

Research Note.

Different perspectives on an individual's life: The benefits of comparing sources.

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Abstract.

The feelings and emotions associated with events such as migration, marriage, or a birth or death in the family are hard to discern from most demographic sources. It is usually assumed that personal documents such as diaries or letters, where they exist, can shed some light on the ways in which people reacted to the life events that they experienced, and may also reveal more about the personality and character of an individual. In this short research note I demonstrate how two sets of personal documents can provide complementary information about an individual with, in this case, a series of letters providing more information about an individual's opinions and feelings than does their personal diary which, though detailed, recorded only factual information about their everyday life.

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Much historical demography is, necessarily, concerned with numbers: births, marriages, mobilities and deaths. However, all such events also generate feelings and emotions. For instance, the reaction of family members to a new birth or death, the dislocation that may be caused by migration, or the process of adjusting to life after marriage. The sources that demographers routinely use do not usually reveal any such emotions, but for some individuals, personal documents may provide insights into the ways in which people reacted to everyday life events. It is usually assumed that personal diaries provide the most revealing information about a person's inner thoughts, and that this was especially the case for female diarists who might have used a personal journal to express feelings and emotions that they felt unable to reveal more widely. There is a substantial literature on this theme.¹ Most diaries were written as private documents, sometimes kept locked, and usually well away from the prying eyes of other

¹. See for instance: M. Blauvelt, *The work of the heart: Young women and emotion, 1780-1830* (Charlottesville VA, 2007); G. Davis, 'Women's frontier diaries: Writing for good reason', *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 14 (1987), pp. 5-14; P. Heehs, *Writing the self: Diaries, memoirs, and the history of the self* (New York, 2013); M. Hewitt, 'Diary, autobiography and the practice of life history', in D. Amigoni (ed), *Life Writing and Victorian Culture*, (London, 2006), pp. 21-39; J. Hunter, 'Inscribing the self in the heart of the family: Diaries and girlhood in late-Victorian America', *American Quarterly* 44 (1992), pp. 51-81; J. Moran, 'Private lives, public histories: the diary in twentieth-century Britain', *Journal of British Studies*, 54 (2015), pp. 138-162; F. Naussbaum, 'Toward conceptualizing diary', in F. Naussbaum and J. Olney (eds), *Studies in Autobiography* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 128-140.

household members. Letters, in contrast, were obviously more public, in that they were written to a relative or friend, with no control over how widely any content was then shared. Some letters from emigrants back to relatives in their community of origin were meant to be shown to other family members, with some even being published in local newspapers.² The content of such letters would most likely have been carefully chosen to obscure anything that the writer did not want their family to know, but letters to personal friends could be much more revealing about the emotions and feelings of an individual.

In this brief research note I will explore the above theme by comparing the contents of a personal diary, with letters from a pen friend to that diarist.³ These sources were written over

² . Examples include B. Elliott, D. Gerber, and S. Sinke (eds), *Letters across borders, The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants* (New York, 2006); R. Hickey (ed), *Keeping in touch: Emigrant letters across the English-speaking world*. (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 2019) W. Jones, 'Writing back: Welsh emigrants and their correspondence in the nineteenth century', *North American Journal of Welsh Studies*, 5 (2005), pp. 23-46; A. McCarthy, "A Good Idea of Colonial Life": Personal Letters and Irish Migration to New Zealand.', *New Zealand Journal of history*, 35 (2001), pp. 1-21; A. McCarthy, 'Personal letters, oral testimony and Scottish migration to New Zealand in the 1950s: the case of Lorna Carter.' *Immigrants & Minorities*, 23 (2005), pp. 59-79; D. Gerber, 'Acts of deceiving and withholding in immigrant letters: Personal identity and self-presentation in personal correspondence', *Journal of Social History*, 39 (2005), pp. 315-330.

³ . I have been given access to the diaries and letters by a relative of Betty Charnley and have permission to use them for research. Jean Bruce had no close relatives, but I have contacted some people who knew her well through her church community in Toronto and they are trying to trace any relatives for me. All personal names apart from Jean Bruce and Betty Charnley have been anonymised as there may be references to people still living who have not given permission

almost the same period, and the documents will be used to demonstrate how two different types of personal writing can reveal complementary aspects of an individual's life. The diarist, Betty Charnley, was born in 1928 and began keeping a daily diary at the age of 13, just before she left school. She lived in north Lancashire, first on a farm and later in a village near Garstang, Lancashire where she had a variety of relatively low-skilled jobs in offices and warehouses. She never married and rarely travelled further than nearby towns such as Preston, Lancaster, Blackpool, and Blackburn. Each daily entry was very detailed, accounting for almost everything she did in the day, including mundane tasks such as cleaning or washing. However, she rarely expressed any opinions or emotions in her diary. She never missed a day and continued writing her diary until shortly before her death in 2018. In 1946, at the age of 18, she also began a life-long correspondence with a pen friend, Jean Bruce, in Toronto, Canada. Unfortunately, I don't have the letters that Betty wrote, but I do have all the letters that she received from Toronto. These reveal much about the conversations that were taking place and the feelings and opinions that Betty had obviously expressed to her distant pen friend.

Jean Bruce was also born in 1928, lived all her life in Toronto, and like Betty remained unmarried. In most other respects, however, her life experiences were very different. She had remained in education until the age of 18, had very different cultural tastes to Betty, and had access to all the amenities of a big city. Jean Bruce also travelled widely, especially in the Americas, and through her work as a secretary/personal assistant in the newsroom at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) had a wide knowledge of current affairs. Jean was a prodigious letter-writer with, at one time, some 28 different pen friends all over the world. Her letters to Betty were long and chatty and she kept a detailed record of all the letters she received and sent. The content of the letters was wide ranging, including accounts of recent activities and

to be identified. The diaries and letters remain in private hands are not currently publicly available.

travel, news from Ontario, and gossip about the lives of friends, relatives and other pen friends. Her writing often expressed quite strong opinions on current events, celebrities in the news, and on the behaviour of others. It is also clear from her comments that she swapped opinions with Betty Charnley, and that Betty had revealed her views in return. Through this writing, the letters reveal more about Betty's opinions and emotions than her diary does. In the following paragraphs these points will be illustrated by selected examples from the letters.

During the first few years of their correspondence, prospects for romance and marriage featured quite strongly. They discussed the marriages of friends and relatives and speculated on their own chances of romance, as in these two extracts from 1950 and 1956 when they were in their 20s.

Don't remind me that I will soon be 23, please Betty. I can hardly believe it really I wonder how old I will be when I get married. I have yet to find anyone I want to marry. However, better to wait and find the right one, don't you agree?⁴

In a way I agree with you, Betty, that we have fewer responsibilities by being single, but on the other hand it must be wonderful to have a husband who really loves you, ...⁵

Betty had clearly responded to Jean's letters and had expressed her views on marriage and spinsterhood. In contrast, in her diary Betty never made any mention of romance, of her thoughts about marriage (though there were brief entries recording events when friends or relatives were getting married), or on the benefits or otherwise of being single.

There were also many occasions when the two correspondents exchanged their views on various current affairs, especially during the Cold War. Both expressed concern about the proliferation of nuclear tests and the nuclear arms race between the USA and Russia, and they also expressed

⁴ . Letter 35: 31 December 1950.

⁵ . Letter 65: 2 July 1956.

views on the various strategies for civil defence. Other examples included discussion of space flight, and on the assassination of President Kennedy.

I agree with what you say about the large amounts of money being spent to perfect space travel while there is so much misery right here on earth. I see the Russians have agreed to new talks with the U.S. and Britain about prohibition of nuclear testing, but what good all these talks do I don't know. The Russians always say one thing and do another. But the U.S. are no better if they go ahead with tests after begging Russia not to do so. They should practice what they preach, I think. Is there a lot of talk about building fallout shelters in England? Here, it's been in all the papers and on the radio, etc., that every home should have a fallout shelter in the basement. However, most people seem to feel that the shelters would be of little or no use in an attack, and they all seem to say the same thing -- "I'd rather be killed outright than survive and find the whole place devastated when I came out." I don't really know how I feel about it -- I don't think too much about what I'd do if it really came to war. Let's get onto a happier subject, eh?⁶

I agree with you, I would not like to take a trip into space. John Glenn has certainly become a great hero now.⁷

President Kennedy's assassination was a terrible shock here. As you say, everyone seemed to be stunned. I heard many people say they felt as if they'd lost a member of their own family. For three days I hardly ever stopped watching television (the American networks broadcast 24 hours a day).⁸

⁶ . Letter 89: 21 November 1961.

⁷ . Letter 91: 4 May 1962.

⁸ . Letter 99: 1 February 1964.

On a less serious note, they exchanged views on the films and performers they saw and were especially vociferous on what they saw as the scandalous behaviour of Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor. They also exchanged opinions on the behaviour of friends and relatives, often making quite strict judgements. Once again, the impression given by the letters from Jean Bruce is very different from that conveyed by Betty Charnley's diary. Whilst she obviously offered quite strong opinions to Jean, Betty never recorded any such sentiments in her diary.

Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor caused quite a flurry when they first arrived here, but after six weeks people had got used to it all and didn't pay much attention when they left, as Mr. And Mrs. I agree with what you say about her – she is indeed a “common” girl – and it will be interesting to see how long this marriage (her fifth) will last.⁹

How right you are, when you say I have lost all patience with [relative's name]. I have decided not to write anymore about him, as it goes on and on forever, and never comes to anything. The last thing I heard was that he had gone back to live with the other girl he was living with before.¹⁰

Research on this material is at a relatively early stage (I have read only the first 20 years of a set of letters that lasted some 65 years), and the documents provide a window on many different themes, including the nature and extent of pen pal networks, the range of material discussed (which has more than a passing resemblance to communications on some modern social media), the ways in which Jean Bruce represented Toronto to her English pen pal, and the differences in lifestyle and experience between two young women on either side of the Atlantic. All of these themes I expected to be able to pursue when I started this research. What I did not anticipate was the way

⁹ . Letter 100: 22 April 1964.

¹⁰ . Letter 91: 4. May 4 1962.

in which the letters shed completely fresh light on aspects of Betty Charnley's character which were completely missing from her diaries.¹¹ I suggest that the lesson to be learned from this is that when reading personal documents it should never be assumed that one source provides all that there is to know, and that even a document as personal as a diary may conceal things which may be revealed by other sources.

Acknowledgements

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¹¹ . I have read all of Betty Charnley's diaries. For more detail on these diaries and other diaries see: C. Pooley, and M. Pooley, 'Moving Home and Changing Lives: Diary Evidence for the Study of Migration and Mobility', *Family and Community History*, 23 (2020), pp. 136-148; C. Pooley, (2021) 'What Betty did: charting everyday activity over the life course', *History of the Family* 26 (2021), pp. 602-622. C. Pooley, and M. Pooley, 'Young women on the move: Britain c1880-1950', *Social Science History* 45 (2021), pp. 495-517; C. Pooley, and M. Pooley, *Everyday Mobilities in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century British Diaries* (London, 2022).