

## **The Epistolary Research Network – Book of Abstracts**

### **Online conference : 1-2 October 2021**

#### 1. Carol Acton (Canada)

*'Thank you for your lovely letter': Evacuee letter exchanges during the Second World War*

Epistolary theorists note that, as vehicles for communication, letters are dialogic. But in extreme circumstances such as war that dialogue may be interrupted or challenged in a way that draws attention to its importance in sustaining connection. This paper explores Second World War evacuee letter exchanges between children and parents, and between parents and foster parents, in a particular cultural context which directed the dialogue by discouraging the expression of negative emotion and emphasised the importance of 'cheerfulness' in letter exchanges. Moreover, communication is also challenged when a child's thoughts and feelings cannot be easily articulated or expressed in the manual act of writing, and are often negated when letters are written under adult supervision, or where exchanges between parents and foster parents, however well-intentioned, take the place of the evacuee child's own experience and thus contribute to its erasure. Any slight autonomy that might be offered a child through letter writing thus may be replaced with the adult narrative of the child's experience, revealing the power dynamics between adults and children. At the same time we find that children find ways to circumvent these limitations, such as writing secretly to their parents to tell of abuse. Since these letters carry the immediate subjective experience of the child in a way that is largely absent from the larger war narrative, they offer us a way of challenging such erasure and returning the child's voice to the history of the war, in spite of their limitations.

#### 2. Danni Cai (China)

*Matters and Manners : Communicating Marital Decisions in Chinese Family Letters*

Epistolary knowledge has long been regarded as essential to all strata of Chinese society. The late Qing and Republican periods, in particular, witnessed an explosive growth of guides to letter writing. Although historians have long mined letters as sources of evidence about the past, scant attention has been paid to the value of letters and letter-writing manuals in capturing ever-shifting modes of communication during the crucial era of transition in modern China. This paper examines model letters declining arranged marriage published in different periods of Republican China. Model letters exchanged between the young and elders in their families underwent significant changes in their negotiations in accordance with the modernizing ethos: roughly in the 1910s, the young in model letters assented to the elders' authority in knowledge and experience, and the elders were considered superior to the young; in the 1920s and early 1930s, the thrust of these letters suggests the young tactfully decline elders' marital arrangements by providing tenable reasons regarding the harm of early marriage; in the late 1930s and 1940s, model letters offered more radical viewpoints attacking the traditional extended family and aimed to cultivate modern citizens. The correspondence of marital decisions in different phases of the Republican period thus provides a concrete example of the changing knowledge of writing family letters in modern China.

### 3. Kathryn Carter (Canada)

*Among the cheats and rascals : letters from an unwilling Irish immigrant to Upper Canada, 1847*

In 2000, the editors of *Epistolary Histories* wrote that “future epistolary histories will have to attend to . . . transatlantic correspondences” and “the mechanics of colonization” (14). It was a challenge I tried to take up in a 2008 published article on the letters of Mary Gapper O’Brien, a British settler living in Ontario Canada, writing between 1828 and 1838. In that article, I investigated the mechanics of trans-Atlantic correspondence, with an eye to the way in which “socio technical apparatuses such as the postal system can shape the way in which colonial spaces are imagined” (9). I concluded that the notions of “home” and “nation” were defined within a transnational network of correspondence and a dynamic traffic of information to worked to weave together an empire.

What seems interesting now is a question about how trans-Atlantic letter writing might offer models of performativity that enhance agency, and if these possibilities were available for letter writers who found themselves in a more precarious or fraught relationship with empire. While an English writer like O’Brien might have felt that epistolary self-creation was aligned with a trajectory of colonial settlement, Irish writers faced more complicated formulae when imagining a new home in Canada through letter writing.

With attention to a set of letters by nineteenth-century Irish women who settled in Ontario, I will explore how those letter writers establish agency through diasporic intimacies and through productive attention to scenes of loss and, in so doing, navigate a complicated relationship with empire.

### 4. Nuria Calvo Cortes (Spain)

*“a Little Tea and Shuger for the voige”: women petitioning for basic needs following politeness rules in early 19th century Britain*

Australia became the destiny for many British convicts in the late 18th century. While in prison and before departing, these convicts often petitioned for several basic necessities. The present study focuses on the analysis of some politeness strategies employed in 15 petition letters, signed by 4 women who were transported to Australia on board the *William Pitt* in 1805. They had all been charged with forgery of bank notes and were at Newgate prison in London. These letters were addressed to the governors of the Bank of England. It is unlikely that these women wrote most of the letters themselves, as the handwriting and the grammar display variation in the different letters signed by each of them. However, in terms of content they all show similarities and they all seem to be aware of their social position and difficult circumstances, as opposed to those of their addressees. The nature of the petition letters as basically including requests is in itself a threat to the addressee’s face, but the conclusion points to an excessive use of strategies to minimise these face threatening acts, and an abundance of face threatening acts to the signees of the petitions. The reasons for this could be the awareness of these women’s position in relation to their addressees and the desperate need to have their requests granted, independently of losing face.

## 5. Marina Deller (Australia)

### *Continued conversations with the lost: epistolary elements in grief memoir*

Grief memoir is a key platform for exploring the facets of lived grief and connecting with lost loved ones. Inclusion of epistolary elements extends these literary pursuits. I ask: what form do letters take when we are grieving? Do we mourn, remember, say goodbye? Do we reach out to those who are unreachable? Can those unreachable loved ones reply? I am currently undertaking a practice-led PhD in grief memoir. As part of this research I am writing a memoir about the death of my mother when I was nineteen. Fowler describes a memoir with woven narrative threads and 'pieces' as 'gathering up fragments' (529); epistolary elements are my chosen method of gathering. In this practice-led paper I will discuss the function of epistolary form in grief memoir through creative excerpts and relevant scholarship and discussion. I will explore three defined categories of epistolary in such work: physical letters (already owned, constructed, missing), what I refer to as 'unintentional letters' (notes, poems, published works), and digital epistolary (emails, text messages, social media). I will also explore the idea of 'continued conversations' with those we have lost through literary letters and argue that writing about a loved one as if they still exist is a way to imagine a continued life for them, a way to grant them 'continuity' (Barak & Leichtentritt 945).

## 6. Reetta Eiranen (Finland)

### *Letters as Emotional Objects and Relations*

Letters can be analysed as emotional objects that construct relationships over time and place. In the nineteenth century, they were a central means of keeping in touch with loved ones and maintaining family networks. The analysis and empirical examples are based on my research on Finnish nineteenth-century educated elite. Emotional objects attach emotional meanings. Letters are especially important emotional objects in situations where there is a need to transcend distances and absences. The emotional intensity of letters grew the longer the separation was. Letters could textually create a strong illusion of presence of the other. This could happen through narrating the other to the same space and vividly describing landscapes and impressions the writer had experienced. Letters were also referred to as "speaking" with the other and their dialogical nature was idealised. Letters as objects can be "proofs of emotion". The length and frequency of letter-writing, that is the time invested in writing them, were evidence of attachment. This is related to the concept of "epistolary pact": the correspondence was supposed to be in balance in terms of quantity and length. The sender was, in a way, emotively present in the materiality of the letter: their handwriting, them having held the paper, even having kissed it. The letter provided a material link through time and space; the sender and the recipient interacted with and through the same object. Recipients could also ritualise the letters: keep them always with them and reread them multiple times.

7. Steven M. Gates (USA)

*The Significance of Northern Civil War Soldiers' Letters to Epistolary Studies*

Civil War soldiers' letters represent a rich and untapped reservoir for epistolary studies scholars. Over three million soldiers served in the American Civil War. Approximately 90% of Union soldiers were literate. An estimated 1.8 of the two million white soldiers could write letters. Historian Gary Gallagher hypothesizes that Civil War soldiers wrote over a million letters a month. Armed only with a rudimentary literacy, they enthusiastically embraced the unfamiliar task of letter writing. Their limited skills, circumstances and unique experience can give their letters a prominent place in epistolary studies. Many of the challenges confronting all letter writers and their recipients in the 19th century, are on display in their letters. Among them are the unseizable present, the barriers of time and space, and their impassioned efforts to rekindle and preserve the emotional bonds between writer and recipient. Especially unique are the ways in which their writing reveals the limitations of narrative for communicating the war and the limits of language for navigating two cultures of death: the home and the battlefield. Especially compelling are soldiers' efforts to preserve their own humanity and to present a self-image consistent with the period's cultural norms. To varying degrees soldiers overcame the letter's traditional barriers and, in the process, revealed clues to the ideologies underpinning their interpretation of the War. I propose a framework for reading Northern soldier's letters that includes the role of epistolary theory, common features of soldiers' letters, reading for unionism, and a methodology for classifying their letters.

8. Trisha Kessler (Eire/UK)

*Letters of loss and urgency: Jewish refugee industrialists, trade networks, and pathways of rescue.*

This paper explores business correspondence between hat manufacturers Bruder Böhm and their customers and colleagues across the globe to reveal the dynamics of loss and urgency following the expropriation and Aryanisation of two factories in Vienna and Czechoslovakia (Sudetenland) in April and October 1938 after their annexation by Nazi Germany. Holocaust history has tended to reduce Jewish industrialists to statistical figures of 'economic and financial loss' with little focus on how, in the immediate aftermath of fleeing their native lands, businessmen sought to use their trade networks to generate forms of rescue and business renewal necessary for survival. This correspondence reveals how refugee businessmen worried simultaneously about thread, fabrics and business supplies central to the continuance of their livelihoods while trying to help loved ones find safe settlement and new lives. Letters illuminate the strains of these lives, the mechanisms they had to put in place to cope with the diminishing agency of trade networks and increasingly fragmented families. While highlighting the fluid and delicate relationship between the entrepreneurial nature of business and the reality of being stateless, this correspondence testifies to the reality of economic destruction and how the very act of writing letters to business colleagues was a form of survival.

## 9. Tuomas Laitinen (Finland)

### *Letter as a performance*

In my artistic doctoral research, taking place at the Theatre Academy of Uniarts Helsinki, I have used letters as a medium for creating artistic performances, “readings”. In these readings, audience gathers into a venue, such as a theatre, each of them receiving a letter as they enter. They open the letters and start reading. The letter as a medium of performance enables the simultaneity of addressing each audience member as an individual and all of them as a group. It also enables a theatrical, performative or even musical experience via using the letter as a “score” for the unfolding event. Letter-writing then performs as composing a framework for the experience and behavior of an audience. Meanwhile a negotiation between private and public spheres is played out.

My proposal for the conference is to present an artistic letter-reading, rendered for an online environment. This reading would, both through its content and form, address the unfolding of a letter as a performance: its audience-relation, its dramaturgy, its temporal register, the eventness of reading. Here a tension is evident: while the writer and the reader of a letter are by default distant in time and place, in performance the opposite is the default setting: the performer and the audience share the same time and place. This tension serves as a generative force for my research practice. The presentation, and the research it is based on, are situated on the field of artistic research.

## 10. Madison Marshall (UK)

### *The discursive production of self and the staging of others in Julia ‘Snow’ Wedgwood’s ‘epistolary album’*

It is 1897. Darwin’s niece, the novelist, biographer and critical essayist Julia ‘Snow’ Wedgwood, is compiling an album of family letters as a gift for her 17-year-old niece. Communicated through carefully selected correspondence and accompanying handwritten annotations, Wedgwood’s self-assembled album ostensibly represents the lives of four generations of the Wedgwood dynasty. While it reflects the widespread nineteenth-century interest in memory-keeping and collecting artefacts, Wedgwood’s album does not fit into any existing hand-assembled album categories and, although it holds similarities with the ‘life and letters’ biographies that form part of the contemporary culture of published and privately circulated memorials (e.g., Marsh 1888; Müller 1902; Litchfield 1904), it differs in its narrative of contextualization. The correspondence showcased in ‘life and letters’ books is punctuated by an editorial commentary which seeks to ventriloquize the absent subject’s thoughts and shape a positive reader response, but the letters in Wedgwood’s album form a backdrop against which her handwritten narrative is foregrounded, thereby revealing her personal opinions and aspects of her own life story. Directly addressing the categorial tensions that exist within the assembled album genre (Black 2020, 2018; Good 2015; Gernes 2001), I gesture toward a new subgenre and coin the term ‘epistolary album’. I argue that Wedgwood shaped her album to increase its prospect of having a significant influence on future thought, and further show that her discursive production of self and staging of others play a fundamental role in the construction of her family narrative, and how she presents it in the past, present and future.

11. Kat McDonald-Miranda (USA)

*“Tracing the Motive for Murder in the Letters of King James VI”*

On August 5, 1600, King James VI of Scotland and an entourage of some of his most trusted men set out from Falkland to hunt. By the end of the day, John Ruthven, 3rd Earl of Gowrie and his younger brother Alexander lay dead in their home in Perth. The brothers were killed by James' retainers after they had interrupted an alleged attempt to kill the king. The event is known to history as the Gowrie Conspiracy, the supposed conspiracy by the earl and his brother to kill the king and claim the throne of Scotland. There was indeed a conspiracy and it did involve the Ruthven brothers. However, it was the king who had orchestrated the plot against his most powerful rival. By 1600, the well-liked and well-connected John Ruthven was causing disruptions between the Church of Scotland and the king, threatening recent agreements. Tensions had also persisted between James and Queen Elizabeth I of England because she still had not yet assured the king that she would name him as her successor. James was nervous that she would, and indeed could choose his cousin, the Earl of Gowrie who also had a claim to the English throne. This paper will use the king's letters to highlight his animosity towards the Ruthven family as well as the deep-seated fears he had that Elizabeth might choose Ruthven over himself. They underscore both James' determination as well as his desperation and provide compelling evidence of the king's motive for murder.

12. Linda McGuire (France)

*On the fake distances and (in)authentic epistolary fragments of Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi*

Two letter fragments survive attributed to a woman from the Roman world. In 124 BCE, Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi, wrote to reproach her son Gaius for an act he undertook that might cause civil disorder. These fragments, belonging to one letter, are exceptionally rare given how few writings composed by women have been transmitted to posterity. Their rarity makes them difficult to contextualise. Some researchers have focussed on their rhetorical language, how they read like an open letter and why they must be fake.

One feature has so far eluded comment. In the Roman Republic women never strayed far from their families. Sons could and did travel, especially the elite who filled government and military postings around Roman territory. However, women did not. The son in question, Gaius Gracchus, was in Rome in 124 BCE. This detail is important. Why would a letter be necessary if they could hold a family council, common in times of crisis as this was. Indeed, Romans did not just write letters to bridge physical separation, but to influence public opinion and promote the interests of the letter sender. This paper proposes to re-examine the letter excerpts to argue for their authenticity. While it is true that women had few acceptable means of expressing themselves publically, correspondence might well have been one of them.

### 13. Cathryn McWilliams (Norway)

#### *Perilous Epistles: Intercepting The United Irishmen*

In 1793 the Society of United Irishmen was driven underground. Sensitive communications called for a more cautious approach to conveyance, which in turn brought its own added risks. As the Reverend William Jackson discovered in 1794, negligence could have fatal consequences. Jackson made the grievous error of sending treasonous letters to France via the post office; these were seized, leading to his arrest and dramatic suicide during his sentencing hearing. In the lead up to the 1798 rebellion, many United Irishmen were arrested and incarcerated on often unsubstantiated charges of treason. For the many northerners imprisoned in Dublin, correspondence was their only means of communication with family and friends. A close examination of the McCracken family letters, sent between Dublin's Kilmainham Jail and Belfast, reveals three means of conveyance: through the postal system, by way of a bearer and via a safe house. As the family's correspondence demonstrates, each method proved vulnerable to delay and interception (Belfast's postmaster Thomas Whinnery being the most notorious culprit). Intertextual comments on the physical state of previous letters (such as references to broken seals) served as warnings against certain modes of delivery and untrustworthy individuals. Fittingly, when the time for rebellion came in the summer of 1798, it was signalled by the intercepting and burning of the mail coaches. This paper will explore how, on the advent of the rebellion, correspondence acted as a double edged sword; the words having the power to betray their creator.

### 14. Elina Saloranta (Finland)

#### *An exchange of letters with the past*

Dear People! I believe I have received all your letters and you presumably mine too. The last time I wrote cards to you from Mitau. That was when Jan left for a week in Riga to draw his altarpiece, as he said. Consequently, I now have some peace and quiet again. I nevertheless think the solitude here is having an overly depressive effect on me. I have become so melancholic and nervous that I cannot tolerate anything. I frequently miss Father, I loved him so unreservedly and he was always so good to me. I do not miss Jan in the slightest – I contemplate the future with him with nothing but dread. The text above is from a letter written by the Finnish singer Elli Forssell-Rozentäle (1871–1943) in August 1909. The letter was addressed to her sisters and brothers, but since it begins with the words “Dear People”, I feel that it is meant for all humankind. During my presentation, I will present the letter in its entirety and tell about an experiment in which I asked artists and researchers to reply to Elli from today's perspective. What kind of responses did she receive from her 21st century penpals?

### 15. Huizhui Wang (USA)

#### *Personal History in Letters: A Discussion of Cao Pi's Letters to Wu Zhi*

In ancient China, where letters were publicly circulated and accepted as a genre of literature, letters were powerful autobiographical materials. To show this, this paper studies the letters of Cao Pi 曹丕 (187–226), a prince who later became the emperor and founder of the Wei 魏 dynasty. Cao Pi was a multifaceted figure, however his current image is overwhelmingly negative because popular culture has portrayed him as a mean prince. While serious literary and historical studies have mitigated this image, none have asked: what image did Cao Pi try to create for himself? In order to answer this question, I will examine how Cao Pi used letters to shape his own public image. Some of his letters demonstrate his self-display as a political figure. Others talk about everyday topics using a casual tone. These letters differ according to Cao Pi's changing status, his purpose, and his addressee. However, the letters which give us the clearest sense of how Cao Pi saw himself are the several letters he wrote to his old friend Wu Zhi 吳質 (177–230). These letters are similar to autobiographical writings because they talk about memories of their youthful travels. Through a detailed textual analysis of these two letters, we see that Cao Pi nostalgically cherishes the carefree youth he lost because of his growing responsibility and significance as a political figure. I argue that the image Cao Pi presents in these letters is the one he wanted the public to remember.

### 16. Cheryl Weaver (USA)

#### *"I consider them lost sheep": What Emily Dickinson's Early Correspondence Reveals About Nineteenth Century American Epistolary Practices*

Among Emily Dickinson's early friendships are Hattie Merrill and Sarah Tracy, part of Dickinson's "circle of five" formed at Amherst Academy in mid-1840s Massachusetts. In her letters to Abiah Root, Dickinson mourns their lack of not only corporeal presence, but the lack of diexical presence as suggested by epistolary letters. This contact breakdown prefigures physical death and highlights anxieties of separation recorded by New England inhabitants of European descent. This communicative disruption occurs on the precipice of an expanding and ever more democratizing postal system with the Postal Acts of 1845 and 1851, arguably creating new class structures and literacies, suggesting a new set of social, economic, and gendered stratifications. Examining letters of young women written during this period illustrates the ways in which stylistic devices of letter manuals and epistolary novels both continue to shape epistolary practices while also grounding changes in epistolary construction occurring over the 19th century American correspondence-scape.

This paper examines Dickinson's early friendship correspondence alongside friendship letters written by young women of the 1840s, focusing on Dickinson's invocation of absent friends in her correspondence with Abiah Root. This not only lays the foundation for understanding a shift in Dickinson's compositional style but shifts in epistolary communications in toto. Dickinson moves from the regulated and private voice of friendship to the enigmatic, telegraphic style that becomes increasingly self-referential as a defensive posture precluding recipients' ability to assert power by breaking the epistolary pact. By paying close attention to Dickinson's early letters, it is possible to understand Dickinson's epistolary choices of selection, rhetoric, and brevity as a means to both adhere to and resist epistolary conventions.

17. Kathleen Venema (Canada)

*"I wrote letters? To you?": Letters as Memory Prompts in Dementia Care*

This paper explores a collection of letters that, in the first instance, brought my mother and me together when physical distance separated us and, twenty years later, brought us some measure of togetherness in the face of dementia's erosions. I worked as a volunteer teacher in southern Uganda from 1986 to 1989, after the end of a devastating civil war. Internet communication was unimaginable and telephones were almost inaccessible, so I spent those years writing and receiving more than 800 letters. My mother, with whom I'd always been exceptionally close, promised to be my most faithful correspondent and she was. Fifteen years after I returned to Canada, my mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, and I knew that the 200+ letters we'd exchanged in the 1980s would offer a version of her life before dementia's processes began. This paper examines how concepts of reciprocity, relationality, interrupted presence, space-time, identity, gift, and voice resonated throughout 2007-8, when I used the letters as memory prompts during my weekly visits with my mother. The memory project extended the letters' already complex temporality by juxtaposing two worlds: the cross-cultural world my mother and I were navigating in the late 1980s, when our letters stood in for the lively philosophical conversations we couldn't have while we were 13,000 kilometres apart; and the unpredictable world of dementia care, where the letters sometimes elicited profound engagement and sometimes, by their very epistolary nature, failed to bridge the unfamiliar distances opening up between my mother and me.

18. Natalie Wynn (Eire)

*Correspondence as a window into key moments in Irish Jewish History*

As Ireland's small Jewish community is somewhat peripheral to the wider Jewish world it has traditionally been studied in a vacuum: as some kind of 'special' or 'unique' case that can be treated in isolation both from broader historical trends and from the critical approach of modern Jewish historiography. The so-called mass emigration period of 1881-1914, which marks the foundation period of the contemporary community, is a case in point. Many of the gaps in the historical sources for this period have been filled by a narrative that is rooted in myth, anecdote and popular memory. The prevalence of communal mythology and its influence on historical accounts of Irish Jewry have led to important sources that have survived, such as correspondence, being overlooked by most scholars.

This paper will demonstrate the ways in which correspondence adds to the historiography of Jewish Ireland by fleshing out existing accounts, overturning myth and revolutionising our understanding of communal history. Significant aspects of the Irish Jewish experience and its relationship with the bigger Jewish picture will be examined through the medium of correspondence: migration and settlement in Ireland; the evolution of the Irish Jewish community as a result of increased immigration; the 1904 anti-Jewish boycott in Limerick; and the instigation of the Irish chief rabbinate.