

Glasgow Women's Library & Irish Women of Our Past

At the start of 2012, as I became more involved with situating Agnes' journey from Ireland as part of a wider context, I started to collect the names of other women who had left and departed Ireland. This development came unexpectedly, shifting outside of a sole focus on my own familial story, seeking to further explore and expand through these other individual struggles and successes. As previously mentioned, through my work, and the opportunity to research such, I was being granted a position and opportunity to honour the voice of my grandmother, and I felt a strong desire to share and extend such gestures of remembrance to others. In terms of recognising this privilege, there was both the sense that I was being afforded circumstance – through my role as 'PhD student' and also in having means to articulate, express and represent, through my personal creative practice, this collection of stories, which may otherwise not find form. For both of these I felt extremely grateful and humbled at such fortune. This in many ways was the first time formally in which there was a need to involve that beyond my own framing of a family story, and to somehow recognise this position of privilege. In addition, in creating routes of empathetic engagement for the viewer to connect with the body of work, through relating and assimilating their own experiences within the narrative of my own, this inclusion collective accounts allowed for more powerful resonance. There was of course, on a base level, ever-present questions of *Why me?* and *Who am I to have this opportunity?* In feeling appreciative for having the means through creative practice to express and explore these family stories, I wanted to create opportunity in my work for others to draw on the work being made as a chance for them to engage in their own telling and expression of such.

I decided to hold a series of 'round table' events where people could come along and share stories in a relaxed environment, finding an audience engaged and supportive in their mutual listening of each other's memories. I also created a book in which people could physically write down details of women in their past who they wanted to document. Details such as their name, where they left from, where they arrived and the dates in which they departed could be contributed, alongside any other images or memories they wanted to include. Through this, an emotive connection could be fostered as the reader connected with the sense of the individual within each story.

After exploring several possibilities I decided to hold the event at Glasgow Women's Library, located at the back of the city's Mitchell Library. From time spent there previously I felt it offered a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere which, was important in supporting the sense that each story was of value and importance, and worthy of being told and heard.

In total I held seven sessions spanning over this period; three one hour sessions held back to back over one evening, and then a series of four sessions, held weekly, sustained with a core group over a month. The first evening – with three separate groups – was intended to establish the potential interest of others to become involved, and those which followed ran with a fairly core group of regulars who had either returned following their first session, or had discovered the evenings after another call out for interest.

Once again, the significance of narratives re-converging, as if destined, occurred during from one of the initial sessions held. With my own story being told to the group of my grandmother Agnes, I had asked my father's sister, my aunt, along to one of the events. Seated in a circle, a group had settled around the table and began taking turns to share our individual stories. My aunt's husband from Newcastle, England, had come along as support and when his turn landed I asked if he wanted to share anything himself. In a paraphrased retelling the following conversation unfolded:

Myself: *Jonathon, I know you are here today to support Eileen but if there is anything you would like to share you are very welcome to.*

Jonathon: *Well, I hadn't come to go into my own story particularly. I was really just here for support to yourself and Eileen. It is so interesting to hear such similar stories though as my grandparents were Irish and we used to come up to Glasgow to visit him. He lived on Cadogan Street, not far from here.*

[The woman beside him turned to him]

Woman: *That is so funny...that is where my grandparents lived too. What number on the street were you?*

Jonathon: *We were number 8, on the second floor.*

Woman: *Goodness, they must have been neighbours to my grandparents. We were number 8, on the second floor. But they were across the stairwell, we were they flat on the left.*

[Jonathon looked stunned and placed his hands on the table]

Jonathon: *They WERE the flat on the left. Hang on...are you Jean?*

It had turned out that they were in fact cousins who had shared grandparents. They had lost touch over the years as Jonathon lived down in England and hadn't seen each other since they were children. From this event, they are now corresponding back and forth. Recently I was told that Jonathan has retrieved some old audio recordings he has of their grandfather telling family stories, something very meaningful for Jean who hadn't heard his voice for so many years.



Figure 1 (l-r) Myself, Jonathon, Eileen, Jean

This story was of course one of many, which reinforced that there was much to be gained from these collaborative events of sharing and finding echo and connection

through each other's tales and memories. That which emerged out of these events ranged from reassurance and comfort fostered through sharing the hardships faced, and other occasions bringing new understandings and insights gained through the knowledge of others 'filling in the gaps' so to speak. Overwhelmingly, there was a sense of pride felt by those who were finding a means to re-live, re-acknowledge, and restore a dignity to stories, which had been buried or concealed. It was frequently voiced by those around the table that they were glad they had the chance to share these histories, which they had thought would remain untold. This is a prominent example of the way in which the research was exploring the possibilities of commemoration through the creative research practice.

Following on from the events, the book, which had been passed around the group, collecting the names written down by those who wanted to leave memory of their own female Irish relatives, remained housed in the library for anyone else who visited and wanted to contribute. Through this period there was feedback and also realisation by myself that it would be beneficial to create some sort of space online where people who couldn't physically visit the library could submit an entry. I decided to create a website that would have a general homepage informing those about the project, whilst having a private area, accessed via shared password, for people to leave their contribution. Created as www.irishwomenofourpast.co.uk I distributed leaflets and a digital callout in an effort to make people aware of this alternative way of contributing to the project.



Figure 2 Information callout document

I sent copies of this to a range of Irish cultural centres, interest groups, various religious organisations, and newspaper publications. I also created online social media accounts on Twitter and Facebook.

During the advertising of the original event at Glasgow Women's Library I had received an email from someone in Australia who had expressed interest in the project, writing that he wished he could have been in Scotland to come along. Whilst I had been aware of the wide reach of where these women had potentially travelled to, I was encouraged to think that, despite physical distance, those within their legacy would hear of the project and want to be involved. In creating the website and the accompanying social network connections, I was able to allow the work to travel outwards beyond my physical location. Whilst this research is in no way deconstructing the particular methodological arena of social media, it is worth noting that capabilities for wider outreach became possible through this. In my own instance, such modes allowed for

spreading word and message of my work, though it wasn't led through or motivated by this socio-digital vernacular.

The names submitted to the project continued to build up, and as each was sent to me I uploaded the details to the online book and provided to the sender the password needed to access the private area displaying the names to the relative who had made contact¹

¹ During this time I was also contacted by several publications who wanted to write about the project and interview me to let their readers know more about what I was doing. Examples of these included 'The Wild Geese' publication – an American based magazine with additional online readership - and various genealogy blogs and networks. This reinforced the great interest for such themes in America, Canada and Australia in particular, where Irish migration and diaspora were notably prevalent. On that note, through the feedback I received as a result of the project callout, there was also particular interest from established Irish settlement areas within Scotland and England, including Newcastle, Manchester, London (Hammersmith and Camden), and the Glasgow area (Govanhill and the Gorbals) and Dundee (Lochee). These in themselves served to act as markers regards the diasporic outreach of such journeys.



Figure 3 Homepage view of irishwomenofourpast.co.uk

I hadn't conceived a specific material outcome from holding the events and establishing the Irish Women of Our Past website. I had hoped that the work, which formed would support in sharing connection and providing means for others to experience similar acts of commemoration towards family legacies, and in representing and the often, concealed, dialogues within them. Following on from this I was keen to continue working with this wider set of narratives and using them to understand my own story and connection with this diaspora.



Figure 4 Unknown author (nd.) Anne Sloane. Personal Collection.



Figure 5 Unknown author (ca. 1900-1910) Mary Anne Sloane. Personal Collection.



Figure 6 Unknown author (ca. 1900-1910) Margaret "Maggie" Sloane. Personal Collection.



Figure 7 Unknown author (nd.) Isabella Reynolds. Personal Collection.



Figure 8 Unknown author (nd.) Rachel McGoogan. Personal Collection.