papers NLI MS 38,603/9

being ‘brought to bed’ and wrote to her about the hire of a nurse; she sent news of the younger children and of her grandmother’s facial spasms.

The La Touche letters also contain examples of this rush towards adulthood. Charles La Touche, at the age of about fourteen, gave advice to his sister Fanny, who was only few years younger. He criticised her re-reading ‘story books’ or concentrating on a restricted library (which included Shakespeare) because of the time it took: ‘we have not so much time to spend in this world’, he said, ‘if you do not try and gain information while you are young and have time, perhaps when you are old you will have none.’⁵⁶ Clearly he knew of his mother’s regret, quoted above, that she had not had time as an adult to keep up her interest in science. Writing a letter like this (which is also an example of child-to-child delivery of education) may have been experienced as a rite of passage for a boy of this age, marking his movement into a different stage of life. In Ruberg’s study of Dutch letter-writing and its role in socialising children, the author draws attention to a specific use of letters in that culture. Formal letters were traditionally sent by adults to children on special occasions, such as on the occasion of their leaving home to go to school or at religious confirmation. While these began to be mocked as clichéd, they were also recognised as ‘performative’, in that their arrival remained necessary to the fulfilment of the occasion.⁵⁷ This usage was not replicated in Ireland⁵⁸ or England, but there are echoes of it in Charles La Touche’s letter to his sister. He laid claim to being recognised as her superior by speaking to her in the manner of an adult. It is quite possible that she may not have accepted this were they physically together; he ‘performed’ his new role on paper, where she could not interrupt. Charles’ brother David La Touche, in his early twenties, wrote to Charles in terms indistinguishable from those that a parent might employ. He addressed the boy as ‘my dearest child’, and advised him on how to deal with bullies in school, exhorted him to attend to his religious duties, and encouraged him to improve in Latin.⁵⁹ This is reminiscent of the manner in which he spoke to his

⁵⁶ Letter from Charles La Touche to his sister Fanny, 22 May 1824. La Touche Papers TCD MS 11272/327. The story books Charles names include Arnaud Berquin’s *L’ami des enfants* which promotes reading among children and close daily contact among parents and children.

⁵⁷ Ruberg, *Conventional correspondence* chp. 5.

⁵⁸ There was definitely an epistolary ‘etiquette’ around engagements and marriage in Ireland. A newly-engaged woman would be expected to write to her fiancé’s family. Eleanor La Touche wrote, and sent a gift, in response to the first letter she received from her prospective daughter-in-law, Anne Tottenham, shortly after her engagement. La Touche Papers TCD MS 11273/23, 33. Elizabeth Caldwell sent a formal letter to her husband’s sister shortly after her wedding in December 1753. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B2/3/316.

⁵⁹ Letter from David Charles la Touche to his brother Charles, 11 October 1823. La Touche Papers TCD MS 11272/323.

mother, mimicking his father's tone and words. Some of his letters to his mother Anne, if the signature had been absent, could confidently be assigned to his father both because of the content and the tone of voice. It is telling, in terms of identity-formation and cultural transmission, that the La Touche father and son were very close. David's identity formation was influenced by his love for his father. In later years he was estranged from his mother, partly for the reason that his mother seems to have treated her husband poorly. John David La Touche and his wife Anne lived much apart and she answered many of his protest letters with silence (an effective epistolary strategy children will have learned to recognise). Their oldest son David (b. circa 1800) learned to 'scold' his mother for this behaviour, because he was closely involved with his father's correspondence, acting as an amanuensis. They often wrote joint letters, with David sometimes finishing his father's letters by taking dictation, on one occasion literally picking up his father's letter mid-word. In 1819 La Touche senior wrote crossly to Anne, who had yet again neglected to write: 'I am without any letter since I last wrote which has rather surprised and disappointed me. I take care to write ... and you should do the same. I suppose if I omitted a post I should not hear the last of it for a long time. David joins with me in this reprimand and expects to teach his wife a better lesson'.⁶⁰ David had earlier written, in a joint letter with his father: 'Papa and I are both very angry with you for being so long without writing to us. Papa was very uneasy lest you should be ill however as he means to scold you himself in the end of this letter I will say no more about it'.⁶¹ La Touche here is referring to the rules of epistolary conduct possibly to make his wife feel guilty; since a missing letter often signalled a serious problem, refusing to write, as a communicative strategy, was not a minor issue. On another occasion he remarked that he was tempted to behave as she did and 'to be huffed by your silence and not write this post'.⁶²

In behaving in a way that to modern eyes seems very mature for young people, children were simply responding to what their adult family members expected of them. At a time when vocational and marital issues were considered at a young age,⁶³ children were expected to identify early with the concerns of the family. The fact that Daniel

⁶⁰ Letter from John David La Touche to his wife Anne, 18 September 1819. La Touche Papers TCD MS 11272/237

⁶¹ Joint letter from John David la Touche, and his son David, to Anne La Touche, 21 Sept 1818. La Touche Papers TCD MS 11272/224.

⁶² Letter from John David La Touche to his wife Anne, 15 October 1806. La Touche Papers TCD MS 11272/137.

⁶³ Of his six-year-old son O'Connell wrote 'John ... is a darling infant and will make a most excellent priest'. Letter from Daniel O'Connell to his wife Mary, 2 October 1816. O'Connell, *Correspondence*, vol 2, p. 121.

O'Connell's twelve-year old son Maurice wrote about his younger brother Morgan in a manner more like a teacher than a pre-teen merely reflects the manner in which O'Connell wrote to Maurice. Maurice wrote to his father; 'Morgan I hear is mending rapidly but, however, I think a lecture from Mr L'Estrange would do him a great deal of good'. Later Daniel asked Maurice for a report on Morgan's health urging him to 'be candid and explicit ... [and say] whether the physician apprehends any danger'.⁶⁴ Not only were children involved in adult concerns, but it is clear that adult conversations were not tempered in response to the children's youth. Daniel O'Connell spoke freely of his concerns to his children. In one letter he moved easily from telling his fourteen-year-old daughter: 'I love your pigeons, sweet Kate, because they belong to my children', to writing 'there is nothing but grief and woe in Kerry. The people are starving and the gentry in bitter want. No rents, no money, the fever and famine raging'.⁶⁵ In another letter, to ten-year old Ellen, he mixed compliments for her last letter, and tender messages to her mother, with a reference to a recent 'very bloody assizes' at which 'seven men were capitally convicted' and likely to be executed.⁶⁶ The O'Connell's children were, unsurprisingly, politically aware at a very young age. Morgan at sixteen years was recorded as being 'as sanguine as ever in the Patriot cause'. Of John 'a sweet boy' of only eleven years, his mother wrote that he is 'quite an enthusiast about the General [John Devereux] ... he begs to take the name Devereux in Confirmation'.⁶⁷ Here is another example of a child's choosing an adult role model. Mary O'Connell noted with pride how her ten-year-old was plied with champagne, in honour of his father, at an electoral victory celebration in 1820. It was not only the boys who identified with their father's concerns; Kate 'was overcome to tears' of pride at the honour shown her father on one occasion, and her father acknowledged the grown-up nature of one of his letters to her in saying 'You see what a politician I am making of my own fair Kate'.⁶⁸ The proximity of children to adults, and the absence of the concept that any conversations might be unsuitable to their hearing, are confirmed in other accounts of children: two-year-old Maurice

⁶⁴ Letters between Daniel O'Connell and his son Maurice, O'Connell, 13 January and 3 April 1816. O'Connell, *Correspondence*, vol 2, pp. 79, 94.

⁶⁵ Letter from Daniel O'Connell to his daughter Kate, 30 May 1822. O'Connell, *Correspondence*, vol 2, p. 393.

⁶⁶ Letter from Daniel O'Connell to his daughter Ellen, 1 April 1816. O'Connell, *Correspondence*, vol 2, p. 92.

⁶⁷ John Devereux (c.1778-1860) a 1798 veteran and a general in Simón Bolívar's army, fighting for the liberation of South American states under Spanish rule.

⁶⁸ Letters between Daniel O'Connell and his wife Mary, 4 January, 14 March, 3 and 4 April 1820. Letter from Daniel O'Connell to his daughter Kate, 27 May 1822. O'Connell, *Correspondence*, vol 2, pp. 229, 242, 253-4, 393.

O'Connell was reported commenting on his aunt Ellen's pregnancy, and on his calling his mother a bitch.⁶⁹ Similar language was cited above being approvingly quoted by Martha McTier coming from her little nephew Tom Drennan, and even the Bishop of Elphin, in the 1750s, told a number of stories to his daughter which were broader than one might expect. One of the bishop's stories derived its humour from a very young girl's knowledge of the sexually immoral behaviour of Lord Kingsborough; another turned on the mispronunciation of a key word. 'Where are you going?', the Bishop asked a guest who was leaving the room. 'I am going to p-ss' was the reply the possibly tipsy Mr Hughes gave as he left to find a Mr Pitts.⁷⁰

There is one other element of this which gives insight into the specific world of female children, and which draws both on the 'rush to adulthood' and the conversations to which they were exposed. From their earliest years, girls were exposed to relentless references to their future as wives. Lady Elizabeth Caldwell's daughter Betty was only about ten years old when her god-mother Lady Aylmer teased her about choosing a mate. Mary O'Connell told her husband how 'amused and gratified' his seven-year-old daughter Kate was with his saying that she 'would be an inestimable present to her future husband'.⁷¹ Molly Burton, niece of Katherine Connolly, at 11 years old, was bitterly disappointed by the birth of her brother which instantly took reduced her dowry by thousands. Young as she was, she knew exactly what to do and vowed to stick even closer to her adoring aunt, in the expectation of a portion.⁷²

Letters and the management of relationships

There were other areas in which children's identities were formed by close contact with adults. They also picked up lessons about emotional behaviour. The revelations made in this area of youthful experience are among the most striking in this study of letter-writing because they bring even pre-literate children into view. Children's engagement with epistolary technology in relation to their emotional well-being is a point at which the technology is seen at its most intricate. It is not surprising to find that children were instructed in emotional expression; parents still do this. Bishop Synge did it explicitly,

⁶⁹ Letters between Daniel O'Connell and his wife Mary, 25 July and 16 August 1805. O'Connell, *Correspondence*, vol 1, pp. 141, 143.

⁷⁰ McNeill, *Little Tom Drennan*, p. 40. Letters from Edward Synge to his daughter Alicia, 4 July 1747 and 25 July 1749. Legg, *Synge letters*, pp. 48, 142.

⁷¹ Letter from Lady Elizabeth Aylmer to Lady Elizabeth Caldwell, January 1777. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B3/30/31. Letter from Mary O'Connell to her husband Daniel, 25 March 1815. O'Connell, *Correspondence*, vol 2, p. 537.

⁷² Wilson, *Elite women*, p. 29.

guided by his belief that strong feelings posed a danger to his daughter's health. 'There is scarcely any lesson more useful to be this learned, than this,' he told her. 'Not to be over fond of any person or thing in this world'. Restraining her affections would, he admitted, produce less joy but promised 'a great deal less sorrow', arising from the 'melancholy contingencies' of life to which everyone was exposed.⁷³ It is also accepted that 'emotionology' - the cultural standards around the feeling and expression of emotions - changed over the long eighteenth century, and the indulgence of intense expressions of emotion became normal. A rare glimpse of the transition in process can be spotted in the diary of Tipperary woman Mary Mathew, written thirty years later than Synge's letter, in 1770. She was distressed to see the Earl of Westmeath, trying to put on a brave face and making small talk the day after his wife died. However, she wavered between the 'false shame' of 'striving to conceal our feelings' and being thought insensible by insisting on talking to the earl of his loss.⁷⁴

More interesting than reading behavioural guidance in letters is the discovery of children's use of letters in emotional management. So acute was their understanding of the function of letters in this regard that they sought involvement in the practice before they could write. We will also see how, the letter as a physical artefact was instrumental in the emotional expression of young children. These little-commented-on but compelling usages are made available to the historian because of the self-referential characteristic of the epistolary genre. Other people's engagement with the 'cultural behemoth' of letter-writing was a regular topic for inclusion in letters. It can be demonstrated that the smallest children understood something of the communicative power of letter-writing, and exercised their will by deploying this to their own ends. Isabella Forward's early nineteenth-century letters to her mother included messages of affection from her much younger siblings. For example, she took dictation from her little sister Mary, who ordered her to write that 'Mary loves dear mamma in Mary's very heart'. The value to the younger child of being able to do this is attested to in an earlier letter from Isabella to Mrs Forward in which she reported: 'Mary goes every day to the drawing room door, at her usual time of being with you, and calls Mamma, but when it is not opened for her she goes away, and says no Mamma not there'.⁷⁵ Mary Forward was too young to comprehend the

⁷³ Letter from Edward Synge to his daughter Alicia, 27 August 1751. Legg, *Synge correspondence*, p. 355.

⁷⁴ Maria Luddy, ed., *The diary of Mary Mathew* (Tipperary, 1991), p. 9.

⁷⁵ Letters of Isabella Forward to her mother Eleanor, 3 and 14 September 1802. Wicklow Papers NLI MS 38,603/1, 9.

duration of her mother's absence but she sought her out where she knew she could find her, first physically and then virtually. By sending her mother a message Mary showed her grasp of the psychological function of personal correspondence. The same letter contains another record, fascinating when we consider the almost complete lack of first-hand records for the very young. In the postscript to her letter Isabella refers to an enclosure that she described as 'a bit of paper which is a letter from Francis he wished so much to send it'. Francis, born in January 1797, at five years old was too young to be expected to write letters, but he too already knew how to use communications technology to collapse the distance between himself and his mother. That possibly blank or scribbled-upon piece of paper is eloquent of the real value of letters, beyond the prosaic text they carry, and of a child's recognition of this.

Francis was not alone in this behaviour; Daniel O'Connell's two-year-old son reportedly 'regularly gets a pen to write to Dan'.⁷⁶ O'Connell exploited this urge, when his son was older, to encourage him in his lessons, by saying he, O'Connell, 'would write to him the moment I hear that he can read'. This was not sufficient for the seven-year-old who promptly dictated a letter to his father via his sister Ellen. William Drennan also promised his five-year-old son that he would send more letters to the boy when he knew Tom could read and write handwriting well. Tom's aunt Martha reported on the child's displeasure when a letter was read out which did not include a reference to him; she also reported that his reading was improving and that he wanted his mother to write to him.⁷⁷ Young Billy D'Alton, about four years old in 1824 and sitting with his mother as she wrote a letter to her husband, insisted on adding a line himself saying 'poor Papa's boy sends his love to him' (figure 1). Billy told his mother to add that he had written this himself, although it is clear from the writing that Mrs D'Alton was assisting. Catherine then wrote that her even younger daughter, two-year-old Eliza, would write another time but the little girl had other ideas and Catherine had to give in to Eliza's insistence on being included. These children had seen that individuals, who were important to one another, expressed this through writing letters.⁷⁸ They were not willing to wait to get involved.

⁷⁶ Letter from Mary O'Connell to her husband Daniel, [3 May 1805]. O'Connell, *Correspondence*, vol 1, p. 138.

⁷⁷ Letter from Daniel O'Connell to his wife Mary, 27 December 1822. O'Connell, *Correspondence*, vol 2, p. 417. Letter from Maurice O'Connell to his father Daniel, 17 and 19 February 1823. O'Connell, *Correspondence*, vol 2, p. 439. McNeill, *Little Tom Drennan*, pp. 91, 96.

⁷⁸ Letter from Catherine D'Alton to her husband John, 4 August 1824. TCD MS 2327/82.

We are thus permitted a rare glimpse of very youthful self-assertion; these children were not merely the passive object of parental attention but had the ability, though epistolary practice, to generate and direct parental attention to meet their emotional needs. The process of writing the letter, and reading the reply, made absence more bearable. They could force their absent parent to pay attention to them, knowing that the rules of the practice usually obliged the parent to respond. Third-party narratives about other children's experience in relation to letters also give powerful insight into youthful emotional lives. The recounting of the pleasure the receipt of a letter had given, gave pleasure itself, and children were aware of this. Daniel O'Connell, on receipt of six-year-old Maurice's first letter, wrote to his wife that he 'cannot describe ... the kind of sensation it has given me'; Maurice was told this and he requested a reply directed to himself. Mary O'Connell urged her husband to comply and, when he did, Daniel asked Mary to recount 'how my darling Maurice received my letter to him. Describe to me ... his feelings just as he showed them'.⁷⁹ There can be no doubt that Mary explained Daniel's request to her children, further entrenching in their minds the complex significance of sending letters. Describing a person's response to a letter was a form of reassurance, to the absent author, that their presence was missed. Lady Ann Caldwell several times lectured her daughter Catherine on the wifely requirement to show gratitude to her husband. When Colonel Samuel Bagshawe was abroad on military service in 1755 Lady Ann reported to him his wife's 'ecstasy upon the receipt and perusal of your letters; not to be described; which if you had been an invisible witness would have given you the utmost pleasure'.⁸⁰

Another third-party exchange shows the strength of the emotional response elicited by the letter as an artefact rather than as part of a practice. There is an account of eight-year-old Kate O'Connell's refusal to let her mother open a letter from her father, Daniel, until Kate had repeatedly kissed it. Her sister Ellen described Kate kissing and hugging her father's letter, 'she even carries it to bed with her every night'.⁸¹ It will have meant a lot to a little girl to be able, uninterrupted and uncontested, to revel in her own

⁷⁹ Letters between Daniel O'Connell and his wife Mary, 12, 14 and 19 March 1809. O'Connell, *Correspondence*, vol 1, pp. 191-3.

⁸⁰ Letter from Lady Ann Caldwell to Colonel Samuel Bagshawe, 26 September 1755. Lady Ann's lecturing of her daughter about correct wifely behaviour, and her reassurance to her son-in-law regarding how dutiful a wife Catherine was, may have arisen from the fact that her other daughter Anne had separated from her husband and was not living in an orderly manner. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B2/3/277.

⁸¹ Letter from Mary O'Connell to her husband Daniel, 25 March 1815. Letter from Ellen O'Connell to her father Daniel, O'Connell, 27 March 1817. O'Connell, *Correspondence*, vol 2, pp. 24, 140.

private relationship with her adored father; she was one of many children of this often-absent, charismatic man. Being the sole owner of a piece of paper on which he inscribed her name, and in which he spoke only to her, provided her with an emotional experience which could be replicated in no other way. In Isabella Forward's case, her younger siblings were so thrilled by receiving their mother's epistolary kisses, which Isabella conveyed to them, that they joyfully kissed Isabella in response. In this action of reading aloud, Isabella herself became, like the letter, a metonym for their mother, a conduit for her attention, a surrogate for her presence, and she was treated, as a letter sometimes was, in the manner of a relic. In the D'Alton letters there are accounts of small children kissing letters, or touching their tongues to the paper, at a spot marked by their mother, which kiss was to be taken off by the lips of the father upon receiving the letter. Both D'Alton parents refer to the mother Catherine's habit of keeping each successive letter on her person until the next one arrived; at night she put the newest letter on her husband's pillow or under her own.⁸² In seeing this, and hearing the explanation for it, the D'Alton children learned that strength of feeling was a cherished part of family relationships and they learned diverse ways to signify this. It reveals how enmeshed were the lives of children and parents – sending messages, reading out letters, observing people read letters, which not only taught the youthful observers to adopt adult language and concerns, but it also exposed them to the kind of behaviour and language use considered normal between married couples.⁸³ This may be one of the most revealing insights afforded by evidence of children's experience of epistolarity because it catches a moment of cultural transmission from mother to child. This is evidence of the impact of women had on wider society by reproducing in their children what they considered to be appropriate emotional behaviour. Observing this transmission from mother to child elucidates the level of 'public' impact of the actions of the 'private' woman, and the processes by which this impact was effected.

⁸² Letters between Catherine D'Alton and her husband John, 5 September 1818 and 25 March 1823. TCD MS 2327/5, 114. Charlotte Scott did the same with her husband's letters, c. 1823. TCD MS 11183/V/199a-b/61.

⁸³ This association between letters and the beloved is a trope in romantic novels. For example Delariviere Manly's epistolary novel *Court Intrigues* (1711) contains the line: 'Your letter was my bedfellow last night; I laid it upon my breast where my heart beat it a thousand welcomes'. Quoted in Rebecca Earle, *Epistolary selves*, p 6. In his history of the epistolary novel Thomas Beebee has written that the fictional letter often 'exceeds' its role as narrative vehicle and becomes itself the object of interest. 'Letters are kissed, wept upon, eaten, beaten, held to the bosom and caressed in place of the lovers who sent them'. Thomas Beebee, *Epistolary fiction in Europe, 1500-1850* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 50.

Recent scholarship on the public effect of women as educational theorists ‘raises theoretical issues about the “imprint of specifically feminine thought and female morality on public consciousness”’. This ‘imprint’ was made through increasing numbers of women publishing educational theory guides, specifically for women’s use. This genre bolstered respect for the role of the woman as educator and promulgated a specific view of women. It was clear to the public that the schoolroom was where young minds were formed; it was a site of transmission for the varying belief systems that form society’s ideological apparatus.⁸⁴ One of these systems of belief encompassed personal relationships and emotional expression. The schoolroom, as a separate academic space was not, as we have seen, the limit of where and what children learned. Women ‘conveyed the legacy of their cultural experience’⁸⁵ through modelling behaviour in the way they lived their lives and expressed their feelings.

The outcome of this ‘cultural transmission’, in terms of emotional expression learned from one’s mother, may be observed in changing adult behaviour. One of the most striking things to be observed in the letters in the database spanning the turn of the nineteenth century is the marked difference in the way married couples wrote to one another compared to couples in the eighteenth century. This will be discussed in chapter six but one example will be given here. Daniel O’Connell spoke quite freely in his letters to his children about his love for their mother. Daniel was clearly sending messages to his wife in his letters to the children. He wrote to 11-year old Morgan ‘give ... my love beyond expression in softness and constancy, to your sweet mother, the best darling that ever blessed man with delightful children’. Mary O’Connell wrote that ‘nothing amuses Ellen and Kate more than reporting your expressions of affection for their mother who indeed feels most grateful for the manner you ... write and speak of me to our dear children’.⁸⁶ This was the leading edge of cultural transmission in which the O’Connell parents reproduced their ideal of husband and wife, father and mother, and how they should address one another, in the minds of their children. The D’Altons were also open about their affections for one another and it may safely be assumed that the children, who had been involved in their mother’s letter writing practice, were exposed to these affectionate conversations.

⁸⁴ Hilton, *Women and the shaping of the nation’s young*, pp. 3, 223.

⁸⁵ Margaret King, *How mothers shaped successful sons and created world history: the school of infancy* (New York, 2001).

⁸⁶ Letter of Daniel O’Connell to his son Morgan, 6 August 1816; letter of Mary O’Connell to her husband, Daniel, 14 July 1817, O’Connell, *Correspondence*, vol 2, pp. 106, 155.

Conclusion

It must have been deeply satisfying for those early historians of women who, having gone back over the ‘usual suspects’ in terms of historical records, found that women’s voices could be heard loud and clear if their ear was attuned. We may feel the same satisfaction now, upon realising that children’s voices may also be heard and amplified through the particular medium of the personal letter.

The letters in this chapter have been subjected to the fullest range of interpretive methodology the genre can accommodate. This close scrutiny of the genre has provided an object lesson on the impact that a sensitive approach to the reading of letters, as a genre, can achieve. Far from being stilted vehicles for adult-mediated texts, historical children’s letters, untouched until now, are a revelation. Given to children as part of their academic and social education, these ‘epistolary natives’ used letters to enable self-expression, self-assertion, identity construction, self-expression in emotions and astute emotional management. We must now consider the impact such children had on the modernisation of the individual and the Irish family from the early nineteenth century. In terms of evidence for the history of education in Ireland, it may be seen that such ‘trivial and ephemeral’ records, as letters were previously thought to be, provide key evidence in showing the ‘fluid and various’ processes by which education was delivered. The eighteenth-century attitude to education dispensed with boundaries between school room and home, and between home and wider society. The significance of all this to the history of Irish women is significant, not least in terms of the insight it gives to female children’s experience of their mothers as role models.

Chapter 5 Servants

Of the three thematic chapters considered here, the subject of servants is the one which remains most thoroughly in the shadows. Two recent surveyors of the scene have established the outlines of the subject; it now remains to fill in some of the detail.¹ The service industry in Ireland was a major employer and the principal employer of women. It was also a significant constituent of social culture; all families, for whom records survive in Ireland, employed servants; domestic establishments of any sophistication were completely depended upon paid assistants; families with both country and city houses could not operate without them; and the hospitality 'industry' assumed their labour and expertise. Studies of the history of service elsewhere suggest that most servants worked, not for the gentry or the middle class, but for artisans and retailers.² Records which might corroborate this do not survive for eighteenth-century Ireland,³ but awareness that this was the case increases the urgency of the need for a study of the industry. Service was not a 'monolithic phenomenon unchanging over time'; the word 'servant' is almost meaningless as an occupational description without reference to its circumstances.⁴ An examination of the subject will throw up questions, if not answers, about a number of important areas of social, economic and domestic history. It is an access point into the study of family life, into the lives of women as employers and employees, into the lives of children and adolescents, and into the lives of lower-class men and lower-class Protestants. Servants are the most visible members of communities otherwise poorly recorded and, given their numerical strength, information regarding them adds necessary detail to the country's historical social profile. A study of them will also provide evidence of the interaction and integration of the different elements from which this profile was composed.

The demographic implications are enormous; even a conservative estimate of the number of servant-employing households, and of the numbers they employed, produces

¹ Barnard, *A new anatomy*, pp. 294-306; O'Dowd, *A history of women*, pp. 133-38.

² Meldrum, *Domestic service and gender*, p. 74.

³ Hints may be found here and there. In David Dickson, "'No Scythians here': women and marriage in seventeenth-century Ireland", in MacCurtain and O'Dowd, eds., *Women in early-modern Ireland* there is a reference to a transplantation certificate for a widow with 2 cows, 3 ploughs of garrans, and two acres who has two women and one male servant (p. 228). In S.J. Connolly's, 'Family love and marriage: some evidence from the eighteenth century', in the same work, a passing reference is made to the 3rd baron Kingston 'marrying his brother's poultry-woman's servant (p279). The mid-eighteenth century census of Elphin records Catholic labourers employing servants, and even servants employing servants. Marie-Louise Legg, ed., *Census of Elphin 1747*, (Dublin, 2004), pp. 48, 100.

⁴ Bridget Hill, *Servants: English domestics in the eighteenth century*, (Oxford, 1996), p. 16.

a figure for employees in the hundreds of thousands.⁵ There were just over 100,000 Protestant families in Ireland in the 1730s and just over 200,000 Catholic families; the population almost doubled before the end of the century. Despite Ireland's sparser population and slower urban development, if British examples are used the probability is that between 5 and 10 percent of the population at any one time were engaged in the business of supplying domestic service. Barnard notes numbers of 10 – 15 per cent acknowledging the distortion caused by conflating the numbers of agricultural workers and domestic servants. L.A. Clarkson's study of Armagh, in 1770, found numbers of servant-employing households to be noticeable smaller than the average in England, whereas the numbers in the census for Carrick, in 1791, and in Whitsun's 1798 census of Dublin, seem to match Barnard's proposed figures.⁶

Becoming conscious of the social diversity of both the employers and employees prohibits the making of generalised statements about the experience of service; the popular upstairs-downstairs model, tinged as it is in Ireland with suggestions of colonial oppression, cannot describe the experience of all workers. The subject of service is relevant to this thesis because of the numbers of servants who were women, and because the availability of service employment had been effecting change in lower-class women's lives since the seventeenth century. It is also significant in that the evidence suggests a predominantly female management of servant issues. Even Bishop Syngé who, from circumstances and probably personality, maintained a controlling hand in every area of domestic account told his daughter that at nineteen she could take over control of 'the female part' of the family, meaning the women servants.⁷ In this chapter a limited number of lines of enquiry will be concentrated on, focussing firstly on the question of whether service was a stigmatised occupation. Secondly, the working relationship between the employer and the servant will be pursued, to reveal how employers' letters can inadvertently reveal something of the employee's experience. The third line of enquiry will consider the potential role of service as a nexus of cultural transmission from one class to another, arising out of the physical proximity of the classes brought into being by domestic service. These issues have been chosen because they are topics which cannot be

⁵ Barnard, *A new anatomy*, p. 297.

⁶ L. A. Clarkson, 'Household and family structure in Armagh city, 1770', *Local population studies*, 20 (1978), pp. 14-31. L. A. Clarkson, 'The demography of Carrick on Suir, 1799', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 87C (1987), pp. 13-36. Tommy Graham, 'Whitsun's 1798 census of Dublin', *History Ireland*, 2 (1994), pp. 10-15.

⁷ Letter from Bishop Syngé to his daughter Alicia, 4 August 1752. Legg, *Syngé letters*, p. 448.

studied in any but personal records, and thus they serve the purpose of the thesis' advocacy of the research value locked up in personal letters of women. Although servants themselves left vanishingly few personal records, even employers' records can be effective in bringing the historian close to the working experience of servants.

Why have servants not been studied?

Servants are a hidden people, hidden because they created few records, although it may be assumed they created more than has been imagined.⁸ They are hidden because the records, both by or about them, have not survived well. In Ireland they have mostly remained hidden because until recently nobody has gone looking for them. Servants have not left behind a community desirous of expressing a self-identity based on shared experience. Domestic service as a profession appeared to die out in the middle of the twentieth century. Labour historians ignored them on the grounds that they were 'isolated from ... working-class ... aspirations ... [and] contributed nothing to the nineteenth century struggle of labour for recognition'; since their workplace was the private home, they were understood to be immune from the market and from class conflict.⁹ Being increasingly lower class, poorly educated, mostly female and doing invisible 'reproductive' work, work which was considered to have no economic value, servants have suffered a particularly thorough effacement from the record. However, an appreciation that they were demographically so significant, and that they were for the most part women, must entitle them to the attention of specialists in the disciplines of women's history, social history and the history of the non-wealthy majority. The letters used in this chapter are of necessity almost entirely those of the employer and it is the employer view which has traditionally determined the outline of and the language used to describe the history of service. Employers recounting difficulties involving servants –

⁸ Louis Cullen, Thomas Truxes, John Shovlin, eds., *The Bordeaux-Dublin letters, 1757: correspondence of an Irish community abroad* (Oxford, 2013). In this collection of 125 letters between France and Ireland, one sixth of them were written by women – ten authors in all - and some of them were servants. This point will be referred to below. It must also be recalled that in published contemporary manuals on how to write letters, examples of letters from servants were always included complete with evidence of vernacular language, for example that by Irish novelist Dorothea du Bois, *The lady's polite secretary or new female letter writer* (1771, London).

⁹ Carolyn Steedman, 'Service and servitude in the world of labor: servants in England, 1750-1820', in Colin Jones and Dror Wahrman, eds., *The age of cultural revolutions: Britain and France, 1750-1820* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 2002), p. 125. Pothiti Hantzaroula, 'The dynamics of the mistress-servant Relationship', in Antoinette Fauve-Chamoux, ed., *Domestic service and the formation of European Identity: understanding the globalization of domestic work, 16th-21st centuries* (Bern, New York, and Oxford, 2004). Cissie Fairchilds, on the other hand suggests that the servant-employing family may have been the 'incubator of class attitudes' being 'the one place where elite and lower classes were in constant contact ... where issues of autonomy and control were fought out. Fairchilds, *Domestic enemies: servants and their masters in Old Regime France* (London and Baltimore, 1984), p. xii.

whether in finding or keeping them, or complaining about them – have produced the ‘servant problem’ view of the industry which has been a cultural trope since at least the seventeenth century.¹⁰ However, as this thesis will argue, the dominance of the employers’ perspective can be challenged through a subtle manipulation of their own records.

Apart from conduct literature, legal publications, and newspaper court reports, most hard evidence about the industry, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, is to be found in domestic account books. These, in varying levels of detail, give numbers in the household, gender, religion, occupational titles, wages, frequency and manner of pay, and length of service. Sometimes they give reasons for discharge, evidence of the provision of charity or healthcare by the employer, or the provision of clothing or gifts to the servant, all of which aids the understanding of the service relationship in pre-contractual days. Furthermore, especially in the earlier period, there is sometimes more narrative included than is usual in later account books; the boundaries between account book and diary were more fluid in the earlier period. This can be seen in Nicholas Peacock’s diary, which is as concerned with financial records as with any other, or in Meliora Adlercron’s account books, which contain entries which rightly belong in a diary.¹¹ Account books are a relatively common survivor among the primary sources and, in many ways, the letter and the account book complement one another. Nevertheless, letters are powerful sources which extend the historian’s access far beyond the insight permitted by account books. Letters about servants, as historian Brigid Hill has observed, can even reveal something of their ‘real characters, of how they felt about their work ... of their relations with their masters and mistresses On rare occasions when, aggrieved by the demands made on them, suddenly they answer back or reveal their individuality in some other way’.¹² For example, employers’ complaints reveal the surprising strength of the servants’ position within the household. They can record how much impertinence, inefficiency and drunkenness would be put up with in circumstances where a good servant

¹⁰ The phrase used as the title of Cissie Fairchild’s book on French servants, ‘domestic enemies’ was a common euphemism for domestic servants in the seventeenth century, and it was older than that. Fairchild, *Domestic enemies*, p. xi. Dorothy Marshall, among the earliest historians to address the issue in England, had as her stated intention the writing of a history of ‘the servant problem’. D. Marshall, ‘The domestic servant of the eighteenth century’, *Economica*, 25 (April 1929), pp. 15-40. Recent scholarship has continued to focus on the employers’ criticisms of servants but interprets this as evidence of social anxiety. For example Steedman, ‘Service and servitude’.

¹¹ Legg, Marie-Louise ed., *The diary of Nicholas Peacock, 1740-1751* (Dublin, 2005). Adlercron account books NLI MSS 3846 and MS 4481.

¹² Hill, *Servants*, p. 3.

might be hard to replace; they show the employer asking around for information on wage rates, which confirms that she or he expects to have to negotiate with would-be employees. In these letters we can also sometimes see servants using their own kin-network for job placement and we see them consciously accessing and dispensing patronage.¹³

The question of stigma

Stigma has been attached to the occupation of domestic service but perhaps this is only an expression of the employers' perspective. For the employee, was domestic service a contemptible occupation? This is interesting because assuming that service was, or at least became, stigmatised in Ireland one must ask the question if this was unique to its particular history? In the popular understanding of historical service in Ireland, the subordinate relationship of servant to master has been confused with the ethnic social divisions in the country, as though service was part of the expression and experience of colonialism. Such a view of the industry must be tested in comparison with the presence of stigma in countries with an ethnically more homogenous society, perhaps through the literature about class. This could also be approached through observing how servants experienced their working circumstances: were they passive victims of an oppressive society or can they be seen managing their opportunities to their best advantage?

There are several possible explanations for the stigmatisation of service which do not require reference to colonial oppression. It is known that servants distinguished among themselves according to the social status of their employers and to their position within their employers' households. Thus it may be assumed that if stigma always existed it would be relative rather than general. Perhaps it arose when most households ceased to employ so many people and the word servant increasingly referred to one domestic assistant hired, to do the heaviest, dirtiest work.¹⁴ Perhaps it is a gender issue and the rise of stigma coincided with the feminisation of the profession; as more diverse and better paid employment opportunities arose for men, increasingly the word servant meant female domestic. Other scholars have explained the stigma in relation to how employers used servants to think about social evolution. The servant in this argument became the 'other' which both defined and threatened the employers' place in the world although this is not pertinent to the question about servants' attitude to their employment.¹⁵ In terms of

¹³ Ibid., p. 260.

¹⁴ Certain kinds of work, especially laundry, were always negatively viewed by servants.

¹⁵ Carolyn Steedman, 'Servants and their relationship to the unconscious', pp. 316-50.

the impact of social change on the industry, an interesting suggestion has been made in relation to service in Norway, where, in the eighteenth century, as in England and we can assume in Ireland, all but the very poorest families employed at least one servant. There, rather than the employing of servants being, on its own, a marker and maker of the middle-class in the nineteenth century as suggested by Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall and others, it was the disappearance of the lower-class servant employer which created the social distance between those families employing servants and those supplying them.¹⁶ In eighteenth-century Ireland, some servants would have been from the same social class as their employers. Toby Barnard has noted that ‘the employment of kinsfolk complicated the social stratigraphy within the house’. Nuala Cullen found that poor relations sometimes fitted into the category of ‘specialist’ servant, ‘sometimes acting as housekeepers, or taking charge of the baking or preserving’; Ann Nulty, an Irish woman working in Bordeaux, was employed as a servant by the Gernon, family who were her relatives by marriage.¹⁷ By the nineteenth century upper and middle class families largely kept their children out of service and, even further along the social spectrum, certain kinds of service came to be considered ‘shameful’.¹⁸ Thus being related to a servant, or employing a servant, became distinctive class markers. Stigmatising service seems to have developed as a way of policing the chasm which allowed the middle class to differentiate themselves from their social inferiors in the nineteenth century. The fact that stigma may have evolved as society changed, rather than being a characteristic inherent in all servant-employing cultures, is an important one to consider in light of the suggestion of a colonial origin for it.

Evidence of how deeply embedded the alleged permanent and constant association between service and stigma is may be seen in a sentence used in Tim Meldrum’s introduction to his work on service and gender. He writes that, ‘domestic

¹⁶ S. Sogner, ‘The legal status of servants in Norway, 17th - 20th centuries’, in A. Fauve Chamoux, ed., *Domestic service and the formation of European identity: understanding the globalization of domestic work, 16th-21st centuries* (New York and Oxford, 2004), p. 185; Sheila McIsaac Cooper, in A. Fauve, ed., *The servant project*, p. 290. Leonore Davidoff, and Catherine, Hall, *Family Fortunes: men and women of the English middle class 1780-1850* revised edition (London and New York, 2002). Mary O’Dowd records a reticence among the lower classes about sending daughters to ‘shameful’ forms of service in the late eighteenth century. O’Dowd, *A history of women*, p. 134,

¹⁷ Barnard, *A new anatomy*, p. 301. Nuala Cullen, ‘Women and the preparation of food in the eighteenth century’, in MacCurtain and O’Dowd, *Women in early modern Ireland*, p. 271. Truxes and Shovlin, eds., *The Bordeaux-Dublin letters*, p. 63.

¹⁸ Mary O’Dowd records a reticence among the lower classes about sending daughters to ‘shameful’ forms of service in the late eighteenth century. O’Dowd, *A history of women*, p. 134.

servants certainly *haunt* the ancient streets and houses of old London' (italics added).¹⁹ The choice of word implies a continuing state of unhappiness whereas the context shows that the author was simply referring to numbers. But no-one has ever said the streets of old Dublin were 'haunted' by clergymen's wives or butchers. Meldrum in fact is one of those recent authors who points up the significant advantages of the service opportunity for women in the eighteenth century, and yet here inadvertently reveals negative preconceptions about how the work was experienced, possibly arising from his distaste for the industry as it operates in the western world still. Teresa McBride, writing of France, said service was one 'of the most debasing of occupations', but provides no evidence for this.²⁰ Fitzpatrick, in his review essay in the 1990s, refers to service, along with prostitution, as a 'despised' occupation.²¹ This is not a statement that can stand unsupported (although it does hint at misogyny being the driver of the attitude to both occupations). There was no transgressive element to a paid domestic servant's activities, as there was with female sexual exploitation. Women employed in private houses were a cultural norm, recognised by contemporaries for their contribution to the economy,²² and women of almost every class were involved to some degree in domestic work, paid or otherwise. The implication that servants always experienced their existence as victims is similar to one which has long been rejected in the history of women generally. It is true that, when other employment opportunities became available to women, they immediately left domestic service, but it must be borne in mind that other cultural changes had taken place by this time also, including increased access to education.²³

When service was the only paid occupation available, this is likely to mean that a service position would be positively viewed by a woman wishing to improve her circumstances or to plan for the future. The stereotype of the female servant trapped in a situation, possibly a dangerous one, from which she was unable to extricate herself, or the long-time retainer, dispensed with, despite having no resources and nowhere else to go, no doubt reflects one reality but that this was not always the case is significant.²⁴ Service was rarely a life-long career: many servants, then as now, used the industry as a bridging

¹⁹ Meldrum, *Domestic service and gender*, p. 3.

²⁰ Theresa McBride, 'Social mobility for the lower classes: domestic servants in France', *Journal of Social History*, 8 (Autumn 1974), p. 63.

²¹ Fitzpatrick, 'Women, gender and the writing of Irish history', p. 169.

²² Mary O'Dowd, *A history of women*, p. 142.

²³ A 'retreat from labour', which was a sign of social promotion, has been noted in every occupation from the founders of factories to the so-called leisured ladies of the nineteenth-century middle class.

²⁴ Meldrum refers to the power to resign as a bargaining tool which gave the servant power, and to the rules of patriarchy mitigating absolute authority. Meldrum, *Domestic service*, pp. 59, 123.

occupation, either to earn money to set up an independent marital home, or, in more recent times, to gain a foothold in a new city or country, prior to seeking different employment.²⁵ This temporary ‘means-to-an-end’ aspect of the time spent in service will have given young women a more positive view of the work as instrumental to personal ambitions. Not all persons willing and available to accept a service position, two centuries ago, were trapped by economic distress into accepting or staying in uncongenial positions. There is evidence in the records to support this. Employers’ epistolary complaints reveal that servants could pick and choose situations, according to preference, and that not all servants felt themselves to be without options. This speaks of servants’ confidence and the existence of sufficient resources to permit an element of choice to enter into the issue. Lady Elizabeth Aylmer’s complaint, in a letter in the 1770s, about servants who, having chosen not to work for a period, ‘grow lazy and indolent and don’t take to work with spirit’, indicates that it was not an unusual circumstance.²⁶ The same woman, when searching in Dublin for a cook for her friend Lady Caldwell, in remote Fermanagh in the late 1770s, was indignant at the ‘conceit’ of the applicants for the post who insisted on specific conditions: ‘some would not on any terms go so far from town, another would go if she could have a certainty of coming every winter in town but a farthing less than 16 guineas she would not take for such a condescension’.²⁷ This reveals a population of job-seeking, experienced servants who could take their time about accepting an offer. Some years earlier, in 1769, Lady Ann Caldwell was performing a similar service for her daughter-in-law Lady Elizabeth, and her letters reveal how poor or difficult working conditions would not be silently accepted by new staff. She wrote to Lady Elizabeth that she did not think it possible ‘for any good [servant] to live in the smoke of your kitchen which will certainly drive her from you as will her keeping the key of the cellar considering what a [?run] has been on it [the men servants] would never bear being stinted by her’. This last statement offers an interesting insight into staff gender relationships.²⁸ It was not just among the upper servants of the titled that this happened. Catherine

²⁵ O’Dowd, *A history of women* p. 136. Sarti, *Servant project*, Conclusion p. 17. Barnard, *A new anatomy*, p. 294.

²⁶ Lady Arabella Denny in writing to Lady Caldwell about Mary Lawlor, a cook whom Lady Arabella was interviewing for Lady Elizabeth in 1758, said ‘it was your Ladyship’s excellent character that made this woman prefer going to you than to Sir Arthur Gore.’ Raughter, ‘Letters of Lady Arabella Denny’, p. 158. Letter from Lady Elizabeth Aylmer to Lady Elizabeth Caldwell, c. 1771. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B3/30/43.

²⁷ Letter from Lady Elizabeth Aylmer to Lady Elizabeth Caldwell, 5 May [1774]. Bagshawe Muniments JRL B3/30/12.

²⁸ Letter of Lady Ann Caldwell to her daughter-in-law Lady Elizabeth, (1 June) [?1769]. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B3/29/83.

D'Alton, the Dublin-based wife of a Catholic assize lawyer, was not surprised, in 1819, when her maid Susan told her 'that she would not remain here longer than this quarter as she never could stand the work in winter with fires[,] cleaning boots etc'.²⁹ Servants with skill and experience, making choices about whether to stay or not had, as a security, not only the knowledge that there were more places than servants - the difficulty in replacing servants is well attested - but that their reputation with their employer would make it easier to be re-employed; employers much preferred to re-hire someone already known to them.

Both letters and account books contain records of servants leaving and being taken back again. In the Ware account book, for example there is a record of Mary Doyle, described in 1770 as 'extremely careful and faithful', who was discharged in February being 'desirous of getting more wages', and taken back on at the higher wages in July. Monetary concerns were not the only issue: another woman was discharged by Ware 'for being unwilling to go to the country' and was subsequently taken on again.³⁰ From Donegal, the Convoy House account-book records a kitchen-maid who left to go to America and who was re-hired by Mrs Montgomery the following month, her plans clearly having been delayed.³¹

Also relevant to the issue of stigma is the question of a servant's reputation in her own extended family: there is reason to believe that being in service was more likely to enhance a woman's reputation, than otherwise, by placing her in a position to contribute directly and indirectly to the support of her family and their employment prospects. A service position was worth more than simply wages to the individual servant. Apart from giving her food and board, and thereby relieving her parents of the need to provide for her, it very often contributed directly to the originating family's income through remittance of the servant's wages. It also represented a source of social welfare and health insurance for the extended family.³² Family support in the form of healthcare, education for the servant and her children, gifts, and charity could last beyond the servant's

²⁹ Letter of Catherine D'Alton to her husband John, 21 September 1819. TCD MS 2737/14.

³⁰ Account book of James Ware. TCD MS 10528 folios 118, 153.

³¹ Account book of Mrs Montgomery, Convoy House, Raphoe, Co. Donegal. TCD MS 7405 entry for Jane Doni[c]an February 1814.

³² In the account book of Robert French of Monivea, for the 1740s, it is clear that some of the cook's wages were sent directly to her father. NLI MS 4918, p. 2. In Dublin Mrs Adlerson records giving charity to different people who have been servants or otherwise previously employed by her. She also contributed towards the funeral expenses of two servant's infants, NLI MS 3846 and MS 4481. A number of letters in the Caldwell collection show parents instructing children to give gifts of money to their nurses, or other servants (or their children) to teach them about their responsibilities to their employees. Toby Barnard drew attention to the welfare benefits accruing to some servants. Barnard, *A new anatomy*, p. 228.

departure from employment. Judith Odell, when returned from the Continent and staying in her home place in Waterford in 1803, reported being ‘teased by visits from tenants, nurses, and old serv[an]ts and the offspring of all those that ever lived with me and my ancestors’.³³ She was not immune to their demands; even the irascible Sir Richard Musgrave’s reputation is enhanced by his sister’s account of her attempts to assist his old butler, ‘dear old Gifford’. Mr Gifford returned to Sir Richard Musgrave in old age and was ‘retained’ there until a place could be found for him. He had been turned off by a Mrs Power, a former fellow servant, then a servant at the Bishop of Dromore, ‘because he would not clean her shoes’.³⁴ The form this provision of welfare took was varied. It may be noted that Alicia Synge’s companion and governess, Mrs Jourdan, married in 1760 at the age of fifty-five, two years after Alicia Synge’s marriage meant she was no longer in need of a companion. It is not impossible that Bishop Synge, who performed the ceremony, had a hand in this match designed, with an annuity, to secure Jourdan’s future and reward her for her service and friendship. The fact that these perks were not written into a service agreement does not mean that the would-be servant was not aware of them. If, by entering service, a woman was seen as having secured useful contacts, it is reasonable to assume that it raised her profile within her family or social network and caused her choice to be viewed in a positive light.

The difficulty employers experienced in finding good replacements for departing staff and their dislike of the unknown quantity, in terms of bringing complete strangers into the house, also put servants in a strong position to recommend their own relatives and friends for consideration as potential employees. In other words their positions permitted them to activate patronage for themselves and their kin-network.³⁵ It is not always possible to see it happening and it is most likely to have happened at the level of lower servant, where young, new appointees could not be expected to be able to provide discharges or references. At this level the turnover of staff may have been higher, and the skills easier to impart, than at the level of upper servant. The Bishop of Elphin permitted his housekeeper Mrs Heap to have her niece live with her; eventually Mrs Heap proposed the girl as a servant for the Synge house in Dublin. This was a big break for an

³³ Letter from Judith Odell to Helen Perceval, June 1803. Graves Papers TCD MS 10047/24/10.

³⁴ Letter from Judith Odell to Helen Perceval, undated [pre-1806]. Graves Papers MS 10047/24/21.

³⁵ O’Dowd, ‘Women and paid work in rural Ireland, 1500-1800’ in Whelan, ed., *Women and paid work in Ireland*, p. 16. Hill, *Servants*, p. 260. Relatively few domestic servants unknown to their employer were hired at hiring fairs in England and employment agencies, which began to be formed in London in the eighteenth century, were not an immediate success. Sheila McIsaac Cooper, ‘Continuity and discontinuity in English domestic service,’ in Fauve-Chamoux, ed., *The servant project*, p. 290.

inadequately-trained young country-woman. The Bishop was caught between the girl's lack of training (and his suspicion that she might be lacking in intelligence) and the knowledge that she was both 'well descended and soberly educated'.³⁶ Christopher Bellew gave his wife the 'pedigree', in terms of the father's employment in the Bellew family, of a woman employed by Olivia Bellew when staying in Dublin for sea-bathing. Christopher wrote, 'I know how much peace of mind it will give you which is a great part of the value of your excursion'.³⁷ The preference for known workers is clear also in the habit of some families to share servants. Judith Odell, when living on the Continent in the early 1800s, had with her a servant called Eleanor, who had been 'spared' to her by her son John in Ireland; she also proposed to send her lady's maid/companion Betty to Canada with her daughter Isabella. Betty's qualities in being 'well meaning and faithful' made up for her lack of finesse for Mrs Odell, who said she 'cannot endure tyranny and moroseness', harking back to an experience she had had with a different woman.³⁸

Domestic accounts support this line of enquiry in that they often record the full names of servants and thus permit theorising about the likelihood of familial relationships among the staff. The domestic account book of Meliora Adlercron, from the 1780s, suggests that she employed a number of members of the same family as lower and casual servants. The name Doyle is not an unusual one but the frequency with which individuals with this surname appear in her records, supports this thesis. Doyle appears to have been the name of one of the children's wet nurses; there was Peggy Doyle the cow girl, and Jane Doyle, a house servant. There is also a workman, a farrier and a recipient of charity named Doyle. In the Convoy House account book the name Dunigan appears too regularly, among those hired as kitchen maids, for it to have been coincidental.³⁹

³⁶ Letter from Bishop Synge to his daughter Alicia, 17 May 1751. Legg, *Synge letters*, pp. 270-1. By 'educated' the Bishop clearly referred to her moral upbringing as Nancy's academic and practical education was called into question.

³⁷ Letter from Christopher Bellew to his wife Olivia, 20 July 1816. Bellew Papers NLI MS 27, 104.

³⁸ Ussher Papers NLI MS 10172. The dating of these letters is incomplete but they are from the early years of the nineteenth century. In Betty Stangeman's position with Mrs Odell may be seen the difficulty in determining the domestic 'standing' and the background of an upper servant. She 'worked and washed' for Mrs Odell, did house cleaning, made her clothes and dressed her although she despised having to make conversation with someone else's lady's maid. Mrs Odell said Betty was 'an excellent creature' although 'filthy and vulgar'; Betty was popular with Mrs Odell's circle, the men who had admired Bel Odell also admired Betty, and Odell was hopeful that Betty would marry a Bluebeard-type character, Mr Colclough, in Germany. Later, when she married a Mr Blackhall in Ireland, Betty became a boarding-house keeper.

³⁹ Adlercron account books, NLI MS 3846 and MS 4481. Convoy House account book, TD MS 7405. Mary O'Dowd has stated that some families provided the servants to the same employers over generations and that sisters and wives of male servants were found working for the same employer. O'Dowd, *A history of Women*, p. 134.

The relationship between servant and employer

So far it has been shown that the employees' view of service – as a sole opportunity for earning and self-advancement and as a resource for the servant's original family – means that it unlikely that it was viewed with disgust. Another way to determine how servants experienced their daily lives is through interrogating their relationship with their employers. It is intriguing to discover that the relationship between domestic employers and employees did not replicate, as we might expect, the formal social hierarchy. The relationship between them has instead been recognised as being 'highly complex and paradoxical', in that the nature of the interactions between them were not only determined by the parties' relative positional authority, or social origins, but were mitigated by personality and circumstance including financial resources.⁴⁰ Bridgit Hill found it baffling that a simplistic 'upstairs/downstairs' model of servant life 'continues to have a powerful hold on the public imagination', although it can only have been the experiences of very few servants in homes where the social distance between them and their mistress was very great.⁴¹ The culturally accepted belief that one was entitled to control the lives of the poor; the unrestricted formal authority an employer had over his or her servants; the position of women in society generally; the lack of support systems during their unemployment, illness and old-age together might seem destined to create an environment within which a servant's behaviour was rigidly controlled by the starkness of the choice she faced between total obedience or arbitrary dismissal. This may have been the employers' preference, and it was reflected in the prescriptive literature. Not surprisingly, but importantly, this is not the full picture.

Evidence of the existence of a measure of power-sharing exists from the earliest point in the master/servant relationship – the point of hiring - where it is clear that servants felt able, and employers expected them, to negotiate. The absence of any regulation on the industry might be supposed to have left all power in the hands of the employer, but two important facts can be discerned in letters: wage rates were not decided by the employer's dictum but by negotiation, and servants were aware of their bargaining power. That employers expected to have to negotiate is evident in the letters of James Caldwell to his wife which reveal him constantly reporting back from those whose houses he visited

⁴⁰ Mona Hearn, 'Life for domestic servants in Dublin 1880-1920' in Luddy and Murphy, eds., *Women surviving*. Also O'Dowd, 'Women and paid work in rural Ireland, 1500-1800' in Whelan, ed., *Women and paid work in Ireland*, p. 19.

⁴¹ Hill, *Servants*, p. 253.

about levels of payment for servants elsewhere. Clearly he was arming himself, and his wife, for dealing with servants who could be expected to express an opinion about proffered wage rates. Bishop Synge's steward Shannon was recorded discussing, ineffectually it must be noted, his terms with the Bishop. Synge wrote to Alicia that Shannon, when he found that his position within the household was to change, said, 'it was hard, after living with me, and serving me faithfully, for above six years, he should be degraded rather than advanced'.⁴² It is also clear that, at the bargaining table, it was often the employer in need of a servant who was under the most pressure. In the letter from Lady Elizabeth Aylmer to Lady Elizabeth Caldwell, quoted above, in which she referred to the idle habits of servants during elective periods of unemployment, she showed that she was aware of the need to approach a would-be employee carefully. She asked Lady Caldwell to discover, 'without speaking plain', if a previous servant of Lady Caldwell's, Bell Taylor, now some time out of a situation, was interested in returning to work.⁴³ Lady Aylmer did not want Miss Taylor to know she was interested, as, by advertising her need, she would put Taylor in a stronger bargaining position. Lady Aylmer's household was in crisis, as a number of staff had been dismissed all at once. The stress she was under is clear from her having to seek out Taylor, despite the fact that Lady Caldwell's report on her former servant was not favourable. Among the Clements papers is a letter from an intending employee, possibly English, possibly a governess (since she said that she would prefer not to mix with the other servants), accepting the terms Mrs Clements offered, although they were less than the ones the letter-writer suggested. The woman hoped that her 'strict attention to my business may induce you to raise my salary when I have been with you a year'.⁴⁴ The detail that James Ware gave of his arrangement with his newly-appointed coachman in 1772 - he recorded a particular rate to be paid at first and an increase of one pound 'if I like him' - contains an echo of a negotiation during which the coachman agreed to serve a probationary period at the lower rate, on the understanding that he would fairly swiftly get a salary increase.⁴⁵ A somewhat similar negotiation is reflected in the account book of Mrs Montgomery, of Convoy House, in the early nineteenth century: she attempted to staunch the flow of resigning

⁴² Letter of Sir James Caldwell to his wife Elizabeth, 6 January 1773. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B3/29/51. Letter from Bishop Synge to his daughter Alicia, 28 August 1750. Legg, *Synge letters*, p. 240.

⁴³ Letter of Lady Elizabeth Aylmer to Lady Elizabeth Caldwell, [?c. 1771]. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B3/30/43.

⁴⁴ Letter from Marinda Ranson to Louisa Clements, 3 August 1816. Clements papers TCD MS 7337/2.

⁴⁵ Account book of James Ware. TCD MS 10528 folio 123.

kitchen maids by promising a wage rise if the newest woman stayed longer than the first quarter. Servants also knew that particular skills drew premium wages. The intending housekeeper to Alicia Synge's home in Dublin demanded a high wage, and refused to live separate from her husband, so confident was she of her desirability as an employee. The Bishop told his daughter not to be put off by the wages demanded; she seemed such a 'find' that Synge, who disliked employing married servants, also considered employing the husband simply to secure the wife's services.⁴⁶ That is not to say that the servant always got what she wanted. Catherine D'Alton's servant, Betty, made a half-hearted attempt to negotiate a rise by suggesting she had an opportunity of a different place, hoping for some 'encouragement' to stay where she was. Her employer promptly called her bluff.⁴⁷

The balance of power, between the parties to an employment agreement, was affected not only by market forces but by the employers' own sense of correct behaviour. This restriction on an employer's liberty is referred to as the 'politics of place' by Paul Griffiths, writing on authority in the early modern period.⁴⁸ He proposes that conscientious employers internalised the obligations that came with their divinely-appointed place in society and were conscious of their actions, towards social inferiors, being observed by their own children, in relation to whom servants were used as a pedagogic tool, and by their social peers. Their behaviour in this regard was thus allied to personal integrity and contemporary conceptions of order and divinely ordained authority. This is confirmed in the O'Connell letters, when Mary O'Connell reacted sharply to her husband's suggestion that not all that could be done had been done for a servant whom Mrs O'Connell had had admitted to the fever hospital. Mary O'Connell asked 'is it possible, love, that you think me so insensible as not to inquire about the maid that was sent to the hospital. ... She wants for nothing.'⁴⁹ For the conscientious employer, paternalism brought with it concern for the spiritual and physical wellbeing of the servant. This could be read dispassionately as virtue being its own reward; protection of spiritual well-being was the Christian duty of the paterfamilias, while the preservation of a servant's physical well-being ensured an uninterrupted supply of labour. It could also be

⁴⁶ Letter from Bishop Synge to his daughter Alicia, 28 May 1751. Legg, *Synge letters*, p. 227.

⁴⁷ Letter of Catherine D'Alton to her husband John, 21 September 1819. TCD MS 2737/14.

⁴⁸ Paul Griffiths, *Youth and authority: formative experiences in England, 1560-1640*, (Oxford, 1996) quoted in Meldrum, *Domestic service and gender*, p. 36.

⁴⁹ Letter of Mary O'Connell to her husband Daniel, 10 March 1818. O'Connell, *Correspondence*, vol 2, 729

interpreted as in terms of moral ‘bookkeeping’: doing the right thing to offset something which would otherwise be a reputational debit. Educating a child of a servant and her employer is an example of this; Maurice ‘Hunting Cap’ O’Connell of Derrynane raised and educated a boy, Charles O’Connell, a relative whose mother was an O’Connell servant Nell Real.⁵⁰ In some cases, it went far beyond this minimum and for some employers the responsibility, which added not inconsiderably to their burden of work and expense, was taken very seriously.⁵¹ To the employer, this level of welfare support was of a piece with his or her traditional but waning expectation of exercising complete authority over the servant’s life. To some extent, it explains the employers’ bewildered dismay when servants, having enthusiastically availed of the perks, evinced less than the expected level of grateful acceptance of control, revealing that they did not see the connection.

The letters of the Bishop of Elphin are invaluable in articulating the complexity of the domestic service relationship, as experienced by the employer, because part of their purpose was to instruct the Bishop’s daughter Alicia in the future management of her household and in her responsibilities towards her dependants. The Bishop, who went to great lengths to avoid employing any Catholics, was otherwise a humane person, by contemporary standards, and a fair employer, who took responsibility for the health of his dependents, as indeed did many of those employers, for whom records survive. At a time when horse-riding was considered almost indispensable for the preservation of health, the Bishop kept horses specifically for his servants to ride. He was moved by his steward’s distress about his family and was sensitive enough to realise that the man’s apparent illness was caused by anxiety about them. He was anxious to ensure that his housekeeper in Elphin, Mrs Heap, should go to Dublin for medical treatment, whether it was strictly necessary or not, so that she would not even ‘fancy’ that her health would be affected by not being able to go. The Bishop’s sensitivity to the finer feelings of his employees is evident in the way his troublesome steward, Mr Shannon, was allowed to become the butler, and thus could call himself the Bishop’s ‘gentleman’, and keep the keys of the cellar, to ‘save his credit’ so that he would not feel ‘degraded’ when another man was appointed steward in his place (although, as we have seen, that is exactly what Mr

⁵⁰ Letter from Daniel O’Connell to his uncle Maurice, 5 January 1822. O’Connell, *Correspondence*, vol 2, p. 345.

⁵¹ Barnard noted that ‘conscientious householders treated their employees responsibly’. Barnard, *A new anatomy*, p. 298.

Shannon did feel). Synge formally consulted a tradesman with whom he had long done business about putting in pumps, although the work was to be assigned to someone else, so that the older man ‘may not feel the pain of being passed by’.⁵² Knowing this characteristic about the Bishop is not only useful in studying his psychological sophistication; it also gives insight into how those in power self-regulated. Despite the absence of external controls, not all employers felt themselves able to act arbitrarily in regard to firing their employees, despite the legal and culturally-sanctioned freedom that was theirs. This has wider significance in mitigating what is seen as one of the industry’s distinctively negative attributes, the lack of employee security due to the fact that the employee’s tenure was entirely at the whim of the individual employer. This criticism stems from the industry’s later incarnation when it could rightly be unfavourably contrasted with other sectors which had begun to be regulated.⁵³

In the period under discussion, there was little legal control on employers generally. The effect of a sense of duty in relation to the ‘lower orders’, on one’s freedom to act, is nowhere better articulated than in the letter of the Bishop of Elphin, to his daughter, in August 1750 after he had discharged his steward Mr Shannon. It is clear that having entered into an employment agreement with this servant, the Bishop spoke for many of his class when he said he felt bound by ‘chains’ of responsibility towards both him, and his extended family, chains which could only be broken by the most blatantly bad behaviour on the part of the servant. Mr Shannon had by this time been employed as house steward by the Bishop for six years, and his abilities, to judge by the Synge’s description, were slim. One of his key attractions, as an employee, may have been that he could be trusted with the keys to the cellar. In all of the Bishop’s surviving letters, beginning in 1746, he was on the verge of discharging Shannon and in August 1750 did so in a disagreement about a demotion. Immediately the Bishop regretted the situation and he wrote to his daughter the same evening: ‘I have so much pity for this simple fellow and his family as to be sorry for [his] egregious folly’. He wished to be rid of Shannon but did not wish to be the cause of the Shannon family’s experiencing the hardship that would be the inevitable consequence. He was bound tightly by his sense of responsibility, those ‘chains’ which he mentioned, which, he said, ‘gall me every day more and more’. He instructed his daughter to act to make it possible, indeed to increase the likelihood, of

⁵² Letters from Bishop Synge to his daughter Alicia, 3 August 1750 and 7 June 1751. Legg, *Synge letters*, pp. 227, 289.

⁵³ Mona Hearn, ‘Domestic servants in Dublin, 1880-1920’, unpublished PhD thesis, TCD 1984. p. 2.

the man asking to be re-instated. This the Bishop would agree to do, although he would not initiate the conversation himself.⁵⁴ The instructions that Bishop Synge gave his daughter to help retrieve the situation *vis à vis* Shannon encapsulate the contradictions inherent in a relationship that is much more than merely contractual and only a little less than fully familial. It shows Synge using his servants to teach his daughter about the depth of her responsibilities to social inferiors; it reveals his recognition of the necessity of adopting authority-creating stratagems to add weight to positional authority. It is instructive in that it not only shows the role of female family members in reducing the disastrous effects of male posturing, but demonstrates that it was socially acceptable for a man to be swayed by a feminine appeal to charity. This permitted men to act on their own charitable instincts while maintaining their necessary reputation as stern masters. The Bishop instructed his daughter to speak to Mrs Shannon, indirectly, but so as to leave her in no doubt of his sympathy for the family - he clearly had great expectations of his teenage daughter's subtlety – so that Mrs Shannon would encourage her husband to apply to get his position back. The Bishop both hoped this would happen and rather wished it would not; he was privately prepared to take Shannon back but ‘would not make the least advance to the silly fellow, nor even consent to his staying but upon the most earnest entreaty.’ In short, his future actions depended not on his preference – which was for the servant to depart – but upon what the servant, and in this case the servant's wife, decided to do. Shannon remained in the Bishop's employ for at least the period of time covered by the extant letters.

Servants would have incorporated what they knew of their employers' sense of Christian social duty into their reading of their situations. That servants were well able to exploit how their employers thought is revealed in a story of a terminated agreement told by John David La Touche in which the paradox within the service relationship is illustrated perfectly. La Touche wrote to his wife, in 1821, that his recently discharged servant William was ‘very sorry for losing his place and very desirous of coming back. He told me that Peggy [another servant, possibly William's wife] was breaking her heart and that if I parted with him he should be obliged to take his children from school. I believe it would be better under all circumstances to take him back. I have told him that

⁵⁴ Letters from Bishop Synge to his daughter Alicia, 3 and 28 August 1750. Legg, *Synge letters*, pp. 228, 240-3.

I would write to you and that I will be decided by your determination'.⁵⁵ Both men can be observed to be deploying rhetorical strategy in this tale; the employer pretended he could not be swayed and any amelioration of the sentence would depend upon his wife; the employee, well versed in the employer's sensibilities, introduced the blasted hopes of his children and the tears of a heart-broken woman as culturally-recognisable triggers for tender treatment. Although completely at the mercy of his employer's will, William knew enough about La Touche's priorities and sense of justice to control him.

Reading complaints about servants

The exact nature of any relationship is reflected in the manner in which the parties communicated with each other. This is difficult to access in the case of historical domestic service because of the one-sidedness of the surviving records - difficult but not impossible. While the servants' words may be lost, the employers' letters frequently contain complaints about servants' behaviour, and, since behaviour is a form of communication, these complaints can successfully be interrogated about the relationship from which they sprang. Frances Tottenham's complaint, in reference to an employee, that 'the lack of a tongue we shall never be at a loss for while ignorance exists' dispenses with the notion of the cowed servant and the autocratic employer, as does her reference to the provoking 'self-consequence' of their dairy-maid Nancy, especially because that statement is followed by her declaration that 'we should be undone without Nancy and must submit to her attitudes for our own sake'.⁵⁶ The nature of some complaints can also be surprising. For example, Judith Odell, whose maid Eleanor lived with her in France in the 1780s, clearly experienced considerable levels of what might be called impertinence from her employee. Eleanor made it clear that she thought her employer's piano-playing so poor that she would 'not dress supper' any night Mrs Odell played, nor would she accept invitations to go to a house where Mrs Odell might be expected to perform. Mrs Odell's punishment, or revenge, upon returning to Ireland was to determine 'never again to bring her from her father's house'. Eleanor had hoped to train two of her children in Mrs Odell's service in Ireland, and to that end became 'extremely attentive and honest and seems even to have forgot the time [she was] the proudest tyrant in Europe'. This

⁵⁵ Letters of John David La Touche to his wife Anne, 27 March 1821. La Touche Papers TCD MS 11272/299.

⁵⁶ Letter of Frances Tottenham to her daughter Anne, 24 June 1792. TCD MS 11272/10.

‘tyrant’ at one point threatened to undermine Mrs Odell’s domestic authority by getting teenager and heir, John Odell, to side with Eleanor against Mrs Odell.⁵⁷

Misdemeanours on the part of servants are amenable to a number of interpretations. Most simply they arose when when the perpetrator’s desire to behave in a certain way took precedence over their employer’s rule forbidding that behaviour. This indicates a lack of concern for the employer’s wishes and a lack of fear for one’s own employment security. They may have also served to manage the stress occasioned by an unequal relationship, in being a form of self-expression adopted by individuals denied the right to avail of orthodox means of communication. At some level, both the employer and the employee knew that a discharge, spoken in haste, was not necessarily final and that neither party wanted it to be. Taking a servant back upon the receipt of an apology was a face-saving exercise and it is likely that both sides were equally aware of this.⁵⁸ Pushing the boundaries to crisis point may have provided enough of a psychological relief to a servant to make it worth having to apologise and take a telling off, or even a flogging. It was a risky method of self-expression but it was not completely foolhardy; as previously noted, the servant would have been acutely conscious of her or his value to the household and on the market.⁵⁹ Bread-making may seem an unlikely vehicle for communication but so it was. It is in Bishop Syngé’s trials in regard to bread that we see how this humble activity may also be a topic susceptible to interpretation as a form of communication, as is suggested by Carolyn Steedman’s reference to the ‘mute insubordination of the kitchen in never getting the ... bread right’. The Bishop often commented on bread and the quality of it, remarking in 1751 ‘I am grown fonder of bread than ever. A piece is always my supper when alone’. In the index to the edition of his letters bread has more entries than any other comestible including mutton, ale or wine. On one occasion, in an attempt to get to the bottom of the ‘great mystery’ of why some bread was better than others, he had a ‘conference’ with Jane, also known as Jennet and Mrs J, the still-room maid in Elphin, whose worst bread was better than what the Synges had in Dublin. Having become used

⁵⁷ Letter from Judith Odell to her brother Sir Richard Musgrave, 24 October 1788. Ussher Papers NLI MS 10,174. There was an employee with Mrs Odell in the early 1800s also called Eleanor, who may have been the same person.

⁵⁸ Meliora Adlercron noted in August 1786 that she had ‘Closed John Hatton’s account ... at which time I was going to part with him for impertinence but upon his asking pardon I forgave him’. This was one of the servants for whose infant’s funeral expenses Mrs Adlercron paid. Adlercron Account Book NLI MS 3846

⁵⁹ Daniel O’Connell used flogging as a means of punishing servants, O’Connell, *Correspondence*, vol 2, p. 785. Bishop Syngé’s youthful employee Billy Smith continued to push boundaries despite the Bishop’s creative use of punishment which included violence. Letters from Bishop Syngé to his daughter Alicia, 16 May 1747, 30 June and 14 July 1749. Legg, *Syngé letters*, pp. 23, 124, 136.

to the quality provided by Jennet in Elphin, the Bishop was anxious to secure the same for Dublin as his ‘nicety’ in regard to that important foodstuff ‘instead of lessening will be greater’. His reports of exactly how Jennet told him she produced the barm, upon which she said depended the consistently high-quality of her bread, runs over the length of almost a page and a half of the published edition of Synge’s letters and (between two ‘conference’ reports), a full, closely written folio page in the originals. Not content with sending these instructions to his daughter the Bishop re-visited the subject, reporting on having had another conference with Jennet within the space of three letters, this time quoting verbatim the language she used in describing her work. Given how important all this was to the Bishop it seems extraordinary that the cook at Elphin, Laurence Carleboe, ‘despises’ Jennet’s account of how to secure good bread, ignoring the Bishop’s efforts to discover her secret.⁶⁰ Furthermore the Bishop’s complaints to his daughter reveal that his housekeeper Mrs Heap let the household run short of bread, as she did with other provisions. These employees were covertly taking subtle opportunities for self-assertion and emphasising their employer’s dependence upon them by hitting him where it hurt.

Another way in which we can be sure that employers and employees viewed service from distinct perspectives relates to employers’ complaints about servants wishing to better themselves. Such complaints reveal the divergence between the employers’ assumptions about what a servant should expect from a position and what the servants’ own ambitions might be. In this divergence the servant can be seen as becoming more modern in outlook than the employer for whom the paternalistic status quo was the ideal. These employer expectations were informed by the increasingly outdated expectation that the servants’ sole ambition was, or should have been, to dedicate themselves to the needs of their new ‘family’. This had been recognised as part of the ‘servant problem’ from at least the beginning of the eighteenth century. This is the attitude that allowed Defoe to propose in the 1720s that no servant should be allowed to ‘quit a place, where they are well fed and paid, without assigning a good reason before a magistrate’.⁶¹ To discover that servants had other plans, which had no relevance or value to the family, revealed that their apparent obedience and application to family concerns were mere ‘eye service’ or manipulative role-playing, and made the employers anxious

⁶⁰ Letters from Bishop Synge to his daughter Alicia, 9 and 16 July; 18 October 1751. Legg, *Synge letters*, pp. 320, 325-31, 382.

⁶¹ Daniel Defoe quoted in Joseph Jean Hecht, *The domestic servant class*, p. 90.

about loosening authority and control.⁶² They were also anxious about being able to trust their servants. The issue of trust ranged from being able to believe a person's account of what age they were, to whether or not they had been inoculated. It was not of course only confined to domestic servants; the sense of betrayal felt by absentee landowners, whose agents on the ground never seemed to send back the expected amount of money, was common. David Dickson, in his study of Cork, has stated that the principal qualification for an agent was 'trustworthiness' and that 'unclear codes of conduct embittered relationships between landowners and agents'. Fraudulent agents engaged in self-motivated strategies to the detriment of the estate they were working for, regardless of their employers' wishes. They felt safe in the knowledge that the absent employer could not afford to take the loss of revenue which dismissal of them or of recalcitrant tenants would cause.⁶³

The ambitious servant was not just a domestic problem. Rejection by servants of their divinely-ordained place represented to the employer an anarchic throwing over of good governance, a form of civil disobedience.⁶⁴ The fact that deeper anxieties about social cohesion were called into being by servants' rejection of their role is unwittingly captured in the manner in which some employers mocked their servants; both Lady Aylmer and the Bishop Synge contemptuously ascribed superior social titles to servants that they considered impertinent, calling one 'this gentleman' and another 'Lady Frances', and referring to the servants 'height' and their 'condescending' reluctance to do their work. Frances Tottenham made fun of a male servant who was 'refining' during his travels in Yorkshire so much that he might not be able to 'bear his native soil' again.⁶⁵ Joking among employers about their servants was a standard fare in letters and has begun to be scrutinised in English scholarship for its deeper meaning. Steedman has written that servants were subjected to 'jokes, anecdotes, satire and sheer rudeness' of a kind which a modern therapist might interpret as the employers' way of responding to great questions of state and society and social and class formation. Joy Wiltenburgh observes that 'knowing who laughs—why, with whom, and at whom—can give us a revealing window

⁶² Fairchilds, *Domestic enemies*, p. 119. The need to control the behaviour of either social inferiors or women, to protect one's own place in society, had been going on for centuries according to Norbert Elias, *The civilizing process: the history of manners and state formation and civilization*, (Oxford 1994). Translated by Edmund Jephcott, pp. 66, 182.

⁶³ David Dickson, *Old world colony: Cork and South Munster, 1630-1830* (Cork, 2005), pp. 325-7. Rachel Wilson, *Elite women*, pp. 88-93.

⁶⁴ Meldrum, *Domestic service and gender*, p. 36.

⁶⁵ Letter from Frances Tottenham to her daughter Anne, undated. La Touche Papers TCD MS 11272/631.

into social dynamics'.⁶⁶ Lady Elizabeth Aylmer's letters are full of complaints, expressed in tones of bewildered outrage and personal affront. She exclaimed in dismay at servants' cheek in wanting to negotiate terms or develop their careers; she was exasperated when she promoted a servant, as she thought, and the woman reacted, not with the expected gratitude, but with tears and a resignation; she failed to understand why her staff assumed as rights what she wished to grant as privilege; and, when challenged by a servant, it is she who was revealed to be in the weaker position. One of Lady Elizabeth's complaints was of a servant's 'going abroad'; this referred to a servant's refusing to seek permission to go out on personal business, or staying longer away than was required by the business he or she was on. This was so often complained of by employers, mostly of male servants but sometimes of female, that it was clearly a key site of dissent. The context is the employer's understanding that she or he had purchased all of the time and all of the labour of the servant; a servant being absent without permission was therefore engaged in a form of theft. This issue touched upon the question of entitlement to leisure time. This was to become a contentious issue towards the end of the history of service, with the employers in the twentieth century echoing what their eighteenth-century predecessors would have said: servants would not know what to do with leisure. The concept of leisure, like education, culinary variety, nice clothes and letter-writing itself, percolated down the social ranks through the century. As more people in different walks of life were exposed to the growing consumer economy, they desired and sought out new goods and practices for themselves. Employers resented their social inferiors availing of the perks of social superiority. They did not expect the lower class to seek these 'privileges' for their own purposes, thereby representing a threat to defined demarcations among the social ranks. They also wanted to be able to dispense them as rewards, as signs of their magnanimity or Christian virtue. Lady Elizabeth Aylmer could not understand her servants' behaviour in this regard. She gave them permission to leave the house on personal matters when they asked and failed to understand why they would not ask. She reported one servant, Catherine, 'gadding about the town without ever thinking it necessary to ask my leave tho' she knew she always had it whenever she condescended to apply for it'.⁶⁷ There was

⁶⁶ Steedman, *Labors lost*, p. 20. Joy Wiltenburg, 'Soundings of laughter in early-modern England: women, men and everyday uses of humour', *Early-Modern Women: an interdisciplinary journal*, 10 (Spring 2016), pp. 22-41 at p. 22.

⁶⁷ Letter of Lady Elizabeth Aylmer to Lady Elizabeth Caldwell, [?c. 1774]. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B3/30/11. It is not clear if Catherine's behaviour was the same whether in Dublin or in the country house in Donadea.

symbolic significance in this behaviour; it suggests that Catherine's refusal to ask permission was on principle, as she did not think she should have to. There was also a recognised point in the day when Lady Aylmer's servants were off duty and could go out if they wished. As she put it in the same letter: 'the moment the candles are [?]lighted] winter or summer they go to country dances till bed time (if they choose it)'. It is important to note that, at a recognised point in the evening, these servants became fully-fledged members of the household, but at no-one's command. This experience, when first it occurred, will have been an important one in the growth of an individual's self-awareness as an independent adult, regardless of social status. Lady Aylmer's complaints reveal the internalising, by otherwise dependent adults, of a sense of personal choice, of having rights as adults. Lady Aylmer's understanding of the word was limited: she saw the right to choose as a privilege, in her gift and so restricted. But her servants acted upon the more modern concept of the right to choose. Choice always has a social meaning, being essential to the organisation of society, whether it relates to the labour or the marriage market, and Lady Aylmer was right to be anxious about what her servants' behaviour implied.⁶⁸

Lady Aylmer's reaction to a servant's wish to better herself is equally interesting. Clearly this was an experience Lady Aylmer encountered more than once, as she wrote to Lady Caldwell that, 'once they get into that style of bettering themselves there is nothing more to be expected but sauciness and impertinence while they stay'. The fact that Aylmer saw the desire for self-improvement as sign of ingratitude is clear from her saying that her servant Catherine used her as a 'step ladder ... to climb to a higher place'.⁶⁹ No doubt Lady Aylmer felt that the training that Catherine received in her employer's house, that qualified her to seek other employment opportunities, should instead have left her grateful and loyal to the place in which she was trained. Ingratitude was also complained of in a resigned tone of voice by the Bishop of Elphin. It is however in the full description of a major show-down in the Aylmer household in the early 1770s that one can see how badly mismatched the expectations of employers and servants could be.

⁶⁸ David Fitzpatrick stated that women making a choice to emigrate or to stay were choosing or rejecting modernity; Fitzpatrick, 'The modernisation of the Irish female', in P. Ferguson and Kevin Whelan, P. O'Flanagan eds., *Rural Ireland 1500-1900: modernisation and change* (Cork, 1987), p. 163; Teresa MacBride, in writing of service post-1820 wrote that 'domestic service had played a pivotal role in the modernisation of women' by broadening the roles available to them and by involving them in urban migration'; *Domestic revolution*, p. 11.

⁶⁹ Letter of Lady Elizabeth Aylmer to Lady Elizabeth Caldwell, [?c. 1774]. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B3/30/11.

It also touches on a particularly sensitive area of employer dependency in the area of care of children. Steedman refers to the ‘extraordinary complexities’ of the relationships brought into being by paid childcare, due to the tension between the contemporary beliefs about a child’s needs and the frequently serious effect of a failure to meet them.⁷⁰ Children’s nurses were the only female servants to whom specific attention was drawn in the law-books because of the results of any negligence or unsuitability on their part.⁷¹ A hint of the relative power of the nurse can be read between the lines of financial account-books. The Ware account-book records an agreement with a nurse, Mrs Molloy, hired at £6.16s.6d ‘with a promise of ‘Christening money’ and who received £1.2s.9d when the baby cut its first tooth in 1773. It is difficult to avoid drawing the conclusion that a bonus payment at the appearance of the child’s first tooth was intended to encourage the nurse to take sufficient care of the child in order to ensure its survival beyond teething, which was considered to be a particularly dangerous period. Mrs Molloy was subsequently discharged as being a ‘vile’ woman and a danger to her charge in 1773.⁷²

Lady Aylmer’s emphases and language in telling her tale of woe to Elizabeth Caldwell are eloquent. The story breaks into two halves; the servants were discovered to be treating the house and its resources as their own, and to have entertained their friends when the employing family were in bed, and this tale encompassed theft, drunkenness and sexual impropriety. But given more weight and paper and more heartfelt language is the associated resignation of one of the children’s nurses, with its intimation of betrayal of both the employer and her child. Nurse Delaney’s behaviour ‘has affected me more than all the rest because my whole dependence lay on her’, Lady Aylmer wrote to Lady Caldwell. Lady Aylmer had decided to ignore the nurse’s involvement in the original affray because the children needed her, a classic accommodation where punishing the wrong-doer would cause suffering to the employer. But a few days later Lady Aylmer ‘could not help telling Nurse Delaney ... that I did not expect such behaviour from her after all my kindness and friendship to her’. This ‘affronted’ Nurse Delaney so much so that ‘she gave me warning next morning and said all the ungrateful and undeserved things that passion could invent, but I have done with her forever, she knew all the child’s weaknesses as well and better than I did and also how hard it would be for me ever to get

⁷⁰ Steedman, *Labors lost*, p. 29.

⁷¹ See for example E. Bullinbrooke, *The duty and authority of justices of the peace and parish-officers for Ireland* (Dublin, 1766).

⁷² Account book of James Ware. TCD MS 10528 folio 100.

one fit to take care of him, this and my making too great a pet of her was her ruin'.⁷³ The two women were poles apart in their view of the relationship between them. Lady Aylmer was deeply hurt by Mrs Delaney's abandonment of her post, which revealed, in the most abrupt manner, that the nurse did not fully enter into her employer's concern for the infant in her care. Her 'making a pet' of Mrs Delaney speaks anxious placation. Mrs Delaney, clearly an experienced and skilled nurse, was insulted at being spoken to in this manner. She would have seen Lady Aylmer's 'kindness and friendship' not as preferential treatment but as a recognition of the quality of her work. There can be no doubt that, in threatening to 'have done with her forever', Lady Aylmer was consoling herself by imagining a scenario where Mrs Delaney endeavoured to get her position back and could be punished by a refusal. However Lady Aylmer's previous experience with her maid Catherine, who remained employed years after Lady Aylmer recorded her secret intention to discharge her for bad behaviour, shows who really had the upper hand. If Mrs Delaney had wished subsequently to reconsider her resignation, Lady Aylmer would have had no choice but to agree for the sake of her son. She was powerless.

Servants as cultural conduits

Thus far, letters have enabled us to challenge the preconception that, for the employees, service was always experienced as a stigmatised occupation. They have given insight into servants' self-assertion, their awareness of their worth both in the work-place and in the market place, and into the complex day-to-day relations between members of the household; it has also looked into the strong impact which Christian morality and individual personality had on day-to-day relationships.

We turn now to another line of enquiry, whether or not servants acted as cultural conduits and, if so, to what extent they played a role in the modernisation of society. By being the main point of contact between the upper and lower classes, servants have been proposed as the means by which new ideas, passing by observation and emulation from the aristocracy to the gentry, continued on their way through the social strata. This is of relevance to the consideration of how change happens, what are the instruments it uses, and how important is it for social cohesion that elite and popular culture should overlap. It is also of relevance in considering if and to what extent modern Irish culture is a product of Ascendancy Ireland. Jean Hecht wrote in the 1950s about this idea of the servant as a

⁷³ Letter of Lady Elizabeth Aylmer to Lady Elizabeth Caldwell, [? 1771]. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B3/30/43.

cultural nexus and, despite the aristocratic origins of his sources, his theories about how the experience of the domestic life of a family wealthier than her own might affect a servant could apply as much to the pauper servant in a tradesman's house as to a tenant's daughter training as a bishop's housemaid. Hecht points to tea, snuff and sugar as 'excellent examples of cultural transmission', as they all entered the culture via the houses of the wealthy, but social commentators were soon enough grumbling about their presence in the houses of the poor. Hecht underlined the broader implications, perhaps a little flippantly: 'A new attitude to church or state', or a regard for all human life and a 'tenderness' towards animals, 'was as likely to be passed on as a new way of cocking a hat'.⁷⁴ Those who imitated what they saw may have been copied in turn by their family and friends who had otherwise no close contact with the gentry; servants can thus be understood to have operated as social capillaries.

An example of this phenomenon from the O'Connell letters was of the nurse who may have been politicised by her association with the Liberator's family. Having attended a sermon wherein the preacher spoke 'much against the Veto', she reported to Mary O'Connell, who then passed it on to her husband: 'Oh, Madam, I wish my Master was hearing Doctor Murray this morning speaking against the Veto. How happy it would make him'.⁷⁵ The role of servants in linking, over decades and generations, the privileged few with the labouring many has significance in all societies. In his review of Barnard's *Making the grand figure*, Patrick Griffin refers to the situation in Virginia where the black majority, shoring up wealthy Virginians' consumerism, performed the same task as the Irish Catholics in Ascendancy Ireland. He suggests that the consumer goods to which the labouring majority were exposed, through contact with wealthy employers, 'could have a democratizing influence, challenging elites but allowing new groups of people to participate in the economy and in some cases in politics'.⁷⁶ This has an obvious significance in Ireland, where historically social divisions, at the upper levels, coincided with an ethnic one. Louis Cullen, referring to the evolution of Irish society, has written

⁷⁴ Hecht, *Domestic servant class*, pp. 221, 227. Hecht disagrees with Thorstein Veblen who in the late nineteenth century believed that, rather than being an agent of change, the servants' experience of upper-class life prolonged the life of archaic traits. Veblen, *The theory of the leisure class* (1899). Norbert Elias in 1939 wrote that 'the movement of behavioural and language controls from the upper levels of society to those sections below implies a specific social structure, characterised by contact, which made this transformation both possible and necessary'. Elias, *Civilizing process*, p. 95.

⁷⁵ Letter of Mary O'Connell to her husband Daniel 12 April 1816. O'Connell, *Correspondence*, vol 2, p. 100.

⁷⁶ Patrick Griffin. Review of Toby Barnard, *Making the grand figure: lives and possessions in Ireland, 1641-1770*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. April, 2007. <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13027> accessed 15 August 2016.

that, although the understanding of the landed classes ‘is ... clouded by being cast in a colonial context[,] [t]he role of the gentry, whatever its composition, was indispensable in the transition from medieval to modern ...’.⁷⁷ It cannot be doubted that the institution of domestic service was as necessary to this transition, permitting continued dissemination of those cultural elements which changed society from top to bottom. In his essay on the material culture of the wealthy, Toby Barnard has stated that, ‘any rigid separation of the poor from the middling sort ... divides Irish life into artificial opposites’, and he finds plausible the suggestion of a downward drift, from masters to servants ‘of the standards and trappings of genteel existence’.⁷⁸

An interesting demonstration of this ‘nexus effect’ can be seen in operation in relation to the treatment of animals. Ill-treatment of animals was a characteristic of many cultures, sometimes resulting in overwork of the animals but also characterised by a tolerance for actual cruelty. It is striking that Quakers, socially-enlightened and to the forefront of movements against both slavery and cruelty to animals, made some of the only references to wild birds and animals in the database, notably in the letters written to Mary Leadbeatter from her co-religionist Margaret Pike. Young Mrs Pike, in spite of the servants’ protests against the resulting dirt, permitted wild birds into the house to keep warm during the very cold winter in 1784: ‘The little birds have been much distressed ... we did what we could for them leaving them plenty of food and all about our house was like one great aviary even the window stones were covered with a variety of birds.’⁷⁹ While a number of eighteenth-century journals of visitors in Ireland mentioned cruelty to animals on the part of the general populace, many personal letters of men, women and children of the middling sort in the late eighteenth century testify to a strong affection for animals.⁸⁰ The extent to which this could go can be surprising; Judith Odell, writing from her son’s estate in Cork in the early nineteenth century, spoke of having to send twenty-two miles to Clonmel to buy meat for the table because her son’s ‘delicacy’ would not allow any animal to be killed which had fed on his land. Mrs Odell, herself tormented on the question of eating meat at all, then reminisced about her youthful unhappiness when, as housekeeper in her father’s house, she had to give the order for a particular animal to

⁷⁷ Louis Cullen, *Emergence of modern Ireland*, p. 35.

⁷⁸ Barnard, Toby, ‘Art, architecture, artefact and ascendancy’, p. 19.

⁷⁹ Letters from Margaret Pike to Mary Shackleton, 2mo 25th 1784. Ballitore Papers NLI 5987.

⁸⁰ Alicia Synge had a number of pets possibly including a monkey. Letter from Bishop Synge to his daughter Alicia, 21 July 1749. Legg, *Synge letters*, p. 141. Mrs Bell, the elderly retainer in the Clements family who wrote to the children while they were in France, spoke at length to them about the various farm animals. Clements Papers TCD MS 7338.

be slaughtered.⁸¹ This ‘tenderness’ toward animals will have been communicated to servants, not only by witnessing the care their employers lavished on animals, and the fact that minding animals for absent owners was a source of income for tenants, but also because mistreating animals was an occasion for punishment. This was the case with the Bishop of Elphin, who would not bring either horses or men out in severe weather if he could avoid it, and who discharged a man-servant for keeping his horses in the cold while he went drinking. He also ‘individuated’ his horses, despite having at least twelve of them, referring to the horses by name (Cream, Spark, or even Dainty for a male horse), by description (little Black), by purpose (Darraci the coach horse), or sometime by origin (the Mullingar horse). One letter in particular captures the exact moment – and even the tone of voice – in which the Bishop imparted his attitude to animals to his servant. In August 1747 there was a small house fire at Elphin. Shannon, the Bishop’s steward, ‘with his usual gravity and phlegm, said that a goose was the best thing to let down a chimney on fire. I bid him go and let himself down. He gaped, and recovering himself, said half aside Humph! That’s good’.⁸²

Hecht referred to other ways in which servants copied or were influenced by their employers’ behaviour, including indulging in club culture, being exposed to new forms of music and theatre, having access to the employer’s libraries and newspapers, and being exposed to political conversations. There is evidence that some of this was the case in Ireland, not least in the concept of leisure time which Lady Aylmer’s servants took such advantage of. The Caldwells in Fermanagh were very proud of their reputation for hospitality and one of the elements of this was the encouragement of music. Sir James, who spent more money than the family could afford on upholding the family’s reputation through consumer spending, wrote to his wife Lady Elizabeth in January 1773: ‘do not be angry about all the musical instruments[;] it is very extraordinary that my hobby horse should be music ... when I have no more ear than the table I write on ... but the truth of it is [it] pleases me because it pleases others’. He went so far as to hire, in 1772, a German military officer named Techlinberg as music master for his house band which was to comprise ‘2 French horns, 2 clarinets, and 2 bassoons’ and possibly mandolins. The players were to be local lads, including the kitchen boy who was thereby relieved of his domestic duties, and Sir James tried to placate his wife for the domestic upheaval by suggesting the training ‘will be making a little fortune for those poor boys’, as it very well

⁸¹ Letter from Judith Odell to Helen Perceval, June 1804. Graves Papers TCD MS 10047/24/11.

⁸² Letter from Bishop Synge to his daughter Alicia, 29 August 1747. Legg, *Synge letters*, p. 80.

may have.⁸³ The Caldwells' servant Maguire had access to newspapers.⁸⁴ This contributes to an imagining of the man, and his relationship with his employers at odds with that suggested by the way his employers spoke about him when he got drunk, and lost some of the money he had been entrusted with. The Montgomery family servants in Raphoe were bought tickets for the 'show' on more than one occasion, as were Mary Mathew's servants. Alicia Synge's young maid Nancy, from land-locked Roscommon, was clearly astonished when she was brought to the seaside at 'Dunlary'. Alicia's father the Bishop, as always, responded to this story with a little moralising to remind his daughter that she too would be as 'savage' as Nancy if her education had been as poorly attended.⁸⁵ A servant, Bryan Rock, who travelled outside the country, possibly for the first time, with his master Mr Lyons in 1759, sent a letter to his employer's children (figure 4). This letter, a rare survivor of its kind, captures in a most immediate manner, and with a high degree of narrative skill, the reaction of an inexperienced but observant traveller when faced with impressive architecture and church music, as well as by sea travel and women's fashions. Of the carvings in Gloucester Cathedral, Rock reported that 'all the kings and princes that ever reigned was there drawn in marble stone' and when apologising to Miss Lyons for his inability to describe the women's fashions he had seen he wrote that he hoped to 'bring some of them [home] in my eyes'.⁸⁶ Two of the O'Connell family's women servants, Hannah and Julia, accompanied Mary O'Connell when she moved to France. Daniel enquired for them on a number of occasions asking 'how do they get on with the French servants. I should be glad to see [Hannah] attempting to make herself understood by a person who knew nothing of English'.⁸⁷

Studies elsewhere refer to the effect of their experience on employees. MacBride has stated, in relation to Victorian servants, that 'many servants found their professional horizons widened by the exposure to the very different style of life of the middle class'. Davidoff suggests that female servants may have passed on their thinking on social

⁸³ Letters of Sir James Caldwell to his wife Elizabeth, 10 December 1772 and 28 January 1773. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B3/29/44, 55. Techlinberg was a drinker and did not survive long.

⁸⁴ The hand list to the Bagshawe muniments describes Mr Maguire as Sir James Caldwell's amanuensis but he clearly served in other capacities when Sir James was absent.

⁸⁵ Letter from Bishop Synge to his daughter Alicia, 9 June 1752. Legg, *Synge letters*, 409-11. Alice clearly answered her father's comments on this point. This is an example of a socially significant activity Carolyn Steedman describes as 'using servants to think with' about social order'. Steedman, *Labors lost*, p. 13.

⁸⁶ Letter of Bryan Rock to Charles and Miss Lyons, 11 July 1759. TCD MS 11426/1/4.

⁸⁷ Letter from Daniel O'Connell to his daughter Kate, 27 May 1822. O'Connell, *Correspondence*, vol 2, pp. 964.

advancement to their children.⁸⁸ In a study of service in France from the early-nineteenth century, McBride has pointed out that it was not just by observing other ways of being that a servant imbibed external influence: ‘the absence of a source of educated people from which to draw servants and the lag in the educational system meant that families generally had to offer some kind of training to their own servants’.⁸⁹ Employers were encouraged, by the conduct literature, to instruct their servants in religion and morals at the very least. This was not simply training in the domestic demands of a sophisticated lifestyle. Basic literacy, which was always a prerequisite for upward mobility, became increasingly demanded of servants by their employers as domestic life became more complex.

The effect of increased lower-class and female literacy on the growing modernisation of society and lower-class women may not of course have played out in the first generation of literate servants but in the lives of their children and grandchildren. The process was undoubtedly a slow, uneven and complicated social development but it seems more likely to have been the case than that proposed by Fairchilds, also writing about France, who suggested that the lack of education and the conservative and superstitious world view of servants would have prevented them from either understanding or being influenced by that to which they were being exposed.⁹⁰ With regard to aristocratic service, it has been suggested that there was a limit to the role the servant could play in social change, given that the social chasm between the servants might be too great for them to use what it was they were exposed to at work. However, this was not the experience of most Irish servants.

Ireland has not been as well served as England in the publication of servant autobiographies. Such works record the impact that sheer good luck had upon an individual’s life and career when exposed, in however chaotic a manner, to the rudiments of education.⁹¹ The fact that so many of these lower-class English autobiographers were servants is testament to the potential of the experience in altering an individual’s life. The records which do survive for Ireland show that some employers provided education, both academic and vocational, to their servants; their preference for literate and numerate

⁸⁸ Teresa McBride, ‘“As the twig is bent”: the Victorian nanny’, in A. S. Wohl, ed., *The Victorian family: structure and stresses* (London, 1978), p. 55 and Leonore Davidoff, ‘Mastered for life: servant and wife in Victorian and Edwardian England’, *Journal of Social History*, 7 (Summer 1974), p. 421 both quoted in Sarti, *The servant project*, p. 12.

⁸⁹ McBride, *Social mobility*, pp. 70-71.

⁹⁰ Fairchilds, in reference to service with the French aristocracy: *Domestic enemies*, p. 118.

⁹¹ Burnett *et al*, eds., *Autobiography of the working class*.

servants is likely to have encouraged would-be employees to seek out such education for themselves and to secure it for their children. Mrs Adlercron in Dublin hired various teachers for her children, before they went to school in Portarlinton and one, the governess Mrs Carmentrent, was also paid two sums of 7 shillings and 7 pence, for instructing one of the maids Esther [Etty] Burne.⁹² Toby Barnard mentions Richard Edgeworth paying for the education of his gardener's children; and the education of the children of one of David La Touche's servants was associated with their father's employment, as evidenced by the fear that they would have to stop attending school if the man lost his position.⁹³ There are references to education in the Bishop of Elphin's letters. He took two little boys to try them out as possible servants and, as a first step, he ordered prayer books for them to begin their literacy and religious training. The Bishop, when asking his daughter to help him get a new butler, specified that he should be 'genteel, honest, and clever tho' no fine gent', who must be able to write and understand figures. Failure to find such a person made the Bishop propose taking a clever charity-school boy who could read and write, and training him for the position.⁹⁴ Interestingly, he emphasised the necessity of this because 'not one here can read or write' although Mrs Heap must have been literate to some degree having on occasion borrowed her employer's prayer book. That charity schools, which prepared boys and girls for service, taught basic literacy skills demonstrates that some learning was believed to be necessary for that career. A high level of literacy would have been as much expected of a lady's maid as of a governess: both would have had need for it in their normal duties. Lady Ann Bagshawe wrote, in the 1750s, to her son-in-law about his son Sam who was being reared by Lady Ann: 'my maid Sidney takes very good care of him with my inspection teaches him his book for I would not nor will my sister let him go to school lest he would catch the small pox'.⁹⁵ Mary Mathew's maid Martha read to her and her companion. Bishop Synge clearly felt his housekeeper should have prepared her niece Nancy Power more adequately for the domestic employment she sought for the girl, that 'for her sake she ought to have done it'. His enquiry into Nancy's education did not just concern skills in practical domestic-management subjects but also writing and arithmetic. During his visit

⁹² Adlercron account book. 1782-88. NLI MS 3846.

⁹³ Letters of John David La Touche to his wife Anne, 27 March 1821. La Touche Papers TCD MS 11272/299.

⁹⁴ Letters of Bishop Synge to his daughter Alicia, 31 July 1747; 23 June and 22 August 1749. Legg, *Synge letters*, pp. 66, 115, 157, 216.

⁹⁵ Letter of Lady Ann Caldwell to her son-in-law Colonel Samuel Bagshawe, 20 October 1758. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B2/3/288.

to Tipperary in 1777, Arthur Young recorded ‘every child of the poorest family learning to read, write and cast accounts’, which may be accounted for by reference to employment prospects.⁹⁶

The question of servant literacy is a significant one for this thesis because where literacy exists letters are written, and a history of epistolary practice must include whatever evidence remains of the depth to which it was reached in society. The survival of a tiny number of servants’ letters permits the assumption that servants of all standing engaged in epistolary literacy to some degree. Indeed, literacy was not strictly necessary for an individual to have availed of the possibilities offered by written correspondence. All a servant needed was the urge to communicate and access to a literate person. In the late seventeenth century, a scribe, Roger Lowe, living in Lancashire, was commissioned to write a love letter for a man who ‘loved a wench in Ireland’ which confirms the presence at that time in Ireland of a young woman who, though a suitable partner for an illiterate man, i.e. from a servant-producing community, had a working familiarity with the letter.⁹⁷ By 1800 all ranks in England were participating in a vibrant culture of letters.⁹⁸ The evidence from what remains of Irish eighteenth-century servants’ letters is strongly suggestive of a similar development, even if the process developed at a slower rate. It was only to be expected, if one considers the increased movement of young women away from home, as the more complex domestic establishments of the gentry demanded more and more paid residential help. Fiction allows the proposal to encompass even the lowest social class: there is a passage in Maria Edgeworth’s *Ennui* during which, upon entering a pauper’s cabin, Lord Glenthorn interrupted the reading of a letter from an absent son. Miss Edgeworth then enlarged upon the noticeably strong tradition among the poor Irish for keeping in touch in this way. The reader can readily accept that this, like much else that Edgeworth wrote, was based on observation. Lord Glenthorn was in the pauper cabin delivering to its crippled owner, Mr Noonan, a coin sent to him by another son in England. It could reasonably be proposed that by the late-eighteenth century, epistolary literacy was like cash - its value and meaning understood by almost all and the use of the one exactly overlapping the use of the other on a map of social divisions. As with all letters to survive, those servants’ letters that remain cannot have been the only

⁹⁶ Letter of Bishop Syngé to his daughter Alicia, 17 May 1751. Legg, *Syngé letters*, p. 270. Arthur Young, *A tour of Ireland*, ed., Constantia Maxwell (Cambridge, 1925), p. 153.

⁹⁸ Whyman, *The pen and the people*, p. 8.

ones to have been created. Amongst the servants' letters found in the postbag of the ship the *Tree Sisters* in 1757, no comment is made which would suggest that the authors were conscious of their writing behaviour being unusual. Instead, phrases such as, 'it is with pleasure I lay hold of every occasion of writing' testify to letter-writing as a habitual practice. Two of the authors, Mary Barry and Ann Nulty, each referred to five correspondents.⁹⁹ Furthermore, employers' letters refer to servants' letters (to employers and to other servants) and make no comment suggestive of its being an unusual practice.¹⁰⁰ 'Granny' Bell, in Cavan, wrote letters her employer's children while they were in France in the late 1820s and early 1830s. She tenderly told seven-year-old Henry Clements 'thiss Was your birth Deay, I Wold if been Sadsfied not to rembered the muntth it Wass in for it meacks mee Low sperited, Mrs D braught the first shoos you had and the first stokns, Wee Drenk your helth in a Strong Cup of tee wee had Ceake and black Curin gam' (figure 3).¹⁰¹ The affection and eloquence of this is in no way compromised by its orthography, and Mrs Bell was no more illiterate than was Bryan Rock or Mary Vesey. Finding evidence of lower-class use of epistolary literacy has profound implications for the society being studied. Some studies on literacy suggest that if even thirty percent of a community have basic literacy skills, it effectively makes their community a literate one.¹⁰² As discussed earlier, in reference to what may be hidden behind the word 'illiterate', even the production of a poorly spelt, poorly written letter was a 'cultural process that demands consciousness of the uses of language and the mastery of skills to express them'.¹⁰³ Lower-class writers by the end of the century, like middle-class women writers at the start, were much more deeply immersed in epistolarity than the rarity of their letters or their poor handwriting and unorthodox spelling, might at first suggest.

⁹⁹ Letters from three servants which were found among the correspondence published as *The Bordeaux-Dublin Letters*. One letter from Ann Nulty contains the line quoted above. Cullen, Truxes and Shovlin, eds., *The Bordeaux-Dublin letters*, p. 157.

¹⁰⁰ Anne La Touche and her lady's maid Jameson communicated by letters carried by Anne's husband John David. Another former female employee wrote asking for a discharge. Letters from John David La Touche to his wife Anne, 11 August 1804 and 16 September 1818. La Touche Papers TCD MS 11272/89, 202. Colonel Bagshawe sent a letter with a gift to a woman hired as a nurse. Letter of Colonel Samuel Bagshawe to his mother-in-law Lady Ann Caldwell, 12 May 1761. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B2/3/306. Lady Elizabeth Aylmer's servant Catherine sent a letter to Lady Caldwell's servants about a missing petticoat. Letter of Lady Elizabeth Aylmer to Lady Elizabeth Caldwell, 6 June 1777. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B3/30/33.

¹⁰¹ 'This was your birthday; I would have been satisfied not to remember the month it was in for it makes me low spirited. Mrs D brought the first shoes you had and the first stockings. We drank your health in a strong cup of tea; we had cake and blackcurrant jam'. Letter of Mrs Bell to Henry Clements, 24 July [1827]. Clements Papers TCD MS 7338/4.

¹⁰² Carolyn Steedman, 'Poetical maids', p. 15.

¹⁰³ Whyman, *Pen and people*, pp. 10, 110.

Personal letters have three particular uses in relation to the history of service, which is otherwise lacking in sources for the employees' perspective. Firstly, they contain evidential information about recruitment and conditions which are the main building blocks for the traditional treatment of the subject. In this they complement domestic account-books. Secondly, the generic characteristic of the letter, which encourages narrative, gives the historian an opportunity to analyse what is being said. Despite being an employer-centric view, the texts can be scrutinised for what lies behind and beneath; they reveal employer (and social) anxiety and restrictions on their authority; they reveal servants' attitudes, servants being ambitious, being unpleasant, engaging in social and other learning. They also permit us to question the prevalence of stigma. Thirdly, in showing that service involved a complicated inter-personal and inter-class relationship, and was a powerful engine of a change individually and socially, they banish the simplistic view of service as an industry peopled by poor native people, doing stigmatised demeaning work, for uniquely-oppressive foreign overlords.

There are assumptions around the history of service. One is that it represented in stark form the colonial, and therefore exploitative, circumstances of much of Irish life, wherein the English Protestants, who had stolen the land from the Irish Catholics, made servants of the dispossessed native population. It must be asked if Catholic servants were more oppressed and greater victims of injustice than their counterparts in England. These assumptions suggest that servitude, inequality and exploitation were brought into being by the colonial character of Irish society. Such thinking is mostly based on the overriding political emphases of Irish historiography and the fact of historical legal discrimination.¹⁰⁴ However, there is no evidence to suggest that service in Ireland was different from service in England, where society was little affected by colonial distinctions, except perhaps where the servants were black. The negative view of service is also influenced by studies of service in the twentieth century, when society was already moving towards greater social equality and by an unexamined concept about what constituted housework and why

¹⁰⁴ That these assumptions exist is clearly demonstrated in a reality television programme aired on RTE in early summer 2013. Supposedly about servants in Georgian Ireland, it promoted a 'monolithic and unchanging' conceptualisation of the subject by including late-nineteenth-century photography, interviews with twentieth-century former-servants and, tellingly, commentary from a prominent historian who stated that some people 'rightly would still see the Big Houses as a symbol of exploitation' and that they should always be seen in terms of colonialism. The same contributor also stated, without adducing evidence, that there would have been religious tensions between the servants of the two confessions in a given household, implying also that Catholic servants were paid less than Protestants in the same positions, for which there is no published evidence. *The Big House* made by Mountain Productions for RTÉ. First episode aired 29 April 2013. Interview with Diarmaid Ferriter, Professor of Modern Irish History, UCD.

assistance was necessary. Domestic service in the early modern period was not the result either of colonialism or pampered female leisure – it was a normal and necessary institution of family life and operated within a normal working domestic relationship. It would be unreasonable to suggest that resentments of a much later, politicised population were everywhere present in the normal working relationships inside gentry houses a century or more earlier.

The history of servants requires a close engagement with the history of the gentry and of Irish Protestants, given that for large numbers of poor Catholics the ‘big house’ was a centre of employment and that, as servants, their working experience and relationship with their employer was as normal as in any part of Europe and was as likely to be positive as the contrary¹⁰⁵. Allowing undisturbed silence to envelope the subject is conducive to the long-term survival of unexamined assumptions, some of which may have their origins in the more recent past. What can be revealed through the study of service through first-hand accounts will prevent our extrapolating backwards from post-Independence historiography, which has made it difficult to imagine a servant’s voice saying much beyond a resentful ‘yes sir, yes madam’ from behind gritted teeth.

¹⁰⁵ Fauve, *The Servant Project*. It would appear that in some instances the Irish experience was less oppressive than was the case elsewhere. In Spain, for example, not only was slavery still a social reality into the nineteenth century, the acceptable treatment of Moriscos was much more abusive than anything for which there is evidence in Ireland.

Chapter 6 Marital letters

The records for marriage which are most frequently available are the formal and public ones – legal instruments, financial settlements, and published conduct literature. Study of marriage has until relatively recently been focussed on the external facade and the formal infrastructure and, particularly, on the financial dimensions. The same absence at the heart of the subject has persisted, as in the case of children’s history, and in the relationship between employer and servant, that is to say, the account of the lived experience of the individuals most concerned. In the case of marriage, the absence of the female participants’ voices leaves particularly large and perplexing questions for the historians, since this was the major area of activity of the majority of adult women. It was her entry into marriage that defined a female as an adult. Furthermore, unlike the two other ‘muted groups’ mentioned, who by dint of age or social class experienced governance in many areas of their lives, the women who lost legal identity upon entering marriage included the wealthy and the educated, women best equipped and most to be expected to chafe at the injustice of their circumstances. These were the women who were exposed to the language of natural rights and mutuality with which the idea of marriage was increasingly being linked in the eighteenth century. It is not alone of the utmost importance to know from more personal records how individual women experienced their marriage, but this knowledge has wider social application; it allows the repressive cultural system reflected by ‘official’ records - the patriarchy - to be seen to have been impacted upon by such contingencies as the personalities of the individuals involved and the relationship between a couple. It also allows historians to understand the full extent of what they know to be the limited capacity of the formal records to speak for the society which produced them. Over the last decades, an increasingly nuanced understanding of married women’s lives in Ireland has developed, albeit without sufficient examination of women’s own records. In 1993, L.A. Clarkson hinted that this would be the case, referring to ‘matriarchal management behind a patriarchal exterior at the family level, and social prominence contrasting with economic subordination at the community’.¹ It is important to look behind the patriarchal exterior to prevent a narrow reading of this complex entity from limiting insight into the period. We now know that individual women had access to the informal power which operates within private relationships, and that some women

¹ L. A. Clarkson, ‘Love, labour and life: women in Carrick on Suir in the late eighteenth century’, *Irish Economic and Social History*, 20 (1993) p. 30.

enjoyed the respect that came from the validation of their enhanced role as teacher. Many women, in most classes, will have found ‘fulfilment according to culturally established standards of womanhood’, thus prolonging the existence of a repressive patriarchal regime. But there is a caveat. Being overly interested in that line of questioning - regarding how so many women put up with marriage practices which are offensive to modern eyes - continues the effacement of the history of the ‘private’ woman and the family by privileging the stories of those who explicitly rejected the regime. By seeking to trace only those lives and experiences which explicitly feed into female emancipatory history prevents us from observing the significance of other areas wherein profound changes were also taking place and which set the scene for what followed.

A key aim of this chapter is to capture the opinions, attitudes and experiences of women in relation to marriage in their own voices. Certain elements are not entirely unknown in an Irish context: that an individual woman’s room to manoeuvre within marriage depended very much on her own personality and that of her husband has been remarked upon, as has the fact that women had far more say in the management of family money than might be reflected in the surviving financial documents. On the subject of the nature of the relationship between a married couple, Malcomson has written that ‘affectiveness’ in marriage ‘was probably the norm by 1800’. He is not the first to point out that money was ‘less generally accepted as a crucial factor in marriage in the eighteenth century’, or that by the 1780s well over half of the marriages contracted in Great Britain were for reasons of personal choice’.² But what of this ‘affectiveness’, how did it come about? Is it possible to know? The answer is probably no, not in full, but the only way to get at the nub of the matter, as Malcomson also said, was through investigating the recorded personal feelings of the couples involved. For this, personal correspondence is the only resource.³ Referring in passing to such issues is not sufficient to convey the importance in the history of women of their changing experience of marriage over the century, a change which should be spoken of in the same respect as female suffrage. Achieving even a limited right to choose was revolutionary, both socially and individually. It is vital that we hear women’s own opinions of this major change, particularly at the transitional period where both ‘dynastic’ and ‘free choice’ marriages

² Malcomson, *Pursuit*, p. 120; R. B. Outhwaite ed., *Marriage and society: studies in the social history of marriage* (London, 1981), p.10. Randolph Trumbach, *The rise of the egalitarian family: aristocratic kinship and domestic relations in eighteenth-century England* (New York, San Francisco, and London, 1978), p. 91. Even if Ireland was behind this curve, the figure will still have been high.

³ Malcomson, *Pursuit*, p. 137.

existed side by side. Other distinctive, gendered experiences have been omitted from the social history of marriage at least in Ireland: they will impact on an understanding of how marriage and the married woman's role were culturally conceived. The role of a mother in her daughter's marital prospects is often only considered with reference to the actual pre-marital negotiations, but her responsibilities and skills were in play long before that. She was expected to manage her daughter's education, which was in the nature of a cultural dowry. Another unexamined female experience was the ambivalence on the part of some women which they experienced as they left their family home after marriage; this has been mentioned in terms of a woman not wishing to be immured in the countryside without access to the social life of the city, but there are other more personal implications that can be examined. The individual's expression of her experience of marriage has implications for an understanding of attitudes generally. For example, one of the key findings in this chapter is the extraordinary contrast to be found in letters between married couples' language at the beginning and the end of the period covered by this thesis as the rhetoric of relationships changed beyond recognition. Letters previously dismissed as ephemeral, because of their repetitious emphasis on private feelings, must be recognised as linguistic heralds of a new age.

Attitudes to marriage

Although the purpose of this chapter is to show how letters can be used to look behind the 'patriarchal exterior' of marriage to witness changes taking place, it is clear that elements of that exterior were still firmly in place well into the nineteenth century. Implicated in the slow pace of change in this regard is the not insignificant fact that it was not only men who used mercenary language to express their attitude to marriage. An approach to marriage untouched by any but financial concerns is evidenced in a letter from John Caldwell to his mother Lady Ann (circa 1749) in which he laid out the steps he had taken to acquire the hand and fortune of Alice Caulfeild, sister to the 3rd Earl of Charlemont; the young girl's step-father was keen to see her settled after the death of her mother in 1743. Caldwell had been assured that, although neither 'handsome pretty or genteel', the girl 'has good common sense and good nature youth and health with affability and condescension' and being so 'very young her mind is as yet to form'.⁴ She also had four thousand pounds and a prospect of another eight to ten thousand, not to mention 'jewels to a considerable value'. Her consent was not being sought, simply that

⁴ Letter from John Caldwell to his mother Lady Ann, [1744x1757]. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B3/5/17.

of her step-father and brother; Caldwell did not propose talking to her until the affair was settled. In the same letter Caldwell also mentioned ‘Miss Donelon a very pretty girl with six thousand pounds [who] was offered to me last Summer’; he also believed ‘with great reason that [he] could get Miss Maxwell’. This attitude to marriage was not unchallenged in the mid-eighteenth century; but as Caldwell exhibited no ambivalence about his approach, this can only indicate that Lady Ann and he felt none. Caldwell’s was not the only way wealthy families viewed marriage at mid-century. Bishop Syngé, when writing to his daughter at about the same time on the subject of a ‘premature’ marriage, expressed himself shocked at parents allowing very young girls to marry simply to get them off their hands. He suggests that those seeking to marry such young ‘nursery-girls ... marry for interest and conveniency’, as Caldwell was intending with the connivance of Alice Caulfeild’s step-father.

The expression of the pursuit of a marriage partner in purely mercenary terms was not specifically a male phenomenon, as the letters of Judith Odell prove. In advising her son Richard about his matrimonial prospects in the first decade of the nineteenth century, Mrs Odell described one of the women in whom he had an interest in terms of her prospective income from her grandmother and a ‘parcel of childless uncles’, and with reference to the favours which could be done for Richard Odell by the young woman’s father. Mrs Odell made a gesture towards the woman’s personal attributes, noting that she was ‘mild, feminine and healthy’, but the subordinate value of these advantages is made clear by Odell’s reference, in the same breath, to a Colonel Turton who ‘took his little wife for her £4000 and shut his eyes on deformity’. She continued, ‘I would allow no vote to my eyes on certain subjects but satisfy my heart and reason’.⁵ This is echoed by the words of Charles Tottenham to his son Charles at almost the same time, when in relation to his son’s prospective wife he asked about ‘her beauty, accomplishments, agreeableness [and] her fortune which let me tell you is not the worst feature in a wife’.⁶ Like John Caldwell, Richard Odell, had several irons in the fire when he started looking for a wife. His mother referred to a Miss Hughes, a Miss Brydges (whom Mrs Odell mordantly called a ‘ponte d’oro’) and another ‘faithful Achates in Norfolk’.⁷ Mrs Odell’s turn of phrase in the matter of matrimony was merciless in a way that is thought-provoking, given the reaction a modern reader might experience if her words were attributable to a man. She

⁵ Letter from Judith Odell to her son Richard, undated ‘Wednesday’ c. 1807. Ussher Papers NLI MS 10,172.

⁶ Letter from Charles Tottenham to his son Charles, 10 July 1803. La Touche Papers TCD MS 11272/47.

⁷ Letter from Judith Odell to her son Richard, 9 February c.1800. Ussher Papers NLI MS 10, 172.

referred to someone's haste to marry his daughters off before they became 'dried bacon' and, in recounting the number of potential partners available to a rich heir, she wrote, 'everyone offers him a wife. If he lost a cow he would not so easily get another'.⁸ Mrs Odell was not, however, unaware of the cultural expectation of the association of love with marriage at least for the female partner. When describing her tears at her daughter's marriage in 1799, she noted they flowed despite the marriage being 'a match of love and joy, and choice at all sides', adding that Bel 'loves the Major with real and solid affection'.⁹

The alternative to a pragmatic approach to marriage was not, in the eighteenth century, the romance that came to characterise nineteenth-century courtships. It was the 'meeting of minds', a concept that had its origins in the literature of the seventeenth century.¹⁰ Arabella Denny was asked for advice by Lady Elizabeth Caldwell when marriage was being contemplated for one of Lady Elizabeth's daughters in 1774. Lady Arabella insisted there was 'much more than fortune to consider ... the qualities of the man and not the extent of his possessions should carry the prize'. She specifically rejected the arrangement whereby a woman might be married to an uncongenial partner – a foolish brute to be specific – so that a large estate could be settled on the expected male heir who 'never appeared in the world'.¹¹ Perhaps Lady Arabella was describing her own unhappy experience. Good sense, good qualities and fifteen hundred pounds a year were in her opinion the necessary ingredients for a successful marriage. Everyone agreed on the necessity of a 'competence'. Julia Bellew's suitor whom she admired for having a 'good heart [and] a most sterling understanding', she felt had to be rejected, against her brother's wishes, because he had not a fortune with which to make her happy.¹²

One of the eighteenth-century Irish letter-writers who expressed herself frequently on the prerequisites for a successful marriage was Quaker Margaret Pike. She never referred to finance in detail, but even so did insist on similarity of 'ages, fortunes and dispositions'. Her abhorrence of anything else being expressed in terms of an 'unequal yoke' shows the religious imperative underpinning her world view: a woman was required to obey her husband, and being married to a man of an unsympathetic outlook,

⁸ Letters from Judith Odell to her daughter Bel, 30 November (1808) and 27 February (1803). Ussher Papers NLI MS 10,172.

⁹ Letter from Judith Odell to Anne Perceval, 6 Sept 1799. Graves Papers TCD MS 10047/7/1.

¹⁰ Margaret J. M. Ezell, *The patriarch's wife: literary evidence and the history of the family* (New York and London, 1987), ch 2: 'The patriarch's perspective: the good wife', pp. 36-62.

¹¹ Raughter, 'Letters of Arabella Denny', p. 191.

¹² Letter from Julia Bellew to her cousin Michael, 23 December [?1794]. Bellew Papers NLI MS 25,152.

or whose judgement she could not value, would prevent a woman from fulfilling her spiritual potential. On hearing that Abbey Wright was engaged to marry William Knott in 1783, Margaret lamented that ‘their dispositions, their ages, their fortunes their pursuits are so different, so disproportionate that tho I hope they may pass their lives with a moderate degree of satisfaction I can hardly [?imagine] poor Abbey enjoying what is commonly called comfort or happiness ... ah, what a woman might she have been had she been but united to a sensibly religious young man’.¹³ Margaret Pike wrote two letters in the days shortly after it became common knowledge that William Pike had unexpectedly proposed for her in 1781. One she wrote to her friend Mary Shackleton and the other to her cousin Tommy. These letters, written before Christy had decided upon her answer, represent a rare opportunity to compare the language used by one person to two recipients on the same important topic. It is notable that Christy went into more detail in her letter to her male cousin, while asking ‘pardon’ for ‘this free disclosure of my sentiments, the affection I feel for thee makes me almost forget that it’s not to one of my own sex that I am addressing myself’. To Mary Shackleton Margaret confided that she was ‘disturbed’ and ‘distressed’ by what she described as ‘this unexpected and undesired affair’. One of the difficulties was that she was afraid the high opinion her ‘friends’ had of the match would force her hand while she feared she ‘could never love him as one ought to do a person to whom they would give their hand’. To her cousin Tommy she expressed this more fully: ‘My ideas of <what is> happiness in a married life make me dread the thoughts of a disappointment ... barely to esteem a man is not enough in my opinion, he ought to be loved above all the rest of the world, else how is happiness to be expected. I think it is running a dreadful risk to trust to the love coming after marriage’.¹⁴

The disjunction between appearances and reality has been recognised by Malcomson in treating of marriages whose origins are known to have been founded on affection between the parties. He acknowledged that personal letters, being one of the only records of individual experience, are vital to avoid misconceptions about the nature of particular marriages. If a man falls in love with a milkmaid, he wrote, it is assumed to have been for love. If he marries an heiress it is assumed to have been an arranged match. These latter marriages would, because the partners appear outwardly so compatible, look like a ‘mere traffic for private or political purposes’, or like marriages dictated by

¹³ Letter from Margaret Pike to Mary Shackleton, 1 mo 15th 1783. Shackleton Papers NLI MS 5987.

¹⁴ Letter from Margaret Pike to Mary Shackleton, 1 mo 6th 1781. Shackleton Papers NLI MS 5987. Letter from Margaret Oike to Tommy Chandler, 1 mo 8th 1781. Shackleton Papers NLI MIC 1094.

‘authority or interest’ if they were to be rationalised solely on the basis of class and the formal settlements.¹⁵ The failure of logic implicit in this assumption is illustrated by what the modern reader learns, from their letters, of the marriage of the James Stopford, who became the 4th Earl of Courtown, and his cousin Charlotte Montague Scott in 1822. On paper, this was a perfect match and, without reading their letters, the involvement of one or both sets of parents in bringing it about could confidently be assumed. But this was far from so, as the young couple came together without any nudging by their families. They arrived at an informal understanding before anything was communicated to the older generation. When their intentions were made known to their families, the elder relatives of both, far from being delighted, proved hard to convince of the merit of the arrangement, believing that the young couple had paid insufficient attention to the likely narrowness of their means. Charlotte’s mother ‘approved of the marriage in every respect, except the money part, which ... neither of [them] considered half enough’. Lady Stopford wrote a long letter to Charlotte entreating her to ‘pause and most sincerely consider ... all you will engage for if you accept [James]’. She continued with a catalogue of the horrors attendant on marrying a man whose father could give him very little, and who was obliged to live, at expense, in London for half the year. These circumstances, she wrote, would have obliged her and her husband to refuse to consent to their son’s wishes had his intended fiancée been anybody other than Charlotte herself.¹⁶ As part of the letter in which he formally proposed, and at the ‘particular wish’ of Charlotte’s father and others of their ‘friends’, James ‘enter[ed] into the subject of ... income’ so that Charlotte would be fully appraised before making a decision that she had clearly made already on other grounds. An intriguing element revealed in the Stopford letters is that James Stopford’s prospects on the death of his father were not part of the discussion of the suitability of his marriage plans and were only mentioned privately and quite diffidently by James to Charlotte: ‘One thing that would not be mentioned, though at the same time it must be borne in mind’, he wrote, ‘is that I am the heir to a very good property. God forbid that I should wish for my father’s death, I should be the most ungrateful of wretches if I did’. Charlotte agreed it would be improper to mention it. If their letters had not survived, a historian interested in this marriage must have assumed that James’ prospects were central to all discussions. What the letters show instead is finer feelings at play, arising out of the deep affection

¹⁵ Malcomson, *Pursuit*, p. 141.

¹⁶ Lady Mary Courtown to Lady Charlotte Scott, [c. January 1822]. Courtown Papers TCD MS 11183/V/119a-b/30.

that existed among the members of the Stopford family. James loathed asking his father for money, knowing the financial burdens he carried, while Lord Stopford himself was said by Charlotte's mother to be so indulgent a father he would not refuse his children were they to ask for 'an elephant to ride to Constantinople'.¹⁷ The Courtown letters also reveal ways in which young people formed their impression of what constituted a desirable match. This is a matter which will be touched on later in relation to the exposure of young children, through their parents' letter-writing practice, to new methods of expressing affection. Young women formed their views on marriage from observation, from their peer-to-peer conversations, from reading, as well as from their mostly conservative elders.

The value of a bad marriage as a warning to young couples is found in the Courtown papers. The unhappy situation of Lady Hore - apparently caused or exacerbated by money problems - was the cause of the antipathy of Charlotte's grandmother to Charlotte's forthcoming marriage, which the older lady felt was underfunded. James assured Charlotte that he would not be a Lord Hore 'in fidelity or extravagance', and sympathised with Lady Hore to whom her husband had behaved 'in a way that excuses any behaviour of her towards him'.¹⁸ This is expressed in a slightly jocular vein, but the language acknowledges the existence of a moral contract between married couples. Charlotte's seven-year-old sister Harriet was imbibing modern expectations by observing the young couple's way of speaking together. She wrote a letter to James Stopford, around the time of Charlotte's engagement, in which she parodied how a 'forlorn' wife might write to an erring husband. Dramatically asserting herself to be 'a victim of despair' (which suggests something of the romantic literature she was also being exposed to), Harriet then wrote 'I have given up all my husbands but you, and therefore I hope you will give up all your wives but me', which suggests an expectation of the right to negotiate on equal terms, an expectation which also owes its existence to an increasingly widespread understanding of the contractual nature of marriage.¹⁹

Harriet Scott's absorption of the high-flown language of romantic literature calls to mind the anxiety about whether this kind of fiction was suitable for female

¹⁷ Lady Charlotte Scott to James Stopford, [February 1822]. Courtown Papers TCD MS 11183/V/119a-b/36.

¹⁸ Letter from James Stopford to his fiancée Charlotte Scott, 11 February 1822. TCD MS 11183/V/119a-b/35.

¹⁹ Letter from Harriet Scott (b.1814) to James Stopford, 17 August 1821. Letters between Charlotte Scott and James Stopford, 6 and 11 February 1822. Courtown Papers TCD MS 11183/V/199a-b/13, 34, 35.

consumption. The anxiety focussed to some degree on the fear that it would make women discontented with married reality and that they would be seduced by men resembling fictional romantic heroes.²⁰ On hearing news of her engagement to John David La Touche in 1822, Anne Tottenham's aunt sent her a cautioning letter. Stopping short of accusing her of being 'romantic', the Countess suspected an 'enthusiasm' in Anne's character that might cause her to be disappointed upon discovering that her fiancé was merely human. She continued 'and when the "adoring lover" is become only the affectionate husband, and faithful friend, do not be mortified when you begin to suspect that he has found out that you may perhaps be only a being of the same species'.²¹ Older relatives were not necessarily always unsentimental, in the contemporary sense. While Charlotte Scott, on the eve of her wedding in 1822, received morally uplifting literature and advice as to what kind of prudent behaviour 'your husband and others have a right to expect from you', Anne Tottenham had received something slightly different, two decades earlier. An older friend in Bath welcomed her onto the 'list of matrons' who could show to the world the superior charms of domestic duties as compared with 'gay and dissipated' single life. However Mrs Leigh not alone assumed the heart led and the hand followed, that is, that Anne had made a free choice of her husband, but she wished Anne a happy marriage, recalling that she herself in 1783 'secured the very first of the kind by giving my hand to his Reverence Mr. Leigh of (?)Rackell Hall, who at this moment has the vanity and to me the flattery to say "My dear Mrs if the sweet Anne is but as happy as you and I she will be blessed indeed"'.²²

Another unique characteristic of the epistolary genre is that, as letters permit the author to 'think out loud' in sharing an opinion, they can catch that individual's evolving thoughts. In this way ambivalence, the hallmark of real social change, may be spotted.²³ An example is Lady Elizabeth Caldwell, who in the 1760s was involving herself in some matchmaking activities of her husband (possibly involving a woman of the Irvine family of Castle Irvine). She was principally interested in the money and knew to a penny the

²⁰ Chris Rouston, *Narrating*, p. 35.

²¹ Letter from Jane, Countess of Ely to her husband's niece Anne Tottenham, 25 February 1799. La Touche Papers TCD MS 11232/31. In Maria Edgeworth's *Leonora* (1806) the extravagantly emotional Olivia explains the breakdown of her marriage in terms of having discovered in her mate not 'a heart suited to my own' but 'merely a husband'. In the opinion of one of the characters, Olivia 'prepared' this danger for herself by reading dramatic German novels.

²² Letter from Elizabeth Sanders to Lady Charlotte Scott, 3 July 1822. Courtown Papers TCD MS 11183/V/199a-b/56. Letter from E. Leigh to Anne Tottenham, 20 February 1799. La Touche Papers TCD MS 11272/30.

²³ Julie Nash, *Servants and paternalism in the works of Maria Edgeworth and Elizabeth Gaskell*, (Aldershot and Burlington, 2007), p. 17.

resources, actual and potential, of both parties. It was a mind-set which would have been natural to her. Her husband would have shared his brother John's business minded-approach to picking a wife when he secured Elizabeth Hort with her £10,000 fortune,²⁴ and Lady Arabella's advice, mentioned above, regarding the suitors for Lady Elizabeth's daughter indicates a shared concern for finance. Yet on the subject of the unknown Miss Irvine, Lady Elizabeth echoed Lady Arabella when she delivered herself of the opinion that 'as the world goes a sensible man of merit with less fortune would make her happier than more fortune without these two qualities'.²⁵ Both Lady Arabella and Lady Elizabeth had personal experience of dynastic marriages and were not convinced that it was the only way. Lady Mary Roche referred to marriage as a lottery - meaning things did not happen just because conditions were correct - when describing her sister Grace's marriage. This, she said, was less impressive than might have been hoped for in a woman who 'from her beauty, accomplishments and being so early in possession of a good fortune had a right to do better in the matrimonial line than any of her sisters and might have gratified the pride of her family by making a good match'. The reason for the match, Lady Mary suggested, was her sister's prioritising personal preference over status: 'perhaps she may be happier in her present choice. I am told the island of Jersey (in point of climate) is delightful, and there she may have all the pleasure which love and fine weather and the indulgence of vanity in being one of the first women on the island can give'.²⁶

As the end of the 'long' eighteenth century approached, the slow move towards individual subjectivity altered the expectations of the emotional reward that was coming to be expected from family life.²⁷ In the Courtown letters, a difference in attitude may be observed between the generations regarding the role of personal attraction and sentiment in the instigation of a marriage. Not alone is it implied in the changing expectation regarding the sharing of a couples' private letters, which will be mentioned below, but it was sometimes remarked upon explicitly. James Stopford recounted to his fiancée a story his mother told him. In a conversation Lady Stopford had had with 'the Duchess', Charlotte Scott's mother, in reference to a particular marriage, the Duchess said, 'I never was in love, I can't say I know what it means'. The fact that Lady Courtown thought it

²⁴ John Cunningham, *Castle Caldwell*, p. 91.

²⁵ Lady Elizabeth Caldwell to her husband Sir James, [?c. 1760s]. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B3/29/20.

²⁶ Lady Mary Roche (née Mary Frankland (c. 1750-1831)) of York. Letters from Lady Mary to her brother Sir Thomas Frankland, 9 May 1799 and 24 Mar 1793. Boyle Roche Papers NLI MS 5391.

²⁷ Rouston, *Narrating marriage*, p. 12.

worth mentioning to her son, who passed the story on to his fiancée, implies how odd it sounded to them all.²⁸ The change was slow in coming and non-linear in its progress. Daniel O’Connell made a comment in relation to a marriage, showing that, in his opinion, his own marriage, contracted in the early 1800s, was of a new order as it was based on personal attraction. He commented to his wife that the traditional marriage, based on swapping female beauty for male wealth, ‘is not an unusual traffic in the matrimonial way. These people without feelings such as ours may go on in a way which has been marked out by so many others’. However, four decades earlier Lady Louisa Connolly made almost the same remark, saying in 1764 that marrying a person one liked was the most important thing, while she recognised that that way ‘was not the usual one’ nor agreeable to ‘the common way of doing well in the world’.²⁹

Such emphasis on sentiment and, increasingly, on romance brought in its train changes that are considered to have had a detrimental effect on the opportunities for women to build on the social freedoms they had begun to secure after 1750. The hearth and home, with its maternal central figure, began to be described in terms of comfort and happiness, leading to its apotheosis in the Victorian era. Lady Elizabeth Aylmer expressed surprise that James Caldwell would not spend time in Castle Caldwell, saying ‘the world ... are all open mouthed at him for his seeming neglect of such domestic happiness’. Lady Arabella, when sending greetings to Lady Elizabeth, sent them to ‘your numerous fireside’, conjuring a picture of domestic bliss.³⁰ A concomitant change was in the description by men of their wives in language that has overt religious overtones. John D’Alton used language to his wife that one might expect to hear in a prayer; ‘[Y]ou ... smooth the rugged precipice like the voice of the divinity whose word calmed the troubles of the ocean – in solitude I find you - in crowds I retire to you – You are the object of all my studies the end of all my speculations ... You are my study and my relaxation – my ornament and benefit’, and again ‘you consecrate your family circle ... with you I find a foretaste of heaven’.³¹ It has been suggested that the tension caused by late eighteenth-century anxiety about newly-assertive women, and the spread of the idea of the natural equality and freedom of human beings (as argued by philosophers including Hobbes and

²⁸ Letter from James Stopford to his fiancée Charlotte Scott, 11 February [1822]. Courtown Papers TCD MS 11183/V/119a-b/35.

²⁹ Letter of Daniel O’Connell to his wife Mary, [c. 1802]. O’Connell, *Correspondence*, vol 1, p. 78. Lady Louisa Connolly quoted in Malcomson, *Pursuit*, p. 119.

³⁰ Letter from Lady Elizabeth Aylmer to Lady Elizabeth Caldwell, [? early 1750s]. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B3/30/1. Raughter, ‘Letters of Arabella Denny’, p. 188.

³¹ Letters from John D’Alton to his wife Catherine, 4 and 10 September 1818. TCD MS 2327/67, 86.

Locke) led to the reconfiguration of the sentimental domestic family as a ‘reservation’ for women. This process, much documented by family historians, provided a new rationale for the subordination of women. The language of mutuality, and the growing attraction of comfortable domesticity, provided wives with the tools to make intelligible the radical inequality between the genders within marriage; by sugar-coating an unchangingly unjust regime and making the medicine easier for women to swallow, such language prolonged that regime’s life.³² Before this happened, other changes in inter-spousal language occurred which showed that the idea of partnership in marriage, after well over a century in discussion, had become part and parcel of the mental furniture throughout the gentry class. Catherine D’Alton in 1827 chided her husband for risking his health in bad weather, with the words, ‘you are very bold not to take care of yourself – altho you must know you are my property and not your own’, thereby identifying herself playfully with an intellectual shift that was not to have legal expression for a century. This is further revealed in Lady Mary Roche’s 1793 letter to her brother in which she makes an interesting anti-‘women’s lib’ gibe. Speaking about an unmarried woman, she asks if the woman had ‘accepted a peerage and declared against matrimony accord[ing] to [?the ?new] fashion’.³³ John La Touche – not a man given to levity – when reporting on having made domestic arrangements according to his absent wife’s instructions, jokingly asked in 1806, ‘is not that acting like an obedient husband?’, and Charlotte Stopford pretended to threaten to divorce her husband if he did not write her enough letters in the 1820s. Arch, seeming throw-away remarks of this nature reflect society’s recognition of changing female expectations of the reciprocal nature of the marriage agreement which by the end of the eighteenth century was so commonplace that it had become part of casual humour. It speaks of ‘of a new form of autonomy which could have had repercussions within the marriage’.³⁴

Little known negative aspects of being married

Earlier in the eighteenth century, some personal letters convey an attitude to marriage that was clearly gender specific: the ambivalence with which some woman may have faced the prospect. Since marriage was the only entrée to adult life available to a woman, and

³² Susan Moller Okin, ‘Women and the making of the sentimental family’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 11 (Winter 198) pp. 65-88; Rouston, *Narrating marriage*, p. 210.

³³ Letter from Lady Boyle Roche to her brother, Sir Thomas Frankland, 18 October 1793. NLI MS 5391

³⁴ Letter from Catherine D’Alton to her husband John, 28 April 1827. TCD MS 2327/139; letter from John David La Touche to his wife Anne, 28 July 1806. La Touche Papers TCD MS 11272/133; letter from Charlotte Stopford to her husband James, (1822/1823). Courtown Papers TCD MS 11183/V/119a-b/62. Rouston, *Narrating marriage*, p. 128.

since the unmarried woman was so deeply denigrated culturally, it is tempting to assume that most women were uncomplicatedly keen to embark on this career change. The experience was more complex than that implies. There has been little discussion of the female experience of marriage in terms of the change in a woman's responsibilities and expected behaviour. Unlike her brothers, for whom marriage would make little difference in how they conducted themselves in public, many women, being newly 'thrown into the world', as Alicia Synge described it, may have felt they were being thrown to the wolves. An awareness of this perspective helps to undermine the simplistic public/private-sphere binary as a description of women's lives. Marriage was not in any simple sense a private, domestic sphere of activity. It may seem that there could be little difference between what an adult did in her parents' home and in her husband's home. This was not the experience of all women. The moment she would marry, a girl would 'commence woman', as Bishop Synge put it, that is, enter immediately into an adult state and be expected to assume the complex suite of personal, domestic and other managerial responsibilities associated with being married. The work itself may not have been entirely new but the public-facing responsibilities may have been a severe test of skills.³⁵

Here is one of the rare instances that some sense is conveyed of Alicia Synge's opinion, despite the loss her side of the correspondence with her father. Sometimes, in order to correct her grammar, her father transcribed parts of Alicia's letters to him, to show her where she had made mistakes. He did so in the letter quoted earlier against child marriage and it is clear that, while Alicia shared her father's objection to the practice, it was from a different viewpoint. Her father was concerned principally about the husband's want of sense in choosing so young a wife, while Alicia was concerned with the young bride-to-be. Very young girls, said the bishop, were fit to take charge of households and children, and to be the brides of 'men of sense'. The main objection he had was that the men who chose such youthful wives were as 'great babies as them they choose'. Alicia on the other hand specifically pitied the unnamed bride for being 'thrown into the world before it is possible that she can know how to conduct herself in it'.³⁶ Alicia's objection shows her understanding that the role a newly married woman was entering was more public than that even of an unmarried adult in her parents' home, and required specific

³⁵ A woman's expectation and experience of entering into adulthood at marriage runs counter to the legal discourse which held that a woman became a non-person, on marriage, through the doctrine of coverture. Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in early-modern England*, p. 124.

³⁶ Letter from Bishop Synge to his daughter Alicia, 7 and 14 August 1752. Legg, *Synge letters*, pp. 452, 455.

preparation which a young girl could not have been expected to have mastered. Margaret Pike articulated her own anxiety on this score. In her letters to her cousin Tommy and to Mary Shackleton, written after her proposal, she assumed that Mary Shackleton could not fully understand her situation, given that she has not yet experienced it. She looked to her cousin Debby, Mary Shackleton's sister and Tommy's new wife, for sympathy. To Mary she said simply, 'it was perfectly disagreeable to me the thoughts of changing my situation', while spelling the cause of her anxiety out more fully to Tommy: 'my youth and inexperience make me dread the thoughts of engaging with the world'.³⁷

There were other unpleasant changes peculiar to female experience. Henceforth as Margaret also knew and did not relish, she would be 'greatly confined', that is, at much less liberty to leave the house, since she would become principally responsible for its management, as her husband would be away from home frequently on business and religious duties. This was an obligation which Elizabeth Caldwell also struggled with, isolated in Fermanagh, not able to spend even the winters or her confinements in Dublin. As her husband spent much time away, Lady Elizabeth's freedom of movement was restricted by frequent pregnancies, household and estate responsibilities and financial constraints. There was a negative impact on her psychological well-being. Elizabeth wrote to James that his absence made her 'melancholy ... and flattens everything that would otherwise be agreeable'.³⁸ It was not only responsibilities which kept a woman at home - the necessity of having an escort complicated all travel plans. Even the redoubtable Lady Ann Caldwell could not arrange to visit her recently-delivered daughter because her son could not confirm his availability to accompany her. Furthermore, at a time when the power of a letter in maintaining long-standing relationships was most wanted, domestic concerns could usurp the time it required. This was anticipated by Margaret Pike at the very beginning of their correspondence, when she wrote to Mary Shackleton: 'I see not one woman in a thousand continues those correspondences when married which have perhaps been one of the most delightful pleasures of her younger days'.³⁹ Margaret Pike's difficulties in contemplating her proposal had another element which must have been shared by many women and which would have been unlike the male experience: marriage would initiate their first prolonged removal from the place and

³⁷ Letter from Margaret Pike to her cousin Tommy, 1st mo 8th 1781. Shackleton papers NLI Microfilm P1094.

³⁸ Letter from Lady Elizabeth Caldwell to her husband James, 12 July 1783. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B3/29/19.

³⁹ Letter from Margaret Pike to Mary Shackleton, 12nd mo 22nd 1781. NLI MS 5987 pp. 15-18.

people among whom their entire lives had been spent. Many boys, by going to boarding school and college (and in being generally permitted more freedom of movement) were separated from home and family at an early age. Not only would Margaret Pike be leaving a family which was close-knit and very loving (and she stated that she had no wish to leave either her mother or her religious Meeting) but she also appears to have had a particularly strong attachment to her 'native soil', Stramore in County Down, and only left it with great sadness. In her letter to Debby Chandler, written before her engagement but when something of it was clearly in the air, Margaret described her feelings on first glimpsing Stramore:

I thought I saw something peculiarly charming, something surpassing all that art or nature had bestowed on every other place I had seen. Oh loved spot how shall I leave thee? Talk not to me of bachelors or the fine things they say. Everything I see and hear and feel makes me dread the thought of risking my happiness by engaging in a connection which death only can dissolve.⁴⁰

After her marriage, and as she moved to new house, she wrote to her cousin Debby Chandler, 'I shall endeavour to continue as long as I can at Stramore ... I would be very sorry to be in any situation from which I could not often get to see that loved place'.⁴¹ This was followed by a long passage about resigning oneself to God's will. She eventually went, with her brother and mother for company, to her husband's 'habitation', but clearly not for long. In 1786, five years after her marriage, she wrote to Mary Shackleton that 'after a good deal of consideration and struggle between inclination and alternatives, we have at length concluded to leave dear Stramore in a few months ... I believe it will be no less unexpected as disagreeable to thee to hear that the County Tyrone is to be our future residence, it has thou may think already cost me much anxiety but I expect the worst is yet to come'. Again she tried to resign herself to God's will, but ended, 'I must quit this subject', a phrase she used when she found it difficult to continue speaking on other deeply emotional occasions, including a house fire and the death of a brother.⁴²

The stereotypical picture of the fainting and weeping bride is a Victorian literary and artistic staple, with the implication that it is the unknown territory represented by the

⁴⁰ Letter from Margaret Pike to Debby Chandler, 12mo 11th 1789. Christy letter 6. Quaker Historical Library.

⁴¹ Letter from Margaret Pike to her cousin Debby Chandler, 2mo 27th 1798. NLI MIC P1094.

⁴² Letter from Margaret Pike to Mary Shackleton, 2nd mo 11th 1786. Ballitore Papers NLI MIC P1094.

marital bed that is the cause of the bride's distress (although the known terrors of childbed understandably could have caused some women genuinely to shrink before 'the awful crisis').⁴³ There has been little exploration of the idea that the weeping bride was mourning the life that was coming to an end. This is a subject touched on in Mendelson and Crawford's study of early-modern English women's experience, in which they concluded that the break with their previous life, occasioned by marriage, was experienced by some women as a 'violent discontinuity', unlike the male view of the experience being as a 'smooth transfer from parental to spousal authority'.⁴⁴ Fifteen-year-old Eliza/Betty Hare, Dorothea Herbert's friend and co-conspirator in girlish flights of vanity, wept at her betrothal; she did not have to leave home but she was wrenched out of her sheltered youth, and brought back from her pleasant stay in the Herberts' house amid tears, to become Mrs Clarke in 1780 without a moment's notice or any consultation.⁴⁵ Margaret Pike indulged in 'a hearty fit of crying' when her friend Abbey Wright 'the last of my young female companions' left to be married. She consoled herself with spending time with her mother, something she had less opportunity of, 'tho never more inclined to it', since her own marriage.⁴⁶ Judith Odell's description of the unhappy tears of both herself and her daughter Bel on the latter's wedding in September 1799 leaves no doubt that it was the emotional damage arising from the break-up of their life-long relationship that was being lamented. 'If you could see my face at this moment', she wrote to a friend on the day after the wedding, 'you would think I had buried her'.⁴⁷ Mrs Odell then recalled the sorry scene when she and her widowed father parted as she left him to be married herself: 'when I recollect the parting scene I had with my own dear father when he wept and laid his head on my shoulder, like the picture of Abraham and Isaac ... It was alas the last time I saw him'. When her son-in-law's military career took him to Canada, with Bel and their new baby son, Mrs Odell used her considerable persuasive arsenal to try to persuade Bel to stay behind. Her efforts failed and of their leave-taking she wrote:

⁴³ Dorothea Herbert's phrase in describing her cousin Charlotte Blunden's approaching nuptials. Dorothea Herbert, *Retrospections of an outcast* edited and with an introduction by Louis Cullen (Dublin 1982).

⁴⁴ Mendelson and Crawford, *Early-modern women*, p. 129

⁴⁵ Herbert, *Retrospections*, p. 72.

⁴⁶ Letter from Margaret Pike to Debby Chandler, 9mo 24th 1781. Quaker Historical Library Christy letters, 10.

⁴⁷ Letter from Judith Odell to Anne Perceval, 6 September 1799. Graves Papers TCD MS 10046/7/1.

I expected to be shocked at parting, but indeed any idea I ever formed of what I was to suffer, fell short of what I felt, when the awful event happened and I felt myself separated perhaps forever from the best of daughters. To avoid taking leave I retired to my room when their going approached. If they had been hung or drowned I could not be more unhappy than I have been, so superior is feeling to reason. But I will quit this painful subject.⁴⁸

To put this relationship break-up in context one must recall not only the restrictions on her freedom to travel but the fact that the eighteenth-century woman was rarely if ever on her own, nor did she want to be. Company was the normal circumstance in which people - women and men - lived their lives. Alicia Synge expressed anxiety if her father revealed he had had few visitors, and Maria Edgeworth's letters make one wonder if she ever willingly passed as much as a moment by herself, so little did she appear to relish it; she endeavoured always to have a sister or two with her.⁴⁹ Women were expected to want and need female companionship, which explains partly why, when both Margaret Pike and Elizabeth Caldwell went to their new homes as wives, they brought female family members with them to bridge the chasm between their old life and their new. The maintenance of their relationships after marriage also depended, not just on geography, but on a new husband's inclination. Anne Tottenham's friend Jane O'Brien, explaining why another friend had not written to Anne on the occasion of her engagement to John David La Touche, explained that the friend was 'dismayed at the idea of losing her friend Anne, in Mrs La Touche and shall I fairly own that I am not quite free from some such feeling myself'. She continued, 'if when we return to Ireland and I become acquainted with Mr La Touche he should not like us well enough to wish as much as we should, to live in the same unceremonious intimacy you and we have lived in, then should we feel truly mortified'.⁵⁰

Female influence in making a marriage

Although the older tradition of parents choosing a husband for a daughter, principally with the view of preserving and enhancing property, remained in place throughout the eighteenth century, it was increasingly being ignored. Even as early as 1743, it is obvious

⁴⁸ Letter from Judith Odell to Helen Perceval, 14 August (1800). Graves Papers TCD MS 10047/24/3.

⁴⁹ Letter from Bishop Synge to his daughter Alicia [5 July 1751]. Legg, *Synge letters* p. 316; Colvin, *Edgeworth letters*, pp. 171, 175.

⁵⁰ Letter from Jane O'Brien to Anne Tottenham, 9 February 1799. La Touche Papers TCD MS 11272/86.

that not all parents exercised total power. Lady Ann Caldwell's sister Judith Cook referred to a young man who had made proposals to 'cousin Warren for her daughter', but Mrs Warren could not prevail on her daughter 'to hear him'. Clearly the exercise of total parental control in this area was affected more by family tradition than by cultural norms and the passage of time. Forty years later when the young Quaker woman Abbey Wright was being pressured to accept an unattractive proposal against her inclinations, she pretended to be content because, as Margaret Pike wrote to Mary Shackleton, 'few ... wish to have it thought that they marry merely to please others'.⁵¹ This is an attitudinal shift clearly articulated; compliance with parents' wishes had always been a culturally acceptable foundation for a marriage, even if it had begun to be ignored. Dorothea Herbert's account, already mentioned, of the marriage of her young friend Eliza Hare shows the young girl was married entirely at her father's command.⁵² Ellen O'Connell, sister of the Liberator, was threatened with being disinherited in 1802 if she refused, as her sisters before her had done, to give up a 'foolish attachment' of which her parents disapproved.⁵³ The attachment, to a relative, was only objectionable because there was not enough money to make the young couple economically secure, and Mrs O'Connell expected the disappointed suitor to thank her later when he found a wife with the necessary fortune to 'enable him to live as he wants'. As it turned out, Ellen O'Connell eventually did marry 'Splinter', as he was called. While these women were being coerced, others were taking control. Prior to her marriage in 1764, Lady Elizabeth Aylmer literally ran away from a would-be suitor, with no reference to parental opinion. Englishwoman Harriet Meynell had to prompt her would-be husband John Caldwell to contact her mother as a 'necessary mark of attention' subsequent to his proposal to Harriet, but she was clearly going to make up her own mind in 1789.⁵⁴ Charlotte Montague Scott in the early 1820s agreed informally to an engagement on her own authority. Mary O'Connell went so far as to get married to Daniel O'Connell in 1802 without the knowledge of either set of parents.

This change from being a pawn to being one of the principal actors in the making of marriages has been inadequately scrutinised. Historians noting that the change

⁵¹ Letter from Margaret Pike to Mary Shackleton, 1mo 15th 1783. Ballitore papers NLI MS 5987 pp. 27-30.

⁵² Herbert, *Retrospections*, p. 72.

⁵³ Letter from Catherine O'Connell to her son Daniel, 18 November 1802. O'Connell, *Correspondence*, vol 1, p. 81.

⁵⁴ Letter from Elizabeth Cole to Lady Elizabeth Caldwell, undated but pre-1764. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B3/30/1. Letter from Harriet Meynell to Sir John Caldwell, 1789. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B3/34/1.

happened does not give enough acknowledgement to the major revolution it represents in female personal liberty. There is a false implications of inevitability, and a failure to acknowledge that the distinction between free-choice and a dynastic marriage was not clear cut. The change was one of personal liberty but it also brought to young women significant responsibility towards their families that they had not previously been entrusted with. The power of the parent to dispose of a child for the good of the family now devolved upon the younger generation. The period around a marriage proposal was a complicated time for a young person because, even where an element of free choice was permitted, the matter was not simply decided by consulting one's own feelings. Margaret Pike declared that, 'marriage has to me a very awful appearance'.⁵⁵ She was distressed at her own unlooked-for proposal, partly because it was 'so likely to be approved of by all my friends', which might oblige her to act against her inclinations. In letters to Debby Chandler she describes her feelings in terms of depression and 'anarchy', having accepted the addresses of a young man on the strength of family advice. Her prevarication, which was due to her feelings of youth, of inadequacy for making such a momentous decision, and a strong preference for remaining in Stramore, was suspected of indicating that her affection lay with someone else. She had to fall back on her faith in God to allow her to take what she considered a dreadful risk with her own happiness. The difficulty lay in the fact that while she trusted her family and friends' opinion, and liked and respected William Pike, she believed there should be something more, an 'alteration' in her feelings toward him, which would tell her that her decision was right.⁵⁶ In the matter of the marriage of Abbey Wright, previously mentioned, Pike wrote to Mary Shackleton, 'I would willingly hope with thee that Abbey would not give her hand unaccompanied by her heart to any man, but my dear cousin, thou knows not what parental persuasion might be able to effect'. John D'Alton in 1818 was asked for his advice by a young woman, possibly a relative, whose family 'all torment her' to marry a medical man to whom she had already given more than one 'hesitating answer'.⁵⁷ The decision was ostensibly hers alone but clearly the matter was not a purely private one. On the spectrum of social behaviour between collectivist and individualist, marriage remained 'dynastic' in that the

⁵⁵ Letter from Margaret Pike to Debby Chandler, [1781]. Quaker Historical Library. Christy letters 9.

⁵⁶ Letters from Margaret Pike to Debby Chandler, 1mo 19th and 2mo 19th 1781. Quaker Historical Library. Christy letters 7, 8.

⁵⁷ Letter from Margaret Pike to Mary Shackleton, 10mo 25th 1782. Shackleton Papers NLI MS 5987 pp. 23-26. Letter from John D'Alton to his wife Catherine, 10 September 1818. TCD MS 2327/68.

individuals were afforded free choice but they were expected to exercise it for the benefit of their family, and to consider seriously the opinions of their ‘friends’.

The question of whether and to what degree women were involved in matchmaking is difficult to determine because the records for contracted marriages only involve the principal men in the families. There are a number of examples within the Caldwell family, apart from the letter quoted above in relation to the Irvine family. Lady Elizabeth’s mother-in-law Lady Ann was in effect running the family and its estates, due to the fact that her husband suffered from a chronic illness up until his death in 1744.⁵⁸ It was to Lady Ann alone that her sister sent assurances that, ‘if there be any proposals for Nancy [Lady Ann’s daughter] they will be accepted of in a proper manner by her uncle’, Nancy being at that time with her aunt and uncle Judith and Samuel Cook in Dublin in 1743, probably for the purpose of being introduced to society.⁵⁹ It is to her mother, Lady Ann, rather than her brother Sir James, that Catherine Caldwell directed her suitor Samuel Bagshawe in 1760, six years after her father’s death. It is clear that, as with personal choice in marriage, the role a woman was permitted in negotiating a child’s marriage was also undergoing change. In a letter of 1810 from Christopher Bellew to his wife regarding his sister Mary Slingsby, Bellew was highly critical of Mrs Slingsby’s close involvement in the negotiations for a match for her daughter Jane (who may not have been aware of the affair, suggesting that this was a socially conservative family). Clearly Mrs Slingsby felt empowered to act in this way even though her husband was still alive. Her brother was angered and believed that the negotiations around ‘a subject where family and other delicate circumstances may become a matter of discussion’ was no place for a mother. He also felt he should have been consulted. Letters reveal those who, outside of immediate family, were asked to be involved in such affairs. Lady Elizabeth Caldwell canvassed her kinswomen Lady Arabella Denny and Lady Shelburne when contemplating the possible marriage of one of her daughters in 1774. Other female relatives and friends were also involved in matchmaking activities. In a letter in 1777, Lady Elizabeth Aylmer, who was probably a godmother to Lady Elizabeth Caldwell’s daughter Elizabeth Frances, wrote to Lady Caldwell, knowing the young girl would see it: ‘I shall in a few years more be looking about for my daughter [i.e. god-daughter] Betty who I hear such an account of

⁵⁸ Cunningham, *Castle Caldwell*, p. 44.

⁵⁹ Judith Cooke to her sister Lady Ann Caldwell, 17 February 1743. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B3/5/3. Sir Samuel, who made his money in brewing, was considered *nouveau riche* by a disdainful Mary Delany. Barnard, *A new anatomy*, p. 272.

as will make me very saucy when choosing for her'.⁶⁰ The casually humorous reference indicates that her meaning would have been well understood by the young girl, who thereby was being instructed in the role played by female relatives in arranging marriages. In the letters of Lady Elizabeth Caldwell to her husband James one may also see the impact a mother's social skills and her authority to act on them could have on a girl's prospects. James Caldwell was insistent that his wife and his two older daughters come to him in Dublin in 1773, but Lady Elizabeth resisted him, saying it would be to the girls' disadvantage. Not only did they not have the wardrobe for the appropriate level of sociability that would be required, but their mother was also of the opinion that 'taking them from their present improving studies an opportunity they will never have again – surely would not be well judge[d] – Bell is just now so robust, so awkward and so full of spirits that till she grows older to mellow down a little it might spoil her fortune to show her yet'.⁶¹

This 'showing' of a young woman was very much the mother's decision, as is made clear by a letter from John David La Touche in 1819, comparing the approaches of two women, one 'a lady who has been taking her daughters off to public places and frequently to balls', and another who had 'well married two of her daughters without having ever produced them in a ball room'. He objected to the former practice, as 'there is something to me very revolting in exhibiting my sweet little girls to the gaze of the idle and dissolute', but the decision on how to manage this part of the family business would be his wife's.⁶² This was a significant piece of family business which was left entirely in the hands of women. The extent to which it was work which only women could do is clear in the letter referred to above from Christopher Bellew about his sister's involvement in her daughter's prospects. The affair having been called off and Mary Slingsby being in ill health, Bellew wondered if she would 'have the health and spirits to bring that girl into public at the proper time? Is she acquiring the friendship of others to supply her place if unequal to the duty herself?'⁶³ It was imperative that this be done before the girl's father, if widowed, might remarry (to the detriment of his daughter's prospects), but there was no suggestion that it formed any part of the father's duty, even

⁶⁰ Letter from Lady Elizabeth Aylmer to Lady Elizabeth Caldwell, January 1777. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B3/30/31.

⁶¹ Letter from Lady Elizabeth Caldwell to her husband James, 2 Feb 1773. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B3/29/58.

⁶² Letter from John David La Touche to his wife Anne, 6 October 1819. La Touche Papers TCD MS 11272/243.

⁶³ Letter from Christopher Bellew to his wife Olivia, 5 July 1810. Bellew papers NLI MS 27,104.

should Mrs Slingsby die. That this had always been so is clear from the Synge letters; in 1751 Bishop Synge told his daughter that he had cautioned a woman against endangering her health by leaving Dublin to live in the countryside because she might thereby leave her granddaughter 'destitute of the care of any parent'. The child's father was still alive, but, if he remarried, his ability to act on the affection he had for his daughter would 'depend on the will of another' namely his new wife.⁶⁴ In this context Bishop Synge's retention of hands-on responsibility for his own daughter may be seen as unusual. The effect that lack of a mother's care had on a young child can be seen in the case of Emily Caldwell, who was not quite thirteen when her mother Lady Elizabeth died in 1778. A letter from a Mrs Weldon, a relative of Sir James, makes it clear that several women had shared the care of the girl while her mother was ill the result was a neglected education. Emily appeared to be living with Mrs Weldon, whose 'ill state of health and almost blindness will not allow me to teach her either to read or spell'. Mrs Weldon therefore recommended that Emily 'ought to be put to a boarding school and that as soon as possible ... The sooner Sir James fixes when she is to go the better for Emily as she loses time every day in everything [?necessary] for Sir James Caldwell's daughter to learn'.⁶⁵ It is noteworthy that this letter was sent to (and was in response to one from) Mary Anne Caldwell, Emily's older sister who was in her twenties, rather than to Sir James himself, and that some of the concerns were about the girl's wardrobe which had also not been properly attended to. Nothing further is known of Emily except that she died unmarried in 1840.

Apart from training their daughters, practically and socially, to attract husbands and being active negotiators as matrons, and apart from gaining a veto, as young women, at the point of proposal, there were other ways in which women were active with regard to marriage. Before reaching the point of accepting or rejecting a proposal, young women played an active part in achieving their ambition to be married. Apart from their family's social standing and their own fortunes as 'attractions', over which they had no control, young women had a considerable role in engaging the attention of young men by their persons, their personalities and their accomplishments. This is an under-explored area of female endeavour which letters can elucidate.

⁶⁴ Letter from Edward Synge to his daughter Alicia, [5 July 1751]. Legg, *Synge letters*, p. 319.

⁶⁵ Letter from Ann Weldon to Mary Anne Caldwell 23 January 1778 [*recte* 1779]. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B3/13/98.

Lady Elizabeth Aylmer made it clear that young women were not expected to sit idly by in the hope that a potential suitor would spot them; they were expected to promote their own interests. Her 1777 letter to Lady Elizabeth Caldwell, quoted above, referred to the approaching Christmas festivities, during which visitors were expected at Castle Caldwell. She wrote: ‘Give my love to the young ladies and tell them I shall be very angry with them if they don’t make some hand with the bachelors with all these jovial dancing parties etc. They might spend two or three winters in Dublin without having so fair opportunities[,] for Dublin is not the place for getting acquainted enough for running ventures for life tho it produces millions of flirtations’. Accomplishments were also under a woman’s control, to some degree, and such self-fashioning brought with it elements of choice and power. It included the degree to which educational opportunities were availed of and it has been seen, in chapter four, how girls were expected to take a certain amount of initiative in relation to their own education when they were young. It will also be recalled that the bribe, mentioned above, offered by Sir James Caldwell to his probably late-teenaged daughter Arabella included both further education and entertainment.⁶⁶ Seemingly inexplicable matches have always been made for reasons other than dynastic. By paying attention to their education, manners, dress, and polite accomplishments, women were investing in their careers by altering their prospects in the only way available to them, and in a ‘language’ understood by all. Barnard has asserted that Irish gentry valued outward appearances both as ‘mirrors of inner, moral qualities’ and as a way of distinguishing those who were educated and cultivated. He added that where definitions of gentility were elastic, often contradictory and therefore disconcerting, as they were in Ireland, ‘present station and finery mattered more than lengthy pedigrees ... those whose dress and deportment caught the eye were accorded the standing they demanded ... [B]ehaviour and appearance were essential’ to the gentry’s estimate of its worth.⁶⁷ The message conveyed by dress was not lost on Lady Arabella Denny, a woman by no means given to empty show or extravagance. She advised Lady Caldwell to train her daughters to be content with ‘proper books’ and with ‘passing the time agreeably at home’. However she drew the line at overly-humble attire: ‘linen of their own work I would not have them

⁶⁶ Arabella Caldwell was clearly an intelligent young woman. She was the addressee of a poem written in 1772 by her brothers’ tutor Major James Ridsdale in which he referred to the rich talents of her mind and memory and urged her to pay attention to ‘wisdom’s call’ or risk losing the ‘good opinion of mankind’. JRL Bagshawe muniments B3/13/87.

⁶⁷ Barnard, ‘Art, architecture’, pp. 21-22; Toby Barnard, ‘The gentrification of eighteenth-century Ireland’, *Eighteenth-century Ireland*, 12 (1997) 137-55 at p. 155.

appear in ... they should always be dressed like gentlewomen of fashion' to show that they were 'well taken care of'.⁶⁸ Where young men had more freedom to choose, and in a culture which valued personal beauty, education and other attributes perhaps as much as family status, a certain amount of power was bestowed on women to swing things in their own favour by manipulating those things which remained in their control. This was significant cultural capital for women and should not be underestimated. Furthermore, the new sociability of the eighteenth century did not just give women more experience of leisure activity and entertainment, it gave them a platform on which to mobilise their increasing freedom and responsibilities in the marriage market. The public 'assemblies' which became significant social events were identified with women and were important to them. Not only did their social training equip them to organise and host entertainments, but the growth of consumerism meant they were interested in arranging and attending such events to show off or learn good taste and innovation.⁶⁹ Fashion was deployed strategically – a fine dress was as important as fine dancing, and either could captivate a young man at a social event. Dorothea Herbert made this point clearly in her memoir *Retrospections*, in which sartorial detail was minutely recorded. On the occasion of being a bridesmaid, Dorothea was bought a new dress by her mother in hopes that it would bring her luck in getting a husband. The amusing account of Dorothea and her friend Eliza Hare's efforts to make themselves more beautiful with skincare, diet, and attention to what they perceived as their capital defect, red hands, was to serious purpose; young girls knew the value of being attractive.⁷⁰ Nor was the potential impact of having good social skills to be underestimated. Barnard has written that simply being 'liked or regarded' by a 'person of figure or character' could counter-balance apparent weaknesses in social position.⁷¹ Wilson refers to these interpersonal skills as 'politeness' or 'civility'. She notes that 'these skills were far less quantifiable than book learning but they were of the utmost importance if a girl wished to build and maintain a good reputation. They rested on good deportment, a pleasing manner and the ability to carry on a polite conversation – 'a subjective mix, difficult to define and best obtained through practice and guidance' from a girl's mother.⁷²

⁶⁸ Raughter, *Letters of Arabella Denny*, p. 176.

⁶⁹ Wilson, *Elite women*, p. 113.

⁷⁰ Herbert, *Retrospections*, pp.119, 64-67.

⁷¹ Barnard, *A new anatomy*, p. 9.

⁷² Wilson, *Elite women*, pp. 45-7.

The importance of this skill set is reflected in a lament by Judith Odell. She was frustrated by her sons who, having had an excellent education, did not seem to have the personalities to make their way as well in the world. She compared the popularity, among her social circle in Germany, of her own son Christopher with that of her paid companion Betty Strangeman, a woman of ‘laboured education’ who made herself so popular as to receive at least two marriage proposals. Chris, Mrs Odell wrote, although he had ‘every advantage that nature, education, birth and fortune can give, lies on everyone’s hands like damaged goods. This is strange when if he would only condescend to cultivate and meet the likings of others, nothing would be easier to him’.⁷³ Lady Mary Roche again used the word lottery in addressing this; the obvious advantages a particular young woman appeared to have did not guarantee the outcome of the journey towards marriage. She compared the prospects of two young women: one, Fanny Williams, who ‘without beauty or fortune besides her being an enfant trouvé ... has captivated Charles Pinfold a young gentleman of rank and character with £2000 a year’, while the other, her own niece Emily Frankland, had ‘beauty rank and fortune without ever having had a lover’.⁷⁴ All society was sensitive to the message conveyed by fine clothing and dancing. Lady Roche, describing the Dublin Castle scene for her brother, expected him to be interested in the dresses of the ‘belles’, and went into great detail about the outré wardrobe of Pamela Égalité, the young French wife of Lord Edward FitzGerald, whom the staring matrons embarrassed to tears. In telling the story of Frederick Eden’s marriage, Lady Mary’s mother mentioned that she had imagined Eden as a match for her other daughter Grace: ‘when I saw how he admired Grace’s dancing I thought he would be a pretty match for her’.⁷⁵ Lady Mary told her brother of the decision of her niece Catherine Whinyates to go to India to ‘secure a husband ... to make her richer than any of her aunts’. Lady Mary amusingly spoke of ‘husband hunting which of all kinds of the chase from pursuing the Elephant to the Flea is the most wearisome and full of disappointment’, and although women were ridiculed for the activity of hunting men, nonetheless the verb is an active one.

⁷³ Letter of Judith Odell to her daughter Bel, 24 July (1801). Ussher papers NLI MS 10,172.

⁷⁴ Letter from Lady Mary Roche to her brother Sir Thomas Frankland, 9 May 1799. Boyle Roche Papers NLI MS 5391. Fanny Williams was a foundling brought up by Lady Amherst of Kent née Elizabeth Cary, the second wife of Jeffrey, Baron Amherst of Holmesdale. Fanny died in 1801.

⁷⁵ Letter from Lady Mary Roche to her brother Sir Thomas Frankland, 24 Mar 1793; letter to Lady Mary from her mother, 19 January 1792. Boyle Roche Papers NLI MS 5391.

Subjectivity, silliness, and sex

One of the great discoveries made in reading the letters of Irish couples in this era is the remarkable change that occurred towards the end of the long eighteenth century. It would be difficult to overstate the difference between a married woman's letter of 1770 and one written in 1820. Clearly a change had occurred in social expectations about certain aspects of marriage, not to mention the freedom with which this was expressed. From a literary point of view, there are many obvious changes; the language became less archaic, and more fluid, the sentences became shorter. But there were other changes which have less to do with literacy and everything to do with the experience the authors were seeking to articulate. In the unabashed emphasis on personal feelings and intimacy, as well as the first appearance of a distinctive lovers' language, these letter-writers had, in a sense, become modern. Earlier letters are characterised by some degree of formality. This has been interpreted as a reflection of the formality of social relationships; a man calling his mother 'Honoured Madam', or a wife referring to her husband as 'Sir' and signing off a letter with her full name, seem to speak of a relationship characterised by the maintenance of a respectful distance. Changes in such characteristics have been used to address, if not to track, changes in social relations, the assumption being that increasingly informal letters reflect an increasingly less formal society. It is not a precise science – there is an insufficient quantity of personal letters surviving from the seventeenth century in Ireland to act as a comparator, and the dissemination of changing usage in the eighteenth century was patchy, with formality and informality existing side by side. Children continued to be given instruction in the formal style, even as their own epistolary practice was becoming less so. Furthermore, it seems to be likely that what to modern eyes appears as a stilted writing style gives a distorted impression of early relationships. The style may have resulted from a lack of ease with the medium as well as an attempt to convey that one had an acquaintance with epistolary civility. There might be little resemblance to face-to-face conduct; in this it is similar to the protocol, continuing to this day, of addressing a correspondent as 'Dear' and signing off with 'Yours sincerely' regardless of the nature of the relationship between the correspondents or the contents of the letter. In the letters from Thomasine Howard to her husband Hugh in the second decade of the eighteenth century, there appears, at first reading, to be considerable formality partly the effect, engendered in the reader, of her unorthodox spelling, stilted phraseology and archaic word use: 'Pray make my acknowledge to those good friends in Ireland who sends

me there kind wishes'; 'I am much oblidg to you for yr kind yeall for my recovery'. Howard was deferential to her husband, writing of 'my greatfull acknowledgmt for all yr kind concern and generousty in this illness wch I shall never forget' and then signing off with her surname. Nevertheless a closer reading reveals that the overall tone of these letters is one of great affection; Thomasine called Hugh by endearments (frowned upon by conduct books); 'Dear little pet' she wrote and 'Dear life'; she flirted with him and paid him compliments, all the while remaining in quite a formal register. His most recent letter, she complimented him, 'exceeds Plinys'; the men in the spa town she was in were 'much courted by there being so scarce but I court none but you and find it enough'.⁷⁶ This middle-aged couple's relationship was one in which affection was freely expressed, considered to be a sign of an egalitarian relationship. What then is new in the early years of the nineteenth century, if it is not increasing personal equality and affection? It is subjectivity, an element of silliness, and sex. These later letters are the first in which the feelings of the writers for one another are very openly and repeatedly expressed; they also refer more overtly to their physical intimate life. Another new departure lies in the way the lovers employ secret language. This is not a language one would wish a third party to overhear, including as it does the silliness of implicating animals or plants in their personal concerns and elements of what may only be described as baby talk.

In regard to subjectivity what is meant in this regard is exactly that distinction the Countess of Ely warned her newly-engaged niece Anne Tottehnem about, that is the difference between the 'adoring lover' of fiction and the 'faithful friend', which is what the best husband was expected to be. The 'friend' of the eighteenth century was not more of a friend to his wife than to the remainder of his family. When Lady Ann Caldwell's husband died in 1744, her son James, in France, wrote and commiserated as one who had suffered an equal loss. He first outlined in detail the effect hearing the news had on him, and then said that although his father had had many friends, 'I believe none of them suffered half as much as you or I did. I cannot say when I shall get the better of it'. When Lady Drogheda's husband was feared drowned in 1758, Lady Arabella Denny was confident that Lady Drogheda's sorrowful reaction was in sympathy with her husband's experience 'not from any present loss she suffers', since her standard of living remained unaffected.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Letters from Thomasine Howard to her husband Hugh. Wicklow Papers NLI MS 38, 600/9.

⁷⁷ Letter from James Caldwell to his mother Lady Ann, 25 February 1744. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B3/5/4. Raughter, *Letters of Arabella Denny*, p. 159.

By the nineteenth century the adoring lover had moved off the pages of fiction and into the personal letter. The dramatic language and rhetorical flourishes in letters seem to be drawn straight from romance literature, whether it be James Stopford's eloquently inarticulate 'Oh Charlotte I can not express what I feel on this subject ... I hardly know what I am saying', or Catherine D'Alton's dramatic, 'time seems to have exchanged his wings for heavy clogs', and 'what happiness did not [your letter] give me, if anything in your absence could be called happiness ... except with you I can have no unmixed pleasure'.⁷⁸ While the vehemence and frequency of such declarations can be seen to simmer down over the years it never entirely went away, and the D'Altons and the O'Connells, who remained married for decades, were verbally affectionate in all of their letters. A significant element of the declarations of love was the wish to be together as an end in itself. When, in the 1770s, Lady Caldwell complained about her husband's absence, she admitted it made her melancholy, but her complaint was couched in terms of how 'exceedingly awkward' it was for her to entertain guests or manage the estate in his continuing absence. Lady Arran in the 1760s expressed her unhappiness, at being obliged to live in isolated circumstances, in terms of her health and her children's wellbeing. She wrote, 'I don't mean by this that I am in the least danger of dying; but I may be worse than death', and she wondered if the gains her husband made by being so long away 'would make up to a number of infant girls for the loss of their mother'.⁷⁹ Both of these women seemed to have different expectations from their husbands had as to what married life would entail. In expecting a more companionate marriage they may be considered to have a more modern attitude to the institution.⁸⁰ The early nineteenth-century lovers, on the other hand, confidently expressed their desire for one another's company simply as a natural result of their being in love and separation was acutely painful for that reason alone.⁸¹ The unique emotional bond between the couple had become a defining part of the married experience and, unlike the earlier women for whom their entering the 'world' was part and parcel of their understanding of marriage, the

⁷⁸ Letters from James Stopford to Lady Charlotte Scott [c. 1821]. Courtown Papers TCD MS 11183/V/119a-b/4. Letter from Catherine D'Alton to her husband John, 29 August 1818. TCD MS 2327/2.

⁷⁹ Letter from Catherine Lady Arran to her husband Arthur, [?31 October 1763x1765]. Arran Papers TCD MS 7578/1.

⁸⁰ Okin, 'Women and the making of the sentimental family', pp. 73-4.

⁸¹ This as it is now known is the action of a specific hormone which makes lovers - and parents and young children - long to be together when apart. Meredith Bombar, Lawrence Littig, 'Babytalk as a communication of intimate attachment: an initial study in adult romances and friendships', *Personal Relationships*, 3 (June 1993), pp. 137-58. Dr Leon Selzer's post 'The real reason couples use babytalk' in his blog *The Evolution of the Self* 12 December 2013 <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201312/the-real-reason-why-couples-use-baby-talk> (accessed 28 May 2016).

institution eventually became defined, not by its public function ‘but by the individuals who inhabit it; it privileged individual subjectivity’.⁸²

Another significant new development is that nineteenth-century letters contain references to a couple’s intimate life, an aspect not mentioned in earlier letters in this database. In the O’Connell correspondence it is only Daniel O’Connell who made overt references to their sexual life (in the edited versions of the letters at least), but it is clear from the way he phrased it that Mary was not passive in the exchange. In one letter he writes, ‘you villain, I shall when we meet put you in mind of all your fair promises of compliance with every request of mine’. On another occasion he said: ‘if you love me you will certainly do anything I ask you when I reach home. Promise me that, darling’.⁸³ In the D’Alton letters there are many references to one or other of the partners missing the company of the spouse while in bed, missing the ‘little minute’ they usually had together in the morning, the fond pressure of an arm. John D’Alton told Catherine he had eaten the sealing wafers from her letters because they had been moistened by her tongue. Catherine was also quite open about how she missed her husband, writing of ‘your darling letter which is safe inside my gown next my heart I wish it was the dear hand that wrote it’. John asked her to keep his letters ‘in your or rather in my own little bosom ... for three hours’. John found his wife’s arms particularly attractive; there are a number of references to biting and nibbling, and in one letter he suggested she have the sleeves of her gown made sufficiently wide to permit him to caress her limbs, a suggestion she described as ‘a darling thought’.⁸⁴ The fun of being newly-married is clear in a letter that John wrote to Catherine, reminding her of what was clearly to him an important anniversary, possibly recorded in his ‘almanak’: ‘this night month you chased me up from the study – do you remember the hunt’.⁸⁵ Charlotte Stopford was even more frank than the D’Altons; when she was teased about being pregnant, or was feeling lonely when James was away during her pregnancy, she laid the blame for her condition clearly at his door. He teased her about her increasing girth and she responded ‘I am sure it is not my fault that I am in the condition I am in now, you good for nothing rascal’, and she threatened not to have ‘anything more to do with you’. She also told him she wished she were with him, as he

⁸² Rouston, *Narrating*, p. 12.

⁸³ Letter of Daniel O’Connell to his wife Mary, 23 August 1805 and 29 March 1809. O’Connell, *Correspondence*, vol 1, pp. 144, 198.

⁸⁴ Letter from Catherine D’Alton to her husband John, 8 September 1818. TCD MS 2327/7.

⁸⁵ Letters from Catherine D’Alton to her husband John, 7 Sept 1819 and 8 September 1818. TCD MS 2327/7, 10. Letter from John D’Alton to his wife Catherine, 3 September 1818. TCD MS 2327/66.

went to bed alone ‘like a bachelor’, when visiting her home in England; ‘though I should feel rather awkward and improper I would soon make you remember you were a married man’.⁸⁶ They, or rather, he, was the only one in the sample, among the married couples, who referred to controlling family size, which he was very keen on.⁸⁷ This expression of intimacy will have been one of the reasons why Charlotte did not wish to ‘knock under that vile practice of showing letters’ to third parties. Charlotte stated frankly that she objected to the old-fashioned idea of sharing letters, precisely because it would interfere with the couple’s communication: ‘You would say to your wife, what you would not say to your most intimate friend’ she wrote. James agreed: ‘if we once began that practice of shewing our letters, there would be constant restraint on us; but now we do not care what we say to each other’. Daniel O’Connell also felt that he ‘would feel a check’ if he thought anyone but his wife Mary were to see their letters. He wrote, ‘I should not if my letters were seen be able to tell you although it is literally the fact that you are my last thought at night’.⁸⁸ The development of epistolary privacy has considerable social significance and was not necessarily undermined by the custom of sharing letters. Catherine D’Alton’s mother-in-law appears to have been privy to the full range of the couple’s epistolary activity when John was away conducting family business; she lived with them and when she wrote to her son it was often as postscripts to Catherine’s letters. Clearly exasperated by all the sentimental verbiage she had to plough through, at one point she exclaimed, ‘Your letters are so full of love that you do not let me know how you are getting on ... I beg you’ll in future give me a sketch of business’.⁸⁹ One can imagine the shared giggle between the two young marrieds at this antiquated attitude to romantic love in one of James’ next letters. After recounting his work to date he wrote, in larger letters and underlined for emphasis, ‘Now Kate tell my mother there is a sketch of business’ which was followed by ‘Now for you alone ... oh how I burn to see you’.⁹⁰ Charlotte Scott’s explicit rejection as ‘old-fashioned’ of her family’s expectation of letter-sharing marks

⁸⁶ Letters from Charlotte Stopford to her husband James, [c. 1823]. Courtown papers TCD MS 11183/V/119a-b/65, 67.

⁸⁷ Judith Odell also wished her daughter ‘hastened more slowly’ in adding to her family and referred to the contraceptive effect of breast feeding. Judith Odell to her daughter Bel, 25 January 1801 and 27 February (1803). Ussher Papers NLI MS 10,172.

⁸⁸ Letters between Charlotte and James Stopford, undated [February 1823]. Courtown Papers TCD MS 11183/V/119a-b/64, 70. Letter from Daniel O’Connell to his fiancée Mary O’Connell, 8 November 1801. O’Connell, *Correspondence*, vol 1, p. 64.

⁸⁹ Letter from Catherine D’Alton to her husband John, 5 September 1818. Postscript by Mrs Eliza D’Alton. On 8 September 1818 Catherine told her husband to ‘keep all that stuff until we meet and speak of yourself, your thoughts your company’. TCD MS 2327/5, 7.

⁹⁰ Letter from John D’Alton to his wife Catherine, 10 September 1818. TCD MS 2327/86.

her behaviour out as new within her family. It is possible to suggest that Charlotte was enjoying discovering herself to be modern in ways she had not expected. In a letter to her sister, written during her honeymoon, she told of an otherwise all-male dinner at which she ‘felt rather odd the only woman at first, but soon found I didn’t care a d – n, and joined in the conversation like any thing’.⁹¹

The change most discernible in marital letters is the use of a special lovers’ language. Psychologists consider this a valid form of emotional bonding, and its childlike character may have its origins in the fact that being in love as an adult takes the individual back to the usually pleasurable state of childhood. Such personalised communication has a number of elements. Certain otherwise ordinary words, phrases or gestures come to carry unique meanings within the context of the relationship. The partners in the relationship rely on a greater number of channels for sending and receiving messages, including emotion-laden non-verbal channels.⁹² A good illustration of the first element occurs in Charlotte Scott’s letters to James Stopford, where the phrase ‘grave and melancholy’ was repeated over several letters, by both authors, in reference to James’ appearance at certain times. It referred originally to James being upset very early in their relationship, when the two had unexpectedly come to see one another as potential partners, but a prior engagement had obliged him to leave London. By repeating the phrase Charlotte and James were able to refer, in code, to their feelings at the prospect of other separations and to the intense excitement of early courtship. Catherine D’Alton, in the 1820s, used what is possibly a combination of the elements of shared memory, coded language and pet name when she called her husband John ‘Count’. In the context of their relationship, this title clearly had a unique meaning, which is not available to the modern reader. Along with this Catherine frequently repeated the word ‘own’ as in ‘My own own own dear Count’ and ‘My own dear own’. This is a play on ‘Eoin’, the Irish version of her husband’s name. She also frequently called him ‘bold’ or ‘dirty bold’ and ‘you fellow you’ which must have had some sort of private charge. Catherine called up a shared memory of an experience which had taken on a key role in their joint history when she responded to a visit to the house where she had been married in 1818: ‘I could not again enter the drawing room where I was made my dear beloved own’s happy wife without

⁹¹ Letter from Charlotte Stopford to her sister Isabella [July 1822]. Courtown Papers TCD MS 11183/V/119a-b/59.

⁹² Robert Hopper, Mark L. Knap, Lorel Scott, ‘Couples’ personal idioms: exploring intimate talk, *Journal of Communication*, 31 (1981), pp. 22-33 at p. 23.

feeling towards it as it were towards a friend to whom I was deeply obliged and wished you had been present, that I might see your thoughts on it also'.⁹³ In another letter, Catherine referred to her husband telling her that he often kissed his gloves because the first time he wore them was at his wedding. Items of clothing were important in this couple's artefactual code – night hats, cravats and garters that could be worn by either husband or wife were all mentioned; letters themselves served as understudies for missing partners and were kept close, kissed and placed on pillows. This is the same newly-developing sentimental impulse which permitted objects and spaces to be invested with emotion through which children learned from their mothers how to express their emotions through the physical artefacts. The reliance on other channels for sending and receiving messages is also a characteristic of lovers' secret language, and can be extended to those who were likely to be in sympathy with how the young lovers felt. Charlotte Scott used the symbols and language of national identity, making verbal links between her family name and James Stopford's Irishness, with references to thistles and shamrocks in a letter to her fiancé's sister after the news of their attachment became widely known. She urged Mary Stopford to write to her about 'what you know and only you will interest me ... as you promised, or I'll never forgive you – any nonsense that comes into your head, as you know that it will only meet my eye'. Being able to share her intense feelings heightened the pleasure of them. In this letter Charlotte sent a message for Mary to give to James, whose name was replaced with a drawing of a shamrock; the message referred to a thorn tree, also sketched, which must have had some significance in the couple's shared history, as it is mentioned more than once. Animals were commandeered to carry messages of affection. Charlotte, in a letter to James, sent messages of affection to his 'grey pony'; James undertook to explain the message to the animal and reported that the pony seemed to understand.⁹⁴ Catherine D'Alton remarked that she wished she was the hen which John told her had landed on his knee; both of them referred to the bird again in other letters. Associated with these private and distinct modes of expression there are other behaviours which third parties would be likely to describe as silly. There is evidence of role playing, sometimes accompanied by regressive language. The Stopfords played flirtatiously with the idea of James in a Father Confessor role. This is an elaboration perhaps of James' and

⁹³ Letter from Catherine D'Alton to her husband John, 12 October 1822. TCD MS 2327/44.

⁹⁴ Letters between James Stopford and Charlotte Scott, 10-15 August 1821. Courtown Papers TCD MS 11183/V/119a-b/11-12. The anthropomorphisation of animals spoke of modern sensibility: Benfield, *The culture of sensibility*, p. 235.

Charlotte's reference to Charlotte as the 'Ditton nun', Ditton being the name of the Scott family home; calling her a nun may be a reference to pre-marital celibacy. Charlotte suggested that James would not be so fond of her if he knew the extent of her personal faults and failings: 'I shall make a confession some day, when I get a piece of paper long enough to make a catalogue of my sins, and if you will promise not to think the worse of me'. James picked up on this and encouraged Charlotte over two letters to send him a catalogue of her faults, stressing he would only love her all the more for 'trusting me as your Father Confessor with your faults'.⁹⁵

Role-inversion was another part of the way a young couple played with their new status. In the letters in this database, where it occurs, it is more often the male partner pretending to defer to the female. Some hint of this is found in the reference previously given of John David La Touche referring to himself as 'an obedient husband', but with later couples it is more overt. The traditional hierarchal role was inverted by Charlotte's referring to James, and James referring to himself, as Charlotte's 'dear boy'. This role playing had more than a hint of infantilising, almost literally, as the female partner sometimes took on a 'maternal' tone of voice; both Charlotte Stopford and Catherine D'Alton 'scold' their husbands, as they would a child, and tell them each to 'be a good boy'; James called Charlotte a 'good girl' and Charlotte, when she sent James her catalogue of faults, described herself as one would a misbehaving child, 'a creature full of whim and caprice, idle ... and everybody says that I am rattle headed'. Lovers referred to themselves in the third person (as very young children are seen to do when they begin to write letters). James Stopford wrote to Charlotte 'the oftener you write to James the happier you will make him', and Catherine D'Alton referred to herself as John's 'own dear Kate' and to her own arms in the third person plural.⁹⁶ No one who had read them could avoid the comparisons between this kind of light-hearted, affectionate banter and Lady Ann Caldwell's or Bishop Syngé's mid-eighteenth-century imperative to rid their daughters (in the former case a married daughter) of 'giddiness'.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Letter from James Stopford to Charlotte Scott, 15 August [1821]. Courtown Papers TCD MS 11183/V/119a-b/12.

⁹⁶ Letter from James Stopford to Charlotte Scott, 3 August 1821. Courtown Papers TCD MS 11183/V/119a-b/8. Letters from Catherine D'Alton to her husband John, 29 August 1818 and 12 September 1819. TCD MS 2327/2, 9.

⁹⁷ Lady Ann wrote to her daughter who had just had her first child 'I won't suppose you can be giddy now that you are a Mother, I shall long much to see how you behave as such'. [c. 1752]. JRL Bagshawe Muniments B2/3/264.

Theorising about the change in the rhetoric of relationships which occurred over the century remains a tantalising challenge. The language of love seems to derive uncomplicatedly from fiction, and the freedom with which it was expressed derives as much from a mastery, from childhood, of the available communications technology, as from growth of sentiment and individualism, and the less heavy-handed parental oversight of young people. However, the new rhetoric positing the husband as the wife's child, is unheralded. It is possible that young couples had always communicated in a distinctive way and what the modern reader of their letters is seeing is a new freedom to write as they would speak in private, released from the obligation to share their letters with third parties. Changed epistolary practice may have provided an architecture of privacy which affected the management of social relationships, just as evolving architectural style altered the experience of domestic life by separating the private from the public functions of the family. While the personal letter had long been a vehicle for doting parents to share examples of their children's developing speech, and Swift's and Stella's 'gangridge' shows that as a behaviour it had a reasonably long history,⁹⁸ childish talk between lovers, as seen in early nineteenth-century personal letters, appears to have no parallel in literature up to that point. The many meanings conveyed by these new usages are no less significant than those conveyed by the growth of informality in letters between children and their parents, or the strategic use of the rhetoric of deference by earlier wives.

The new love letters of the nineteenth century have not yet been cited in Irish scholarship, except as part of an individual woman's biography or as an example of a particularly female use of letter writing. The editor of the O'Connell letters specifically referred to the exclusion of the couple's 'expressions of love and affection', which were considered to make for 'tiresome reading'. They must now be added to a broader history in the same way that other apparently ephemeral, content-free letters have been. When one considers the attention increasingly given to the letters of the so-called unlettered, in a proactive effort to decipher what social meaning lies obscured by their literary exteriors, the potential becomes clear. The editors of lower-class emigrants' letters only really began to appreciate fully what they could tell them about the societies

⁹⁸ The author acknowledges Dr Aileen Douglas' prompt on this point. Jane Synge used to send examples of the infant Alicia's 'prattle' to her husband the bishop in the 1730s Letter of Bishop Synge to his daughter Alicia, 19 May 1747. Legg, *Synge letters*, p. 25.

from which the individuals came when they gave serious consideration to repetitious tropes that had previously been dismissed as insignificant.

Is it ‘predictable and repetitious’, having cited published recognition of the changes in the experience of marriage, to insist upon the value of illustrating just what this meant to individuals? How can it be if, as Malcomson says, ‘the observation of contemporary nuances is fundamental to sound historical conclusions; the past must first be recreated before it can be pronounced upon with any degree of confidence’?⁹⁹ It is not sufficient to re-draw in broad strokes the lines of constraint corralling women; its meanders and weak points must also be observed, as must women’s own articulated opinion of it.

The history of marriage in Ireland has been little examined until recently, remarkably so, considering how large the institution and the experience bulked in national, dynastic and private life. Where it has been examined, it has been principally to follow political and financial lines of enquiry. Belatedly historians of women have begun to excavate its grimy strata although they also have tended to follow the high road towards female emancipation. But marriage was the most public of private activities, and this thesis has as one of its principal imperatives the rescuing of the private life of the average gentry woman, heretofore dismissed as of little relevance to the development of female emancipation or to the evolution of Irish society. Maria Edgeworth evoked the landed estate as a distinct shared frontier where the private and public worlds could meet for mutual benefit.¹⁰⁰ Marriage should be seen in the same way for private women; the married woman was not considered the same as the adult unmarried woman, the former was of the world in a way that the latter was not. This chapter has attempted three principal lines of enquiry. Firstly, by returning to the well-known but slow development of female freedom to choose in relation to marriage, it is intended to acknowledge that this change is not only of concern to female emancipatory history. The question of free choice or dictated behaviour reflects the organisation of society. Women’s letters articulating their experience are fundamental to reimagining this social evolution. Every family had to orient itself in relation to a spectrum which ran between tyranny and liberty, and their personal letters reveal the tensions this gave rise to, where increasing personal agency pressed against a framework of social authority and family control. Secondly, this chapter

⁹⁹ A. P. W. Malcomson, *Archbishop Charles Agar: churchmanship and politics in Ireland, 1760-1810* p. ? quoted in Barnard, *Protestant ascents and descents*, p. xii

¹⁰⁰ Clíona Ó Gallchoir, *Maria Edgeworth: women, enlightenment and nation* (Dublin, 2005), p. 11.

has sought out specific experiences of women within marriage. On the one hand, this has taken the form of an examination of power and responsibility in relation to marriage, which has revealed a significant variety of expectation that existed throughout the period. It speaks of cultural limitations on the role of the public married woman. This chapter has also highlighted the way in which individual women responded to the idea of marriage. Given that it was the only adult role culturally acknowledged as open to women, it is further evidence of a contemporary understanding of the role of the married woman to know why some women approached the occasion with trepidation. Finally, this present chapter has, in the form hitherto poorly-considered love letters, unearthed an important path by which the personal letter can support new research on the history of marriage in Ireland. The change in the understanding of marriage as a public institution to one in which individuals principally sought subjective well-being is evident in the early nineteenth-century love letter. The dynastic business partners gave way to the adoring lovers of fiction in the letters of the early nineteenth-century, and the letter, as vehicle for everyday language, must be considered to be an untapped resource in elucidating, from the rhetoric of relationships, society's changing attitudes.

Conclusion

This questions asked in this thesis were initially prompted by a rejection of the neglect of domestic work in the history of Irish women. This neglect fed a value system that privileged everything from which women traditionally have been excluded. It resulted in the exclusion of the experience of most women from historical consideration; even the early years of women's history were spent on fitting a vanishingly few individual women into the conventional narrative. Studying women in the eighteenth century presents an opportunity to counter this. Greater numbers of women than before had access to some level of education meaning that more of them are discoverable in the record; they were also enabled to benefit from and contribute to the Enlightenment. They began to appear in the public consciousness as they engaged in philanthropy or as published authors. The role of mothers as teachers was recognised, as was the public significance of private family life over much of which they presided. This was also the century where a critical mass of opinion turned against child marriage and towards personal adult choice. The much-vaunted sociability of the period included women as managers, and participants, of assemblies, and as part of large-scale home-based hospitality. No less a word than revolution can describe these changes. Why then, despite the suggestions of the pioneers of Irish women's history, has private life languished in obscurity? Furthermore, despite those historians' recognition that the path of that history would be determined by the remaining resources, why does the most frequently surviving female-authored record, the personal letter, remain underexploited? These questions appear to be best explained by reference to feminist and nationalist ideologies that can now bear revisiting. From the perspective of feminist historiography women who made no protest at losing their legal identities on marriage, and who concerned themselves contentedly with the management of their families, were not understood to have been as much a part of the evolution of Irish society as were public activists in the following century. However, this is to fail to acknowledge the extent to which the eighteenth century laid the foundations for the advances of the nineteenth. From the perspective of nationalist history, the fact that Protestant and gentry Ireland had a formative role in modern Irish history was little articulated until the last quarter of the last century. It has become more obvious as the architecture of social history has become more elaborate. The reticence about using personal letters may also have stemmed from the fact that most of the surviving letters were the work of wealthy and often Protestant Irish women. The work of several

historians who agree on the heterogeneous nature of Irish society, ensures that the findings of this thesis, based on the letters of the gentry, will be relevant to other social groups. This thesis posed the question: what might be the impact, on the history of Irish women, of the application to their letters of the findings of newly-developing critical studies of the personal letter. In this the objective was threefold: to promote the history of private life, to hail the eighteenth century as a key period in women's history, and to advocate for the letter as a key access point to these subjects. By scrutinising some of the most difficult-to-access topics relevant to the subject of women's private life, concerning children, servants and marital relationships, details of a woman's world view of eighteenth-century life can be discerned; the protean value of the personal letter as a source for Irish women's history may now be more fully appreciated; and the 'dearth of records' justification for favouring the nineteenth and twentieth century in women's history, in preference to the eighteenth, can be discounted.

This thesis' arguments rest heavily on the personal letter. It is the oldest and most frequently occurring female-authored record that survives for Ireland. Approaching it, along the pathways recently carved out in English scholarship on epistolarity, will have considerable effect. Previously considered to be unique rhetorical artefacts, difficult to use and with limited relevance beyond the author's biography, letters are now understood as context-sensitive records of social interaction with therefore a broader general relevance. The study of the history of the letter has been gathering pace for decades and has accelerated in the early 2000s. The changes in approach have been thorough: from publishing the letters of classical authors to those of illiterate peasants; from the 'great' man to the 'great' woman; from prejudicial editing of 'tiresome repetitions' to meticulous inclusivity, every effort continues to be made to wrestle with what is a difficult source to which to do justice. There are many discoveries to be made, once the reader appreciates that the principal function of the letter is not the transmission of information but the building and maintenance of relationships. These discoveries are to be made whether the subject is an individual or a community. A key proposal in this thesis is that female letter-writing was deeply embedded in society by the second half of the eighteenth century. This is partly based on the implications of the subtle use of women's letters in fiction that speaks of a culturally recognised female sub-culture within epistolary practice that will have taken many years to establish; it conjures up a much earlier female usage than that reflected by the quantity of surviving records. The proposal is also based on an acknowledgement of the skill involved in producing the earliest letters. Letters dismissed

as illiterate early forays into technological use were, in many cases, sophisticated and effective products, honed by years of practice. Acknowledging that women used letters for much longer, more expertly and in a distinctive way, one of this thesis' suggestions is that women were more closely involved in shaping the social and cultural revolution that came into being in the eighteenth century. This revolution, which encompassed so many changes, from the reform of manners to the change in courtship and marriage practices, has been long accepted. What is beginning to be expressed now is the extent to which women imprinted their own sensibilities on this revolution. It has been suggested that it was not merely the impact of literacy generally that contributed to this, but specifically because letter-writing permitted the formation of a wide female network which extended their area of influence. Network mapping is a relatively new area of historiographical activity. It developed out of a realisation that it was not sufficiently fruitful to track intellectual dissemination through looking at what published works key individuals had in their libraries, but it was necessary to know with whom they maintained contact. These mapping excises originally sought out 'intellectual' networks, confining themselves to such traditional areas as science and literature. Taking a broader definition of the word, one may begin to consider the existence of a network of women discussing and disseminating domestic-intellectual issues. Much work is required to evaluate the potential breadth and impact of such a network. An acknowledgement of its existence demands recognition of the public impact of the domestic work of private individuals. Three domestic constituents were examined by this thesis, that is children, servants and marriage, to ask what new insight could letters produce. These are difficult subjects to access even through letters, particularly the first two. Adult women, particularly in relation to their education and through the institution of marriage, have been the subject of a strengthening literature. Children's history has been approached principally through the questions of illness and neglect, while servants have had very little attention being even more difficult to discern in the eighteenth-century record.

In the case of children, their own personal records have rarely entered historiography although they provide a corrective to a popular focus on negative childhood experiences. By the early years of the nineteenth century, children were beginning to be literate from a very young age, which is a significant milestone in the history of childhood. Access to letter-writing was provided for purely pedagogic purposes, both for academic instruction and for the purposes of socialisation. The insight into the various ways home-based education was provided for children, and their

enthusiastic engagement with it, as revealed in letters is valuable. However, letter-writing swiftly became an instrument by which children asserted themselves within their families. It is in children's use of letters that some of the most flexible potential of epistolary communication is to be seen; children understood the role of letters in emotional expression before they could write themselves, which is evident in their insistence on getting involved in the practice at a remarkably youthful age. Their letters show how they also used the practice as a tool to develop and articulate a sense of their own identity, to decide how to present themselves to significant others, adults and siblings, and to manage and express emotions. The combined effect of having access to children's first-hand records, and the self-referential nature of letter writing, gives the reader a more textured understanding of the experience of middle-class Irish childhood.

Few subjects prove the value of a reappraisal of a record type more than the history of servants. Their own first-hand narratives are missing to a great extent from the Irish record; looking at the subject through the lens of their employers' records might seem to threaten to condemn servants to one-dimensionality. However, it is here that the new methodology in handling letters comes into play. The reader, looking at employers' complaints, discovers servants' communicative strategies or, reading of employer's negotiation of the power with her or his servants, recognises the existence of the complex interdependent relationship. This permits the reimagining of some employee experiences as being less oppressive than might have been assumed. It reveals the manner in which the enlightened employer was morally self-regulated and how the industry served as a welfare support system for some servants. The value of a more detailed depiction of the relationships within this industry is obvious, not least in its immediate dismissal of the concept of the servant as a passive victim of circumstance. There is the added value, in a country where the ethnic and social strata align, being permitted to see a functional inter-ethnic relationship within the service industry and to permit a fuller realisation of the lives of poor, including poor Protestants.

In terms of women's history marriage is at once a problematic subject and a necessary path to access their experiences. It has been problematic because it was traditionally seen as an oppressive and controlling framework into which women were forced and therefore it was thought to have little to bring to the history of female emancipation. On the other hand it is one of the most documented social events and a significant experience in individual women's lives. Nothing can alter the stark fact that by entering into a married relationship a woman legally became immediately less of a

person than she had been, or than she would be should she live to become a widow. It is not surprising why some historians of women originally preferred to study the lives of those who were instrumental in bringing this state of affairs to an end. Nevertheless, thousands of women entered into the state of matrimony and their expectations and experiences must be brought into the historical fold. What can letters tell us uniquely about the women's experience of marriage in the eighteenth century? The legal and financial traditions did not change at this time; the move from dynastic to free-choice marriage was not an invention of the eighteenth century and its adoption was slow and uneven; and the 'marriage of affection' was centuries old. One way in which letters add to our knowledge is by adding to studies of individual women's experience that elucidate the restrictions on the operation of patriarchy; however, this is not the principal discovery. Reading women's letters on the subject, or in the context, of marriage has produced some new insights. The survival of female-authored letters means that historians can canvas the opinions of young women facing marriage at a time when free-choice had given them a responsibility towards their families which had not hitherto been theirs. By reading their own letters we can see that, for some women, being married entailed a loss in leaving the family home and lifelong relationships. The more public-facing role of the married woman was viewed with trepidation by some. A key discovery was undeniably the evidence that letters provide for a change in how society viewed marriage, and what married couples expected from one another, towards the end of the period. The purpose of marriage changed from being a business partnership to being a source of personal and intimate reward; the role of the male partner, once an eighteenth-century 'friend', now began to encompass the nineteenth-century 'lover'; the individual female partner, once chosen principally for her resources and family connections, began to become uniquely desirable for her individual self. These changes eventually made their way into popular literature, but some of the language in which they were expressed is only ever encountered in personal letters.

The intention of this thesis has been to advocate for the letter as a historical source and that has been the chief reason why three themes were chosen in the expectation that they would reveal the full extent of the medium's flexibility. This has been successful but it may also be considered as a limitation on the study. Each of the themes is fascinating on its own and could have borne a more in-depth examination of the relevant letters. There are other approaches which could have been considered. For example if all 2000 letters in the database had been taken from a tighter geographical area, trends in that region

might have been more clearly discernible. Nevertheless it has been proven that there are many fruitful lines of further research discernible in a source-driven examination of domestic life.

To what extent if any can it be said that the findings of this thesis are similar to circumstances in England? Are there distinctly Irish elements to be observed when the evidence of the two countries are compared? It does not seem possible or desirable, to seek to find an exact mirroring or a complete chasm between the two geographical areas. All historians of the period note that wealthy Irish families moved freely in English high society and saw it as a natural extension of their social existence. When women English women married Irish men they referred to themselves as Irish and became defensive about the country. If English dramatists put Irish buffoon squires on the stage, there were Irish in the audience getting the joke, if they were not writing the plays. Just as it has proposed that studying one class will throw light on the experiences of other social groups, it may also be proposed that studies in either Ireland or England can in many cases be reciprocally valuable. In arguing that focussing on non-literary and non-aristocratic women, through the lens of their own records, will transform the understanding of women's history, this thesis follows a path carved out by Amanda Vickery two decades ago which reveals female acceptance of the culturally designated domestic burden, but with no 'grovelling subordination'.¹ The recent work on epistolarity in England, when applied to Irish records, cannot fail to be transformative. Daybell has shown how their personal letters locate the different forms of women's power and influence, inside and outside of their families and are vital to discern the fact and quality of women's relationships with people other than their husbands.² Equally, the arguments of this thesis that children's letters and early nineteenth century love letters are uniquely informative, will be a useful approach to these materials in England where this material has not yet been put to this use. The position of the different nations' histories to one another may be thought about in terms of accents – they differ very significantly, are immediately noted, and carry their own message, but the same language is being spoken.

In the case of children the next desideratum is a union catalogue of their records across the repositories of the country to quantify the materials available.³ One potential

¹ Amanda Vickery, *The gentleman's daughter: women's lives in Georgian England* (New Haven and London, 1998), p. 285.

² Daybell, *Early modern women's writing*, pp. 33, 193.

³ A union catalogue of children's books has recently been compiled. The National Collection of Children's Books <https://nccb.tcd.ie/libraries-collections>.

line of enquiry of great interest is in the use of child and intra-sibling humour. In the context of what appears to be a rush directly from childhood to adulthood, this flags the question of children's awareness of themselves as a distinct group within the family, with a mode of communicating unique to that grouping. Also, given the evidence that letters were socially performative, the letters among sisters and brothers will offer great insight for gender construction and expression.

Domestic education of children is an understudied element in education history and necessary to investigate as it will provide a perspective on later provision. Letters between parents discussing their children will also produce considerable insight. Women were expected to be in complete control of the children while young, but concerned fathers involved themselves quite closely also. The language with which they did this, the involvement of women with older sons' education, and the evidence regarding whose advice was sought, outside the immediate family in relation to these matters, will prove that the official lines of demarcation do not map exactly onto traditional expectations. A subject with considerable potential for development, and one that would benefit from access to large amounts of letters of both children and their parents, is the history of the governess. The role of the governess, one of those 'known unknowns', was highlighted by early historians of women in the 1990s.⁴ Although they were central to the educational experiences of many thousands of Irish children, governesses remain almost invisible in the record. When one considers the likely number of children under the care of a governess, an estimate of 60,000 in the mid-nineteenth century, their significance to the overall picture may be appreciated.⁵ The close engagement with personal letters in this thesis strongly suggests that employers' personal family letters may be a productive access point for evidence of the experiences of these women and the impact they had on their charges. When did they begin to be employed in large numbers? We assume it was one of those cultural changes which found its way into the gentry from the aristocracy, but when did this occur and who facilitated it?

The history of servants is also ripe for expansion because so very little has been done. Every family represented among surviving archives employed servants and a

⁴ MacCurtain, O'Dowd and Luddy, 'An agenda for women's history' *IHS* 1992. John Logan, 'Governesses, tutors and parents: domestic education in Ireland, 1700-1880', *Irish Educational Studies*, 7 (1988), pp. 1-19.

⁵ There were over sixty-two thousand children under governesses' care in 1841. John Logan, 'Schooling and the promotion of literacy in nineteenth-century Ireland' (Unpublished PhD thesis, Department of Modern History, NUI Cork, 1992), p. 28.

targeted search for references would be fruitful. It also cannot be insignificant to discover that servants wrote more letters than has hitherto been imagined. The relationships they maintained in this manner, and the language they used to do so, are issues of the keenest significance for social and class history and the history of working women. It is unlikely that large quantities of such evidence will be recovered from the archives, but some which have survived are presently obscured by archival descriptive traditions. The evidence of the service industry itself needs to be scrutinised, and comparisons made with service relationships elsewhere, to establish if there was a colonial aspect to the relationship in Ireland. It has been noted that most of the servants referred to with any frequency or at any length in employers' letters have been upper servants and therefore likely to have been Protestant. A larger database of letters might reveal a greater number of lower and Catholic servants or, if not, would permit one to address the issue as to why it is only the upper servants who appear in the record. It would also be interesting to compare the extent to which male employers' letters contain as many references to servant issues as female letters can be seen to.

The most significant next step for women's history generally would be a large-scale online transcription project aimed at publishing as many letters as possible. This would permit the network mapping which will reveal the impact of literate private women on their society. This could initially take the form of a case study of someone for whom reasonably good evidence of a network survives; either Lady Ann Caldwell or Lady Elizabeth Caldwell would be extremely valuable additions to the social landscape of eighteenth-century Ireland. A more large-scale project of this kind would encourage the kind of research questions which depend upon this scale of access such as language analysis; an example might be the frequency with which women use the rhetoric of food in referring to missing loved ones. Subject-based lines of questioning would also be supported; a subject such as the changing attitudes on the issue of female (and youthful generally) choice in marriage partners would be very revealing. This was a revolution in women's personal liberties which deserves the kind of attention that the history of suffrage receives. It would be possible to observe who promoted or resisted, or even who commented on the change, and a comparison of female and male, or age-demarked letters, on the subject would throw up interesting material. Such an investigation would allow a key finding of this thesis to be tested more rigorously: the alteration that came about in the language of married partners. This could be elaborated through a targeted search for more courtship letters, and letters from the early years of married life, in which

the linguistic choices of both partners could be closely analysed. Letters making reference to physical intimacy could be compared with earlier and later letters to discover if the early years of the nineteenth century represent a brief and unusual period during which this was the norm.

If the centrality of the letter as a source is recognized more fully, and if the tools of digital humanities can be developed to assist, all three of these themes can be developed. It is no more than was demanded by the earliest historians of Irish women who acknowledged that the surviving records would dictate the shape of the discipline. A major project to image, transcribe, contextualise and publish, almost indiscriminately, as many women's letters as possible will herald a new age in Irish women's history.

Conclusion

Eighteenth century women can now be discerned moving about as significant characters on the historical stage. The passive victim is a distant memory and the effect of the conventional narrative and the official record in rendering women invisible has been countered. Scholarship has proved that disabling legal instruments and restrictive cultural norms operated only so far and that behind every throne was a trusted, well-informed and respected woman. However, we cannot let things rest here. We cannot continue to describe women in terms of their disadvantages, even if we are describing how they overcame them. We need to get rid of these obscuring thrones and examine women as they moved across uncontested ground. We must view them by their own lights, by the standards of behaviour meaningful to the times. It is not too extravagant to claim the eighteenth century as a women's century and its social revolution as a women's revolution. This revolution has not received the kind of attention other revolutions routinely receive, although the implications of it can hardly be more significant. It should be expressed in these terms not only for a comparison with female experience of the seventeenth century but, more importantly, for the perspective it provides for the activism of the nineteenth century. Enabling the 'new woman' of the eighteenth century to be a part of her world in a way never before seen was literacy; of all the opportunities this brought with it surely letter-writing is among the most fascinating because of the breadth of its reach. It was used in many different ways, by different kinds of women; it created new ways of thinking and of acting and, more importantly, it allowed the ever increasing numbers of women eighteenth-century Irish women to write themselves into the record. In this way, in the way they make women more fully visible, letters are the antidote to historiographical couverture.

Appendix I: letter from Mary Vesey née Muschamp to her husband Thomas, Bishop of Ossory, 1713.¹

The archival catalogue description of this letter (figure 5), which states that it is interesting only as an example of upper-class female illiteracy, demanded further investigation. At the very least, if the author was ‘nearly illiterate’,² why did she produce a letter that was three pages long? In dismissing this letter in this manner the cataloguer thought only of the comparison with modern standards of orthography and assumed that upon these details depended the value of the letter; if one ignores that detail, one immediately recognises the letter’s considerable value. At first reading we note the marital affection, female self-confidence, evidence of the managerial wife active outside of her home. However, these points had already occurred to the editor of the *Field Day Anthology* regarding letters over half a century older. This is the point - the Vesey letter has merit for the historian because it is far from the first of its kind.

Mary Vesey was taught to write in the formal manner and with better handwriting but chose not to, or found it too cumbersome and unnecessary for intra-familial use. At first glance the handwriting is a loose cursive, apparently legible and reasonably practiced. When we look more closely and see the incorrect and phonetic spellings, the partial or indecipherable words, and the lack of a single mark of punctuation, we see the results of a feature of early literacy education; Vesey had mastered penmanship, but not spelling, which was not unusual when handwriting was learned from head-line books. We know that Mary Vesey was taught to write correctly because of the existence of another letter, written to her father Denny Muschamp, two decades earlier (figure 6). It is in a careful, almost elegant hand and is tortuously formal, belying its origins deep in the seventeenth century. In the space of a very short text, it becomes increasingly less coherent and badly spelled. That this letter was an early effort by the author is corroborated by her father’s having written on the outside ‘My Molly’s letter’, as one would annotate a child’s first literary offering. Mary, however, may have been in her early teens by this time.³

¹ Letter from Lady Mary Vesey to her husband Thomas, 11 May 1713. De Vesci Papers NLI MS 38,876/1.

² Deborah Heller, ‘Elizabeth Vesey’s alien pen: autography and handwriting’, *Women’s writing*, 21 (2014), pp. 357-384.

³ Mary Vesey’s date of birth is unknown; however the early letter from her to her father allows a date of *circa* 1679 to be proposed. The letter was written in 1693/4 and the annotation suggests it was an early if not a first effort. In the letter Mary refers to the income her father allowed her, which is unlikely before the

In Vesey's 1713 letter, gone is any attempt to deploy the careful penmanship learned in the school room; gone is any formality or convoluted expressions of respect; there was no wasting of paper by attention to elegant lay-out. None of this alters the fact that this was a successful literary artefact. Vesey was not in any sense struggling with the medium. This one letter incorporates all the evidence one could wish for of an affective married relationship, mutual spousal respect, and female self-confidence. The letter hurtles along with great energy, covering the usual eclectic mix of topics characteristic of women's letters. There are a number of aspects to this letter that could be drawn out for extended interpretation. Most obvious is the way in which letter-writing enabled Vesey to escape domestic containment, both in the sense of being able to carry out business 'online', while at home with the 'brats', and in the sense of letting the historian see that she was confidently transgressing the private/public sphere boundaries as she carried out 'corporation' business in the bishop's absence. The 'orality' of the letter comes through in the phonetic spelling – 'dar' for 'dare', 'twill', 'a hunder poun' - and also in the use of a colloquial, even archaic, phrase to 'rap and run'; unfamiliarity with written texts lead women to rely on spoken discourse when constructing sentences. Such evidence makes an 'illiterate' woman's letter more valuable than any other kind to a student of language. We can also appreciate the fact that Mary Vesey, mother of literary salon-host Elizabeth Vesey, was alive to early eighteenth-century discourse about women's involvement in public affairs.

Lady Mary had an active role in managing the family finances (much of which originated with her). Her husband's acknowledgement of the validity of this involvement is confirmed by the evidence that he felt the need to explain his spending to her. She also was able to raise funds for his use when he was travelling. The fact that Mary Vesey expressed disappointment that her husband could not be with her for her expected confinement adds to growing evidence that early-modern men took an active interest in their nurseries. It also adds a little to the biography of a couple who are most frequently characterised by their high living and possibly neglectful family life. Lady Mary's commission to the Bishop to buy china reflects consumer activity which, in material culture studies, is an active strand in eighteenth century research. Consumer spending is recognised as one of the ways in which the women of the Ascendancy bolstered their

age of ten and more likely to happen around the age of twelve to fourteen. The payment of an income may have started subsequent to the death of Mary's mother and around the time Denny Muschamp married again in 1692. Mary was married in 1698.

families' social reputation. Lady Mary is depicted in the literature as a shallow woman fussing over 'door furniture';⁴ however her teasing reference here, that the new set of china is to maintain her husband's reputation as the soon-to-be Bishop of Killaloe, shows that her shopping was a business strategy and that her husband was implicated in the activity. This humour is one of principal elements to note in the letter, along with politics, which takes up most of the text. When commissioning the china Lady Mary explained the need for it by reference to the Bishop's dogs causing havoc in the house; she also took the opportunity to insult Lady Galloway's taste in such matters. Humour and politics combine in her arch reference to the Bishop's trusting to 'a woman's management' in affairs of business; Vesey ended her letter on a note of high dudgeon, issuing a threat she may well have carried out, against a political rival of her husband's. Captain Barrington had had the temerity to say of her, in public, that women should not meddle with corporation business. He lost his seat in 1715.

For the purposes of this thesis the principal element to be noted, in the comparison of Vesey's two surviving letters, is that, for her to become the letter-writer she was in 1713, Lady Mary must have had a lot of practice. She must have written many hundreds of letters of which only a tiny number survives. She refers in this letter to another sent to her husband; there must have been many. Her other correspondents have not even been this fortunate; their letters have disappeared from the record. It is vital that this ubiquity of letter writing, and the magnitude of the record loss, inform our conception of the workings of eighteenth-century society and the extent of women's contribution to it. This is why such emphasis is placed here on retrieving this single letter, symbolically, from the historical wilderness implied by the word 'illiterate'. To dismiss it is to cut off a path that leads directly to the emergence into the public eye of women in the later eighteenth century. Women such as Arabella Denny did not spring fully formed into the pages of history after 1750. The groundwork had been laid long before, and letters like Lady Mary Vesey's allow us to explore the prehistory of these later developments.

Editorial note. In the transcription a small amount of punctuation has been added in square brackets. In the modernised version more have been added and spellings have been modernised, silently.

⁴ Barnard, *Making the grand figure*, p. 173.

Abbylex May ye 11 1713

My Dear Life

your brats and I are all well thank god and all morisis⁵ Lick to do well[.] ?Thon ?den⁶ gives his duty to you[.] I was in great hopes that I should not heve writ enny mor to you befoor you Left London but yours this day has quiet cast me down seing I must not expet you to Leve London till my recking I fear will be out for I think I havnt much A bouf 6 week to go but I must be satisfid for I am seur you will not stay won minet Longer then neds must[.] I am vext you did not get your bill tim A nouef for I am seur Tom⁷ might heve sent it sooner and he writ me word he sent it A great while A go[.] I cold not get [?] but 30 pound to send you which I logd in Toms hands thinking you might want it when you Landed and I heve writ to him this day to send it you by the next post which is all I can possibel get as yet but when ever I can I will send you all I can rap and run with but I heve A difelis don⁸ on my back senes may day and that is for [?] which must be anserd and twill be A great whil befoor I can expet enny of our may rent but however defer boreoing as Long as you can[.] you nead make no exqus to me for your Laying out so much monny for I am in no consor for that knoing you will Lay out nothing but what neads must therfoor don't Lett that trobel your hed it will pay itself in time with intres[.] I writ you word in my Last how you may get A hunder poun at Least present Ly if you A prouf of it when you com over but I must beg to ad won Littel expenes mor to you which is all I desir out of this 30 pound I send you now that is won dosen of cheny pleats for A third cors I would not have them very fine tis what the Busup of kilalow cant be with out nor cold Sr Thomes well and your dogs has not Left me won[.] ther is non to be got in dubling but what is extrafeganty dear or I would not trobel you[.] if you cold get my Lady Lusborro⁹ to by them I belive she could do it best for you but I would not trost Lady Gallaway for I think her no byer of enny thing[.] Mr flower¹⁰ ho is gon back A gain to London can tell you what his cost for I hear he has bought a good deal of chenny and sent it to Chester for tis extrafenly dear in dubling now[.] Harry Webb has a ?nycer hand at packing them up and will bring them sefe I am seur <if you bring 6 tea cups it ?should do

⁵ Possibly Morris Cuffe's family.

⁶ There was a family name Den in Kilkenny.

⁷ Thomas FitzGerald, man-of-business of Thomas Vescei who 'inherited' him from his father in law Denny Musgrave. (Turtle Bunbury)

⁸ A reading of 'a devil's dun' could be suggested.

⁹ ?Lady Lanesborough. Mary Vesey's stepmother was Frances, the widow of George Lane, 1st Viscount Lanesborough.

¹⁰ William Flower, elected to parliament for Co Kilkenny in 1715, who built a mansion at Castle Durrus around this time. Barnard, *A new anatomy*, pp. 62-4.

well> this if you can do with eas do if not dont trobel your self for I would not trobel my Life A bout enny thing for I know you dont wont trobel but never freat your self A bout boranakill¹¹ nor trobel your self to writ to him but Leve it to me if you dar trost a womans manigment[.] Moris Cuff¹² went to dubling Last week eles he should have bing chos this day but as soon as ever he comes down he shall be choes for if ther be trost in man I cant feal it or I would not A tempt it[.] the [?] presis me to have it don befoor you com for fear the should preveal with you to bring in freaman¹³ which he is bent A ganst and you nead not fear ?Stringer I am suer and Olliver and the hy sherif and I have writ to Tom Fitsgorald to be down by that tim and if the should strif to A pos me the havt voats A nouef in this kingdom to car it which is the reson I belive the don't say enny thing of it now and would be wiling it should Ly till you come but it shant if I can help it for Capt <Barinton¹⁴> cant say wors of me then he has that it twas not a womans bisnes to medel with corpereshon[.] [T]his he sayd to my sister ?Whealer¹⁵ but I tock no notis of it nor semd to be angry at it nor would I have you take enny notis of it till I put it out of his power to do you enny harm which will be soon I hope[.] I am my Life [yours] for ever MV

Abbyleix May 11th 1713

My Dear Life

Your brats and I are all well thank God and all Morris's Like to do well. ?Thom ?Den gives his duty to you. I was in great hopes that I should not have written any more to you before you left London but yours this day has quite cast me down seeing I must not expect you to leave London till my reckoning I fear will be out for I think I haven't much above 6 weeks to go but I must be satisfied for I am sure you will not stay one minute longer then needs must. I am vexed you did not get your bill time enough for I am sure Tom might have sent it sooner and he wrote me word he sent it a great while ago. I could not get [?scarce] but 30 pound to send you which I lodged in Tom's hands thinking you might

¹¹ Ballinakill, Co Laois was incorporated by a charter of James I in 1613. Regarding this spelling, there is an incidence in Mary Delany's letters where she refers to Baldoyle as Burdoyle. Angélique Day ed., *Letters from Georgian Ireland: the correspondence of Mary Delany* (Belfast, 1991), p. 254.

¹² Maurice Cuffe (b. 1681) son of Agmondisham Cuffe and his wife Anne Otway; brother of John, 1st baron Desart (and grandfather of Dorothea Herbert). Maurice represented the City of Kilkenny in King George I's Irish Parliament from 1715 to 1726. John Cuffe was Sherriff of Kilkenny in 1708.

¹³ Samuel Freeman, MP representing Ballinakill in 1715.

¹⁴ Barrington. This family sat for the borough with short breaks until 1750. John Barrington was declared not duly elected in 1715. Ulster Historical Foundation <http://www.ancestryireland.com/history-of-the-irish-parliament/constituencies/ballynakill/accessed> 9 September 2016.

¹⁵ ?Wheeler. The Muschamps, the Cuffes and the Wheeler-Cuffes were all related families.

want it when you landed and I have written to him this day to send it you by the next post which is all I can possibly get as yet. When ever I can I will send you all I can rap and run with but I have a [?] down on my back since May Day that is for [?] which must be answered and t'will be a great while before I can expect any of our May rent but however defer borrowing as long as you can. You need make no excuse to me for your laying out so much money for I am in no concern for that knowing you will lay out nothing but what needs must therefore don't let that trouble your head it will pay itself in time with interest. I wrote you word in my last how you may get a hundred pounds at least presently if you approve of it when you come over but I must beg to add one little expense more to you which is all I desire out of this 30 pound I send you now that is one dozen of china plates for a third course. I would not have them very fine t'is what the Bishop of Killaloe can't be without nor could Sr Thom as well and your dogs has not left me one. There is none to be got in Dublin but what is extravagantly dear or I would not trouble you. If you could get my Lady Lusborro to buy them I believe she could do it best for you but I would not trust Lady Gallaway for I think her no buyer of anything. Mr Flower who is gone back again to London can tell you what his cost for I hear he has bought a good deal of china and sent it to Chester for tis extravagantly dear in Dublin now. Harry Webb has a ?nicer hand at packing them up and will bring them safe I am sure <if you bring 6 tea cups it should do well>. This, if you can do with ease, do, if not don't trouble your self for I would not trouble my Life about anything for I know you don't wont trouble. But never fret yourself about Ballinakill nor trouble yourself to write to him but leave it to me if you dare trust a woman's management. Morris Cuff went to Dublin last week else he should have been chose this day but as soon as ever he comes down he shall be chose for if there be trust in [*?word missing*] man I can't feel it or I would not attempt it. The [?] presses me to have it done before you come for fear they should prevail with you to bring in Freeman which he is bent against and you need not fear ?Stringer I am sure and Oliver and the high sheriff and I have writ to Tom FitzGerald to be down by that time and if they should strive to oppose me they haven't votes enough in this kingdom to ?carry it which is the reason I believe the don't say any thing of it now and would be willing it should lie till you come but it shan't if I can help it for Capt. <Barrington> can't say worse of me than he has that it was not a woman's business to meddle with corporation. This he said to my sister ?Wheeler but I took no notice of it nor seemed to be angry at it nor would I have you take any notice of it till I put it out of his power to do you any harm which will be soon I hope. I am my Life [yours] for ever MV

Appendix II: photographs

I had one like your servant William has such a rogue as you
say I hope you stopped the value of the horse from being for I
have conceived he proved to do it from his constant in other
respects and intended to part the one I had in the sugar bowl
instead of it in his mouth. With respect to my friend Lord
Thames I should not have you either depend
on his sanguine about it, "Wadwin" it appears has not
had it all as yet and what he says with respect to anonymous
words may be only for the purpose of making a better bargain
for himself why do you say I never had any opinion of poor
Bobby you know I love every word that comes from his dear
old lips and every little blot of paper that I
find after his death - and you are very interested
why I don't value them & I am very glad your
neighbours are so attentive to you for you would be very
tired at home in the evenings without your food - you
see how much & how valuable I consider my own society to you
and your second wife the celebrated Mrs. B. I have your attention
and I am afraid you I am not in the least jealous of it
when you tell me it had the effect of making you stream
of your first and our dear little ones - they are thank God
all quite well and Billy is getting quite stout and strong
and constantly out with David & Jane I think it is the best
way to give him the benefit of the country which he is in
it and he is quite surrounded looking at the way making
Lancaster however than them at all which I am very glad
of as if he had any inclination that way I could not have
him so much out of doors (Billy poor Papa's boy sends his
love to him) Billy desires would tell you he wrote the above letter
his own self which I assure you he did with some assistance

Figure 1: Billy D'Alton's note to his father, 1824. TCD MS 2327/82

My D^r Girl.

To explain what I mean by giving your head a female turn, I write this letter in the way I wish you to write - It will be a very short one, for I am just setting out for French park to consecrate the Church, & have time only to tell you, y^t I am well, & rejoice that you are so.

As the Evenings are now growing shorter, I think you had better make your visit to Rathfarnham some morning.

You rec^d S^r Chancelor's card on Monday. This gave you time to send to Artaigh to excuse your selves for one Wednesday; & you might have done it without offending - But it is no great matter. I believe you spent your day there full as pleasantly, as you would have done at the Hill.

Tell M^{rs} Jordan I thank her for her letter. In it she speaks of an old acquaintance whom she met at St. Bridget's Church. I knew her well ~~many~~ years ago

Figure 2: Bishop Synge's letter to his daughter Alicia. TCD Deposit Synge, letter 28.

My Dear Mother
 I have been thinking of you very much lately
 and wondering how you are getting on. I hope
 you are well and happy. I have been very busy
 lately but I shall try to write you more often.
 I have been thinking of you very much lately
 and wondering how you are getting on. I hope
 you are well and happy. I have been very busy
 lately but I shall try to write you more often.
 I have been thinking of you very much lately
 and wondering how you are getting on. I hope
 you are well and happy. I have been very busy
 lately but I shall try to write you more often.

Figure 3: Mrs Bell's letter to Henry Clements, 1827. TCD MS 7338/4.

11436/1/4

Bristol July 11th 1759

Master Charley I have been so late to you hoping
 you are all well I have been so late to you hoping
 of your father's health I have been so late to you hoping
 landed at Dergale then we found weaves went to the
 from thence to another from thence to Whitechurch from
 thence to Crossberry there went in about 10 along a fine
 river in fine banks and fine prospects as we should
 wish for to see we went that day so much to water
 and had it not for the Day Thursday out yet we were
 lucky we had a great Deal of Company and in half an
 hour the boat never stopped till she went to sea
 for my end for she is obliged to go like a tag
 but me Master I not think to go to night upon the
 point of the Reine we landed at Dergale all the way
 we saw here that night the morning took a horse and
 went to a quarry large town called Bingley then
 hired a horse and went from thence to another large
 town called Oulton from thence to another town every
 quarry large town called glasher and the wonder is
 since I have seen I never saw any a little of it there there
 is a College church and they say that it is 7 Hundred years
 since it was built it would be a good Day work for man
 To get to the top me Master went there and when
 he came Home he asked me why did you go there for
 I struck another Deceit work you never will see just
 and knew where he was going well I was so angry
 that I went there and gave above 10 pence the
 showed me every Duckers all the Kings and Diners
 that ever appeared & are there drawn in marble stone
 you actually take them to be stone some of the
 the Boye told me that he would not go to the top
 of the tower with me if I gave six pence more
 But that if I showed me that I might go up
 I went I believe I reckoned very near 200 Hundred
 steps before I got to the top when I got to the top
 I looked round about me and I thought that every
 four or five rods about me was you that
 Down from me I saw a bell there and it was
 bigger than the furnace in the true house
 that as I came Down Dragoon begun

I expect to bring home the next year had Dragoon with me but my money
 will go but short ways upon them

Figure 4: Bryan Rock's letter to Charles Lyons and his sister, 1759. TCD MS 11436/4

Ablylex May 27 1713

My Dear Wife

Your brother and I are all well thank God and all
by merits I did do well then I do give his duty to you
I was in great hopes that I should not
have writt any more to you before you left
London but your this day has quiett us
down seeing I must not expect you to leave
London till my reckning I fear will be out for
I think I have much to do but I need to go but
I must be satisfied for I am sure you will not
stay more minutes longer then needs must I am
writt you did not get your bill from of none
for I am sure from might have sent it sooner you
he writt me word he sent it a great while
ago I could not get sees but 30 pound to send you
which I hope in some hours that is you might
writt it when you found and I have writt to
him this day to send it you by the next post
which is all I can possiball get as yet but
when ever I can I will send you all I can rapion
run with but I have a defelie can on my back
some may say and that is so to which must be
said and will be a great while before I can say

Figure 5: Mary Vesey's letter to her husband, 1713. MS 38,876.

March 11th 1693

Dear Sr

you were pleas'd to be so kind to let
 me know that you had sent me a pound a year of which I received last
 year 45 pound, and this year 50 pound, last June, and 10th 6th the 11th
 of September, and 11th 2nd the 11th of September, and 11th 10th the 21st
 of October, and 11th 19th the 21st of December, you were so extremely kind
 Dear Father to let me know, and Thomas Fichgarcia with you were
 for Ireland so that I had 45 pound of which I received 42 1/2
 when I wanted it the the year was not out till this month if
 you will be pleas'd but to continue your favors in lett in me have
 as it be four hundred the year, the I have hardy confidens a
 enough to deserve it, but I hope you will pardon Dear Sr the

I shall ever be your most
 Duty full Daughter
 M. Marchant

Figure 6: Mary Vesey's letter to her father, 1693/4. NLI MS 38,868.

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