

2018 ASECS-McGill Fellowship Report

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I have a great deal of gratitude for the opportunities afforded by the ASECS-McGill University Fellowship for research conducted at the prestigious Burney Centre in the Autumn of 2018. During my time at the Centre I examined rare and under-discussed letters by from Susanna Phillips, Charles Burney, and Frances Burney, among others. This archival research, as it turns out, was imperative for the completion and success of the third chapter of my doctoral dissertation project, the subject of which I will outline later on. Again, in having this rare and wonderful opportunity to immerse myself in the impeccable collections of McGill University and the Burney Centre, I was able to push the bounds of my research, locating connections that I would not have been able to formulate without the luxury of time and support.

This project, the third chapter of my doctoral dissertation, explores how the Burney family influence contributes to the burgeoning image of nationhood in Ireland. In this exploration, my research draws upon the following methodological approach: the primary methodological approach is close textual analysis of primary source materials, including memoirs, novels, poems, newspaper articles, advertisements, and public records. This is the study that took place at the Burney Centre, specifically in a close examination of letters. The literary texts in this study were often not taken seriously as objects worthy of study, or worse, forgotten altogether. I view these texts, both literary and historical, as important subjects of analysis in decoding the limits and possibilities of an Irish labouring-class poetic tradition. In addition to textual analysis, I frequently

conduct archival research on cultural ephemera to historically contextualize the discourses of eighteenth-century Irish nationhood as a socio-cultural construct prevalent in popular and political discourses that the authors in my study challenge. Finally, I use the theoretical frameworks of border studies, literary networks, and gender studies to formulate my interpretation of Susanna Phillips's personal letters in connection with other labouring-class writing, building on Deborah Kennedy's idea that literary relationships between writers are built "not from blood, but from ink." The McGill-ASECS Fellowship has been an integral part of gathering and commenting on documentary source material.

In particular, I examined closely letters between Frances Burney and Susanna Phillips, specifically those from the years of 1794 to 1799. In these letters I considered how both Frances and Susanna discuss both the subject of the Gordon riots, anti-Catholicism and see if it shares a relationship with nation-building in Ireland. In the 1790s the Catholic Association became increasingly active in Co. Louth. Susanna was reluctant to move to County Louth with her husband, Molesworth Phillips, and she spent a great deal of time alone in their estate. What's more, Susanna had only just arrived to Ireland when rumours of a French invasion of Ireland began to circulate. Uncovering the anger, tension, and general attitudes of the Irish-Catholics and Anglo-Protestant estate-holders is vital understanding the literary landscape of Ireland within this period, particularly as most eighteenth-century published writers within Ireland maintain the fraught title of "Anglo-Irish." Charles Burney, too, had much to say on the subject of England's borders in relation to what he considered increasing challenges to Protestantism. Perhaps most famously he noted this in an exchange with Frances in

regards to growing revolution in France. Despite his objections with Susanna's move to Ireland, she departed London in 1796 at which time Charles wrote of Molesworth as a "wrong headed and tyrannical spirit."

It would be a significant stretch of the imagination to call Susanna's time in Ireland enjoyable. Of course her reluctance to leave her family and life in England indicate this, but her letters from Ireland also suggest a great period of isolation, one wherein she would have maintained a complex existence of socio-economic privilege and also suspicion from her neighbors and servants. In a letter to Frances, Susanna writes of her new home: "The country around is flat, and I think very dreary - some little hills appear at a distance, 3 spires and the sea which is a grand object.... We have a garden at present in great disorder, and the house is almost surrounded by barns and outhouses...." Here, the "great disorder" Susanna describes is typical of the complex fusion of Anglo custom within Irish life. Features of conventional, Western aesthetic beauty, including hills and tress, were not present within many estates in Ireland, particularly those neglected by English landlords. The socio-political make-up of Ireland during this period includes an intersectional and highly nuanced convergence of religion, class, and nationhood. Within Susanna's letters, these vectors of identity are often expressed as features of her isolation, along with her husband's well-publicized affair.

Moreover, the mounting military crisis within Ireland coincided with Susanna's arrival hardly helped her anxiety and isolation. In a letter to her family in England Susanna remarks on the cold conditions women of her status must endure: "During a hard frost the roads are impassible on foot for women who like us are encumbered with

shoes and stockings and the distance [to the church] is above two miles.” Her remarks on women’s footwear and the conditions of Irish weather as restrictions are not unlike those made by labouring-class Anglo-Irish poet Mary Barber several decades earlier, who persistently complained of the constraints of women’s clothing on the realities of Irish life. Indeed, it would seem that English sensibilities and customs do not suit Irish life and landscape.

The end result of my time at the Burney Centre was ultimately a useful and multifaceted chapter of my doctoral dissertation project wherein I introduced the term “chaotic domestic” to describe an image of the domestic that is turbulent, unruly, and one that mirrors what is happening outside of the home within nature. In Susanna Phillips’s disruption of the domestic, I argue, there is a disruption of Englishness itself. Her time spent in Ireland, however brief, shapes her writing, both public and private. Phillips is influenced by Irish literary trend and convention, particularly the little-discussed Irish labouring-class poetic tradition, most of which was modeled after Scottish, German, and English traditions. Indeed, most labouring-class writers in Ireland were Anglo-Irish, making their status in the tradition complicated and precarious in comparison to their Scottish and English contemporaries, such as Robert Burns, Ann Yearsley, and John Clare. Irish labouring-class writers, or writers who appeal to the conventions of labouring-class writing, such as Laetitia Pilkington and Mary Barber, create increasingly chaotic domestic spaces in their verse as a commentary on shifting borders and burgeoning nationalism in the period. The Burney connection here falls physically on Susanna Phillips, but is often mirrored in the family discussions of France

in the period, as I traced with Charles and Frances.

Although there is a flood of wonderful existing scholarship on the Burney family and eighteenth-century labouring-class women writers alike, there remains an impression that the range of influence through which the Burney family held was limited to England and France. The third chapter of my doctoral dissertation project further explores Susanna Philips's responses to, and anticipation of, literary trend and convention; indeed, these offer a more accurate view of Irish female labouring-class identity and a more complex understanding of Susanna Philips's influence, two subjects that have received little attention to date. Indeed, because figures such as Barber and Pilkington do not often fit squarely into the laboring-class poetic tradition, as they were not of the labouring classes at all, their avid adherence to the literary trends and publication practices of women labouring-class writers makes them problematic and intriguing figures within the literary tradition.

The McGill-ASECS Fellowship, while a prestigious honor for any scholar, was important to the completion of my project as it supported the practical means of documentary research at the Burney Centre. Through the McGill-ASECS Fellowship, I accessed letters at the Burney Centre at McGill University that were essential for presenting a well-rounded image of Susanna Phillips in relation to the Irish labouring-class poetic tradition. Further, the support of Peter Sabor, Catherine Nygren, and Christopher Lyons as well as other scholars at the Burney Centre including, but not limited to, Mathieu Bouchard, Megan Taylor, and Sarah Faulkner proved invaluable for the completion and execution of this project.