

## Transatlantic Letters and Settler Identities: Jane White Writes to Ireland, 1849–1865

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*Abstract:* This article reads one side of a transatlantic correspondence, that of Irish emigrant Jane White, who relocated to Canada in 1849, during a time of high migration from Ireland to Canada. The point of reading her one-sided correspondence is because it challenges scholars in both material and theoretical ways. Jane’s letters are a richly complicated source for such an undertaking, allowing readers to assess the impact of material circumstances and the “mechanics of colonization” as they shape and inform the epistolary platform upon which Jane White rehearses Protestant and middle-class identities. These identity affiliations—which act as connective tissue to the land of her birth, and which she reinforces in letter writing—are concretely tied to the processes of colonization and settlement, but complicated by being Irish. Despite the relative comfort of her family, Jane’s letters to Eleanor Wallace reveal a young Irish woman struggling to maintain her identity in the face of prejudice. The following examination of her letters suggests ways of situating the personal letter in settler histories by focusing on Jane White’s engagement with questions of identity, social status, and colonial relations within the epistolarium, the discursive world that is shaped by and created within the dialogic field of the letter and the material factors of its creation.

An archived set of letters from Irishwoman Jane White spanning nearly twenty years, from 1849 until 1865, records her migration to and life in Goderich, Canada West.<sup>1</sup> Seventeen letters survive, most of them written from her new home on Lake Huron, and are addressed to Eleanor Wallace in Newtownards, County Down, south of Belfast. No return letters from Eleanor have yet been found in Canada.<sup>2</sup> The first surviving letter was written when Jane arrives on June 29, 1849, two years after the height of the potato famine, and it describes her arrival at Grosse Isle, Quebec, the infamous quarantine site that housed so many ailing Irish refugees; approximately 3000 of them died there just as they reached the shores of North America in those last few years of the 1840s. Jane, however, was not among the impoverished and saw with her own eyes how her migration experience was materially different because of her middle-class privilege; it meant she escaped the worst of transatlantic travel, but it also meant she did not have the “stereotypical” Canadian-Irish immigrant experience that her letter is supposed to illuminate. She died at the age of 36, unmarried, in January 1867 just as Canada became a confederated country. Actively negotiating the transatlantic divide in her letters, she clearly struggled to find her footing in waves of change, migration, and colonization.

When the White family sought new opportunities in Canada, Jane was eighteen years old, educated and single. She was an only child. Her hometown of Belfast was a powerful industrial center, more prosperous than Dublin. Even though famine was devastating the west counties in the 1840s, it was not something that personally affected the Whites, who lived comfortably and were able to bring a piano and a servant on the journey.<sup>3</sup> After being settled in Canada for a few years,

Jane's father campaigned (unsuccessfully) to be the mayor of Goderich, suggesting he had gained some measure of respect from his adopted community. Although a few historians have used Jane White's first letter to illuminate Irish migration during the famine, the focus on famine migration to Canada actually diverts readers from what can be learned from the entire extant oeuvre of her letters.<sup>4</sup> White's oeuvre stands out for being the most complete set of letters available at the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) within a limited collection of nineteenth-century correspondence from Canada.<sup>5</sup> This fairly unique data set reveals a young Irish woman struggling to maintain her identity in the face of prejudice in Canada as the nation was being formed and settled in the years before Confederation. Letter writing proved to be an ideal vehicle through which she teased out the contradictions of her transplanted identity.

Historian Michael Kenneally wrote in 2005 that historiography about the Irish in Canada would be enriched by paying attention to life writing such as letters, diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, and travel writing.<sup>6</sup> One benefit of examining such documents would be to correct "pervasive notions of the archetypal Irish immigrant, derived from the Irish-American experience and reinforced by the specific associations of Irish Famine immigration to Canada."<sup>7</sup> But the benefits of using life writing as source material go beyond simply correcting the historical record of Irish-Canadian settlement, because life writing also illuminates the formation and delineation of immigrant identities. Kenneally states: "life writing ... calibrated layers of subjectivity and delineated nodes of reference of immigrant identities."<sup>8</sup> The value of immigrant letters is also evident to historian Kerby Miller, who spent his career collecting and transcribing hundreds of such letters dating from the 1600s to the 20th century, to provide a comprehensive picture of the motivations for and attitudes toward migration to North America. What Miller's impressive investigations do not explore in detail, however, is the value of letter writing itself to the immigrant experience.<sup>9</sup> How letter writing figures into the process of "calibration" as the immigrant becomes settler is a question that has received attention, best summarized in Liz Stanley's work on settler colonialism and migrant letters. She determined that the migrant letter is not its own genre, different from other kinds of letters; however, she concludes that "exploring letters (and recent variants) sent from and to a range of (historical and contemporary) migratory contexts is a central task for epistolary scholarship."<sup>10</sup>

This study of Jane White's letters, then, as one particular kind of life writing in one specific migratory context, shows how immigrant identities are dynamically formed in concert with the realities of transatlantic correspondence and its challenges, which were both practical and emotional. This study answers the call from the editors of *Epistolary Histories*, who wrote that "future epistolary histories will have to attend to ... transatlantic correspondences" and "the mechanics of colonization."<sup>11</sup> I read their phrase "the mechanics of colonization" as describing the historically determined and unsettled circumstances that letter writers negotiated: from the practicalities of posting a letter to the complexities of nurturing emotional bonds over vast distances while establishing new identities in settler spaces. I further argue that the process of negotiating these tricky circumstances had an impact on the formation of settler identities and therefore settler culture in a colonial space like Canada. So, to begin: Jane White's letters are misread when examined primarily through the lens of famine migration; instead, this paper seeks to use the entire corpus of Jane White's letters to show her engagement—through the affordances of epistolary writing—with complicated questions of identity, social status, and colonial relations.<sup>12</sup> Jane's letters are a rich source for such an undertaking, and illustrate how she used letter writing as a platform upon which she could rehearse and untangle a historically specific identity that was Protestant, middle class, and female. Laying claim to particular (though sometimes contradictory) identities is how she

weaved connections between the settler space of Canada and the land of her birth. It is an operation performed through and reinforced by letter writing; and it is an operation concretely tied to processes of colonization and settlement in Canada though complicated by her Irishness.

The seventeen letters from Jane White in PRONI comprise a surprisingly substantial record that exists because her friend had saved them.<sup>13</sup> This statement says a lot. Pre-Confederation “Canadian” records stored in Northern Ireland are a legacy of Canada’s colonial history, but they also demonstrate how the “mechanics of colonization” were underwritten by emotional bonds connecting settlers to the friends and family left behind. Kathleen Venema notes that nineteenth-century letters are a “unique technology for managing family relationships and kinship ties across vast distances in space, time, and ideological orientation.”<sup>14</sup> Perhaps Eleanor Wallace saved the letters because she regarded them as historically significant; however, Eleanor seems to have been one of those people who just saved things.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps Eleanor saved the letters simply because she cared for Jane. Their affection is implied when Jane writes about missing Eleanor eight years after arriving in Canada: “I wish I had you to walk beside, I would like one of those long walks with you up the Belfast road, sometimes when alone and I begin to think, I often wish for my old home.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the letter is not only a vehicle for the construction of an emotional relationship but also an object that, itself, evinces emotion. The ties that bound them together nourished their correspondence and prompted Eleanor to cherish the letters as objects. This act exemplifies how the emigrant letter was not only a channel of information but “more often a channel of solidarity and consolation,” as Brenda Hooper-Goranson puts it.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, the letter was an instrument of colonial expansion. In her impressive study of settlers’ letters sent from British Columbia to the UK, historian Laura Ishiguro writes that British postal reform in the nineteenth century signaled the importance of letter writing and the circulation of letters as “key practices of colonialism.”<sup>18</sup> “In this sense,” Ishiguro states, “a system for moving letters around the world should be seen as an important form of imperial infrastructure.”<sup>19</sup> By midcentury, there was also a push for a more organized postal system in what is present-day Canada. Similarly, a report in the *Globe and Mail* in 1848 stated that the desire for a better Canadian postal system was “prompted by a growing conviction that the social and commercial interests of the Colonies were intimately connected with the extension of their postal intercourse and that they truly regarded it ... as the means in a new country of extending civilization.”<sup>20</sup> The mere survival of the cache of letters from Jane White at PRONI is noteworthy. Considering the haphazardness of the transatlantic postal system before 1850, White’s practical options for getting a letter overseas were sometimes limited.<sup>21</sup> Accidents meant that postal traffic could be lost at sea, by fire, or by mishandling. The postal system that extended from empire to colony was evidence of an imperial infrastructure, but it was also a technological affordance that materially dictated how much could be written and how often the correspondents could communicate. While we might debate whether the letters of Jane White belong to Canadian or to Irish history, it is more accurate to say they operate in a colonial, transatlantic, and postal space, drawing old cultural norms to the new world; exporting new observations to the old world; extending civilization; all while grappling with the changes to self-concept as a traveler and settler within a metastasizing empire.

Jane White’s first letter was written when her passenger ship, the *Eliza Morrison*, arrived in Quebec.<sup>22</sup> White describes the quarantine at Grosse Isle: “There are a great many sheds erected in the island that have been very useful for sick persons. There was a doctor here on Sunday from shore who examined the ship and was convinced there was not any sickness among the cabin or poop cabin passengers.”<sup>23</sup> For the one out of ten passengers that could afford to travel in cabin

class (like Jane), there was of course less likelihood of illness. Deaths did occur aboard the *Eliza Morrison*. Jane's postscript reads:

We have had 4 deaths during the voyage four females from dysentery which was prevalent here and a child lost from smallpox Mr Mawhinney a Presbyterian clergyman lost his wife and had only been two or three months married she died as we passed the banks of Newfoundland at which place the cold became very intense I never felt the like of it before it was strange looking to see the mountains of Newfoundland covered in many places with snow so very late in the spring.<sup>24</sup>

The image of a new bride dying while the White family encounters the unnaturally cold climate of Newfoundland is a haunting one. However, this funereal coda comes after she has described her happier experience of the quarantine delay. She writes that "the passengers all feel discontented at being kept here," so she walks off to the woods where she meets two "young Ladies" and their servant, and they have a picnic.<sup>25</sup> This first letter is also notable for descriptions of the voyage out, and she relates tales of "fearful days" at sea, the "severe heaving of the ship," and the "fearful gales" that brought them close to shipwreck. The letter ends with directions to Eleanor about how to share the information contained in the letter: "Harriet Dobson, please tell her I am safe arrived here and please say I will write to her very shortly and give her my very kind love." She also asks to be remembered to Miss Jane Galston: "tell her I cannot give much information about Canada yet" (in a comment that underscores how important a source of information the immigrant letter was to those left behind). It is true that her first letter is a descriptive document about arriving at Grosse Isle eight weeks after leaving Belfast Lough, but the letter says little else about famine migration aside from the description of the quarantine sheds.<sup>26</sup>

Historian Stephen Davison writes that Jane White's letters "comment on a wide range of matters including: the voyage from Belfast, the quarantine station at Grosse Isle; the first impression of the country," but his summary focuses on the first letter alone and disregards the remaining sixteen.<sup>27</sup> White's first letter is also included in a collection of first-person accounts called *The History of the Irish Famine*.<sup>28</sup> Certainly, her first letter has value for its proximity to the tragedy of the famine migration. However, it is not written from the point of view of the steerage class. It hardly describes anything to do with famine migration; and the content of her remaining sixteen letters is not connected to the history of famine migration. In fact, she seems to be mostly unaware of or in denial about the human disaster that preceded her arrival at Quebec (she does not mention any trepidation about undertaking the trip or reports of what she had heard previously about Grosse Isle, if anything). Historians have focused on her depiction of Grosse Isle, but I would argue that the value of her letters, as a whole, is located in the very element that might repel most contemporary readers: the judgmental tone that pervades the rest of her correspondence to Eleanor. It is here, in her unkind generalizations, that we see the operations of identity maintenance within the porous social categories of settler spaces.

Jane's letters do not contain "carefully coded political statement[s]" such as those seen in working-class Irish immigrant letters studied by David Fitzpatrick, "rich in half-articulated signals and warnings, and minutely studied by its audience."<sup>29</sup> Instead, she makes overt and direct judgments of perceived social differences. She can be haughty, but I believe her judgmental tone is a reflexive act of self-maintenance. Letters to Eleanor offer a way to perform agency and seek connection in a confusing colonial milieu where social categories were not fully settled; the letters are tactical, used to reassure herself that she retains some of her previous identity, and are a source of comfort because Eleanor understands the nuances of her social position as it was in Belfast.

Writing to a correspondent back home meant that there was much that Jane did not have to explain as she “calibrated the layers of subjectivity,” in Kenneally’s words. Despite the strictures that may have limited how much and how often Jane could write, letter writing gave her a chance to articulate the “nodes of reference” she used to construct a transplanted identity, one that relied heavily on her identification as a Protestant, middle-class woman.

Identifying as Protestant and middle class, Jane White was representative of the bulk of Irish migrants in Canada despite the fact that “the stereotype of the Irish emigrant has been that of the indigent labourer,” and the narrative of Irish migration to Canada, especially when it focuses on the 1840s, generally tells the story of famine and tragedy.<sup>30</sup> Jane’s experience as a middle-class Protestant immigrant of the 1840s was more predominant: “we now know that the majority of Irish immigrants in mid-century Canada arrived prior to the Famine were Protestant and rural-based” writes historian Catherine Wilson.<sup>31</sup> A study of Irish migration to Canada at midcentury by Ruth-Ann Harris also finds that emigrants “were not drawn primarily from the most impoverished group but from those who saw their opportunities declining and sought to re-create in the New World what was slipping from them in Ireland.”<sup>32</sup> Miller concurs, arguing that many migrants sought “*personal* economic betterment” and that the majority of them, until the 1830s, were Presbyterian or other Protestants, mostly departing from Ulster.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, in Goderich, where White settled, Protestants were the majority.<sup>34</sup>

Jane White foregrounds her Protestantism while still at Grosse Isle when she singles out a group of Catholic Quebecois. She finds the scene to be aesthetically pleasing at first, explaining how a group of Roman Catholics in a steamboat “came past here on a pleasure excursion from Quebec, full of people gaily dressed ... it was a handsome sight.”<sup>35</sup> However, she quickly notes that they are being recreational on a Sunday: “it showed very bad respect for the Lord’s day. They are only to be excused on account of being Papists.”<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, Catholic passengers on nearby ships were dying without access to a priest because there were simply not enough rowboats to get enough priests to all of the ailing migrants, but she seemed to be unaware of this.<sup>37</sup> In subsequent letters, Catholics offer a key point of contrast: “The Roman Catholics seem an enthusiastic people. I never liked any I knew. I was slightly acquainted with a Lady here of that persuasion, my mother advised me to drop the acquaintance. I did so and do not regret it, they are so bigoted and uncharitable.”<sup>38</sup> A few years after, she writes to Eleanor: “I join with you in not thinking much of the Roman Catholics. I have known some of them here and think them deceitful. I would be neighbourly with them but would not take them for companions, their bigotry is too much.”<sup>39</sup> In this formulation, she bonds with her correspondent: “I join with you.” This has the effect of justifying her own biases and signaling that she still upholds the norms of her original community in an epistolary act of “solidarity and consolation.”<sup>40</sup> This phrase suggests there was comfort in not having to justify or explain her opinions to a sympathetic audience who understood the worldview that Jane imported to Canada.

White was not alone in using Catholics as a foil in correspondence. Dublin-born Frances Stewart migrated with her Belfast-born husband in 1822, and they settled near Peterborough, Ontario. She left a large set of letters, written to cultivated and educated friends such as novelist Maria Edgeworth, and in which she exhibited prejudices similar to Jane White’s; these letters were published as *Our Forest Home* in 1889. Here she is in a letter to fellow Canadian settler Catharine Parr Traill: “we are at present very quiet here & seem out of the reach of harm,” she writes, “tho’ surrounded by Roman Catholics who are doing everything they can to take the lead & have an upper hand in every public establishment & no doubt are all Fenian, but I hope may be kept down quietly.”<sup>41</sup> In an earlier letter, Stewart singles out Catholics from the south of Ireland for

condemnation: “Certainly, the southern Irish Catholics are the worst---everywhere--& often, if they do get on for a time, do something dishonest which sends them to jail & so to ruin & destruction.”<sup>42</sup> This letter in particular dwells on the work habits of Scotch people versus those from southern Ireland, and then she articulates the curious success of an Irish family who lived near Douro, Ontario, commenting that hard work and being from the north of Ireland overcame the disadvantages of being “Papists—and very bigoted ones too.”<sup>43</sup> Stewart goes on to write: “Wherever Protestant settlers are they certainly do thrive best but they must be of sober steady industrious habits.”<sup>44</sup> In general, she believed the poverty of the incoming settlers was casting a bad light on all Irish immigrants. Stewart carefully calibrates her Irish identity, weighing it against additional determinants of class and religion. The way in which Frances Stewart aligns her sympathies with the “Scotch-Irish,” the Protestants from the north of Ireland, is both rigidly moralistic and also malleable: it enunciated a flexible Anglo-Irish (or West Briton) identity that might make things easier for an Irish settler transitioning into the colonial space of Canada. It is a finely tuned operation that makes sense to a reader who can understand all of these particularities; it is an act of delineation that needs a sympathetic correspondent from back home.

Every social category was fluid in the colonies. Migration included the promise *and* the threat of social volatility, and middle-class women in particular were keenly aware of the possibility of downward mobility. The middle-class female emigrant, in particular, faced challenges both on the voyage out and in the colonies, where social distinctions were not rigidly upheld and where opportunities for social mobility were different for women than men, who might seek fortune through burgeoning industries or political engagement, like Jane’s father. Marriage was the usual vehicle through which women could maintain or improve their class position, but this was not an opportunity that presented itself to Jane.<sup>45</sup> The maintenance of her class position, starting from the moment of departure, was necessary because a change in class status could have real consequences. Janet Myers surveyed the shipboard letters written by women that were part of the Female Middle Class Emigration Society (FMCES), a project begun in the 1860s to deal with the “excess” of single, middle-class women in England. These women were socially disadvantaged from the start of the journey because their tickets were bought with assistance; therefore, the founders of the project eagerly insisted that governesses sent to North America were “vastly superior to the hordes of wild Irish and fast young ladies who had hitherto started as emigrants.”<sup>46</sup> Middle-class status was not evident among these women of uncertain backgrounds and little means, so the founders of the FMCES contrasted the English and the Irish to illustrate the differences. Middle-class status might therefore be further complicated for a young Irish woman like Jane by prevailing prejudices in the colonies about “wild Irish and fast young ladies.” It was even more important for her to cling to a concept of respectable, genteel womanhood (from ship to settlement) to overcome assumptions about her Irishness.

The piano the White family brought from Ireland proved to be a useful tool through which to demonstrate middle-class status; Jane is dreadfully proud of it and her playing skills. The snobbery in her discussion of local piano teachers in Goderich, for example, is revealing: “the only one competent to teach is a Mrs. Charlesworth (I mentioned her name to you before) but she charges £4 per quarter.... I never would give instructions of the kind to anyone. I could do it just as well as her. I soon snapped anyone who asked me for lessons.”<sup>47</sup> The following year, Jane returns to this subject, telling Eleanor that “there was a tuner up from London this summer who pronounced my very old piano the most substantial he had seen.”<sup>48</sup> The piano, brought from Ireland, allegedly better than any in the colonies, is a physical reminder of the life left behind. Her haughty

commentary is poignant because, in Goderich, her family's "level of prosperity was very far below that of the town's main families."<sup>49</sup>

As Jane settled into her new home, she created an imaginary shared world through letter writing, the epistolarium, in which she recreated the woman she was, a woman who was still recognizable *to* her correspondent and recognized *by* her correspondent: settler letters therefore imagine identity through a poetics of relation. When writing to a network of friends or family, much does not have to be explained about the nuances of social status, class standing, gender expectations, and religious affiliation. Like other Protestants, Jane relied on a social network that had been developed in Belfast.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, her letters are rife with allusions to the extended network of friends left behind. Most of her letters end with messages such as "Please remember me to your cousin. My mother is curious to know if Rev'd. H. Moore is still in Newtownards?" or "Please remember us to Mr. and Mrs. Waugh & Mrs. Hill & all enquiring friends."<sup>51</sup> Even in one of her final letters, written in 1864, the network of Irish friends is recalled: "My father would like to know if Mr. Kennedy is living and well. Please remember me affectionately to Mr. and Mrs. Milliken"<sup>52</sup> Compare these messages, showing stable and varied connections to community, with this poignant letter of 1888 from a Mrs. Welch to John Gamble in Belfast, who dictated it to someone who was literate, and in which Welch is clearly in search of the whereabouts of a family member:

TO MR HUNTER Mrs Welch want to know if you are Margeret Gage's son if you are will you oblige me by writing a few lines to me to let me know if she went home she was married to Daniel Hunter a soldier of the 4<sup>th</sup> regiment of foot he died in Sydney Australia I am Margeret Gage sister—be good enough to write at once and let me know if she ever went home and oblige.<sup>53</sup>

Although it is not clear if Mrs. Welch is Catholic, she is certainly cut off from correspondence by illiteracy. I have been suggesting that settler letters imagine identity through a poetics of relation: who am I in comparison to you, and who am I in comparison to the person you knew before I left? Who am I now that I see my original community through fresh eyes? To which community do I properly belong? Have I changed? However, these "poetics of relation" depend on education, literacy skills, access to correspondents who remain at the same address, and the ability to post a letter. Jane White could reach a stable community back in Northern Ireland and conspicuously rehearse her identity in the epistolarium; illiterate migrants, on the other hand, were less likely to contact them. Therefore, they were less able to practice the poetics of relation and identity maintenance.

If Jane White carefully calibrated her Irish identity in letters home, another adjustment was needed when she confronted colonial prejudice. When situating herself within a Canadian context, Jane emphasized a pan-Irish identity. For example, White voices a pan-Irish sentiment in the 1859 letter that denounces Catholics, praising Irish compatriots at the expense of the English: "If they were an English family, I would have no mercy for them, but seeing they are Irish I would put up with their every fault."<sup>54</sup> What this signals is a shifting register in the functional definition of "Irish." In letters home, Irish identity is parsed out to distinguish between Irish from the north or south; and differences between Catholic and Protestant are brought to the fore in order to cement identity affiliations with those left behind. The subtle differences would be more easily understood by a reader in Ireland, not to mention a matter of local interest to those left behind. She tells Eleanor in the first letter, for example, that there are "two families from County Antrim in the poop."<sup>55</sup> With reference to Canada, however, where prejudice against the Irish is not nuanced, she wishes to defend any fellow countryman, using a more encompassing notion of what it means to be Irish.

The prevailing attitudes in Canada towards all Irish immigrants (without differentiation) are well illustrated in Susanna Moodie's memoir *Roughing it in the Bush* when she describes Grosse Isle in 1832:

Never shall I forget the extraordinary spectacle that first met our sight.... A crowd of many hundred Irish emigrants had been landed during the present and former day; and all this motley crew who were not confined by sickness to the sheds (which greatly resembled cattle-pens) were employed in washing clothes.... The men and boys were in the water, while the women (were) running to and fro, screaming and scolding in no measured terms. The confusion of Babel was among them ... each shouting ... in his or her uncouth dialect.... The people who covered the island appeared perfectly destitute of shame.... Many were almost naked, still more but partially clothed. We turned in disgust from the revolting scene.<sup>56</sup>

Moodie does not make any distinction between middle-class and working-class Irish or between Protestants and Catholics. They are just "Irish emigrants," but of course Jane White would not have recognized herself in Moodie's description. Much can be said about the class fluidity that provoked Moodie, an educated, middle-class Englishwoman, to emphasize her social distance from the "confusion of Babel," but this is an example of the garden-variety prejudice against the Irish (writ large) that prevailed in Canada at midcentury.<sup>57</sup> Pan-Irish prejudice meant that Jane sometimes needed to defend her identity using pan-Irish language.

In light of these prevailing prejudices and challenges, the harsh tone of Jane's letters has to be read as a defensive posture. She uses letter writing to demonstrate that travel and migration have not reduced her to the "motley crew" of impoverished Irish immigrants, and her predominant rhetorical mode is to highlight the shortcomings of others. It is not only the Catholics that come under fire, however. She writes, for example, "Methodists are making great progress here. I rather like their doctrine but I think they are a troublesome people to belong to due to a great deal of hypocrisy among them"<sup>58</sup> She casts a suspicious eye on Americans and worries about Goderich becoming "Yankeefied." "I used to think," she writes "the Yankees were nice people but I don't think so now, this proud mean aristocracy of money is very revolting"<sup>59</sup> On this topic, she would agree with Susanna Moodie, who feared the Yankeefication of the colonies. "'Yankeefication' functions," writes Oana Godeanu-Kenworthy, "as a shorthand for all the things Moodie struggles to resist both in the backwoods and in the clearings—rudeness, individualism, materialism, lack of principles and honour, rejection of tradition and convention, and an egalitarianism that begets mediocrity."<sup>60</sup> Carter Hanson argues that, beginning in 1825, "there emerges in English fiction about Canada, and in actual emigrant practice, [the idea] that the true vocation of the middle-class emigrant is to re-create the English class system in Canada."<sup>61</sup> How tricky this must have been for a single Irish woman of uncertain middle-class standing, a woman who is fully dependent on her family's flagging fortunes. One useful antidote to such social disruption was to enact and enunciate gentility through refusal, as White does in her letters. All of Australia is denigrated when Jane writes: "I think it was a strange whim of Mrs. [Crocker] to go to Australia, but she knows best, if I thought I was to go there it would nearly break my heart I detest that country from all I have heard about it."<sup>62</sup> Her judging eye falls even upon those who dance: "When dancing predominates in a community, there is not much solidarity."<sup>63</sup> In sum, the slippery shifting social formation under construction in Canada causes her to reinforce in writing, again and again, her middle-class position: "We ought to feel thankful that we have a sufficiency without going into debt, chiselling, cheating and roguery are the order of the day."<sup>64</sup> Chiseling, cheating, and roguery are actions

resulting from the shifting social terrain of the colonies that provoke settler anxiety. Letter writing offers an ideal forum where she can rehearse her guardedness and her disavowal of confusing colonial spaces where her own precarious middle-class fortunes might be reversed or upturned.

Another way that White avoided a negative self-representation in the letters was by remaining silent about local stories that might cast Irish Protestants in a poor light. For example, in 1858, the same year the letter in which she condemns cheating and roguery was written, her local newspaper reported on a group of Protestants involved in a riot that resulted in injuries to Catholics and the destruction of a Catholic pub, Keef's House in Biddulph township. The newspaper notes that "The list of the men held to bail . . . comprises most of the well-known Protestant Irish names in the neighborhood: Stanleys, Hodgins, Callighams, etc., etc., etc."<sup>65</sup> Because this paper served the county, Jane very likely had access to it. Irish Protestants involved in roguery do not get mentioned in her letters. Self-maintenance relies on knowing what to say and what *not* to say. Self-maintenance relies on explaining who you are and who you are *not*. Jane needs to articulate her social standing by way of comparison to others because the social differences that granted ease and comfort to the White family in Ireland were only *tentatively* transported to the new world. The precarity of their social standing in a dynamic colonial space catalyzed a rhetorical process of self-maintenance in her letters; she distinguishes herself from other identity categories in order to uphold class standing and maintain social respectability. It suggests a kind of anxiety, produced when settlers could not count on social cues from the old world being easily recognized in the disorganized social hierarchies of settler spaces. Ishiguro cautions historians that "fear and anxiety may not have been the dominant affective lenses through which settlers understood colonial projects," and asks letter readers to look at what affective lenses were actually used.<sup>66</sup> In a similar way, an early historian of the Irish diaspora exhorted readers many decades ago to "focus on the migrants themselves without preconceptions or discriminations."<sup>67</sup> What Jane actually expressed was prejudice, which I *do* read as evidence of anxiety about being misapprehended due to her Irishness and about the precarity of her middle-class standing; she assuages her anxiety through expressions of solidarity with a distant correspondent. The letter home is a mirror in which the writer can see reflections of who she is, even when everything else feels uncertain. When navigating a volatile climate, it is a balm to write to someone who understands (without explanation) all the details and nuances of your worldview.

Jane White's correspondence has currency, then and now. Young Jane was in a situation where her eyewitness account of migration was valuable, practical, and compelling. Her letters allude to a network that could help her in material and psychological ways; having access to the tools of letter writing and a stable epistolary audience gave her a way to rehearse and remember social and cultural norms that she then imported into colonial spaces. Transatlantic correspondence was emotionally necessary for her, a way to preserve ties with kinship networks left behind, and a way to revisit and recalibrate old identities in a colonial space where her "Irishness" might be misread.

The currency of her letters now lies in their historical value. It is perhaps ironic that Jane seemed oblivious to the plight of impoverished famine migrants, only to have her first letter reproduced in order to tell that story. Historians have tried, I think mistakenly, to squeeze her into a role as an eyewitness to Grosse Isle, based on her first letter. It is one final, complicating factor of her Irishness that letters that actually emphasize her distance from an indigent experience of migration are used to give witness to it. Her legacy, like her settlement process, is complicated by prejudices about the Irish and about Irish history. It is easy for contemporary readers to dismiss Jane White's

letters as prejudiced, judgmental, and haughty, but to do so misunderstands the difficulty of transplanting her identity into a settler space.

Michael Kenneally sums it up: “life writing texts present the fundamental issues inherent in transplanting identity [and] can offer instructive and poignant perspectives on Irish immigration to Canada.”<sup>68</sup> Jane White’s letters are a robust source of data, but they tell a story that is partial, local, personal, and biased—evidence of a woman struggling to find her place in a dynamic and fluid social order where she sees cheating and roguery as the order of the day. The tone of her letters can be read as evidence of her anxiety about being misapprehended and about the precarity of her middle-class standing; the haughtiness can be read as a sense of shame about her family’s uncertain social position in the new world; her bigotry is actually a struggle to enunciate a particular (Anglo-)Irish identity, one that might also be the most malleable and most suitable for transplantation. A retrospective memoir could not fully capture or represent the process of transplantation as it evolved over a period of years. Where else to rehearse all of this except with a caring correspondent? Where else except letters? The epistolary form is a useful vehicle for migrants as they engage with processes of settlement and its impacts on personal identity; it is a useful vehicle for historians who want to see the process as it unfolds.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Canada West was the name used between 1841 and 1867 to describe an area that had previously been named “Upper Canada” and referred to an area in what is now southern Ontario.

<sup>2</sup> The first letter from Jane White is digital record D.1 195/3/5 at the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast (PRONI). The finding aid at PRONI indicates that there are two archived letters written from Eleanor, but when a request was sent to retrieve them, they were said to be lost. Many thanks to archivist Michael Molnar at the Huron County Museum and Historic Gaol in Goderich, Ontario, who helped me search for any other evidence of return letters from Eleanor Wallace, even though we had no luck. Cecil J. Houston and William J. Smyth note that not much information exists about the White family in Goderich aside from “Jane’s letters, her father’s will, manuscript census records, and land transfer documentation.” *Irish Emigration and Canadian Settlement: Patterns, Links & Letters* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 288.

<sup>3</sup> Houston and Smyth, *Irish Emigration*, 287. Houston and Smyth reproduce six of her letters, those offering the most substantial and penetrating summary to date of White’s social location in the colonies.

<sup>4</sup> In addition to Houston and Smyth, see also *The History of the Irish Famine*, eds. Christine Kinealy, Gerard Moran, and Jason King (London: Routledge, 2018). A linguistic approach to the letters of Jane White can be found in Carolina P. Amador-Moreno, *Orality in Written Texts: Using Historical Corpa to Investigate Irish English 1700–1900* (New York: Routledge, 2019). Niall O’Leary maps out the transit of the letters (as metadata only) in his visual representation of correspondence, accessible online at Visual Correspondence: Analysing Letters through Data Visualisation [https://www.correspondence.ie/index.php?letters\\_function=4&letters\\_search\\_term=9782](https://www.correspondence.ie/index.php?letters_function=4&letters_search_term=9782).

<sup>5</sup> At PRONI there are letters from seventeen Canadian correspondents in total, but many of the examples are limited to one letter only. A handful of correspondents are represented by two to three letters. See note 13 for additional information. Another useful source for Irish emigrant letters can be found at the Mellon Centre for Migration Studies (Omagh, Northern Ireland) where an online compendium gathers assorted documents connected to North American migration between 1700 and 1950; however, these are not original archival sources. See <https://www.dippam.ac.uk/ied>

<sup>6</sup> Michael Kenneally, “Irish Immigration to Nineteenth-Century Canada: Alternative Narratives,” *Canadian Issues* (Fall 2005), 39.

<sup>7</sup> Kenneally, “Irish Immigration,” 38.

<sup>8</sup> Kenneally, “Irish Immigration,” 39.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Kerby Miller’s *Ireland and Irish America: Culture, Class and TransAtlantic Migration* (Dublin: Field Day Publications, 2008); and his *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and Irish Exodus to North America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>10</sup> Liz Stanley, “Settler Colonialism and Migrant Letters,” *The History of the Family* 21.3 (2016): 418.

## Jane White Writes to Ireland

<sup>11</sup> Amanda Gilroy and W. M. Verhoeven, Introduction, *Epistolary Histories: Letters, Fiction, Culture*, eds. Amanda Gilroy and W. M. Verhoeven (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 14.

<sup>12</sup> See also scholarship by Julie F. Codell, “Serialized Artists’ Biographies: A Culture Industry in Late Victorian Britain,” *Book History* 3 (2000): 94, where she observes that “Victorians consumed mass quantities of biographies as collective lives, serialized biographies, letters, reminiscences, [and] memoirs.” Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, among many others, note the rise of autobiography among women during the nineteenth century in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). Writing about the self in the second half of the nineteenth century was seen as particularly useful, especially if you migrated, as evidenced by a surfeit of emigrant autobiographies both published and unpublished. It is not clear how much this phenomena influenced Jane White (if at all), but perhaps this zeitgeist encouraged her to record her life in letters.

<sup>13</sup> The only other notable collection of correspondence from Canada at PRONI belongs to Ellen Dunlop. Eleven of her letters, written between November 30, 1874, and October 29, 1888, are archived there. Dunlop was born Eleanor Stewart, the second daughter of Frances Stewart. Dunlop was the one who collected and first edited her mother’s correspondence into a publication called *Our Forest Home*, ed. E. S. Dunlop (Toronto: Presbyterian Printing and Publishing, 1889). Dunlop was also a friend and correspondent to Catharine Parr Traill, the Canadian author.

<sup>14</sup> Kathleen Venema, “Letitia Mactavish Hargrave and Hudson’s Bay Company Domestic Politics: Negotiating Kinship in Letters from the Canadian Northwest,” in *Re/Calling Early Canada: Reading the Political in Literary and Cultural Production*. eds. Jennifer Blair *et al.* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2005), 147.

<sup>15</sup> Eleanor Wallace also received and saved letters from correspondents in Dublin, Ireland, and Augusta, Georgia. See Niall O’Leary’s website Visual Correspondence: Analysing Letters through Data Visualisation [https://www.correspondence.ie/index.php?letters\\_function=4&letters\\_search\\_term=9782](https://www.correspondence.ie/index.php?letters_function=4&letters_search_term=9782).

<sup>16</sup> Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, April 1, 1856. Public Records Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast (D.1 195/3/9). All references to White’s correspondence are taken from this archive.

<sup>17</sup> Hooper-Goranson, “No Earthly Distinctions: Irishness and Identity in Nineteenth-Century Ontario, 1823–1900” (PhD diss., McMaster University, 2010), 288.

<sup>18</sup> Laura Ishiguro, *Nothing to Write Home About: British Family Correspondence and the Settler Colonial Everyday in British Columbia* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2019), 39.

<sup>19</sup> Ishiguro, *Nothing to Write*, 39.

<sup>20</sup> “Report of the Commission of the New Colonial Postal Arrangement,” *Globe and Mail*, March 18, 1848, 1.

<sup>21</sup> See also Kathryn Carter for a discussion of the practical mechanics of transatlantic 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” (“Neither Here nor There’: Mary Gapper O’Brien Writes ‘Home,’ 1828–1838” in *Diversity and Change in Early Canadian Women’s Writing*, ed. Jennifer Chambers [Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2008], 9).

<sup>22</sup> The *Eliza Morrison* officially arrived in Quebec on July 1, 1847, according to the Shipping Intelligence (the date likely reflects when they cleared quarantine); it was 32 days in transit from Belfast and 519 passengers were declared well at Grosse Isle despite the four deaths en route (The Ships List, <https://www.theshipslist.com/1847/shipsjuly1847.shtml>). The ship itself was named after the sister of an industrialist who became a mayor of Belfast, William Pirrie, and the youngest son of Eliza Morrison was the man who would design the Titanic. See Kyle Harris, *Scots in Victorian and Edwardian Belfast* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 59.

<sup>23</sup> Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, “Grosse Isle,” June 29, 1849 (D.1 195/3/5) PRONI, Belfast.

<sup>24</sup> Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, June 29, 1849.

<sup>25</sup> Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, June 29, 1849.

<sup>26</sup> A substantial collection of primary documents related to famine migration and Grosse Isle, in particular, can be found in Marianna O’Gallagher and Rose Masson Dompierre, *Eyewitness: Grosse Isle 1847* (Saint-Foy, QC: Carraig, 1995).

<sup>27</sup> *Northern Ireland and Canada: A Guide to Northern Ireland Sources for the Study of Canadian History, c. 1705–1992*, ed. and comp. Stephen Davison (Belfast: Queen’s University Belfast and the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, 1994).

<sup>28</sup> *The History of the Irish Famine*, eds. Christine Kinealy, Gerard Moran, and Jason King (London: Routledge, 2018), 180–83.

<sup>29</sup> David Fitzpatrick quoted in Ruth-Ann M. Harris, “‘Come all you courageously’: Irish Women in America Write Home,” *Eire-Ireland: Journal of Irish Studies* 36.2 (Spring/Summer 2001): 175.

<sup>30</sup> Houston and Smyth, *Irish Emigration*, 55.

<sup>31</sup> Catherine Wilson, *A New Lease on Life: Landlords, Tenants and Immigrants in Ireland and Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 1994), 4.

- <sup>32</sup> Harris, "Irish Women in America," 183.
- <sup>33</sup> Miller, *Ireland and Irish America*, 33.
- <sup>34</sup> Personal Conversation, Michael Molnar, July 23, 2021.
- <sup>35</sup> Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, June 29, 1849.
- <sup>36</sup> Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, June 29, 1849.
- <sup>37</sup> See the letter from C. F. Cazeau to the Medical Superintendent of Quebec, August 2, 1847, in O'Gallagher and Dompierre, *Eyewitness*, 235.
- <sup>38</sup> Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, April 1, 1856 (D.1 195/3/9).
- <sup>39</sup> Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, June 29, 1849.
- <sup>40</sup> Hooper-Goranson, "No Earthly Distinctions," 288.
- <sup>41</sup> *Revisiting "Our Forest Home": The Immigrant Letters of Frances Stewart*, ed. Jodi Lee Aoki (Toronto: Dundurn Natural Heritage, 2011), 227.
- <sup>42</sup> Aoki, *Revisiting*, 141.
- <sup>43</sup> Aoki, *Revisiting*, 140.
- <sup>44</sup> Aoki, *Revisiting*, 141.
- <sup>45</sup> It is not clear why Jane never married. On April 1, 1856, she writes "Remember me to Mrs. Harrison tell her I don't know when I am going to get married ... you and I both have plenty of time to wait and should not let ourselves be blind to our own interests" (D.1 195/3/9). The next year she complains of health issues, which may be factors leading to her early death, including rheumatism and "fits of deafness" that her mother attempts to cure by throwing cold water over her head at bedtime (August 1, 1857; D.1 195/3/14).
- <sup>46</sup> Janet C. Myers, "Performing the Voyage Out: Victorian Female Emigration and the Class Dynamics of Displacement," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 29.1 (2001): 130.
- <sup>47</sup> Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, April 1, 1856.
- <sup>48</sup> Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, January 9, 1857 (D.1 195/3/11).
- <sup>49</sup> Houston and Smyth, *Irish Emigration*, 288.
- <sup>50</sup> Ruth Harris observes that "Most [Irish] Protestant emigrants belonged to extensive social networks based on congregational, mercantile, and extended family links sustained by correspondence. Catholic emigrants, on the other hand, were far likelier to depart as individuals and were much less involved in continuous social networks" ("Irish Women in America," 168).
- <sup>51</sup> Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, July 19, 1859 (D.1 195/3/19); Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, August 1, 1857.
- <sup>52</sup> Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, January 9, 1864 (D.1 195/3/23).
- <sup>53</sup> Thomas Welch to John A. Gamble, May 10, 1888. Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast (D1424/11).
- <sup>54</sup> Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, July 19, 1859.
- <sup>55</sup> Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, June 29, 1849.
- <sup>56</sup> Susanna Moodie, "A Visit to Grosse Isle" in *Roughing it in the Bush*, ed. Susan Glickman (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1989) 29.
- <sup>57</sup> See in particular Oana Godeanu-Kenworthy, "Mind Above Matter: Work, Gender and Social Class in Susanna Moodie's Immigration Memoirs," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 56.3 (2020): 370–83; Sherrie A. Inness, "An Act of Severe Duty: Emigration and Class Ideology in Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush*" in *Imperial Objects: Essays on Victorian Women's Emigration and Unauthorized Imperial Experience*, ed. Rita S. Kranidis (New York: Twayne, 1997) 190–210; and Stephen Slemon "Unsettling the Empire: Resistance Theory for the Second World," *World Literature Written in English* 30:2 (1990): 30–41.
- <sup>58</sup> Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, October 31, 1855 (D.1 195/3/8B).
- <sup>59</sup> Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, September 22, 1856 (D.1 195/3/11).
- <sup>60</sup> Godeanu-Kenworthy, "Mind Above Matter," 373.
- <sup>61</sup> Hanson, *Emigration, Nation, Vocation: The Literature of English Emigration to Canada, 1825–1900* (East Lansing: University of Michigan Press, 2009), xi.
- <sup>62</sup> Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, October 31, 1855.
- <sup>63</sup> Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, January 9, 1857.
- <sup>64</sup> Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, August 27, 1858 (D.1 195/3/18).
- <sup>65</sup> "Riots in Biddulph," *Huron Signal*, January 9, 1858. Accessed at <https://www.canadianmysteries.ca/sites/donnelys/archives/newspaperormagazinearticle/2095en.html>.
- <sup>66</sup> Ishiguro, *Nothing to Write*, 97.
- <sup>67</sup> D. H. Akenson, *Being Had: Historians, Evidence, and the Irish in North America* (Port Credit, ON: P. D. Meany, 1985), 67.
- <sup>68</sup> Kenneally, "Irish Immigration," 40.