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A deduced difference ; a creative and critical exploration of the verse novel

O'Mahony, Nessa

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“A DEUCED DIFFERENCE”

A creative and critical exploration of the verse novel

NESSA O'MAHONY

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UNIVERSITY OF WALES
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ABSTRACT

This study is a creative and critical exploration of the poetic form of the contemporary verse novel. The project combines poetry and narrative to produce a collection of poems in verse novel form, the writing of which informs a dedicated critical assessment of the verse novel.

At the heart of the thesis is an original verse novel which tells the story of three Irish women's experiences of emigration over a 150-year time period. It draws upon historical sources including an archive of letters housed by the National Library of Ireland in Dublin written by members of a family from County Kilkenny who emigrated to Australia in the 1850s. Using biographical materials as well as source-based historical analysis, I explore through creative practice such issues as emigrant identity, language and self-creation, using my own experiences as a UK-based twenty-first century Irish woman as a creative counterpoint.

The study also comprises an investigation of the verse novel form. I examine primary examples of the verse narrative genre in its various forms – poetry sequences, long verse narratives and verse novels, paying particular attention to Wordsworth's Prelude, Byron's Don Juan, Pushkin's Eugene Onegin, the verse narratives of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning, Arthur Hugh Clough's Amours de Voyage, an early twentieth century example by Gilbert Frankau, Nabokov's Pale Fire, Anne Stevenson's Correspondences, Vikram Seth's Golden Gate, the verse novels of Australian poet, Dorothy Porter, History: The Home Movie by Craig Raine and more recent examples from Bernadine Evaristo, Deryn Rees-Jones and Fiona Sampson.

CONTENTS

	Page Number
Acknowledgements	6
1. Introduction	7
2. <u>In Sight of Home. A Verse Novel</u>	15
Preface	18
Chapter 1: The Beginning	19
Chapter 2: Meeting the Butlers	26
Chapter 3: Extracts from Fiona Sheehan's journal 8 th January 2003	32
Chapter 4: The inevitable flashback	36
Chapter 5: Orphan	46
Chapter 6: Getaway	51
Chapter 7: An Emigrant's Preparation	55
Chapter 8: Extracts from Fiona Sheehan's journal 24 th January 2003	59
Chapter 9: The Leaving of Dublin	63
Chapter 10: Voyager	70
Chapter 11: Getting down to work	76
Chapter 12: Point of departure	81
Chapter 13: Extract from Fiona Sheehan's journal 18 th February 2003	89
Chapter 14: Among lettered folk	92
Chapter 15: Wild Colonial Girl	101
Chapter 16: At home at Woodlands	105
Chapter 17: Extract from Fiona Sheehan's journal 20 th February 2003	108
Chapter 18: Walking out	112
Chapter 19: Serving the Butlers	117

Chapter 20: Extract from Fiona Sheehan's journal 26 th February 2003	122
Chapter 21: Bereavement	128
Chapter 22: Extract from Fiona Sheehan's journal 1 st April 2003	131
Chapter 23: Losses and Gains	134
Chapter 24: Moving in, moving on	139
Chapter 25: Births, marriages, deaths	147
Chapter 26: Extract from Fiona Sheehan's journal 6 th May 2003	156
Chapter 27: Family commitments	159
Chapter 28: Expectant	165
Chapter 29: In two minds	169
Chapter 30: Family News	173
Chapter 31: Hail and Farewell	179
Postscript	184
3. Commentary	185
4. A survey of the verse novel	249
4.1. Introduction	250
4.2. The Nineteenth century	252
4.3. The Twentieth/ Twenty-First centuries	318
4.4 Conclusion	382
5. Appendix One – Letters from the Butler Archive	385
6. Bibliography of Sources Consulted	412

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1. INTRODUCTION

As a poet, I have always had a particular interest in story-telling as a way of interpreting my world. I have tended to use narrative as a means of making sense of my own experiences and of understanding the lives of other people around me.

As with many writers, the narrative instinct was formed in childhood. The stories I told myself, the plots I lived through in my imagination, were more vivid and meaningful than my actual reality as a shy, bookish, youngest child. I read a lot of novels. My exposure to poetry was limited to what the school curriculum had to offer (Yeats, Kavanagh, Kinsella, Wordsworth) and what I was capable of memorising (“Surprised by joy — impatient as the Wind / I turned to share the transport [. . .] ¹”). As I matured, I transferred that narrative instinct to more practical uses, starting to work as a journalist and learning how to use language to tell other people’s stories in as concise and accurate a manner as possible.

I only turned to creative writing at the age of thirty. I re-discovered my imagination courtesy of a locally-based creative writing course which I had taken as a way of branching out from journalism. My first efforts were short stories, all of which I realise now were heavily autobiographical in their focus on lonely, unfulfilled women in hostile environments. Nor were they particularly good, the characters being little more than ciphers for the emotions that I hadn’t yet learned to understand or, indeed, channel. Furthermore, these stories simply weren’t satisfying to write. The short story form reminded me too much of the journalistic pieces that I had been

¹ William Wordsworth, “Desideria”, *The Oxford Book of English Verse 1250-1900* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931) 616 .

writing for my living over the past few years in that they needed structure, plot development and exposition. I had no sense of discovering through them a voice or a style that was uniquely mine.

Then came the moment when I was asked to produce a poem for the creative writing class. I expressed reservations, reminding the teacher that I wanted to be a fiction writer, not a poet. He countered that I might want to create a poet as a fictional character some day and this would be a good exercise, so I persevered. I was not prepared for the experience of actually writing the poem, however. I had chosen as my subject a favourite spinster aunt who had died some time before; the poem attempts to evoke her personality through a description of items in her bedroom.² I remember the extreme mix of emotions I experienced in writing the piece; the tears were coursing down my face and yet another part of my brain was sharply focussed on finding the right words and shaping the poem in the way I wanted it. Suddenly I had found a way of expressing my own concerns and insights that was profoundly different from my normal discourse of journalism and press releases, and this was deeply satisfying to me. From that moment on, poetry got my full attention.

And yet there was still the desire to tell stories and to create characters. Quite early on, I developed a taste for dramatic monologues as a way of exploring the motivations of people I encountered. In my first collection, Bar Talk, there is a poem entitled “Margaret’s Bar” which is in the voice of a woman who owns a pub in a small town in Co. Kerry. She is a somewhat embittered observer of life, reserving her greatest vitriol for the holidaymakers from Dublin who come into her bar on bank holidays

² Nessa O’Mahony, “The Carer”, Bar Talk (Dublin: iTaLiCs, 1999) 43 .

and who behave without decorum. The poem arose out of an actual encounter I had with such a woman on such a bank holiday; at the time I was quite annoyed at her reaction to me but gradually my desire to understand her motivations outweighed my sense of outrage and I decided to write the monologue as an attempt to get under her skin:

They come bank holidays,
lads who've had their fill,
young ones hanging off them.
They've no respect, those girls,
if their mothers knew
what they got up to at my bar,
the times I've shamed them.

One pair I mind well –
it was the August festival
and rain swelled the crowd
jostling for stools.
The two of them at it,
could have been anywhere
for all they cared, 'ating each other.³

The experience of finding the right voice for the bar-owner was particularly enjoyable. I relished being able to use vernacular words I'd heard from my

³ O'Mahony, Bar Talk 39 .

grandmother such as “mind” for remember and “ating each other” for the act of kissing; enjoyable too was the sense of observing my own behaviour from another person’s perspective. I had not yet read the dramatic monologues of Browning or, indeed, Carol Ann Duffy, but could sense that the exploration of other voices might help me to diversify my subject matter away from what already appeared to be an oppressively confessional focus on my own concerns.

In retrospect, it appears to have been a comparatively small step to move from writing the occasional dramatic monologue to completing an actual verse narrative, although it is arguable whether I would have taken on the challenge of writing a larger-scale sequence if it hadn’t been a requirement of a university degree. In the summer of 2003 I was in the process of completing a Masters in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia and needed, for my dissertation, to write a sequence of 24 poems. Rather than opting for a thematic link between individual poems, I was drawn to the idea of using my own family history as the basis of a narrative.

During the year my tutor, George Szirtes, had introduced me to the poetry of Anne Stevenson, in particular her long narrative sequence, Correspondences.⁴ Szirtes was aware of my interest in writing a family narrative using imaginary letters as the narrative framework and felt that Correspondences might offer a good model for my work. I was immediately caught by how Stevenson used the epistolary form to tell the story within the story; her letters span an extraordinarily long period of time which necessitates lengthy gaps in the narrative, and yet for all that she manages to convey a coherent sense of chronology and indeed exploits those gaps with often powerful

⁴ Anne Stevenson, Correspondences (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan U.P., 1974). For a more in-depth exploration of this work, see pages 332-40 of this dissertation .

effect. I very much liked the idea of advancing a story in short bursts and allowing the hiatuses in between to carry some of the narrative weight. After all, as a poet, I am always aware that a poem is not just made up of lines but also of the white space that surrounds those lines. I am conscious of the impact of white space on a page, and frequently deliberately shape my lines in order to maximise the potential of that impact. But I also wanted to explore how well I could create characters, develop convincing voices and an interesting story, while at the same time maintaining the heightened language of poetry. I also wanted to feel a sense of identification with my main character, to explore how I might have behaved had I been in her shoes and, hopefully, to help the reader to identify with my character. The result was “Writing Slope”,⁵ a narrative sequence of 22 poems, based on imaginary journal entries and letters that tell the story of my grandmother’s love affair with a republican gun-man during the Irish Civil War. As I have written elsewhere about the process of producing “Writing Slope,” I will not go into great detail here; a quotation from one of the poems, “Now Voyager”, will suffice to give a sense of how the narrative and poetry were combined:

Mary B. was going on about it in Dooley’s snug –
the latest thing, she said, with Hollywood’s finest,
drooling about that German, what’s his name.
I told her she’d be better seeing to her family and feeding her man,
he looks half-starved when he comes in.
But on she went, mouthing about cigarettes
and wanting the moon and some such.

⁵ Nessa O’Mahony, “Writing Slope”, Trapping a Ghost (Bristol: bluechrome, 2005) .

I thought I must just go and see it, sure what harm?

So I found myself snug in the back of the Plaza one-bobs.

Máire was minding the kids, Pat off somewhere.

There was that Betty Davis looking fierce drab,

and the ocean liner and the handsome man,

and the way he lit the cigarettes, two at a time.

It gave me a start, how he handed it to her,

lit, straight from his lips, gentle

like it was the rarest gift he could offer.

That's what Seán did after the Dublin hop.

He walked me home and we stopped

on the corner of Belgrave Square.

“Do you want a smoke?” he asked.

I, never one to admit, said “I do”

and he lit up, held it between his lips,

I could see the red glow of the tip in the dark.

Then he handed it to me, slow like, and I took it in a dream [. . .]⁶

In the poem the heroine, Annie, is reminiscing about the early days of her romance with the gun-man, Seán Flood. There are obviously novelistic devices such as dialogue, but there is also a heightened and deliberately imagistic language – “I could see the red glow of the tip in the dark” – and both internal and end rhyme. The

⁶ O'Mahony, “Writing Slope”, *Trapping a Ghost* 52 .

intention was to create a clear, idiosyncratic voice for Annie that is both vigorous and occasionally lyrical, clearly embedded in a poetic idiom.

I also wanted my readers to believe in the authenticity of the story, despite the fact that the sequence itself was based on an entirely artificial construct. While I had indeed inherited my grandmother's writing slope, it regrettably did not contain a journal, photographs, letters or any other archival material, so I based my story on research of the period and my own imagination. Perhaps I did my job too well. A number of critics who subsequently reviewed the book assumed that the letters and journal entries must be real and that I had merely versified their content.⁷ Although it was somewhat gratifying to realise that I had managed to convince people of the authenticity of these invented documents, it did surprise me that readers somehow expected greater veracity from poetry than from fiction. This led me to question whether people tend to suspend their disbelief more readily when reading poems than when reading prose fiction. And, if so, would this be a positive advantage for a verse novelist who chose to tell her stories through poetry? That was a question I was anxious to tease out as part of my next creative project, the writing of a full-scale verse novel based on an archive of letters I had uncovered in the National Library of Ireland.

My intention in this dissertation is to explore the verse novel form both through actually writing a verse novel and commenting on that process, and through a brief examination of the development of the genre itself. I want to discover the particular advantages gleaned by the writer who chooses to write in this form, as well as

⁷ For example Belinda Cooke in Shearsman, 63/64, April 2005, and Selena Guinness in The Irish Times, 14 January 2006 .

considering the disadvantages. There follows a verse novel, In Sight of Home, a commentary on the creative challenges I faced during the writing of the work and a chapter-by-chapter analysis of the final draft. The study concludes with an examination, from a practitioner's point of view, of the development of the verse novel genre, from its early beginnings in the nineteenth century to more recent examples from contemporary literature.

2. THE VERSE NOVEL - IN SIGHT OF HOME

IN SIGHT OF HOME

*I am the blind woman finding her way home by a map of tune.
When the song that is in me is the song I hear from the world
I'll be home. It's not written down and I don't remember the words.
I know when I hear it I'll have made it myself. I'll be home.*

Paula Meehan, "Home", Pillow Talk (1994)

Preface

Is this the best place to start?
Here, in the gloom
of a stranger's living room,

in the breath-misting chill
of early January?
Books piled high, dust everywhere.

Somebody's home,
though it had been months
since a curtain was drawn,

a light was switched on,
the radio played
the one o'clock news.

Was it here, or earlier;
when I picked up
the phone,

or when I logged on
and my new life
began to download?

Chapter 1: The Beginning

I

The best New Year's Eve yet.
I slept from 8pm to 6am,
missing the bells, the yells

and all the false promises
that wouldn't make it past noon.
I warmed the coffee up,

took the last slice of Christmas cake
from the wrapper and sat down
with telly pages and a plan

to do absolutely nothing
on this first day of 2003.
Nick and Nora had just got their man

when the phone rang,
a voice I vaguely knew
announced she was in town.

Roisin Ryan! It must be 10 years
since I'd seen her last,
drunk in the upstairs lounge of Nearys.

Roisin's been away. First New York,
then Santa Fe and now she owns
a small boutique in Greenwich Village.

It seemed she'd kept track of me,
bought my few pamphlets, always boasted
that she knew the bard of Ballyboden

when we were in pig-tails.
Exaggeration, unless Belfield⁸ fashions
weren't quite as I remembered them.

She was home to see her folks,
and pay her last respects to a great aunt
who'd died during the year.

The aunt had left behind her last effects;
did I fancy a trip to Kilkenny
to help with the house clearance?

'It'll be a laugh – plenty of time to catch up,

⁸ Belfield is the location of University College, Dublin and the university is always referred to as Belfield by the students who attended there .

down a few pints, compare notes
on all those bastards we've been dating.'

It seems Roisin's Auntie was a literary type,
there could be first editions to tempt me,
and there was nothing better lined up

until I took that wee trip
I was thinking about.
But that could wait.

So I agreed to meet her
on January sixth - Nollaig na mBan.⁹
Women's Christmas, no less.

⁹⁹ Literally translated from the Gaelic as Christmas of the Women. Also known as Little Christmas or Twelfth Night. In Irish tradition, Nollaig na mBan was the day when the women of the house gathered together and celebrated a high tea with leftovers from the Christmas Feast .

II

I'd have known her anywhere.
It might have been ten years
but that Isabella Rosselini bob,

babushka doll cheeks
and startled blue eyes
were unmistakable.

Beautiful skin (which moisturiser?)
and gravity hadn't begun
to play the tricks it pestered me with.

She had a prosperous air; wore silk,
amber in great chunks at her neck,
Choo-shoes, naturally.

We drove to Kilkenny in her car, a rental
with more va-va-voom than mine, CD-player
belting out Coltrane along the N9.

She talked of marriages gone wrong,
of New York life and whether I knew
what happened to other college pals.

I had a flash-back: she'd called over once,
broken-hearted from the latest escapade,
and spent the whole day playing

Sinead O'Connor's 'Nothing compares 2 U'
over and over till I thought
my mother's cassette deck would melt.

It's been seven hours and fifteen days
Not quite that long in my case
and I hadn't been playing tapes

so I decided to wait a while
before telling her about my latest fiasco;
a four-pinter at least.

III

You would need an OS map to find it.
Roisin hadn't visited since she was a kid
but knew the way since the funeral.

There wasn't even one horse,
just a grocery store, a straggle of two-storeys
and a cottage, pebble-dashed,

set apart from the others,
looking like the kindest thing
would be to bull-doze it.

Roisin was apologetic:
"Not much to look at, Fiona,
and probably fusty inside

but who knows what riches we'll find".
She turned the yale key in the door
and pushed the reluctant wood.

We were greeted by dead air,
a smell of distant cabbage dinners
and old lavender.

Gloom inside, dust covering brown furniture
though the place was neat, lace doilies
dotted here and there by the house-proud auntie

who'd seen her last days out in the local Home.
Books everywhere, on shelves,
tottering in piles on the floor,

leather-bound and paper-back
mixed indiscriminately with bundles
of newspapers, occasional sheets

of writing paper, nice stock,
sloped handwriting of another age;
her auntie took notes of her reading.

We spent the last hours of January light
sorting through the debris
of a woman's life.

IV

We agreed to split up;
Roisin tackled the bedroom -
I didn't feel right in her auntie's sanctum -

while I sifted through the living room,
setting aside the books of any value
though there were no first editions.

Had her aunt lived in Australia?
There were history books,
old prints and maps of the continent,

tales of travellers and convicts.
I wondered if Roisin had relations there;
I didn't recall her mentioning any.

She emerged with a Clerys bag
full to the brim with papers and photographs
"I'll keep these for Mam, but are these

of interest?"

She handed me a bulging jiffy bag,
ribbon-tied, the envelope scrawled

with names and dates I couldn't decipher.
"Oh it's nothing of worth.
Just letters: they look old.

Must be from some cousin of auntie's.
You take them, Fiona. You're the writer.
They're more in your line than mine

and if you find a map for buried treasure
we can divide out the spoils".
She shivered theatrically.

"Come on, we've done our bit,
it's getting dark and we've
pints and steak waiting."

The parcel was a snug fit
in my shoulder-bag;
I'd make space for it later.

V

The clock radio blinked 3am
in the dusk of the hotel room
as a light from the corridor

sneaked under the door
and sent a heat-seeking dart
to the centre of my head.

The room didn't swim exactly
but I'd had three too many
downstairs, had forgotten

the hollow legs of my college friend,
and made the stupid mistake
of trying to keep up.

We both retired at twelve,
she in company (a five-o'clock shadow type)
me resigned to a fitful sleep solo

but the rogue light
and the jiffy bag on the floor
had other things in mind.

I emptied its contents out
on the salmon-pink shag pile,
counted some 50 sheets

of closely-printed writing,
letters slanted at 90 degrees,
lines criss-crossing

so the effort to read
made me more sea-sick
than four gin and tonics had.

But I soldiered on, ordered them by date.
Sleep seemed aeons away;
I'd forgotten my pulp fiction.

Chapter 2: Meeting the Butlers

Pleaberstown
20th March 1845

Dearest Forristal

The matter is at an end. Edward and Father spoke with me last night after supper. They agree that even if the bishop would consent to drop his objections to the match, they could not agree.

With Father on his own I might have found a way – he is so easily persuaded – but once Edward sets his face against something, there is no hope.

We cannot always understand God's purpose for us, though the passing years may make that more clear.

So we must part, dear love. This is the last time I will call you that, although I pray that we will remain the best and most constant of friends.

Your loving Margaret

Pleaberstown
19th November 1845

Cousin

Harsh words I had expected, but the bitterness with which you last wrote has hurt me deeply.

You charge me with many faults, dear cousin, not the least being insincerity and weakness of character. How can I answer that? Must I answer that to someone who I thought knew me better than I knew myself?

I am not too easily led, nor do I give my father or my brother more than their due reverence. They have more experience of the world than I do and have had reason to know how harshly it treats those who flout its conventions. My poor father's recent travails are proof of that.

How many nights have I knelt and sought Our Lord's guidance? Too many to count. But not even prayer would be a consolation if you turned away from me, dear friend.

I have searched my conscience and feel sure it is for the best. In time, you will come to understand and share my faith. Then we can meet again as fondest of cousins, best of friends. Ballyogan will always be my second home, as Pleaberstown is yours.

Fondest regards to Aunt Ansty,

Margaret.

Pleaberstown
6 August 1849

Dear Cousin Forristal

As you see, I am safely arrived home at Pleaberstown. The trip from Ballyogan was without incident, except for one broken wheel at Fairley Cross which was soon mended. Edward and I spent the time quite happily, relating all the pleasant events that had passed during our visit. The landscape was quite unspoiled and, thank god, there was little sign of the hunger that is bedevilling other parts of our dear land.

How to convey my heartfelt thanks for all your kindness? You know only too well how grateful I am for your friendship, and for Bessy's too, of course. We are all pleased to see you so well settled and happy.

And pass on our dearest dearest love to Aunt Ansty. She has been like a mother to us all since our own dear parent died. I and my brothers and sisters all agree that wherever we might roam around this world, home would always be with you and dear Ansty.

Wherever we roam! Things are still so uncertain here. It seems Father has resumed his errant ways and is drawn more and more into bad company. Edward is quite afraid about the state of things; he is sure that Father has compromised the lease and he looks very grave each time he comes back from his talks with the Agent.

So we may have to give this dear place up. Where would we go? What would happen to all of us, particularly the little ones. I fear so much for poor Joseph. I have tried to take Mother's place but I know he feels the lack.

Still, my dear cousin, in my mind's eye I can see your dear dear face and that brings consolation. I will not worry until all the facts are known.

Edward and I unite in expressions of regard to you and Bessy, and Aunt Ansty,

Your fond cousin,
Margaret Butler

Camden Street
9 September 1849

Dear Forristal

We must either buy or quit. Affairs being as they are, it would be mad to throw good money after bad and stay at Pleaberstown. The old man let the property get so into debt, the land's not worth the hard-rent, not within 2s-6d an acre of being worth it.

I could buy it out within the half-year – I am the match of Duffy's machinations and could teach Squireen McGrath a thing or two – but think we need a fresh start and now should look around for opportunities. The boys are growing fast; there's nothing for them here, just demagogues and petty rivalries. I have heard good reports of the new colonies. Land is cheap and the Butlers could make their mark in New South Wales.

And as for Father, it would be better to remove him once and for all from the source of the mischief or he'll bring ruin on all our heads.

Margaret is in agreement with me on this although she's fond of the old place and would stay on if let. Advise her, cousin. She has always listened to you.

Love to Bessy and the little one.

Edward

Pleaberstown
May 4th 1850

Dearest Forristal

Thank you for your letter of April 30th which was so welcome. I fully understand you are not so free to visit now that the little ones take up your time and that is how it should be. You have your home, and obligations.

My sisters often tease me that I am of an age to make a match and find myself a home. But since Mother died and Father left it is all that I can do to keep us all together. In truth, it is hard to imagine that any other place might compare in comfort or warmth to what I have known here and with you at Ballyogan. With all my responsibilities, I no longer think of marrying.

Although things seem so perilous now, still I have a sense that I belong here, despite all Edward's talk of joining Father overseas, and taking our chances in a New World. Home is where those you love are and here I'll stay, if they let me.

The girls are all well (Eliza gets bonnier each day, Bridget is still the sensible one, Kate the dreamer) and my brothers are growing into young men, particularly my little pet, Joseph, who has, I think sometimes, a look of you, dear cousin.

All of them unite with me in expressions of fond regard to you, Bessy, Aunt Ansty and the little ones,

Margaret Butler

Chapter 3: Extracts from Fiona Sheehan’s Journal 8th January 2003

Home?

For 30 years a suburban semi-d,
pebble-dashed, walled
in by concrete

I'd play out my fantasies
in the back garden, a crew-cut
Scheherazade in cast-down shorts,

shaded from the cruel desert sun
by Foxford rugs
thrown over upturned chairs.

I spun my tales to blasé Crolly¹⁰ dolls,
though I didn't know then
what fate I must postpone,

got a glimpse of that later
in the street politics
of dodge ball and kick the can.

The lesson quickly learned:
I would always be
a dab hand at spectator sports.

At 31 I bought my own four walls,
eschewed pebble dash for white wash,
chose orchid stems and Persian rugs,
waited for Shahriyar to find the 'burbs.

¹⁰ Crolly was a popular, Donegal-based manufacturer of dolls in the 1960s and 1970s .

*Note to self: This could make a cycle of poems ...
A woman alone, others deciding her fate.
I need to find her a voice.*

Margaret 1

Back from Ballyogan
all is resolved
and at an end
Edward says
for the best
consanguinity
they say
cousins
cannot comfort
I am too tired
to gainsay
F says
nothing
a chill takes hold
I feel my head fill
my ears close
their lips move
and I hear
nothing
I want to

Margaret 2

the house still
all in bed save me
the last to ascend
the stairs
each night I go
from room to room
plump cushions
extinguish lamps
damp down the fire
ensure all is as was
when the others wake
a slight ache
I cough as
I say my prayers
turn back the sheets
flinch at their cold touch
listen to the wind rise
bring the last leaves
down

Margaret 3

Joseph is sleeping
he curls into himself
too large now
for the cot
too small still
for this man's bed
they have built for him
his poor shape seems
lost in the blankets
he tosses to the floor
if we go he will grow up
in a land
I cannot yet name
cannot describe
I will give him names
for strange trees
I will teach him
to say his prayers
under strange stars

*Punctuation non-existent line breaks all wrong, will sort later
The handwriting's vile and I'm sure I've missed lots
without transcription.*

*I'll take my time.
I need distracting from my own storyline.*

Chapter 4: The inevitable flashback

I

Or was this the start?
Switching on, clicking the link,
opening new mail after days of silence.

Luke was back home
for Christmas,
busy with family, no time

for goodnight darlings,
for reassurance that he was coming
back to Ireland, back to me.

Words lifted off the screen,
cursor flickering to confirm
what my gut had known for weeks.

‘Dear Fiona (*or was that Dear Joan?*)
I care for someone else.
I respect you too much to lie.’

Respect was one word for it –
I could think of others
as I went through the Outlook folder,

selecting his name, erasing all trace,
preparing to face my family
for the festivities as familiar lonely heart.

What a prick! His technique
broke my back;
no loss there.

II

I should have scarpered when
he told me he was into NLP;
how else explain such a lapse

than to say I was hypnotised,
a three-month trance, a blind eye
(or two) to his little preferences,

the dirty cartoons in the spare room,
the fairy lights strung up over the camp bed,
his penchant for raw meat ...

and yet ... and yet ...
the thrill of logging on,
the blinking icon, the zing of text.

Why did I waste my time?
I clearly thought it was
a renewable resource.

III

My first love?
Since you ask, William Powell
in the Thin Man.

His wisecracks were
the epitome of style, I'd insist
my future man must share his wit.

No dark masters for me;
I scorned my schoolmates' whims
for Darcy or Rochester.

My grandmother said
"For every old sock an old shoe"
and I knew there was one to fit.

Years passed;
I watched my friends pair off,
had vodka-fuelled chats

about what signals
I was sending out
(or wasn't).

Then I fell for the first time
(if you don't count the boy who fenced
and turned out to be gay)

for a beautiful youth,
all gangling limbs and joints that cracked,
eyes like melted Bournville.

But he wouldn't be untrue
to his college sweetheart and by now
I could do platonic pretty well.

My specialist subject
to be the confidante
to a variety of males.

Then sex appeared in the guise
of a curly-haired satyr
who made it look so easy,

gave me a taste for Sundays in bed
and moonlight dances
and doing it on beaches.

My mistake was to think
it would out-last
the novelty.

But I was finally launched,
could look my friends in the eye,
trade stories about male perfidy.

The pattern was set,
the search and find, the rescue
when it all went wrong,

as it always did.
There was no other way, the happy ones
were just fooling themselves.

When my father stopped asking had I met
anyone I cared for more than myself,
I knew my fate was set.

IV

Christmas morning I woke
in my own house,
my own bed.

The air quiet, families in the estate
not moving yet, too early for
the boot-slammings exodus to the parents'.

There was frost; bamboo grass petrified,
the beech-hedge frozen and glistening,
a wren rifling through bark chip.

A trace of the morning star as the sun
began its slow arc from the firs
by the Owen Dower to the giant walnut tree,

warming roof tiles,
revealing terracotta red
little by little.

It was warm inside, a gas-fired cosy glow
to swan about in, sip coffee, to open gifts,
no wise man to wrestle the remote from.

There was no need yet to pack my overnight,
to don the face of daughter, sister,
peace-maker, bottle-washer.

No need for mistletoe or angel's bells
until I drove my grudging way
to Bedford Falls.

V

I arrived to a full house,
crammed to the brim
with forced smiles,

children rushing round
glucose-charged
from room to room,

adults surreptitiously
checking their watches -
(the marrieds that is -

we spinsters knew
we were there for the long haul;
nobody to go home to, after all.)

So time could suspend itself,
go backwards, Scrooge-like,
though Christmas Past

were just the same
as this one, the same vow
that next year would be different.

The kitchen full, I drifted to the living room
where a sister-in-law eyed me warily,
never quite sure what note to strike

with the writer in the family.
Small talk exhausted, she turned to poetry.
'There's a new book out', she said brightly,

'I heard it on *The Pat Kenny Show*.
Everyone's in it.
Are you?'

Terrific! I'd hoped the latest oversight
would go un-noticed, they don't usually
give a toss about my scribblings.

'I'm not in that one, just an editor
who doesn't know her arts from her elbow,'
I laughed convincingly.

Did I imagine that the room went quiet,
did several pairs of eyes look away?
Christmas makes you paranoid!

VI

I sleep-walked through Stephen's Day.
A night in a single bed and mallow-soft
mattress had left me aching

and from the mood
in the living room
no-one had slept well.

Dad was already installed,
flicking through channels
like a man possessed

and Mother was tidying, muttering
under breath as she crunched
discarded wrappers into tight balls.

'Your sister's already left. Couldn't wait
to get away, had friends to visit, apparently.'
'Friends' pronounced venomously.

Wise move, I thought,
and wondered how to devise
my exit strategy.

My eye fell to the floor,
to a colour brochure a niece
had shoved under the sofa.

I pulled it out, took a note
of the special New Year offer
with some ferry line to the UK.

Not a bad deal.
Maybe a one-way trip
was just what the head-doctor ordered.

VII

Awkward moment in the hall.
I thought I'd slip out while
the others were taking their leave

so I grabbed my overnighter,
had just pulled back the door
when my father emerged.

He took it all in; the bag, the covert exit.
"Your mother and I had hoped
you'd stay a while longer.

We see you so rarely these days.
Could you not take your ease,
have a cup in your hand with us?"

He smiled tentatively. I swallowed.
There was time, after all.
"Sorry, Dad. I'm expecting a call."

VIII

The third G&T did it.
I sat in the snug in Keoghs
with the usual crowd of hacks and poets

(who was it said, *hyenas scrabbling for scraps?*),
listening for the umpteenth
to some diatribe about the latest literary comet.

I was ready with my cracks
about casting couch publishers
and how it was all a fad

and nobody cared
for real writing nowadays
when I heard that bitter tone

and thought my mother
had shown up suddenly
and was letting us have it.

How had it come to that?
Promising novice into also-ran
without my noticing.

Back home I checked my email.
Still no more word from Luke although
there were countless offers to boost my manhood.

I leafed through a pile of books.
No more than 30 poems for a decade's work.
I pulled out my suitcase.

Chapter 5: Orphan

*Loughrea Workhouse,
September 1847*

*I wasn't born here,
but don't remember any other home.
Ma brought us in one winter
when our stomachs got too loud,
she died soon after.*

Then it was just me.

*We live behind high white walls,
sleep in cattle stalls.
I only left once,
tried out at a farmer's house
where I cooked, scrubbed –
they sent me back
as I didn't please the mistress.*

*Each day the same.
Up before cock crow,
we rake our straw,
dry-rub the walls
till they shine,
then kneel two hours
in the prayer hall.*

If God hears, he doesn't let on.

*We queue for oatmeal
and watered-milk,
we do our shift –
steeping shirts, spinning flax,
only the infants and dying
have no work.*

*Once the laundry was short
some scraps of cloth –
we were taken out,
one by one, and searched.
The men watched,
low laughs behind hands.*

*Some devil urged me on
and I spoke up,
said they had no right
to treat us so barbarous.*

*Quick as anything I was caught,
dragged out by the hair.
The Master pulled at my clothes,
left my breast bare.
He kicked me, dragged me,
put his hands
where he shouldn't have*

*till the girls gathered around,
nudging like young calves
closer and closer
so he had to turn, go back
to where the men stood laughing.*

*The girls lifted me, covered me up,
found a rag to stop the blood,
carried me to the corner
of the woman's yard.*

*But they came
and searched me there,
lifting up my skirt,
reckoning what I wore.*

I had but one petticoat.

*Loughrea Workhouse,
March 1849*

*I was no troublemaker.
I did my chores, said my prayers,
kept my eyes down when the Master passed
but he had marked me that day.*

*So when he called me into his office
I thought the worst,
was surprised at his polite voice
that he bade me sit.*

*I saw the Guardian in the corner,
and with him a man in naval uniform,
a doctor with a kind look.*

*They were drawing up a list.
Had I ever heard tell of Australia?
I said I was not sure,
but thought it pretty far.*

*The doctor examined me,
asked about illnesses,
then said I was fit to travel.*

*The Guardian said it was a decent trip
and wouldn't I like to see Australia for myself?*

I caught the Master's look and said yes.

*Plymouth,
23rd October 1849*

*The word has gone round the Depot.
Tomorrow we set sail
and put an end to all this waiting.
Not that we mind the wait.
The room is clean,
there are fewer girls
and food is regular.*

*We each have our own trunks,
names painted on the front,
a list of contents underneath the lid -
six shifts, two petticoats,
six pairs of stockings,
shoes and two warm gowns,
a prayer-book and a bible.*

We keep the trunks locked.

*We were examined again today.
Another doctor who
will sail with us.
He showed us more respect
than others have.
He checked our heads,
ordered warm baths and haircuts.*

*Tonight I said my prayers
but cannot sleep for the excitement.
Others girls are weeping
but not I.
I have left no-one behind.
God willing, there will be more chances
in a new world where
nobody goes hungry or dies.*

*The word feels strange
on my tongue
but I like the sound,
Aus-tray-lee-ah.*

Chapter 6: Getaway

I

A quiet stroll around town and the Sales:
Grafton Street jammed with harpies in jimmy choos,
hefting bags twice their body size

but everywhere else seemed empty.
I walked towards Merrion Square,
passed the Shelbourne with its party-over air,

nodded to the graves
in the Huguenot cemetery –
too early for Hartnett's bluebells¹¹ –

and meditated on the prospect
of hot chocolate at the Gallery
with other Christmas refugees.

But before that, one more chore.
The ferry company had offices here,
which were open despite the holidays,

ready to do business with anyone
looking to get away for a while,
a short break or long haul.

Surprisingly, no queues! I wandered inside
and within five minutes had emerged
clutching a one-way ticket – my exit pass.

¹¹ In his poem 'Slowly the blossoms are falling ...' Irish poet Michael Hartnett evokes the annual spectacle of the bluebells flowering in the Huguenot Cemetery in Merrion Row, Dublin. "Slowly the blossoms are falling / on the Huguenots; / and earlier on, for every soul, / a bluebell wet and waxy / springs up to tax the Dublin sky", from Michael Hartnett, *Collected Poems* (Oldcastle, Co.Meath: Gallery, 2001) 238 .

II

I've only just learned
that you're only as big
as the ones who take your calls.

You can measure your size
by the length of the gap
between the *can I help you?*

twang of an anonymous blonde –
chewing gum, copy of 'Take a Break'
open at the horoscope -

and the cold reconnect, the pat lines,
the *not at her desk right now,*
at a meeting, can she call you back?

And you swallow the gorge of
I didn't get where I am today without ...
Meek as you like,

because you have to play this game,
you can't afford to take
or give offence

or she'll remember, put you on hold,
next time, placed in a queue,
your call is important to us,

a constant loop
of waiting and waiting
for someone, somewhere, to ring.

III

Two weeks later
and I still hadn't mentioned
I was planning a trip,

but that ticket was now burning a hole
and if I really wanted to stay away
I'd have to make arrangements,

tell the folks,
say goodbye to my mates
(would they notice?)

look for tenants for the house,
not to mention find a job, some way
to support this mad endeavour.

Or should I just abandon the notion?
Things weren't that bad, and the legion
of devils I knew were better than ...?

I picked up the pack of letters
I'd been flicking through
for the past few days.

Although the writing was faint,
the slanting scrawl near illegible
I could still glean some of their meaning.

Chapter 7: An Emigrant's Preparation

Pleaberstown
13 September 1852

My dearest Forristal

It was well you had an early start and escaped the tremendous rain. All day the skies grew dark till by four we had the candles lit throughout the house. Eliza and I sat in the parlour looking out the old bay as the first drops splashed the glass and the wind picked up and shook the branches and leaves were whipped off and came flying through the air.

Bridget brought four pails and there was need of them when the steady drip began through brown spots in the wood left from last winter. Edward says repair is a needless expense – he seems content to leave this dear place go to rack and ruin now he has turned his thoughts to departure.

I thought Bessy would have set out herself if you had not returned. She'll think twice before allowing you to offer to come again.

Will you write to Dublin for that book? Direct it to be sent to the Station at Thomastown. If, as it seems, we are for new parts, I would like to read and know what I might expect. Perhaps it doesn't rain in Australia! But who will I have to write to, dearest cousin, when I am far away?

My best and warmest love to Bessy and Aunt Ansty and to all the little ones.

Yours always, Margaret.

Pleaberstown
22 September 1852

My dearest Forristal

Summer ended with a storm. Last week had promised much, we thought we might stretch the evenings yet, walk to the bridge before supper, smell the after-breath of roses, the night-scented stock that Edward brought from Ballyogan. Do you recall that flower? So sweet on the night air, yet in the day withdrawn to bud, withered and homely as a weed. It won't have survived the deluge.

Eliza says she loves the longer nights. She bustles around, lighting lamps, placing logs just so around the hearth. But I am sad when evenings draw in, I shiver in the gloom, turn my thoughts to long ago – the warm parlours, sing-songs and games of cards with my dear friend. All distant and past, all that is left are kind kind remembrances. And letters, which soon may have to travel across the world to reach the ones I love. Will you still remember your fondest of correspondents?

There is still no word from Father, who does not write, but Mrs Morris has heard from her son in Sydney that he has got a place. You would think that he might let us know his address.

Forgive my ravings, dear cousin. I may have caught a chill in the downpour. Give my fond regards to B. and all the little ones, especially the Duck Man (does he grow tall?),

yours, Margaret.

Pleaberstown
2 November 1852

Dear Forristal,

Mr Egan has forwarded the book. The station-master sent that it had come so William was dispatched to Thomastown post-haste. We've been poring over its pages since he came back. Such a small book to describe a new world.

It's hard to take it all in. The country is 2,000 miles East to West and 1,700 from North to South. Eliza asked how many County Kilkennys that would fit and though the Chambers Guide is quite exact it could not answer that!

But how we gasped about the things portrayed: the vast landscapes, mountains, shattered peaks; rivers that go for miles and flood betimes while others are mere trickles; sparse interiors that they call bush; and parklands which the manual said could match any gentleman's estate in England. Edward laughed at that, he likes the notion of being an Australian gentleman. Michael prefers the farmer's life, his eyes grew wide at mention of 10 million sheep that graze the country's pastures.

I liked less the other beasts it mentioned. Animals with pouches called kangaroos that are five feet tall, leap twenty feet and can outstrip a horse on occasion. Others things called opossums and, would you credit it, a thing half-bird, half-beast with a duck's bill and feet, but with the body of a rat. And rivers full of every type of fish, and shrimps and mussels of the kind Edward eats in those fancy Dublin restaurants. But snakes, can you believe? These colonists had not the benefit of St. Patrick's prayers.

The thing that worried me most were the native folk. Aborigines they're called, jet black, the book says, with 'large heads, large lips and wide mouths, and are altogether the reverse of beautiful'. It says they are amongst 'the lowest of all known savages in the scale of intellect.' William growled at that, saying it reminded him of 'Punch' or 'London Illustrated' scenes of Ireland; that nearly caused a fight with Edward! But I don't know what to think, and only pray we won't have much dealings with their kind.

At least the climate promises better things, even if the seasons are reversed. The guide says people live to greater age, there is a woman of 125 who is still working in the fields, children grow taller and the dry air is good for consumptives. I'm sure Kate will thrive in those conditions. It seems New South Wales is the jewel in the Colony's crown. Land is much easier to get and there are generous deals for those with capital. Edward is sanguine that we will all make a better life for ourselves. The boys, of course, can think of nothing but the gold that's being found over there.

So it seems we're off by no later than the Spring of '54, once Edward gets our affairs in order. There is so much to do. I must be prepared.

your cousin, Margaret Butler

Chapter 8: Extracts from Fiona Sheehan's journal
24th January 2003

Why bother to find
a precise name for the pain
beneath my bottom rib?

Prosaic causes for complaint:
the sky dappled the wrong hue,
the moon too slow,

the to-ing and fro-ing
on the stairs,

laughter next door
a prelude to throes
passionate as clockwork.

Across the wall,
hostile screams.
Familiar contempt is better

than this quiet room,
waiting for tears to well
to Barber's predictable strings.

*Still haven't found a form,
work on the voice for now*

Margaret 4

Each night the same
I wake in the dark
breath short
the dream
at the edge
of memory
birds still quiet
too early to rise
too early to rouse
the house
my chest pains me,
there is a pressure
at the back of my eyes
I feel my heart's
dull rhythm
and I fear
what I'll feel
when my feet
touch the floor

Margaret 5

Father goes ahead
he set his mind to it
for once could not
be shifted from
his strange course
to Lord knows where
Edward mutters
about creditors
their reach being
not long enough
What I want to ask
I cannot
Will our ties
stretch that far
will he wait
for us to find him
on the other side

Margaret 6

Nightmare
again
the same face
black as Satan
red eyes
lips bared
a snake
round his waist
at his feet
a beast with
a dog's head
bird's wings
a moon
huge and
blank
curving
a wrong
arc

Chapter 9: The Leaving of Dublin

I

It was simple in the end.
I found a small ad,
a company in North Wales

looking for editors.
I could do that with one hand
tied behind my keyboard.

Maybe the poems would come back
in a new landscape where people
didn't keep track of a poor record,

where nobody would ask,
"How's yer man?" and gurn that
'no surprise there' smile I hated.

And Wales was close to home,
a two-hour ferry ride
if it didn't work out.

I found a letting agent, slick, red-haired,
agreed a price and handed over
a set of house keys,

began the task
of boxing my life up
into carboot-size chunks.

II

Extract from Fiona Sheehan's journal, 26th January 2003

These walls unhouse me,
magnolia paint smoothing away
the scrapes of nine years,

unwary scuffs with trays,
finger marks of
occasional passion.

Dry-cleaned curtains preen,
patterns freed from nicotine,
carpet fluffed, innocent of wine spills,

of coffee cups, though a ring
betrays the sheen
of the dining room table.

The garden wears its Sunday best –
waiting for other guests
to light candles in it,

to smell the lavender,
cut rosemary for lamb roasts,
watch the slow growth of crab-apples.

I close the door, hear the Chubb click
the ending of this conversation,
or the pause ...

III

The ship slipped past containers;
snow sprinkling the Sugar Loaf
my last view of home.

The crew were all polite but bored.
I arranged my bags, grabbed
port-side windows

and eyed the clock,
waiting for the buffet to open, to while
away the hours with indigestible food.

It was an accident when I cuffed the child
running past me for the umpteenth;
her parents in the bar, presumably.

Feedback turned our heads:
a blonde singer was setting up
in the passenger lounge.

Her backing track brought
Vegas to the Irish Sea,
her banter mid-Atlantic.

Second hour up, the crowd stirred.
The sky changed, horizon taking shape
as mobiles beeped,

announced new ways to keep in touch
and Wales opened up
its snaggle-tooth smile.

IV

I needed somewhere to live.
The papers listed names,
unpronounceable places,

with occasional photographs of
grey terraces, grey stone.
Visits to each place

took me up vertiginous slopes,
challenging my car with corkscrew
bends at right-angles.

I was surrounded by slate,
beech trees hanging over dripping walls,
hard-faced houses clinging to mountains.

Then a lucky break.
There was a house on Anglesey,
looking over at hills, not dwarfed by them.

I liked the name: Beaumaris.
Promises of fine sea views,
Victorian promenades.

Extract from Fiona Sheehan's journal 29th January 2003

i

Not so hard, then.
A short ferry ride,
some forms to fill,

helplines to register
a fresh existence
in a strange town.

Now, sofa-stretched,
TV lip-synched, sleep-
settling to a stiff neck at 1am.

I am what I choose.
Possibilities persist
until the morning.

ii

I'll get a cat.
We'll watch the night fall,
comatose with deluxe dining
on Whiskas and ready meals.

We'll curl up on the sofa,
gasp at reality shows, purr
at the twinkle in the chat-host's eye.

Later, we'll go out hunting,
scouring the undergrowth
on the wild side of Henllys,

navigate silky trails,
breathe in the damp dusk
till our pores ooze musk.

She'll show me the dark delight
of fur and sinew, the oh so
delicate crunch of back-bone.

31st January

Some days I wake
and wonder where
I've washed up.

The tide's gone out,
yachts lie where they fell,
tilted awkwardly on props.

Motor boat engines
clench black fists in air, stranded
by a breeze withholding forecasts.

On the sand-bar
shadows search for pickings,
fill their bags, move on.

Closer to shore clockwork
oyster-catchers bob, then take to air
as a radio pips noon.

A black-backed gull
pulls at something
long-tailed.

A car kerb-crawls
for a spot on the sea-front,
fails, resumes the circuit.

I watch a man walk his dog, pause,
read the sign he has seen
every day for a lifetime.

Chapter 10: Voyager

*I do not know the date.
Hours go into days
go into weeks.
Each morning the same.
We wake to blackness,
the only light
the glow of Matron's lantern.*

*But our nostrils fill:
oak tar mixed with sweat,
damp wool, the tang
of vegetables on the turn,
sometimes a hint of rum,
always animal dung.*

*And there are a hundred sounds:
creaking wood,
the muffled thump of water,
the hoarse shouts of crewmen;
the groans and sighs
of 200 girls dreaming of home.*

*Some dream of the place
we are going to,
and wake up screaming,
telling of tigers and elephants
and burning trees
and savages with red bloody eyes.*

*I dream of water:
green swamps I wade through,
fronds cloak my skin,
huge foamy waves
lifting me high up.*

*I'm never afraid.
I find my feet, stride on,
always wake before
I reach the end of water.*

*Off the Cape of Good Hope,
25th December, 1849*

*A strange Christmas.
I woke early and came on deck
to find the sea quite flat,
a grey mist settling around the masts
like an old shawl.
The deck was wet –
planks cold beneath my feet.*

*All was quiet save the caoin of the seabirds;
they sounded as mournful
as the girls last night,
who'd sat about crying for Ireland
and blaming fate
for abandoning them to exile.*

*Doctor Strutt tried to hush them up,
said there'd be no Christmas dinner
if they didn't quiet.
Later they filed in small groups
to the upper deck at midnight
to where the priest said mass for us.*

*Today the Captain called us all at half past twelve.
There was mutton and spuds and buttermilk,
plum pudding, dark and juicy it was
and so rich I thought I'd never swallow it.
The doctor gave each girl
a glass of punch to help it settle.*

*Then we sang carols
and the younger ones
danced with the crewmen –
the Captain turned a blind eye
for the night that was in it.*

*A ship's mate said the seasons
are different in Australia,
that summer's in December and
Christmas falls in hot, dry weather.
I liked the sound of that
but all the same joined with the rest
and sang old songs
of frosty nights and snowy cribs,
raised a toast to Ireland in our wake.*

*Female Immigrant Depot, Macquarie Street,
10th February 1850*

*Two days on Australian soil
and it seems we've swapped
one set of high walls for another.*

*Convicts were held in this place
and they have kept the iron bars
to lock us in for fear
we'd terrorise the locals
with our wild Irish ways.*

*The day we arrived some men came
and took their pick of us
for serving girls or housekeepers.
They looked us up and down,
inspected teeth and gums,
inquired about fleas and lice,
talked above us like we couldn't hear!*

*A few got jobs,
the rest of us must bide.
We have heard of work
in a small town south of here
where they raise sheep
and other Irish live.*

*It is a three-day trip
through bush
but I will risk it.
I yearn for open space,
for sun and low walls.*

*Macquarie Street
10 March 1850*

*Delay after delay.
Each day they promise
that we'll leave tomorrow
but we gather at dawn,
bags in hand,*

*only to wait for another
shamefaced excuse:
the horses are lame,
a broken wheel,
a flash flood along the trail
that washed away the road.*

*I swear they hope
we'll just disappear,
one by one, into
this dusty town
where men stand at corners,
watching us over their pipes,
farmers eyeing
a side of beef
at a cattle mart.*

*The few women here:
shadows who keep
their glance down,
slip into doorways
when we pass,
vanish like ghosts.*

*Depot, Macquarie Street
17 March 1850*

*Still here on the saint's day
so a little feast was planned.
The doctor made punch,
but Matron glared,
waiting for the least sign
that we girls were the loose type
the whispers said we were.*

*Later a few of us slipped out,
walked the dark streets,
breathed the warm air,
talking about how this time last year
the snow froze the shamrock
growing round the walls of Loughrea.*

*Down at the seamen's guild
the smell of spirits and beer
spilled out through the open windows.
Inside we saw rows of men,
heads down, chins to their chests,
clutching glasses to their breasts,
each man more silent than the next
till notes rose from the corner of the room,*

*the reedy sound of a mouth organ
offering a Hail Glorious Saint Patrick
which was taken up, one by one,
till the whole room bellowed it
out through the windows,
down the street,
the tune winding
round the masts
in the Harbour.*

Chapter 11: Getting down to work

I

Another email from Roisin,
full of the joys of a New York spring
and the latest squeeze.

She asked about the move,
was I settled in, had I got
anywhere with the letters yet?

I didn't really feel
like telling her my progress,
sharing my plans for poems,

the book, the radio documentary.
Another fascinating insight
into the mind of an émigré.

Something that could get me
back into the spot-light.
Time enough to tell that –

I had work to do.
There was no faster way.
than transcribe, word by word,

leave the gaps, just hope
the meaning would emerge
when I pieced it together.

II

This lot could take years!
Each letter a mass of ink-stained
runes, blotchy and worn.

But slowly a picture emerged,
dot by dot, stroke by stroke,
like black and white film in developing fluid.

I could hear Margaret's voice, a tone
that I thought I recognised;
someone who lost the fight to stay at home.

It reminded me of a college trip
Roisin and I once took to visit
her émigré sister with a flat in Paris.

Ciara nearly threw us out
after a post-dinner row when I, in my cups,
claimed she hadn't had the mettle to stay in Dublin.

A funny thing. Ciara is now ensconced
in a family semi-D in Lucan, Roisin and I
scattered to Greenwich Village and Gwynedd.

III

Impatient with my speed, wanting to know more,
I wondered if some friendly archivist
might lend a hand,

show me the tricks of the trade
how to transform slants and cross-strokes
into courier or times new roman.

I'd take a trip to Bangor
see if a librarian there
might suggest a formula.

IV Extract from Fiona Sheehan's journal, 12th February 2003

The landscape is patient,
permits my slow
discoveries.

I turn a bend,
a buzzard leads me,
wing-span wide enough

to fill the windscreen
as he beats the air,
then sweeps away seawards.

I test out place-names,
my tongue still mutinies over
u's and w's, hellish double ells.

And proof the eye
will fool you:
standing on Mynydd Mawr

looking towards Wicklow
you might be on Bray Head,
looking back at Llyn.

Someone speaks,
a different music soars,
reminds you that the ground

you stand on is not your own,
though it might
lend itself a while.

The first lambs out,
and it only February.
Here, where I write,

there's a new vase,
the first daffodils
coaxing the sun.

Chapter 12: Point of departure

Pleaberstown
5th January 1853

Dearest Forristal

Just a short note to enclose 1s 1d so please send me $\frac{1}{4}$ of the best tea. Aunt Bessy can bring it when she comes on Wednesday. Tell her I will wait by the bridge.

I can hardly credit some news just received. John Clancy, a young man from the next parish, has written from Australia to say he has work building roads and he reports that our Father is now working as a steward on £2 a day. I think he might have written to let us know. We have been so worried about it but it seems he gives us not a thought.

Perhaps, as Edward says, it will be better for us all when we are all together again in that strange land.

Yours hastily

Margaret.

Pleaberstown
25th December 1853

My dearest Forristal

So this is really to be our last Christmas at home! It seems so strange to be celebrating the birth of our Lord while surrounded by packing boxes and white cloth coverings for the furniture. We went to early Mass, then Eliza rustled up quite a feast of goose and dripping and fine fruit pudding. The young ones were full of merriment but I could not find an appetite when we all sat down, much to young Joseph's delight and Eliza's disgust. Joe was very happy to assist in the clearing of my plate! He is growing up so fast and will be quite the young man by the time we arrive in Australia.

We leave for Dublin just after New Year and Edward says everything must be in readiness. We will require two carriages which may prove difficult to secure without the neighbourhood being alerted to our departure – Edward is adamant that we must keep the secret for as long as possible lest the remainder of the creditors descend upon us. He has settled all that he believes honour requires – as for the rest, he declares they are blackguards of the highest order who led Father astray and thus caused the greater part of our difficulties. They have already exacted enough punishment and are welcome to pick among the remains of what we leave behind us at Pleaberstown, which may be a considerable amount, as we can bring so little with us to the new world. So says Edward. But the thought of strangers weighing up our possessions and assaying our worth leaves me feeling sick to the pit of my stomach. But I cannot say this to Edward, or indeed any of the family. They have trepidation enough about the coming journey, without my adding to it.

So my dear dear cousin, I greatly wish that you and Bessy might come between now and New Year and take some keep-sakes back to Ballyogan. It still seems impossible that within a matter of weeks I will be heading to the other side of the world and that I am unlikely to see my dearest friends again. I know that we said our goodbyes last week (it was such a joy to hold you all and to lift up my little Duck Man who is now such a weight!) but if you could manage to come just one more time, and stand with me upon the old bridge like we used to do, I would be deeply grateful. There is still so much to do but there is always enough time for dear friends.

We all join in sending our fond love to you and Bessy and Ansty and the little ones

Yours, Margaret Butler

19th March 1854
Liverpool

Dearest Forristal

Here we are, and here we wait a fortnight at least till the tide is right and we set sail for Sydney. Edward secured our berths at 18 guineas each! The price is prohibitive and yet we must ensure we make the voyage in some comfort. 18 guineas buys a cabin for each.

And another guinea each for the voyage over here! We sailed from Howth on St. Patrick's Day (auspicious date for the first leg of our great adventure) on a packet steamer of the Dublin & Liverpool line. When first we boarded I was sure we had mistaken the ship, so great were the number of animals crowding the decks. Cattle, sheep, pigs, all in great noise and confusion with a scattering of men herding them below. The human cargo huddled where they could – steerage passengers finding no space beneath that was not taken up by animals. The poor souls stood, crowded and shivering, for the 14 hours that the boat steamed to Liverpool. But we at least were in reasonable comfort, warm, dry and received a good meal of beef and port wine. None were sick, the steward said the swell was moderate, that we were lucky for this time of year.

But all were glad when Liverpool came in sight, a majestic place of great ships with many masts, white sails gleaming. Huge crowds milled the docks and we were besieged by every kind of man and child trying to prevail upon us with tickets to embark, or maps to boarding houses, offering to take our bags and guide us to select accommodation. Edward soon convinced them that we should be left to walk unmolested.

We found our way to Wapping and Wakeman's Boarding House where Mrs Wakeman was expecting us with welcome cups of tea and cuts of bread. There must be 100 people staying here – such is the throng seeking a new life. We are crowded to the point of suffocation.

I will write again before we leave. Now we must gather provisions to see us through the long journey to a new world. It would be a great service if you could send, if you can, six pounds of tea, some quinine and two gallons of whiskey wrapped in cloth and placed inside a sack of potatoes. Edward asks for 1 lb of snuff.

Tomorrow Edward and I walk out to see our ship, the Lancaster, which is newly arrived and anchored in the harbour. A barque, I'm told, whose captain is Master Gilks. I can hardly believe it will carry me away so many thousands of miles from all I love. I cannot restrain my tears so I will leave off.

All here unite in expressions of regard,
Your loving Margaret.

30th June 1854
The Barque Lancaster

Dear Forristal

I had not thought I would be writing to you again till we landed in Australia. We had been five weeks at sea when a steward, a Lyons from Inistioge, would you credit it, informed us that we'd shortly pass a ship heading back for Liverpool and home, so if we wanted to dispatch letters to our loved ones we should make haste. No further encouragement was needed – I think that letters are my life's blood now, the current that will keep me tied to home.

So you will hear all the adventures we have met since setting sail from Liverpool on May 24th. We had waited for two days in the Mersey, after been pulled from Queen's Dock by a steam tug, waiting, waiting, for the winds to lift. Then pandemonium when Master Gilks gave the order to set sail. Sailors manning their posts, climbing masts, untying ropes, and passengers rushing about, setting up a shout and dancing their delight, overjoyed, it seems, to be underway and leaving their homelands for ever.

Someone had brought the union pipes¹² and soon the air was filled with Irish tunes – so like a floating Ireland we became I wondered whether any people were left back home. A veritable Noah's ark we were, too, with cattle, sheep, geese setting up their clamour below decks once the music started.

The first gales blew up as we passed Lambay and the Irish Sea grew wild, losing that mild, calm look that had deceived us. Many of us then recalled the sad fate of the Tayleur. They say 400 souls perished when it was wrecked off Lambay last January, all of them making for a new life in Australia. A sad fate. But those were winter gales – a summer storm or two could not threaten us.

Poor Eliza was the worst for mal du mer but all the girls kept to our cabin, and couldn't eat for days, so sick did the motion make us. The boys were all out on deck, yelling with joy at each roll of the ship until the captain told them to go back below. The gales lasted three days – I thought I'd never find my feet again, despaired that we would not have a single piece of uncracked crockery to unload in Australia. Things eased, and Eliza, Mary, Bridget, Kate and I braved the decks on the days when winds were gentle enough.

I can't recall all the strange places we have passed though Edward keeps his journal assiduously and will have a fine account to send you all once landed. I knew the Bay of Biscay for the squalls that sent us below back deck for days but it became clear enough to catch a sight of Madeira off portside (I have learned the sailor's lingo as you see) though it was little more than a speck on the horizon.

We are passing down the coast of Africa presently. Who would have thought during all those nights at Pleaberstown that one day we might cross the Equator? The sailors have a practice for each new recruit when this great event occurs. What it is I cannot

¹² Nineteenth century term for the uilleann pipes, a set of pipes played with elbow and mouth .

tell, as the ladies were all asked to go below before the ritual got under way, but we heard the sounds of much merriment above our heads.

The weather is too hot most days to venture out and we keep below, although it can be stifling and we're forced to brave the glare for an hour so as to fill our lungs with hot, dry air. That's when we catch a glimpse of strange animals. There was quite a furore when turtle fish were spotted — sailors and steerage passengers grabbed pikes and anything they could use to spear them. The meat is very sweet, or so I'm told; Edward could not prevail upon me to try some.

As for food, the rations are quite good on board; we have regular supply of mutton and beef, enough potatoes to keep all satisfied, wine and brandy, and fresh water, though this is guarded as a precious commodity — the Captain keeps buckets out to catch rain-water. Of course the steerage class fare worse than we; I've seen some miserable and thin wraiths scavenging and begging scraps from the sailors' mess. There have also been bouts of sickness — one woman nearly died I believe and others look like they'll hardly survive the journey. My heart goes out to my fellow countrymen.

Boredom is the worst we have to face. Although there is diversion from time to time — some of the passengers delight in tormenting sea-birds with their target practice — the days are all the same, an expanse of grey water, sometimes green, or brown, but rarely blue and never anything for the eye to fix on. The steward says we aren't quite half-way, but promises that it will grow much livelier when we round the Cape and hit what he calls the 'Roaring Forties'.

I must sign off — a shout has gone up that the other ship has been sighted. So I must wish you all a fond fond farewell and send you best wishes from all our crew to you, Aunt Bessie, Ansty and the little ones.

Your loving Margaret.

1st October 1854
Sydney

Dear Cousin

We landed safely here on 9th September and are currently settled in lodgings while I make arrangements for the family to obtain permanent accommodation. Temporary lodgings are expensive (a small house costs half a guinea a week for all of us and it seems that merchants take pride in extracting huge premium from newly arrived settlers such as we) but at least it appears easy for reputable men to obtain land. I had received letters from the administration in New South Wales before embarking which assured me a lease of more than 500 acres of good land close to Sydney so I am hopeful that we will secure somewhere soon.

My priorities are for somewhere with good grazing land – Michael is keen to test his husbandry skills - and with a house with ample space for Father, Margaret, and the others. It is my intention to stay in Sydney and I have already made contact with a former colleague from Chambers in Dublin who has given me an introduction to the Chief Justice. Legal professionals are still a rarity here so I am confident I will find an opening within days.

We were in total 15 weeks at sea and a voyage which, while not eventful, was full of incident. We had the good fortune to sail in a well managed ship with a good master and a disciplined crew and thus were spared the sorts of excesses we have heard from some of the other recent arrivals we have met here in Sydney. It appears that it is not unusual for ships to be becalmed and to run low on provisions, which had already been squandered by a corrupt crew – the poorer passengers might face starvation even before they land. But thankfully that was not the case on the Lancaster. Master Gilks kept a firm hand on his crew but was a fair man and he appeared to have equal concern for the welfare of the most important and the lowliest of his passengers. We none of us starved and there was little sickness among the Butlers, apart from a slight discomfort for the girls from time to time.

Our route was as follows: we left Liverpool on 24th May and headed through the Bay of Biscay south past Spain and towards the coast of Africa. We stopped first at Tenerife on 16th of June, where we got fresh supplies and made minor repairs to the ship. We then sailed on to the Cape Verde islands and, after another two weeks, we passed the equatorial line. The crew arranged a ceremony to mark this auspicious event, which they called Crossing the Line. The ladies were invited to go below deck before the festivities got underway. Then the mate, who had assumed the role of Neptune and wore his bay laurels (in fact kelp tied together with ship's rope) with great gravitas, called upon all those who had for the first time crossed the equator, to step forward. There was much nervousness among the five or six young Pollywogs, as they were termed, and much hilarity amongst the other sailors, who knew what lay in store for them. A barrel of water and a bar of soap were produced and a large cut-throat razor was brandished by the boatswain, who was also dressed like some Roman God or other. The Pollywogs were ordered to drop their trousers; those who demurred were manhandled cheerfully by the rest of the crew. However, Master Gilks was careful to ensure that events did not become too boisterous; grog had been carefully

rationed on the day in question. The Master later told me that it was a time-honoured ceremony going back to the Vikings. The ladies were quite scandalised when the events were related to them later on, although I did not tell my sisters every detail.

We then continued along the coast of Africa to Cape Town, meeting occasional lapses of wind when we were becalmed but making good progress generally. We reached Cape Town on July 12th, restocked and re-equipped for a week and then departed for the most hazardous and challenging leg of the voyage, the 6,500 miles to Sydney through 'The Roaring Forties'. July and August are winter months in the southern hemisphere, and so we faced mountainous seas and gales that lasted up to two days a piece. At the height of the bad weather, my sisters stayed below and suffered greatly from *mal du mer*, especially Margaret, who is not robust at the best of times. It was remarkable to watch the industry of the crew at such moments, manning the pumps and repairing whatever damage the treacherous winds caused. But we were never in danger; the Lancaster is a sound ship and she faced her travails with great fortitude. There were great extremes of cold – some crewmen suffered badly from frostbite and seamen in the rigging could not wear gloves lest it hinder their work with the ropes. But we survived these extremities, and arrived into Sydney Cove some two months after leaving Cape Town. Since arriving we have made ourselves quite comfortable in our new country; there are many people here happy to assist new arrivals with good prospects to find their feet.

I shall write again once we have secured a permanent address. I know that Margaret is keen to have all the news from you all. She has been low in spirits since our arrival but I feel sure that once she is mistress of a new home, she will have plenty to distract her.

I send our best wishes and respects to Bessy, Aunt Ansty and the little ones.

Edward Butler

Chapter 13: Extract from Fiona Sheehan's journal
18th February 2003

*So she finally went.
Poor Mags, her whole world
turned upside down.*

Margaret 7

I did not believe
until now
until the first step off land
and my stomach lurched
with the sway of wood
on water
I did not believe
until now
felt sure
we would
turn back before
finding port
let the horses
retrace the path
to Pleaberstown

Margaret 8

We wait
for tide
I watch
the ebb
the current's
slow tug
pulling us
further
and further
till the rope
must fray
undo
the knot
that binds me

Margaret 9

Dead heat
damp clothes
dead weight
breath
caught
in my ribs
no shift
in sails

Must we stay
in this wood
tomb
yet I dread
the jolt
that takes
us further
nearer
what

*Exile is easier now.
An hour in a car queue,*

*two hours bounced
in a tin-plate catamaran
a day-trip to a new life*

Chapter 14: Among lettered folk

I

I should have guessed.
The woman behind the library desk looked mournful
when I asked about transcription services.

‘There are no short cuts to scholarship,’
she intoned, adjusting her specs,
‘You must transcribe each letter word by word,

after a while you’ll recognise the writing,
words will come easier.
Have you discussed this with our archivist?’

I shook my head regretfully –
sorrow seemed the only response
for my scholarly inadequacies.

She sighed. “Go out of here, turn left
and the furthest door is archives.
You’ll have to make an appointment.’

The girl at the Archives desk
was friendlier, enthusiastic,
eyeing my jiffy bag like it was riches.

“We’ve lots of material that could help.
Did you know that many Welsh went out there too,
chasing the gold they found in the early 50s?

There was even a famous shipwreck
here in Anglesey, the Royal Charter,
it was said to be carrying Australian gold.”

That rang a bell. I’d seen a memorial somewhere.
And one of the letters had mentioned goldfields –
we scholars just love synchronicity!

II Extract from Fiona Sheehan's journal 18th February 2003

Out to dinner with staff from the uni.
We speak of linguistics and belles lettres,
the more letters, the better in this game.

We range from etymology
of testaments and testifying,
to vegetable pigments mutandis –

root crops that were too lingam-like
in their state of grace - to Celts, to languages
that live and die and half-live on sign-posts.

A request to pass the salt
stops conversation mid-thrust.
A puzzled, embarrassed look

at what 'salth' might be,
or indeed whath 'mighth' might be
for those who thought

a soft Irish t
was just the breakfast
variety.

The crispness of exchange,
tight, precise, now stalled
by the lingering, moist

half-sibilance of another culture,
of another rooth crop
mutating in full view.

III

After a slow start
I began to make good progress,
went into Bangor most days,

exchanged small talk
with the girl behind the desk, got
an occasional smile out of the archivist.

The second week in, I decided
to take a break from the letters, was immersed
in an 1849 almanac for Australian emigrants

when the door opened. I glanced up,
caught a pale blue eye in the tanned face
of a man, mid-30s I guessed, stringy, lean,

looking a little choked in his shirt and tie.
Not that my antennae were immediately raised
but he was younger than anyone I'd met already

and might be worth a coffee.
Didn't think he was from round here, the tan suggested
he'd be happier out of doors than in dusty archives.

He gave a quick, shy jerk of facial muscles
before sitting down, opposite,
opening a lever-arched file, waiting while

the assistant brought him his reading matter,
then getting down to work, head down.
It was clear I'd have to make the running here.

IV

Lancaster of Liverpool, Gilks, Master, burthen 748 Tons, from the Port of Liverpool to Sydney, New South Wales, the 12th September 1854

Surname	Given name	Station	Age	Of what nation	Status	Comments
Gilks	William	Captain	43	British	Crew	
Nicklennight	Daniel	Mate	23	British	Crew	
Donaldson	Joseph	Carpenter	23	British	Crew	
Bissett	William	Carps Mate	24	British	Crew	
Perry	Walter	Boatswain	25	British	Crew	
Bridges	Robert	Sailmaker	58	British	Crew	
?	Cornelius	Steward	25	British	Crew	
Wee ?	John	Cook	34	British	Crew	
?	Andrew	Seaman	23	British	Crew	
Garn ?	John	Seaman	22	British	Crew	
Kelly	Michael	Seaman	32	British	Crew	
Thompson	William	Seaman	38	British	Crew	
Adangton	William	Seaman	21	British	Crew	
Langley	William	Seaman	21	British	Crew	
Quin	Charles	Seaman	24	British	Crew	
Scott		O.S.	19	British	Crew	
Hitchcock	Edward	O.S.	20	British	Crew	
Price	James	O.S.	24	British	Crew	
White	Andrew	O.S.	40	British	Crew	
Paterson		Seaman	24	British	Crew	
Hughes	George	2 nd Steward	18	British	Crew	
Henderson	William	Joiner	24	British	Crew	
Roberts		Seaman	29	Trieste	Crew	
Xantrie		Seaman	27	Trieste	Crew	
Canstrick		Seaman	21	Trieste	Crew	
Arles	Henry	Seaman	22	Boston	Crew	
Dawson	John	Apprentice			Crew	
Henry	Thomas	Apprentice			Crew	
Robins		Apprentice			Crew	
James	Thomas R.				Passenger	
James	Sarah				Passenger	
Fairhurst	Mary				Passenger	
Hogg	James				Passenger	
Reed	Geo.				Passenger	
Reed	Ann				Passenger	
Reed	Frederick				Passenger	
Reed	Henry				Passenger	
Martin	Sarah				Passenger	
Brady	Edward				Passenger	
Patterson	Robert				Passenger	

Webster	Geo.	Passenger
Johnstone	John N.	Passenger
Butler	William	Passenger
Butler	Joseph	Passenger
Butler	Michl.	Passenger
Butler	Thos	Passenger
Butler	Margt.	Passenger
Butler	Mary	Passenger
Butler	Bridget	Passenger
Butler	Catherine	Passenger
Butler	Patrick	Passenger
Waddell	John	Passenger
Waddell	Ann	Passenger
Waddell	John	Passenger
Waddell	George	Passenger
Waddell	Robert	Passenger
Waddell	James	Passenger
Waddell	Thomas	Passenger
Humphreys	Geo.	Passenger
Cleaton	Wm.	Passenger
Gray	Robert	Passenger
Gray	Elizabeth	Passenger
Rogers	Mary	Passenger
Rogers	Elizabeth	Passenger
Rogers	Robert	Passenger
Creagh	Robert	Passenger
Lester	Thomas	Passenger
Lester	Elizabeth	Passenger
Lester	John	Passenger
McDonald	Bridget	Passenger
McDonald	Rosehama	Passenger
McDonald	John	Passenger
McDonald	Michl.	Passenger
McDonald	George	Passenger

V

Amazing what you can find
on the Net these days.
This particular catch

hauled in an entire list
of names, ages, nationalities,
for the Lancaster's voyage.

Blanks where the captain's hand shook
and the transcriber wouldn't hazard a guess,
or put a question mark where she could.

I scanned the rows
of mates and ordinary seamen,
mere boys, some of them,

although four months at sea
would have made men of them,
aged them in brine.

We weren't told how old
the passengers were, though most
seemed in family groups, or couples.

Here and there a single name,
some men and a woman; did any unite
their fortunes by the end of the voyage?

The largest group were the Butlers,
nine of them crowning the list
as they probably did the dinner table.

All present and accounted for, save Edward,
though I'd guess the Captain erred
and called him Patrick, the default for Irishman.

VI

The guy from the archives is giving a talk tonight.
I saw the poster on the notice-board:
'Fatal shore – 19th century emigrants in Australia'

by Dr Michael Jenkins, a string of letters following.
It will make a change from lectures
on Welsh bards or triple-harpists.

I could even get to have a proper talk with him,
show off my new-found erudition about the Antipodes
(eg, his title comes from Robert Hughes).

In the Archives, we've barely said hello,
but there are moments when I catch his eye
and he actually blushes! Which may be a sign

of interest, though most men I knew
wouldn't be caught dead
admitting interest.

More fool me. I'd think it was an act,
the sustained wriggle
of the salmon on the line.

Wrong every time.
He'd turn out to be the fisherman
who'd throw his catch back.

VII

The lecture had gone well.
Dr Jenkins proved a decent speaker
after a few painful bouts of throat-clearing.

It seems he's descended from some old cove
who left Wales in the 1860s
to make his fortune in Australia.

Joseph Jenkins didn't seem to mind leaving
a wife and a brace of children behind
or a farm he hadn't managed to drink away.

But he brought the most important things:
his mother tongue, a diary that he wrote up
religiously and a Welsh Bible that kept him alive

during 20 years in New South Wales
living the swagman's life,
bemoaning his fate till he came home again.

When he forgot himself, Mike Jenkins
was engaging in a tweedy sort of way.
Having nothing better on,

I waited for the crowds to disappear
before making my approach
to suggest comparing notes over tea.

Chapter 15: Wild Colonial Girl

*Yass, New South Wales
12th April 1852*

*It's a small town, a scatter
of huts and sheds at the edge of bush
where the sheepmen come once a week
to buy or trade stock, to get provisions,
to drink what they've sold.*

*I work in the grocery store.
The boss is a Norfolk man
who said right off he thought the Irish
lower than the low.
To prove his point he put me straight
to cleaning out the privy,*

*I wasn't allowed to serve
until I'd proved to him I wouldn't run off
with his foodstock.
But at least he feeds me regular;
I've heard stories of other girls
near starved to death.*

*So I'll bide my time,
keep an eye out
for a new situation,
sweet talk the sheepmen
who come in.*

*Meanwhile the nights are mine.
I can walk out among the trees,
watch the sky, the spread of stars
in shapes I don't yet recognise.*

*And sounds I never dreamed of:
wild dogs calling to each other,
the screech of birds
they call kookaburras.*

Yass
19th December 1853

*Here, you are
what you make yourself.
There's a man who sweeps the street
and sleeps in a battered shed
on the outskirts of town.*

*He speaks to nobody,
no-one to him,
though he is a common sight
in town, dragging his brush
up and down the streets.*

*The children have their fun
in plaguing him.
They run up to his door –
that is, the planks of wood
he's laid against the entrance –
and throw stones until the din
raises him from slumber.*

*Once they set fire to the corner
of the shed and sat and laughed
while he raised a dust storm
quenching it.*

*He's Welsh, a temperance man
who they say was once
a prosperous farmer,
though you'd never know
to look at him,
sad wreck of a man.*

*He tried his luck
down at the diggings in Victoria,
even struck gold once or twice
but lost it all to mates
who were less lucky, more devious.*

*He says he'll return home one day,
meantime he stays, writes
in his battered old book,
poems, he says, and jottings,
and remembers
what the bible said
about Ruth and the alien corn.*

Sydney
15th October 1856

*Fr Maginnis was as good as his word.
He promised he would find me a job
if I returned from Goulbourn.
So I came back, weary of heart, sad
to leave so many friends at the station.*

*But I could see it wasn't wise to stay
once the Missis had taken against me.
She was alright at first, seemed glad
to have someone from home to talk to.
We had many good chats out on the veranda
after the little ones were bathed and sleeping.*

*Then the Master broke his leg and was round the house
and under our feet though he seemed a good laugh
and was always joking, sure there was no harm in him.
So I didn't see at first the Missis' face darkening
or I would have recognised that pinched look,
the sharp glance meant trouble.*

*When Father came to say his monthly Mass
she must have had a word
because he took me aside
and asked me would I leave with him.
He's a kind man, he doesn't judge,
unlike many of his sort.
His God makes time for sinners,
though I'm not one.*

*The new position is at a place near Berrima
in the Southern Highlands
with a family who came out in '54.
Butlers from Kilkenny –
well got from what he tells me –
one is headed for a judge,
others are grazing sheep
in the thousands.*

*The best thing is there is no Missis;
the place is run by a spinster sister
who finds it all too much –
I'll soon tame her.*

Chapter 16: At home at Woodlands

Woodlands, Australia
31st March 1855

Dearest Forristal

This is by way of sending you our new address as we have finally secured the lease and moved here in February. The process was a lengthy one – Edward was forced to go from pillar to post in the Governor’s office in an attempt to sort the matter out. But in the end things were settled to everyone’s satisfaction and we have our new home.

I must confess my heart sank when I first saw the dwelling. It is very small, not being one half of the dimensions of Pleaberstown, having just six bedrooms, a dining room, parlour and kitchen. It is also of a wooden construction that seems very frail and vulnerable to the wild winds they have here. But Edward was assured that this was the most suitable material for the climate (cool in summer, cosy in winter) and he has great plans to add more rooms and turn it into a homestead fit for the Butlers. Michael approved of the grazing land (we’ve 200 acres) and the boys were delighted with the wild prospect of the hills that surround us. We are hopeful that Father will join us soon.

I plan to have a small kitchen garden where I can grow vegetables and I am told that fruit does very well here, so an orchard will follow. In truth there is so much work to be done that I despair of ever completing it, and all the time my heart hearkens back to the familiar fields around our old home, and the friendly warmth of Ballyogan. But there is no choice but to persevere, and pray. For God must find his way to so distant a place.

I will end here, cousin, before the tears fall too plentifully. I know it upsets my sisters and brothers and I will appear cheerful for their sake. Fondest regards to all,

your cousin, Margaret Butler

Woodlands, Australia
1st November 1856

My ever dearest Forristal, Aunt Bessy, Uncle Martin and cousins

I trust this letter finds you all well. Please forgive the delay in responding to your last most welcome letter. To tell the truth, I have been feeling in low spirits for the past few months with my old ailment and it has been such a struggle to keep this household going. Woodlands is no Pleaberstown – dust gets everywhere; I have only to sweep out a room when a storm rises and fills the place again. And what an effort to grow the vegetables we eat at table, none which look like the ones we grew at home.

My brothers and sisters are well but, much as I love them, it is such hard work feeding and cleaning for them, especially since Eliza left last Spring. We have had word from her last month. She is settling in well at Ipswich, the Sisters are kind and she is looking forward to taking her vows next Easter. I envy her the contentment she has found.

Edward came to visit in August. He is now well established in his legal career and has built a fine new home for him and Sarah at Darling Point, where the best families in Sydney live. He got the notion whilst here that I needed help so had a word with Bishop Clohessy when he got back with the result that we have a new member of the household now, a young Limerick girl, a Murphy from Bruree, who came over on the workhouse orphans scheme some years back.

Lizzie is a mean-looking thing; she stares at you straight in the eye and won't look down for anything. She keeps the place clean but only because I'm always watching her – you can sure that quick as whip she'd be up to mischief if let. And she's quite affected – she already has that nasty twang that the squatters' wives have here. She's good with the younger ones though. She can turn her hand to most anything.

Joseph seems more settled these days. He was very restless some months back and seemed about to leave – the papers are full of all those gold-strikes and he's determined to make his fortune with a claim. He's still only 15. He's much too young to venture off on his own. This is such a dangerous country but I don't know how much longer I can protect him. Edward says I worry too much, and perhaps I do.

So tell me all your news, cousin dear. How fare all the children? Are they still all at home? What of little John, my sweet little Duck-Man. Does he remember his old aunt now so far away? What news from the parish? And how fares Pleaberstown? I cannot tell you how often I think about that dear place, and home. Sometimes I fancy that in my mind's eye I can recreate the town, the houses, the little bridge, the protestant church, the smallest detail, that if I stare long enough at the sky once the sun has set I might catch a glimpse of something familiar. Then I blink and see the same blank sky, the same scattering of unrecognisable stars.

How I do go on! Please write soon, and be a better correspondent than
your cousin, Margaret B.

**Chapter 17: Extract from Fiona Sheehan's journal,
20th February 2003**

Shall I expand the cast list?

*Margaret at odds with Lizzie right away,
snobbery, or does she sense
like a mother hen ... Lizzie the fox?*

What might L sound like, I wonder?

still no form ... Margaret doesn't seem to want it ...

Margaret 10

Who named it
Woodlands
The few trees
seem parched
their bark
like paper
coming off
in strips
roots are
bare knuckles
clawing into
baked earth

Margaret 11

Edward took the post
to Berrima
the first chance
to let F know
to name the place
we have
washed up in
E returned
said it would take
six months
for a response
like dropping
stones down
a well
never hearing
the splash

Margaret 12

There is a forest
a ten-mile ride
there and back
the first place
I forget
I am not home
old trees
green canopy
that hides
the strange sun
flies bite
familiarly
leaves crunch
dissolve
in dust
I could be
by Ballyogan's
oaks again
if I stop my ears
ignore the laugh
of galah birds

Margaret 13

I will not
show
I will not
bow
to her
straight back
her blue gaze
She will learn
to look down
when I
enter the room

Margaret 14

Eliza takes
her vows
a new name
hair shorn
black habit
shrouding her
gold ring
fastens her
to God
My finger

bare
age swells
knuckles
plumps the skin
where
the band
would have
lain.

Chapter 18: Walking out

I Extract from Fiona Sheehan's journal, 20th February 2003

My hands are my best feature,
neat, too small to span
the full scale on the piano

and when I let the nails grow,
remember to file and shape
they're quite presentable.

I go ringless usually
and so forget the empty space,
the full tan, bare skin,

the tell-tale lack of gold
tagging me like some rare
migrant that's just flown in.

But others see, glance automatic,
smiles smug as they add me
to their latest endangered list.

II

I woke slowly, my head clogged,
sodden with too much wine and the sense
that something had happened too soon.

Ungluing my eyes, I shot a glance
to the other side of bed; at least I'd had the wit
to send him home,

I couldn't face a breakfast of small talk
and false intimacies, the pretence
that a night of tangled limbs meant ever afters.

Details came trickling back.
His shy grin as if he'd just discovered
Van Diemens Land in the cleft of my breasts,

the way he called me *cariad*,¹³ as if
he chose his superlatives carefully
and meant this one. Way too soon for that.

My stomach lurched, I needed
a cup of tea to keep the panic down.
I stripped the bed while waiting for the kettle's hum.

¹³ The Welsh word for little darling or beloved .

III

Mike texted me. Seems we'd made a date
for morning coffee in the flea-pit
they call the refectory at the uni.

He really isn't my type, too easy to read.
Perhaps this offered a chance
to end it quickly.

So I was there prompt, clean,
a dash of lippy keeping
the self-loathing subliminal.

At ten past he dashed in, blurting apologies.
In his old man's tweeds
he didn't look like a life changer.

As he played with his filofax my breathing slowed,
the needle pricks in each temple eased.
I agreed, dinner might be nice, his place, Friday.

IV Extract from Fiona Sheehan's journal, 20th February 2003

Hours of seeking the path,
taking wrong turns at stiles
and kissing gates,

mis-reading maps,
following arrows round bends,
dead-ends or boggy steps.

Then rain began,
a soft cue that shelter
lay beneath pine-trees,

in the hush of scattered drops;
that a fallen trunk would bolster us
for as long as it took.

Chapter 19: Serving the Butlers

*Woodlands
6th December 1856*

*I've been here two months
and already know
whose bread to butter,
when to keep quiet,
when to chat.*

*Fr Magennis came with me from Sydney
to pay my fare and see me 'settled in'.
He speaks highly of Master Edward,
mentions good connections
and the need to please my Mistress at all times.*

*That would be the oldest girl, Margaret.
She has the face of soured cream -
and she wanders around the house in a dream
as if she's lost something valuable.
Nothing pleases her -
the weather is hot, the food mean.*

Nothing is like home.

*Nor should it be.
I would have thought she'd be glad
to shake the earth off of that miserable place.*

*A more pampered bunch I never saw,
faces scrubbed, plump arms, hands soft,
nobody to look crossways at them.
Kate, the youngest girl, is a quieter type.
She's gentle and kind to me;
she helps out in the kitchen, has a way
of brightening even Margaret up.
She spends much of the day in her room,
quiet at prayer.*

*The boys are grand.
They behave when Edward is there,
but when he has left for Sydney
they are as boisterous
as they ought to be.
There's plenty of land
to keep them occupied
and Michael has built up a large flock.*

*But all the young ones can speak of
is taking their chances on the gold fields.
They bury themselves in accounts of sudden riches.*

*Even young Joseph, though I'm sure
Miss Margaret would not let him go.
She watches over him
like a broody bantam.*

*Woodlands,
31st December 1856*

*A new addition to the household.
Edward rode out from Sydney one Sunday
and brought with him an old,
worn man in shabby clothes.*

*He looked the type
that often turned up at the workhouse
and rarely lasted long,
hunger eating them up from the inside,
no strength to work,
sitting where they could find a spot.
He minded me of that old man in Yass.*

*But for all his jaded look
there was a likeness you couldn't miss
and there could be no mistaking
the way the sisters fussed around him,
taking off his shoes, sitting him down,
soothing him with cups of tea and soft words.*

*Miss Margaret came to the kitchen later.
She didn't explain much
(she likes to keep her secrets)
but said her father had newly arrived
and should be made as comfortable as possible.
She gave me a list of his favourite foods;
where she thought I'd find fresh salmon
I can't fathom.*

*He'd been a Steward for the road builders
but didn't look like he had worked
this long time, nor would he again.*

*When I brought supper up –
I found him and Joseph thick as thieves.
In the glow of the gas-light they looked
more like grandfather and grandson.*

*The old man kept asking Joe
to repeat himself but wouldn't admit
he was hard of hearing.
Mostly he just gazed into the fire,
ignoring the swirl of talk,
keeping his emigrant thoughts
to himself.*

Woodlands 12th February 1857

Flummery, the old man's favourite.

*Miss Margaret mixes flour and water
(no more than a tablespoon)
stirs well, her mouth thin,
knuckles white on the spoon
as if she thinks it might escape her.*

*She pours the paste
into a pan on the hearth,
stirs again until she sees bubbles
blistering the milky broth.*

*Then she adds gelatine
(a teaspoon, no more, no less
at the price McCormack charges)
and, lord help us, a whole cup of sugar.
Then four of our own oranges,
freshly squeezed, a lemon
and the pulp of passionfruit.*

*She stirs again,
then takes it off the heat
and pours it into a dish
resting on crushed ice.*

*She carries it out
like it was the crown jewels
and leaves it in the cold store,
12 hours and more
till it is set and ready
for his High Tea.*

*Not so much as a mutter out of him
as he keeps his head down
and cleans his plate,
sucks his spoon.
She watches every mouthful
with a mother's care.*

Chapter 20: Extract from Fiona Sheehan's journal, 26th February 2003

Note – Found this on the net ... might be useful for local detail, some lovely sounds

THREATENED SPECIES RECORDED WITHIN THE LOWER HUNTER CENTRAL COAST REGION

Bynoe's Wattle (*Acacia bynoeana*)
Coastal Spurge (*Chamaesyce psammogeton*)
White-flowered Cynanchum (*Cynanchum elegans*)
Tranquillity Mintbush (*Prostanthera askania*)
Charmhaven Apple (*Angophora inopina*)
Thick Lip Spider Orchid (*Caladenia tessellata*)
Heart-leaved Stringybark (*Eucalyptus camfieldii*)
Slaty Redgum (*Eucalyptus glaucina*)
Magenta Lilly Pilly (*Syzgium paniculatum*)
Green and Golden Bell Frog (*Litoria aurea*)
Regent Honeyeater (*Xanthomyza phrygia*)
Southern Brown Bandicoot (*Isodon obesulus*)
Red-crowned Toadlet (*Pseudophryne australis*)
Wallum Froglet (*Crinia tinnula*)
Yellow-bellied Sheathtail Bat (*Saccolaimus flaviventris*)
Eastern Falsistrelle (*Falsistrellus tasmaniensis*)
Squirrel Glider (*Petaurus norfolcensis*)
Spotted-tail Quoll (*Dasyurus maculatus*)
Brush-tailed Phascogale (*Phascogale tapoatafa*)
Long-nosed Potoroo (*Potorous tridactylus*)
Sanderling (*Calidris alba*)
Painted Snipe (*Rostratula benghalensis*)
Comb-crested Jacana (*Irediparra gallinacea*)
Turquoise Parrot (*Neophema pulchella*)
Powerful Owl (*Ninox strenua*)
Grey-crowned Babbler (*Pomatostomus temporalis*)

Margaret 15

This is a place
of ghosts
heat
blanches skin
then turns it
into leather
like the thing
I saw once
taken from
the bog
near
Pleaberstown
trees
calcify
become
skeletons
their silver
limbs
dazzle
till I look
into the sun

Margaret 16

My father
went away
his grandfather
has returned
in his place

Margaret 17

Each night I am
the last thing
that he sees
I plump his pillow
settle sheets
rub his heels
with balsam
made from herbs
and goats milk
he says it soothes
to have me
say his prayers
for him
to have me
kneel for him
before his God.

Extract from Fiona Sheehan's journal, 27th March 2003

Note – the first poems in months ... something is working anyway

I

This morning, my darling, as the sun came up
and the mountains stretched their curves out
and the sea was a great rippling mirror for yachts

the swifts filled the sky, swooping,
settling just a second, round an old nest
collapsed for weeks beneath a window sill.

They darted and dived and perched a while
before resuming their deep arcs,
a blurring of sleek lines back and forth

as if they had finally realised
they had over-stayed and must imprint
the smell, the feel, of that tattered hive,

the way I keep returning to your lips,
not believing that this could be memory,
that I'll wake up some day on the other side.

II

We both read maps
as poorly
as we read ourselves,

not knowing yet
the ordnance of a back,
the topography of an inner arm.

We reached the highest point at Moelfre
when the sun was edging round
from South Stack, casting shadow

on the memorial stone, a demure slab
detailing the night when 400 souls
were lost to waves and rocks.

October hurricanes reminded villagers
crowding the cliff's edge that the sea
was no respecter of Australian gold.

Or did it covet it?
Shingle is yellow here, a fleeting sparkle

amid the Methodist grey of Anglesey

The gold lures divers still,
dreamers
of every kind.

We prospected the ledge,
looking for tormentil,
found only yellow furze

to hold on to,
to give us purchase
against the glittering spray.

III

He brought roses.
Now, the first signs of wilt, silk
underpetals curling into themselves,

velvet interlaying tighter
to keep the light trapped
in the latticework of veins.

It's been 20 years since I first dreamt
that every girl's reward
came with red petals and green ferns.

So I'll preserve them with warm water
laced with a witch's brew
of sachet powder,

watch each morning
as the petals fall, one by one
and gather them up,

sealed with hot wax and vellum envelope
I've kept all these years
for that very purpose.

Extract from Fiona Sheehan's journal, 28th March 2003

It comes more easily
when acts of love require
acts of taking leave,

the coaxing in,
the easing out
of another's body.

So you are always prepared
for the latest leave-taking
to be the final one,

a moment to look back,
shut the door, assess
the chance of other openings.

Chapter 21: Bereavement

Woodlands, Australia
29th May 1857

Dear cousin Forristal

It is my sad duty to tell you that Father died here at Woodlands on 24th May, after succumbing to an illness bravely borne for many months. He had never fully recovered from the stroke that afflicted him more than two years ago, although we had hoped that he might last for some years yet, with our care. But it was not to be, God willed otherwise.

The first great change came over him in January, and he sank fast after that. We were not sure he would survive till Easter, and indeed he received the last sacraments from Father Maginnis (a Kilkenny man) on Good Friday, it was a solemn and touching scene. But then he rallied, although it was clear he never would again be the man he had been, we had hope again. Indeed he was little more than a living skeleton, and spent his days praying and preparing for death. His death was truly edifying – he accepted God's will with great patience and tranquillity, a lesson to us all. He died peacefully in the bosom of his family – only distance kept Eliza and Edward from being there. God Rest His Soul.

I will conclude with other news. We are all in reasonable health. Edward thrives – he now has the position of Crown Prosecutor for the District Court in Sydney, while his legal business brings in £500 a year. His wife, Sarah, is tall and dashing-looking. They have no children yet. Here at Woodlands we have been making some improvements and now have two good rooms for parlour and drawing room, eight sizeable bedrooms, a storeroom and a kitchen with oven. The latter is Lizzie's demesne, and one does not bother her there. She has notions, that girl, but I have learned that it is easiest to keep out of her way.

You may have seen an account in the papers of the new gold fields they've founded. They call them the 'Snowy River' diggings and they are making the fortune of many. It is only 100 miles from us so three of the boys intend to go out in the Spring and to try their luck. Joseph intends to go and there's no holding him, no matter what I say. I pray that St Christopher will watch over him, though I fear that it is more a matter for St Jude's good offices!

Please give my love to Bessy and the little ones and tell Billy Butler that we received his letter a few days after Father's death. I will reply shortly.

William, Joe, Mike, Thomas and the girls unite with me in fondest feelings of love and affection to you and all enquiring friends.

Your cousin, Margaret Butler.

*Woodlands,
3rd June 1857*

*The old man has gone and it is a mercy.
The last few weeks there was nowhere to go
in this house without hearing his breaths,
hoarse and laborious, stopping and starting.*

*At first we had no rest,
waiting to see if each pause
had sent him to his Maker,
then it would start up again
the rasp and wheeze of
something grasping at life.*

*In the end we got used to it,
learned to wait,
barely lifted our heads
when the house quietened,
only knew he was dead
when the pause lengthened.
and the sobs began.*

*Margaret gave instructions.
I was to lay him out, wash the body
then cook a fine meal for the Bishop
who'd given him the last rites,
a fine feast to befit the priest
of this last Irish chieftain.*

*Some chieftain.
Little more than
bleached bones
washed up on the shore.*

Chapter 22: Extract from Fiona Sheehan's journal
1st April 2003

Three years ago today the phone rang.
I picked it up expecting a plan
for pints, some salesman or other

and got instead dead air,
a pause full of static
then my mother's flat voice.

Dad had collapsed.
I could hear words
like hospital, surgery,

but the sounds didn't seem in order.
I couldn't control the spasm in my throat,
my lungs filling, the receiver falling.

Nine days we spent in the waiting room.
We came, we went, put money in the meter,
read papers, did crosswords

but mostly we just sat and stared
at the one picture on the wall,
something by Constable, I remember.

Dad pulled a Lazarus.
Doctors preened their bright whites,
spoke of Lancet write-ups,

then looked grave and told us
what we could expect of a man
of his age when he came home

which he did eventually.
The routine resumed,
the panic subsided.

I did my fair share
for the first few months,
then the visits grew rarer.

I was busy, didn't have time
to run that errand, fetch the paper.
In truth, I couldn't face my spectre father.

Margaret 18

No struggle
at the end
not peace
not acceptance
of God's will
just a slipping away
a slowing of breath
so gradual
we hardly felt
it stop
what was left
a husk
a breeze
would have
scattered

Margaret 19

I am too old
for an orphan
there is no one
to look above to
none beneath
to nurture
Joe will fly soon
he already
puffs up
his feathers
when that girl
looks his way

Chapter 23: Losses and Gains

Woodlands 31st December, 1858

He is nine years younger than me.

*Each evening he walks me out,
shows me the run of the farm,
the way the land curves with the creek,
stretches so far you have to squint
to see the boundary.*

*He describes what snakes to watch for,
warns of huntsmen,
forgets I've been here longer than him,
that I have already learned
the sun's arc is opposite to home.*

*He takes my hand,
identifies all the trees
that shade the farm house,
the spindly stringy-bark,
the wattle, the river gum,
the pungent eucalyptus.*

*He names the birds.
I know the collared doves,
plump on a bench, necks entwined,
and can recognise the red-backed wren
who darts like his Irish cousin*

*but he silences me
when he points out galah-birds,
the rosellas and lorikeets,
the blue-faced honeyeaters,
black-headed perdalots.*

*I watch his lips frame the words
as the dusk grows
and he continues his list
of plants and flowers.
He picks some yellow everlastings
as he walks me home.*

Cambalong,
Snowy River
2nd February 1859

Dear Cousin Forristal

I trust this letter finds you in good health. You will be surprised to hear from me, I'm sure. Ed. and Mags are the letter writers in our family but I thought you would find a report on our hunt for gold to be of interest and that Bessy and the boys might like to know what life is like on the diggings. I've heard the papers over there are full of news about all that gold and there may be some tempted to try out for a prospector.

Tell them not to bother.

Joe and me have been here six months and for all the nuggets we've seen, we might as well have stayed with Mike and his sheep up at Woodlands. We quickly got a claim for £2, bought our tent and materials and spent our days crouching by the river's flow, sieving and sifting.

Life is hard. A man can break his back 12 hours a day, digging in mud, drenched in water, and still find nothing more than flakes of pyrite (they call it *fool's gold* – no lack of *amadawns* here). And Joe and I are young – there are men here better than 60 years of age digging and picking for scraps.

The only ones who make a buck are the shoe-makers. It seems every last man must have his boots imported and the price you give for a pair of Wellington boots shipped from England is £1. Tea and coffee is half a guinea a pound and soap cannot be found at all in the diggings – in all the dirt we all end up looking the same, the Irish, the blacks and yellow Chinamen who dig here. Mind you, many of the Celestials, as they call them here, are coining it anyway. They grow vegetables and sell on to the diggers at a profit. Some have even opened up small shacks to sell the quare food of theirs – not a spud in sight.

We do not intend to stay much longer here. The companies have bought up most of the claims along the River, we'll not make money here. Joe seems anxious to get back and there are reports of new finds up in Mudgee, which is closer to home. So we'll not be sending any fortune back to Ireland.

I'm writing this by candlelight and at 3s a wick they're precious things, so I'll stop now. Give all our love to Bessie and the boys,

your cousin, William Butler.

Woodlands
1st April, 1859

Back home
the earth betrayed them,
rich clay pulpy
with purple mush,
new growth gone bad.

Blight, they called it,
rot, God's judgement
on their lazy-beds,

one year, the next,
the next,
until hope lay
unburied
with old stalks,

another bad smell
among heaps of waste
littering the roadside.

Here, forgetting,
they buy new spades,
take up tools they never
thought they'd use again
in new earth, new stone,

break hard ground,
sifting the fill,
holding their breath
for the tell-tale glint
that divides the hungry
from the full.

Woodlands
3rd April 1859

The letter came today.
Miss Margaret was so relieved
she read it to me,
came into the kitchen and sat by me,
not guessing how keen I was
to hear the news.

I'd only agreed that Joe should go
when he promised
the first nugget he found
would make a wedding ring.
He took a piece of string with him
sized from my finger
so he'd get the measure right.

Of course he had a different tale
for Margaret.
It has been a trial
since he's been gone.
He was her darling,
took her mind off
her own troubles,
stopped her harping on
about home and Ireland.

Now, six months on,
there's no sign of rings or riches.

The boys work 12 hours a day digging
and sifting by the water's edge,
finding nothing but fools gold
and blisters and bad backs.

The boys don't plan to stay;
Joe will come back,
Bill intends take a berth
with the next gold shipment to Liverpool.
If he can't find his own gold
he might as well take money
for those who'd better luck.

Joseph has stretched his wings.
Perhaps he'll come back
and not notice
when those wings are clipped.

Chapter 24: Moving in, moving on

I

Mike thinks my place is too small.
He has a pained look,
each time he comes over,

says the walls are closing in
that he's crowded out by piles of books,
by houseplants dotting the bay window,

which leaks, naturally.
How can I stand to live
in such cramped conditions?

He says the next step
is to find a place together.
He has a field trip lined up

but once he's back
and he's renewed his contract
with the Department

we should think about
taking things a little further.
So he's started to pore

over property supplements,
makes lists, ticks off the pros and cons
of various locations.

He hasn't noticed yet
that I always change the subject,
that I like my leaky bay,

that books pile up where
I want them, that I never signed up
for a permanent fixture.

II Extract from Fiona Sheehan's journal 21st April 2003

i

It could have gone either way
but the stroked cheek, the gentle caress
on this post-prandial sofa

ends in breaths slowing into sleep
as your body sags, zig-zags into my contours,
your head rests on my shoulder.

I stroke, fingers finding their pace,
not knowing the name for the tingle
in my throat, or the way my heart

struggles between beats, now soft, now fierce.
I keep a look out for predators,
unsure if my own thoughts won't feed

on your exposed skin,
the three-veined throb
at your temple.

ii

The year turns. A raincoat drips
off the back of the chair
you sat in to catch the changing light.

You could sit for hours
when things were fresh
and heart-stopping.

When we last met,
you sat by me, head-achy,
my head exploding with counter-arguments.

I looked across, searching for what caught me,
seeing instead an assortment of nose, eyes, ears, lips
that I ought to love.

Where does it go, then,
that perfect vision,
that only-you certainty?

Leaving instead (Picasso-style) –
an arrangement
of body parts.

iii

Forever on the chase
of a glorious sunset,
a happy ending,

we watch the dull disc
sink to the Irish Sea
behind a bank of cloud

that hasn't shifted all day,
stubbornly hanging on like
a blind stuck on its cord,

leaving a gap wide enough
for a narrow chink
to ruddy the lighthouse.

The sea its habitual grey,
buff wavelets stiffening
in grumpy valediction,

pointing the way down
as if the sun needed
its daily reminder.

We await the finale,
the flashy striated pinks,
the last glint of light

when shapes appear
on the distant horizon,
a silhouette of curves,

of hills, of cliff faces,
aerial masts positioned
where I know I left them,

the familiar shape
of the bay, roofs, for god's sake
a church steeple.

In the instant it takes
to gasp my recognition
it's gone,

this Brigadoon stroke Dublin
and I'm left staring across
at a blank, sullen screen.

III

I needed good advice.
Who better to give it than Roisin,
veteran of romantic battlefields?

Though it had been a while
since we'd spent much time together
she knew me well,

how I ticked,
or didn't when it came to
clocks of a biological nature.

At Christmas we'd torn strips
off every type of man
we'd ever been with.

She'd recognise Mike's type,
be able to gauge from my description
whether this was one to keep

or if he was destined
to go the way of all flesh
I'd ever tangled with.

Her reply was swift;
she must sit up half the night
at her computer.

Her words were terse:
ditch him, cut loose, why pay the price
for one man's neediness?

All they ever want is a substitute
for their mammy, except in the bedroom
and even that point was moot.

Once they have you where they want you,
looking up recipes, washing socks,
imagining nothing nicer than a quiet night in

then they bugger off, on to
the next sap who'd buy the fiction
that this one had a happy ending.

Reading between the lines I saw
that Roisin's latest must have done a bunk,
but that didn't make her wrong.

IV

What an eejit! I had the chance
last night, at coffee stage,
just before clearing up

the crumbs and spilt milk.
I'd casually dropped the fact
that I was staying put.

I didn't yet know my plans,
I'd more travel lined up, couldn't commit
to setting up house with him.

For once Mike was direct.
"Is it over?"
I cleared my throat,

ready to pass judgement
but the pause grew
and my stupid tongue

locked.
Wasn't this
what I'd always wanted?

A decent man,
someone who put me first,
had good recipes for pasta?

I kicked for touch,
played for time:
we'd post-mortem it later.

V

Mike flew out to America.
I drove him to Manchester, car jammed
with luggage and unfinished arguments.

He still couldn't understand
why I wouldn't move in with him,
why I wanted to stay

with a pile of old papers
and a messy desk.
I didn't have the neck

to end it there at the airport,
in the crowds filing to check in,
Mike with his flustered, where's my passport air,

his baffled smile, the sort of look
I'd last seen when we put the poodle down.
Trusting but in pain.

I'll see you when I get back.
Easier to let the tears come, then,
to turn away, to find the exit,

to rehearse all the way along the A55
the words I'd write to greet him
when he next logged on.

VI

Another email from Roisin.
She's heard from a long lost relation,
some contact of her auntie's.

She's based in New South Wales,
had reared her kids,
discovered genealogy

and tracked down Roisin's aunt
through the internet. They'd begun
to exchange nuggets of family history

then the trail went dead,
or rather the auntie did –
now she's keen to revive it.

Roisin wants me to email her,
give her all the gen
on the Butler cousins.

Which is fine for her.
Fact is, I'm not all that keen
to let go an exclusive.

Chapter 25: Births, marriages, deaths

Woodlands, Australia
2nd December, 1859

My dearest cousin,

Life has been nothing but a catalogue of misery since we came to this dreadful country. Father's death was hard but he was a good age and had at least prepared to meet his Maker. It grieves me to tell you now that last month came news that our poor dear William has been lost at sea. He drowned when the steamer the Royal Charter went down off Anglesey.

Perhaps you have read an account in the paper - 400 souls were lost in a hurricane. William only took a berth at the last minute; a mate from Snowy River was transporting gold and offered Bill a share and a free passage to Liverpool. Bill was glad of the chance, and planned to come back out early next year on the return voyage.

The first we knew was when Edward rode out from Sydney with the news. We could hardly believe it. Joe, who had seen Bill most recently, went to his room, and wouldn't eat for days. Not even Lizzie, who it seems is now his great friend, could persuade him. And the worst thing, cousin dear, is that we cannot find out if William's body was recovered. There have been reports of bodies washed up as far as Ireland but so disfigured by the violent seas that none would know them.

It breaks our heart to think that our poor William might lie unclaimed and without sight of Christian burial. It is a great thing to ask, I know, dear cousin, but we would be for ever in your debt if you could undertake the hazardous journey over to Holyhead and try to find any trace of our poor boy. I have had word that the local reverend, a Mr Roose Hughes, has kept a record of all those lost and buried many of the drowned at his little church. Perhaps he might assist.

My heart is quite broken, and my prayers go unanswered.

Respects to Bessy and the children,
Mgt. Butler.

Woodlands
30th April, 1860

He would have been 26 today.
No trace was found,
not so much as a shoe washed up.

Fr Magennis said mass in the parlour,
we all knelt in prayer,
heads bowed, murmuring
as the priest intoned,
the room drenched
with the smell of incense.

Afterwards, we went out
to the paddock to plant a tree,
though we hadn 't found
the sapling of Mountain Ash
Miss Margaret wanted,

forcing instead into
hard ground
the silvery bark
of a eucalyptus,
the ghost gum tree
that grows in these parts.

Extract from Fiona Sheehan's journal 5th May 2003

Taken from Church Record Book, Pentraeth Church, Anglesey

11:11:1859. Female person.

Female person.

Female person.

14:11:1859. Male person.

15.11.1859. Male person.

1:12:1859. Male person.

Inscription on a memorial stone, Llanallgo Church, Anglesey

This monument has been erected by public subscription to the memory of those who perished in the wreck of the "Royal Charter" off Moelfre on the coast of Anglesey on her passage from Australia to England, Wednesday, the 26th October, A.D. 1859.

There Lie in this Churchyard the remains of 140 of the sufferers and 45 in the Churchyard of Penrhos Lligwy, all of whom were buried by the Pious and Charitable incumbent the Rev^d. Stephen Roose Hughes and his brother the Rev^d. Hugh Robert Hughes

*So many washed up
unclaimed.*

*Does he lie here
in the rich red clay
of a Welsh island?*

Margaret 20

No sleep
for weeks.
How can I
till I know
he rests
has found
peace
with Father
I thought
danger
lay here
with snakes
poison bark
hot rain
hard clay
How could
I guess
he'd meet
death
in sight
of home.

Woodlands
2nd March 1863

*I'm back at Loughrea,
stretched on my old cot,
the other beds empty,
the room dark but for
shafts of moonlight
that catch the motes
hanging in the air*

*and I'm shifting in bed;
I cannot find a way
to ease my limbs
out of hard angles
on this mattress
of straw and air.*

*The sounds begin
from the other side of the wall,
the softest murmur
of higher and lower tones
blending into each other.*

*And I can't guess
whose secret sweetness
I am listening to
but the cold grows around me
and the blanket slips
no matter what I do to grasp it.
I cannot move
to block my ears,
to let my breathing
drown it out.*

Goulbourn,
15th June 1863

*Fr Magennis arranged it.
At first he wouldn't help,
did not wish to risk the Butler ire
lest he see a dip
in his weekly collection.*

*But when he saw
the way it was with me,
how far gone, he must have thought
the arrival of a Butler bastard
a worse disaster.*

*So we slipped out
when Margaret went to town
and rode the 20 miles
in the early morning,
a June bride
braving the winter mists.*

*The priest said the blessing
as quickly as he could,
stumbling over the Latin.
We two stood, our third was
the priest's housekeeper
who kept shaking her head,
eyes closed, hands
grasped tight on a bone rosary
that clicked through her fingers.*

*We'll stay here a few days,
then ride back and face the wrath
of Mistress Margaret.
I wonder how she'll take
to her new sister.*

Woodlands, Australia
2nd July 1863

My dearest Forristal

Please forgive my tardiness in replying to your so welcome letter of November last, which arrived here by the January Mail. Indeed, it offered great delight to us all, bringing as it did such precious visits from our cousins who we have not seen for so long. You can hardly imagine with what joy, and what astonishment each likeness was handed round the dinner table. We could barely trace resemblance to the little ones. Except for young Margaret, who retains the same good natured face we all recall so fondly.

But could that elegant young lady be little Ellen? Her portrait was immediately seized upon by her cousin Thomas who admired it so much he declared himself in love and placed her image by his in the family album. And what of young John? That dashing lad can hardly be my Duck Man, my rare pet with whom I spent such sweet days. Tears spring so readily to my eyes these days, I cannot see clearly to write.

I must say, however, cousin dear, I was a little disappointed in your own likenesses. Aunt Ansty would look better with her bonnet off and the artist did not do you justice for the handsome man you are. Do get them taken again, and add to them the likenesses of our dear friends Mrs Jones and Mr Baglins, so old acquaintances may be reunited again.

Edward says these new daguerreotypes are quite the rage in Sydney. He urges us all to sit for our portraits so we can send them home. I would rather not – from what I hear it is all explosions and bad smells and who would want to see this dried old maid? Australia's weather has not been kind to my complexion; I would prefer the soft rain of Pleaberstown on my face to the hot streams of Woodlands.

This Christmas, Thomas set out on a journey of 1,000 miles and paid his long promised visit here on St Stephen's Day – they call it Boxing Day, as they do in England, it's a godless place. His journey was eventful – he rode to Rockhampton, then travelled by steamer to Brisbane, called to see Bishop Quinn and then on to Ipswich to see our dear Eliza, who is in the convent there. En route his coach was stuck-up by bushrangers, who demanded cash from all who travelled there. Pity the poor Bank Clerk who had a bag crammed with notes. Tom had hidden some cheques in his boots so all he was parted with was a ten shilling note! He and Eliza laughed over the escapade when he was safely arrived in Ipswich. She is well and happy and is thriving in the tranquillity of God's service. I think she does better there than had she stayed at Woodlands.

The latest Butler baby, Edward's girl, is named Alice, for her mother's side. She was born on St Patrick's Day. And Joseph is married since June to Lizzie Murphy who has been with us since '56. I did not think it wise because her background is so very different (she was a Workhouse girl) but there was no talking to him and I could not prevail.

Pray forgive my blots and mistakes. Your cousin Margaret.

Woodlands, Australia
23 September, 1863

My ever dearest Forristal, Uncle Martin and Friends

All your letters dated June 20th arrived safely by the Sydney mail and must have crossed the one I sent in response to your earlier letter. I am glad to hear that you are doing well and news of your pleasant meetings and merry-making is a great pleasure to us all. It is as if we are there, in the drawing room at Ballyogan, seeing old friends and remembering happier times.

I can hardly believe that all my little cousins – both Forristals and Joyce – are now young gentlemen and maidens. I can only wish that their paths be smooth and bright and that they prove to be the pride and joy of their parents. I would also wish that some day they might meet their Australian cousins, but the Lord will decide such happenings.

My life passes in the same dull dull way. I get up early, pray, dust out my bedroom (although by half past three it's full of dust again!) and the dining room. I manage the dairy, sew, read a good deal though it is hard to find anything of interest, but mostly I think, my thoughts flying away to far off lands and far off times. I scarcely ever lie a night in bed without dreaming of that sea-beaten shore thousands of miles from here. But each morning I wake up in a foreign land.

My garden is my chief concern. I dig, I plant, I crop, I shade the young shoots from cold and sunshine but this country's harsh, ungenerous nature yields a scant, sickly return. I fancy the soil knows that I bear an Alien's heart towards it. Lizzie tries to help but she hasn't great strength these days.

These days I am quite the squatter. I now have three fat lambs as well as Eliza's tabby, Maggie. You will laugh when I say I love them all intensely but, in truth, I prefer these beasts to Australian mankind, or woman either.

I think I have now racked up all news of any interest. Forgive my little scraps of sentiment – remember how barren my life is and how limited my wanderings.

All unite with me, etc, Margaret.

Chapter 26: Extract From Fiona Sheehan's journal
6th May 2003

More poem possibilities

*Bad luck all round but Lizzie seems
to find a way regardless. How would she sound?*

And Margaret loses herself in duty

her making do frightens me

Margaret 21

He was lost
so close
to shore
so close
to home
will the sea
yield him
to air
which side
will he
wash up

Margaret 22

I found a feather
in the dust
russet rich
tiger striped
I picked it up
I could not say
which bird
one of many
that circle
blue sky
loop wide
their alien cries
I tucked it
into my belt
it lies snug
beneath
my alien heart

Margaret 23

Joe says
he is a man now
has no need

of a woman's care
though he's quick
to take her hand
I avoid
her smile
let her
sharp tone
merge with
screeching
birds
and bide
my time

Chapter 27: Family commitments

I

I decided to email Roisin's cousin.
A guilty thought that I was making capital
of some else's history

kept nagging me.
Besides, Flo could prove useful
for local information, might even know

if there were any scholarships going,
a grant, a nice bursary for
a visiting writer.

I woke up to her response
blinking on the mail-sweeper;
streuth she was keen.

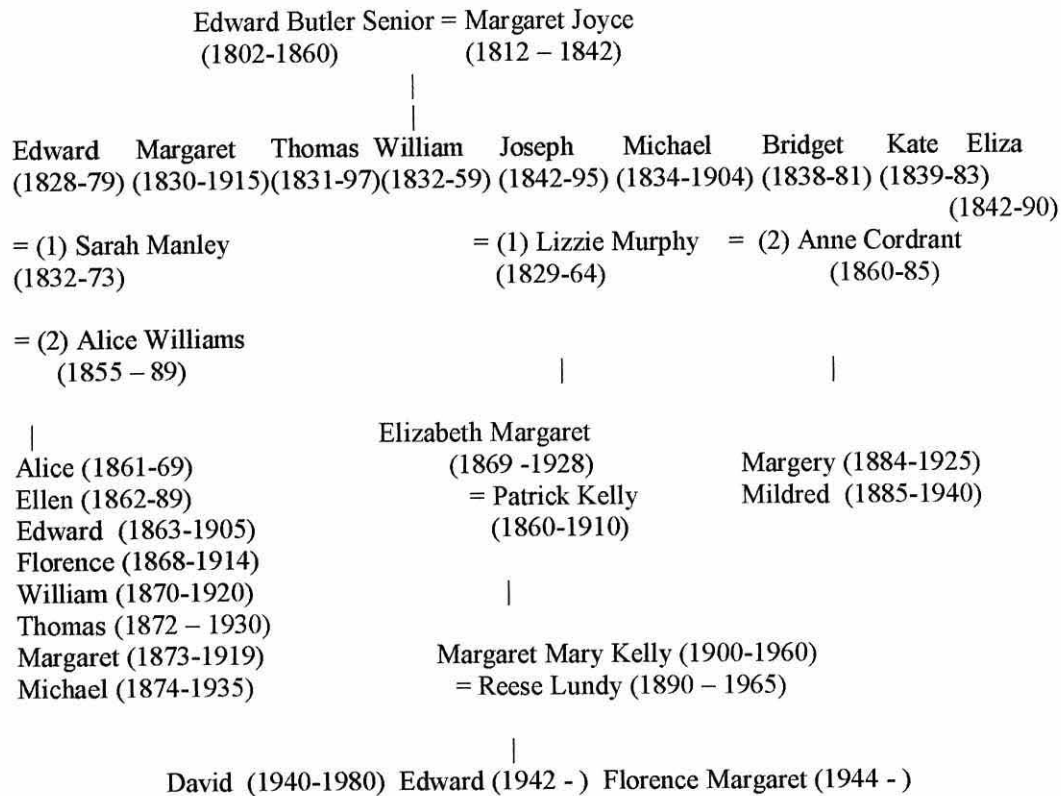
She sent a very interesting attachment.
It seems she's a direct descendent of Lizzie B
and kept tabs on the rest of the tribe.

Best yet, she has her own pile
of ancient correspondence
from the Forristals of Ballyogan.

She asked if it mightn't
be a good idea to try
to bring the two sides together.

II

FAMILY TREE OF THE BUTLERS OF PLEABERSTOWN AND WOODLANDS



III

Genealogy required a quick trip home.
Mother made it clear
my presence was expected

at a gala night
to celebrate 40 years
of happy nuptials.

Births, marriages and deaths,
the only reason left
to get together.

IV

The photos come out. We gasp at their youthfulness,
try to guess what he was proclaiming
in his '40s tweeds and heart-throb hair-do,

admire her flawless skin, her Vermeer pearls.
Separate, then paired for dinner dances,
a rose in her hair, a corsage

he must have had help choosing.
Did her fingers tremble as she fastened his bow-tie?
Did they waltz to Mozart in the National Ballroom?

In one shot they seem to float in a garden corner,
old ivy creeping behind on a granite pillar
as she puts a flower in his button-hole.

Then the wedding day, her elegant in pink,
him laughing at the [best man?] photographer.
She hasn't learned, yet, that rictus grin

she'll use later as the kids arrive
and there's five of us urchin-like,
squat in the high grass, squinting at the lens.

She's grim custodian of the brave face,
consort for public occasions, bouffant neat
but the eyes focus on some distant spot

we can't imagine, the site of alternative
histories perhaps, a darkened room,
a quiet countryside, a frame empty of us.

V

Which is better?

The devil you know or

the angel who might bore you?

Chapter 28: Expectant

Woodlands, 12th October 1863

*Cracked earth, dry ground,
grass burned off
into brown matting.
Lord knows when
the sky last darkened
and we felt His rain.*

*We get chores done by late dawn,
feed the hens, milk the cows
who can still yield.
Their throats are too dry
to low their distress,
they cough in their stalls.*

*Then we retreat,
find shade where we can,
it is enough
to feel sweat drip
from the base of our necks.*

Margaret barely speaks.

*Michael and Joe ride out.
Most days it is burial duty
though the ground is too hard,
so they gather the carcasses up,
pile them into pyres.*

*Smoke letters
on a blue sky.*

*The creek has run dry.
It trickles in the centre
of the hollowed bed,
jagged rocks dust-covered,
shriveled curls of
water snakes.*

*I pray for the life
inside me, hope
it can still swim
its own current,
staunch its own tide.*

Woodlands, 2nd December 1863

*Nine months gone
and big as the new sow
Joseph brought back from Berrima.*

*We made a pen for her out back,
gathered straw and shavings
left behind from the fencing posts
made her snug as we could.*

*She doesn't move,
waiting for time or nature
or whatever will shift
the life inside her into cold air.*

*Mike says they'll be out by April,
could be up to eight bonamhs,
the start of a good herd.*

Nobody names her.

*Margaret wrinkles her nose,
talks of dirt, thinks up recipes for pork,
complains that we cannot grow
ingredients to go with it .*

*At night I sneak out,
lay a hand on her rough hide,
watch her bulk in the shade,
eyes tight and pink
behind thick lashes.*

*It's like she's dreaming
of a home she can't remember.*

*I've taken my skirts out
as far as they go,
next will be to sew panels in,
or else go about in shifts
like the natives do.*

*I wait, grow heavier.
feel my steps
go deeper in the earth,
trace the blue line
of the veins that lattice
my belly like marble,*

let nature or time decide.

I

Three weeks late.
Each morning the trip,
the wait, the stomach lurch

at finding no red
dotting the towel,
clockwork abandoned.

The bathroom closes in,
wooden sauna
walls loom.

I take the kit out of the bag
crinkled from constant opening
and closing.

Nausea rises -
it could be a sign
or just nerves.

But I know what I don't want:
another life
has no claims on me.

It's too late for that;
I've watched friends, paid dues
with visits, teddies, the odd poem.

Not my time.
I put the box back, resolve
to wait a while longer.

Chapter 29: In two minds

I

Drought over,

so why
no smile
today?

II Extract from Fiona Sheehan's journal 10th June 2003

Last night I dreamt of someone
not quite you. He had your features,
but the focus was blurred or else

you were a little thinner, a little shorter,
you stood on the earth a little differently,
this you, this not-quite-you.

This morning that memory has
evaporated like the moisture left by fog
on the deck as the sun breaks through.

I try to conjure you, your image near the surface
but obscured like the shape under leaves
of whatever forages beneath my bedroom window.

Perhaps the you, the not-quite-you
will resolve out of the dead air
of each trans-atlantic phone call,

out of the static-heavy pause
before your synthesised voice
answers a question I have not posed.

III

Off to London on a research trip.
There's a gale at Bangor station
and the landscape sways with the tilting train.

A child is crying down the carriage;
minutes later her red-faced mother
pushes her through feet-encumbered aisles.

Sweaty men in suits glare up from laptops,
fat women with shopping bags and hairy chins
shake their heads and reminisce.

Me, I think of those lines by Yeats
and ponder what I might have wished
had I been blessed with my own child.

I might have wished an easy birth,
a calm sleep, a room
innocent of shadows.

I would have wished good friends,
summers of white clouds,
sun like the tang of orange ice on tongues.

Later, I would have wished for her
the first dance and the last
and all the dances in between,

then the comfort of her own space
and the grace to like her own company
until she was ready to answer someone's smile.

I might have wished a happy motherhood,
a table full of friends and family,
a study filled with photos, songs and books.

If there had been time I might have liked
to carry my own child along the aisle
of a tilting train that's running on and on.

Chapter 30: Family news

Woodlands
2nd February 1865

Dear Cousin Forristal

This has been yet another year of many changes, some happier than others. For the past year I have been mother to a new born child, the daughter of Joseph and his wife Lizzie, who sadly died giving birth to her.

There had always been the danger of a troublesome birth for Lizzie was already 35 and it was unwise to think of motherhood. I tried to make her rest during the final weeks but she was of a stubborn frame of mind and refused to let me help her. When her time came, it was clear we must call for the doctor but by the time he came it was too late to save her. It was only by God's grace that the little one survived.

We've called her Elizabeth Margaret because her aunt Eliza acts as Godmother. We hope that you will stand for Godfather, although from a great distance. We hope that some day she might have the opportunity to travel home and see those people and places that remain so dear to us. Joseph was distraught in the weeks afterwards but rallied when he remembered his responsibilities. He has been working at an Auctioneer's firm in Berrima for the past month and is doing well.

Meanwhile, you would hardly recognise your old spinster cousin. Elizabeth keeps me busy from dawn to dusk and beyond and there is so much to do each day there is no time to fret. I believe that Providence brought this little child into my life and I will ensure that she lacks for nothing. In time I shall send you a likeness of her.

As for other news, Mike continues well and expands his flock constantly. As for Thomas, he has for the past year been editor and part proprietor of the "Freeman's Journal", a position he got through the offices of Edward and Dr Quinn, the Bishop of Bathurst. He has a fine time, reporting all the doings of the colony.

In the act of writing these lines, dear cousin, your own letter of the 15th September has come to hand. I am glad to hear that the family is faring so well – it was particularly good to get news of young Margaret and her prospective suitors. I will await with interest further news of all births, marriages and deaths in the parish.

Mike, Bridget and Kate unite with me in a thousand fond remembrances to you, dear old Forristal, Aunt Bessy, Margaret, Ellen, William and the dear boy John.

Yours, Margaret Butler.

Darling Point, Sydney
December 1, 1873

My dear Forristal, Uncle Martin and Friends

Forgive me for not writing sooner. I wished to wait until I could announce our great news – Edward has been appointed to the Chief Justiceship of this territory. It is a signal honour, as you shall see. I am sending you the papers that will give a full and proper account of proceedings.

I continue to take care of the motherless child, who is growing fast and is the very image of her father. There is no change since last I wrote.

All is busyness now so I must wait to write a fuller account.

All the Butlers unite with me in wishing you good health,

Margaret.

Woodlands
13 February 1874

My very dear William

Your letter and paper with the sad news of your dear Father's and my most beloved friend's death reached me in late January. It was indeed a fine tribute to him in the *New Ross Standard*, much deserved and bringing back many memories of Old Times.

He was for thirty years and more my correspondent ever kind and true. I and my brothers and sisters loved him with a deep affection that neither time nor distance dimmed. I am consoled that the closing of the evening of his long and eventful life had been so peaceful, attended as it was by all the sacraments and offices of the Holy Church.

My dear Aunt Ansty is now my only old relative in the Old Land. I was glad to hear that she and all the other Joyces continue well. We too fare reasonably well here, and prosper, though time takes its toll. But Eliza Meg is a great consolation to me.

I unite with my brothers and sisters to commiserate on your great loss, and to offer you our fondest remembrances.

Your cousin, Margaret Butler.

Extract from Fiona Sheehan's journal 15th June 2003

Margaret 24

All over.
I thought
I would know
would feel
the snap
of sinew
All those years
his letters
like
sentences
completed
for me
Old friends
divided
by nothing
more than
the slant
of ink
the smell
of finest stock

Margaret 25

I remember

We stood
on the old bridge
one August night
the air sweet
not a breath
between us.
I barely felt
your hand
on my back
as we watched
the stream
ripple the stones.
All at once
a dart of blue,
a flash of orange
skimming
over water.

A gift
you said,
naming it

though I
already knew
this king
of fishermen.

The first
of many gifts,
Forristal.

Chapter 31: Hail and Farewell

I

Good old Flo. It seems
there's an Australian Irish Society
who often invite visiting Irish writers

and Flo has swung for me
an all expenses paid trip
to Sydney to do research

and give the first reading
from the Butler saga.
No title yet, but if

'work in progress'
was good enough for Joyce,
it's good enough for me.

A 22-hour flight first class,
a rental car, a good map to help me
discover where Mags Butler left her mark.

II

Manchester Airport 18th June 2003

BA257 from Newark was delayed.
I hung around arrivals,
watching the crowds, the ebb and flow

of greetings and farewells,
trying to guess the story behind
each meeting up of parents, lovers, emigrés.

In my bag, an air-ticket newly sent by Flo,
my head buzzing with the trip to Oz,
the sequence that I'd read,

learning their voices,
practising the nuances of
Lizzie and Margaret,

at the same time practising
the speech I'd learned off,
my welcome back to Mike.

Suddenly I remembered how once
when my father was returning home
from some work trip or another

and my mother brought us along
to the airport, I couldn't be contained
when I saw him through the frosted glass

and raced out of her grasp past
smiling customs men to where
I could hug his knees and cry for Daddy.

He was pleased, though he strove to hide it
beneath the facade of disciplinarian
he tried to keep with us.

I don't know how my mother looked,
if she was panic-stricken
when her four-year-old took off

through the crowds,
whether she smiled when she saw
her man come out with her little girl

or was she merely dutiful by then,

stretching her lips, going through
the motions of the waiting wife?

And it scared me that I didn't know
how my face would look when Mike came out
through that frosted glass.

He was there, striding through
as if there was no-one else in the arrivals hall,
smile wider than ever.

Then I knew how it would go,
this *ave atque vale*
at the meeting point,

There was no home
I could welcome him to.

III

Beaumaris, 20th June 2003

A morning to take flight;
mountains pink-tipped,
dawn sky purple still,

surface scratched by two jets
tearing their orange wakes
in opposite directions.

No wind and low tide,
the Straits a mirror
which geese glide over,

forming their pattern,
slotting into shape
before lift off.

A ragged order,
a V drawn by a five-year-old
on a crumpled page.

They gain height, desultory honks
give them shape, purpose
as they find their route, or follow.

Below, a motley crew.
Herons pause, albeit in slow motion,
a curlew pipes them off.

On shingle, a grey shape;
a cockler crouches as he rifles kelp, searching
as if the earth-bound have the answers.

Postscript

Irish Sea, 21st June 2003

We head into the sun,
turn our face to salutations,
our back to the dark east,

its morning promises.
The sea rocks us asleep,
a gentle port to starboard.

Halfway back, a gull, lost.
Light catches its beak,
perhaps a trick of the perspex.

The waves flatten out as if
there's suddenly space
for all that water

in this place of no coasts,
no harbours,
no moorings called home.

3. COMMENTARY

i. Creative and Structural issues at the start of the project

In this section I will examine the issues surrounding the selection of the source material for the verse novel and the creative and practical issues raised once that source had been found before turning to a more detailed commentary on the drafting of the work and the completion of the final draft.

In 2002, I copy-edited a book of contemporary accounts of women's lives in nineteenth century Ireland.¹⁴ During that process, it struck me that many of the voices contained in these accounts, particularly those describing the experience of emigration, were interesting and dynamic in their own right; I became intrigued at the notion of attempting to bring them back to life through some form of imaginative recreation. This idea was the genesis for the PhD dissertation. Having decided that I wanted to use some aspect of the nineteenth-century Irish emigration experience as the subject for my narrative, the first task in finding a suitable source for the story was to consult a range of material drawn from Irish archives housed by the National Library, Trinity College Dublin and the National Archives. I was looking for documents with the scope necessary to generate a long narrative and trawled through diaries, manuscripts, official reports and contemporary correspondence. One example was the Commissioners of Woods papers, housed in the National Archives, which included details of state-aided emigration schemes from crown estates in Ireland in the 1850s and which turned up fascinating individual accounts of emigration to the United States. Others dealt with emigration experiences in other parts of the world, including Australia.

¹⁴ Nellie Ó Cléirigh, *Hardship & High Living. Irish women's lives 1808 – 1923* (Dublin: Portobello Press, 2003).

In examining these documents as potential source material, I had a number of criteria for the selection process. First of all, since I intended to write an original creative work, it seemed desirable that the source material should not have been previously published or widely disseminated. This ruled out many of the letters and diaries that have been published in previous studies of Irish emigration.¹⁵ Secondly, I needed a source with a broad enough range to allow the construction of a full-length narrative. Individual letters might include fascinating glimpses into the lives of emigrants; for example, the Commissioners of Woods papers included a letter sent by a young woman called Margaret McCarthy who emigrated to New York in 1849 and who wrote a letter home to her family encouraging them to follow her. The letter, which is included in Nellie Ó Cléirigh's study of Irish women's lives in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,¹⁶ was full of fascinating details about the voyage over to America, such as the type of clothing needed for newly-arrived emigrés, but individual letters such as this did not on their own offer sufficient material to generate an entire narrative. Ideally, I was looking for something that provided a sense of progression over a period of time and which would allow me, through historical research, to fill in any blanks left by the chronology of the archive. Thirdly, I was looking for strong individual voices to emerge from the source material. My creative preference at this stage was for either a sole narrator or small group of narrators with whom the reader could empathise and in whose story they would take an interest. So I was looking for accounts that were personal, individual and entertaining, on which I

¹⁵ For example, David Fitzpatrick, Oceans of Consolation. Personal Accounts of Irish Migration to Australia (Cork: Cork UP; New York: Cornell, 1994) .

¹⁶ Ó Cléirigh 57-66 .

could build a character-driven verse narrative. The Butler archive seemed to meet each of these criteria.

The Butler archive¹⁷ is a collection of 22 letters and assorted fragments of notes and letters written principally by Margaret Butler, an Irish Catholic from Kilkenny who emigrated with her family to Australia in 1854, to her relatives who remained in Ireland. The archive also contains letters from Margaret's brother, Edward, her sister Bridget, and a relation, Edward Daly, as well as a number of incomplete fragments from other members of the immediate and extended Butler family. The letters date between 1841 and 1917 but the vast majority refer to the period post-emigration (1854-1870) when the family was settling into Australian life. The archive was deposited by Irish relatives of the Butler family with the National Library of Ireland in the late 1990s and has thus far been unsorted and unpublished, although the letters have been transcribed, something I was profoundly grateful for when I first began to read them and discovered the difficulties of deciphering nineteenth-century handwriting, a difficulty which is shared by my novel's protagonist, Fiona Sheehan.¹⁸

Reading through the transcriptions, it struck me that the letters were bursting with narrative energy. They paint a clear and vibrant picture of a middle class, prosperous family leaving Ireland because they wished to make a new life in a new country, not because they were forced out of their old one, and who make a highly successful transition in Australia. They were thus very far from the stereotypical image of

¹⁷ Butler Archive, Access Number 4205, National Library of Ireland, Dublin .

¹⁸ I was first shown the archive by Colette O'Flaherty, Assistant Keeper at the National Library of Ireland, who was aware of the nature of my research and who felt the letters might provide the type of material I was seeking .

transported convicts or evicted tenants which we have come to associate with stories of Irish emigration to the Southern Hemisphere and which have been described by writers such as Thomas Keneally. His book, The Great Shame, contrasted the experiences of convicted transportees Hugh Larkin, a poor tenant farmer, and William Smith O'Brien, the charismatic leader of the 1848 Young Ireland rebellion, and his rebel comrades.¹⁹ It seemed to me that the Butler archive, which demonstrates very different experiences and preoccupations from those of evicted tenants or failed rebels, offered the potential for inspiring a creative work that would provide an original take on the emigrant experience.

A more detailed examination of the letters will help to explain why I was convinced of their narrative potential.²⁰ The earliest is dated 184[1]²¹ and is written by Edward Butler, Margaret's brother, to his cousin, William Forristal, from an address in Camden Street, Dublin. Butler refers to various land purchase negotiations and seems to imply that the family are considering leaving their holding in Pleaberstown, Co. Kilkenny, as a result of an accumulation of debt on the property. At the same time, Edward mentions other possible land purchases and displays a considerable grasp of the legal technicalities, not surprising in one who was later to climb the ranks of the Australian legal establishment; he became Lord Chief Justice of Sydney in 1873. The complexity of the affairs mentioned creates the impression of a well-established and well-educated family whose business affairs are somewhat chaotic: rich material for a fictionalised account.

¹⁹ Thomas Keneally, The Great Shame (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998; London: Vintage, 1999).

²⁰ Full transcriptions of the letters are included in Appendix A of the dissertation.

²¹ Where dates/names are uncertain in the transcription, brackets are used.

There is a twelve year gap to the next letter, from Margaret Butler in Pleaberstown in November 1853, to the same William Forristal; he is the recipient of most of the letters and appears to have been a first cousin of the Butlers. Margaret displays a much chattier and more affectionate style than her brother, and her grasp of grammar seems somewhat less exact. She refers to various members of the extended family and gives a strong impression of the type of familial bonds which were to be a constant source of support to her during her years abroad. Throughout the remaining letters, there is a reiteration of good wishes and warm thoughts towards the same aunts and cousins, as well as references to other family intrigues involving relations in another property in the Waterford/Kilkenny area.

The archive contains three fascinating letters from Margaret and her sister Bridget to William Forristal between March and May 1854, when the family are lodging in Liverpool, waiting for their berth on a ship to take them to Australia. These letters provide vivid descriptions of the emigrant's experience in Liverpool at the period; they are full of details of crowded docks, over-populated boarding houses and very practical information about the types of provisions needed by passengers undertaking such a lengthy and arduous journey. In one, Margaret requests that her cousin send a sack of potatoes with butter and two gallons of spirits which are to be placed in the middle of the sack of potatoes! Margaret seems to have been frequently sick over this period – one could already imagine a scenario where her illnesses were more imagined than real as she appears to exhibit quite a nervous and melancholic temperament. This apparently nervy temperament offered a strong clue as to how I might develop the character of Margaret over the course of the verse novel.

Unfortunately, there is no letter describing the Butlers' actual voyage to Australia and there is a six-year gap to the next letter in the archive, which is written by Margaret to her Forristal cousins from her home in Woodlands, Australia. Margaret is writing to inform them of the doleful news of her father's death; he seems to have gone to Australia ahead of them and had been working as a Steward there. There are side references to Edward's marriage and to his promotion to the position of Crown Prosecutor in the Sydney district court. Margaret also mentions that three of her brothers plan to go prospecting in the new gold fields that opened up in New South Wales in Australia's version of the gold rush. There is no reference to how the prospectors fared, although one might draw conclusions from the family's upward mobility that they fared reasonably well. It was clear that their experiences would have to be teased out in the verse narrative itself (where they in fact fail in their search for gold), using contemporary accounts and historical research to inform the writing.

Over the next two decades, the letters home paint a portrait of a family spreading farther and farther across the territory, but who continue to be tied by close bonds. They also seem to experience their fair share of exciting incidents. In a letter dated 1867, Margaret makes passing reference to her brother William travelling over 1,000 miles to visit them for Christmas and being caught up in a coach-robbery by bushrangers while on his way to visit another sister, Eliza, in a convent in the Queensland town of Ipswich. Life, however, could be dull for those who stayed at home. In the same letter, Margaret describes the monotonous routine of life at Woodlands, which includes dairy management, gardening and small farming, and her own sense of boredom and frustration with her lot. Subsequent letters refer to family deaths, marriages (including a highly problematic union with the daughter of a

Protestant landowner), illnesses, droughts, court cases and bush fires. There is news of visitors from Ireland, sometimes relatives, sometimes children of family friends, and of new settlers who had to be found positions in New South Wales – Margaret continues to be the main chronicler of her family's fortunes, despite the fact that she frequently has to battle with illness and what sounds very much like depression.

The last letter we have from her was written in February, 1900, when Margaret states that she has now reached the venerable age of “three score years and ten”. She continues to update her cousins on the latest family events – there is no record in the remaining letter fragments of the date of her own death.

As this brief account of the Butler correspondence shows, there was plenty of material that could be used to generate a verse narrative. However, my initial reading raised some interesting questions about the creative decisions and directions to be taken with this project. The most obvious issue was the existence of large hiatuses in the narrative flow of the letters, a factor that, as we have already seen,²² Anne Stevenson also had to contend with in her verse narrative, Correspondences. In many cases there are gaps of seven and ten years in the Butler correspondence; one could assume that other letters were sent and received in the interim, but these have not survived. So, in order to achieve a coherent narrative, and in the absence of any alternative biographical information about the Butlers, I found it necessary to fictionalise quite substantial parts of their story.

²² See page 11 in the Introduction section of this dissertation.

In many cases, I was able to use historical research to fill in the blanks; for example, I read up on sea voyages from Liverpool to Australia, the experience of prospectors in the Australian gold rush and the lives of women who ran the homesteads in the “squatter” properties of New South Wales in the 1860s and 1870s. This research, in turn, led me in many other unforeseen directions. For example, I learned about the loss of the steam clipper, the Royal Charter, which sank off the rocks of Moelfre, Anglesey, North Wales, during a hurricane in 1859, and which was reputed to be carrying gold bullion from the Australian gold fields to Liverpool. As I was living on Anglesey at the time, I felt that if I found a way of linking the Royal Charter sinking to the Butler family, it would offer an opportunity to incorporate into the verse novel my own impressions of, and reactions to, the very beautiful Anglesey landscape while at the same time developing another thematic aspect of the project. I was keen to include, where possible, links to my own experiences as an Irish woman living in another culture so as to discover whether the contrasts and connections between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries might make an interesting commentary on the nature of cultural identity and home.

Another question raised by my initial reading of the archive was whether or not to diverge entirely from the Butler story, using the available information as a starting point but creating an entirely new set of characters and situations based on their lives. My initial preference was to see how far I could remain true to their general story, while at the same time creating a credible and engaging narrative, but I did not rule out the possibility of creating new characters who might interact with, or respond to, the Butlers. In the next part of this chapter I shall discuss the solutions I found to these various creative issues.

There were other strategic issues to be considered at the initial stage of the project, the most important of which were formal considerations. Having decided that I wished to write a verse novel, I had to decide about how strict or loose the form would be. My “literature review” of other verse novels²³ revealed that verse novelists had adopted many and myriad formal approaches to their work. In The Golden Gate,²⁴ Vikram Seth followed Pushkin’s Eugene Onegin model of iambic tetrameter to construct his story of Californian love and friendship out of 590 sonnets in 13 sections. Glyn Maxwell divides his verse novel, Time’s Fool,²⁵ into nine chapters and uses terza rima throughout. One of the most recent exponents, Deryn Rees-Jones, uses a variety of forms and structures in her verse novel, Quiver.²⁶ But I was not yet ready to impose an arbitrary formal structure on my own creative work and preferred to wait and see whether a form suggested itself as the poems progressed. In my previous creative work, I had tended not to use strict form, preferring the comparative looseness of free verse and using a sense of rhythm to dictate line length and stanza structure. It was not yet clear to me whether the verse narrative, dependent as it would be on so many fictional factors – voice, characterisation, plot – would require a more obviously formal approach in order to contain the narrative and copper-fasten its poetry credentials.

²³ A more detailed discussion of the development of the verse novel genre is included in the critical commentary section of this dissertation .

²⁴ Vikram Seth, The Golden Gate (London: Faber, 1986) .

²⁵ Glyn Maxwell, Time’s Fool (2000; London: Picador, 2001) .

²⁶ Deryn Rees-Jones, Quiver (Bridgend: Seren, 2004) .

The issue of voice also seemed to be crucial to the success of this endeavour. In my previous verse narratives, I had sought to create credible voices and sympathetic characters in order to engage readers with the narrative. I therefore needed to decide whether I wanted to tell the story through one point of view (and Margaret Butler's view point seemed the most obvious to concentrate on) or else allow other narrators to take their share of the story. There appeared to be advantages to taking the second route, as it seemed to widen the scope of the type of action being described; for example, it is highly unlikely that Margaret would have had any direct experience of gold-prospecting, and would merely have heard stories about it from her brothers. However, if I chose to allow the brothers to tell their part of the story, it could make for more immediate and compelling narration. But the challenge was to ensure that each voice was distinct, that each character had his/her own register. I found one possible solution in the work of Craig Raine, who manages this feat very successfully through the use of a third-person narrator in his History: The Home Movie,²⁷ which tells the story of two very different families, the Raines and the Pasternaks, through the filter of the third-person narrator, whom we take to be the poet himself. Each character is carefully defined and delineated. However, I was also concerned that the option of a third-person narrator might take away from the immediacy of the first-person narrative which the letters themselves engendered. I decided to experiment with various narrative techniques to discover what worked best in the particular context.

Another question at the initial stage was whether to weave a modern narrative or commentary through the historical narrative. In the early stages of planning this

²⁷ Craig Raine, History: The Home Movie (New York: Doubleday, 1994) .

project, I envisaged a two-strand approach in which my own experiences, or rather those of the poet narrator based on me, were counter pointed with the historical action. The post-modernist dialogue between past and present has already been used in many creative works, for example A.S. Byatt's Possession²⁸ and, to an extent, by Raine in his History: The Home Movie. I decided to continue to write poems in a contemporary mode that would go alongside the writing of the Butler poems and share their thematic concerns.

ii. Creative and Strategic issues raised on completion of first draft

Having identified the letters from the Butler archive as ones that contained a strong, coherent voice and narrative, I began to work on a novel outline that would allow me to explore through a creative treatment of those letters the themes of emigration, home and identity. However, I soon discovered that another important theme, the pursuit of love and the realisation that it has many different shapes and forms, was one I was keen to incorporate into the story. The desire to do so was driven by my recognition that the Margaret Butler who emerges from the letters is a solitary and unloved figure who never seems to find her own emotional home, once she leaves Ireland for Australia. The letters reverberate with repeated expressions of love and affection for the family left behind and the places obviously so dear to her. She signs off with expressions of “best love”²⁹ or “best and warmest love”.³⁰ In one of her letters from Liverpool, while waiting to sail on the barque Lancaster which was to take her to Sydney, she sounds positively heart-broken in expressing her farewells to her “dear

²⁸ A.S. Byatt, Possession (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990).

²⁹ Butler 4, undated.

³⁰ Butler 3, 25 February 1854.

Forristal”.³¹ Once in Australia, her letters continue to express curiosity about, and interest in, the events back home in Ireland, an interest that seems far greater than her apparent engagement with events taking place in her new home, if the cursory nature of her accounts is anything to go by. My creative response to the writer of these letters was to imagine a character who, for whatever reasons, had never found the opportunity to form an intimate relationship or experience a real love in Ireland and who, by force of circumstance, was obliged to live the remainder of her life in lonely exile in a foreign country.

But although the extant letters created that impression, there were so many gaps in the narrative that it appeared to require significant degrees of fictionalisation in order to create a coherent story. This became clear when I began to work on the novel outline and realised that, in order to create a satisfying fiction, I would need to choose a main theme and then create a narrative to explore that theme. As previously stated, there is a six year gap between Margaret’s last letter from Liverpool³² and her first letter from her new home in Woodlands,³³ the small ranch to the northwest of Sydney that she and her siblings acquired. There is no description of the arduous four-month voyage to Sydney, nor any indication of how the Butlers settled themselves once they arrived in the new country. Clearly there had been correspondence between the Butlers and their relations back in Ireland because Margaret refers, in the first surviving Australian letter, to receiving “yours of the 8th March on the 14th of May”.³⁴

³¹ Butler 5, 19 March [1854].

³² Butler 7, 9 May 1854.

³³ Butler 8, 29 May 1860.

³⁴ Butler 8.

But in the absence of those intervening letters, the narrative seemed to require something to fill in the gaps. Equally, there is a seven-year hiatus between that letter and the next letter, dated 20th June 1867. In order to have a coherent narrative, some sort of device would be required to bridge the gaps in narrative contained in the original correspondence. It seemed to me that I had two main choices. I could either leave the letters as they were, gaps and all, and create an interweaving narrative based around one of the characters mentioned in the letters, or else add additional letters to follow up on the leads generated by the original letters in order to propel the story I wanted to tell or, in fact, to create an entirely new story. Although it raised ethical issues about using real people and events for fictional purposes (a point I shall return to later in this commentary), I decided to opt for the latter approach because it allowed me to retain the over-arching structure of the archive and, by using the letters, to retain the documentary flavour of the work, something I was keen to maintain if at all possible. Historical research would be required to supplement the information contained in the Butler letters to help fill in such gaps but luckily there was no shortage of historical accounts of journeys to Australia to which I could refer.

At this point, I was still faced with the issue of whether or not to use a specific poetic form for the poems, particularly as I had opted for a parallel and interweaving modern narrative, featuring a twenty-first century narrator, Fiona Sheehan, who would discover the letters and respond to them in ways that would clarify doubts and problems she was having in her own life. I felt this modern strand was needed on two grounds. Firstly, and pragmatically, I myself was a writer settling into a new landscape and environment and wanted to respond to that new environment creatively. Therefore, such an approach would allow me to incorporate those

responses into the overall narrative in a reasonably harmonious way. Secondly, I believed that the interweaving of a modern and historic narrative would help to illuminate the themes I wanted to deal with. In the twenty-first century, we move around with greater ease and frequency and for many, though not all of us, there is no longer a question of forced exile, and yet the experience of being in another country or, in fact, feeling like an exile in one's own home place, is still real for many people. Indeed, increased migration resulting from the lowering of economic borders within the EU and elsewhere is creating more societies in which the position of the emigrant is as vulnerable as ever. And although the twenty-first century emigrant, Fiona, is not in economic or social exile, she does in many ways feel estranged both from her own society and the new society in which she has settled. I concluded that there was much to be explored in contrasting the modern and historic experiences through the medium of the verse novel.

It soon became evident that in order to achieve this counterpoint between past and present, there needed to be a clear contrast in poetic form and structure between the modern and historic narratives. Having decided that the modern narrator, Fiona, was to be a brusque, slightly jaded character who liked to crack jokes and talk dirty and who saw herself, somewhat delusionally, as a hard-nosed survivor, it seemed appropriate to come up with a rather tight stanza form that would remain consistent throughout the narrative. In this I was influenced by the approach that the Australian poet Dorothy Porter took in some of her verse novels, in particular her detective verse novel The Monkey's Mask,³⁵ which we will examine in greater detail in the critical section of this dissertation. Porter's protagonist is a tough, Sam Spade-like character,

³⁵ Dorothy Porter, The Monkey's Mask (London: Serpent's Tale, 1997) .

and Porter adopts a structure of terse couplets for her narrative. I liked the fluidity of this approach, the way it provided momentum to the narrative, so I decided for my modern narrative to adapt the stanza style to a consistent three-line, non-end-rhyming shape that depended on a good deal of internal rhyme, fast rhythm and run-on lines to keep the narrative well-paced.

However, for reasons of clarity, the historical narrative strand needed to contrast with the modern style, both in tone and appearance. I spent a good deal of time experimenting with loose versified versions of the letters before deciding that a prose form would suit their documentary nature a great deal better than any verse form could. Furthermore, as I have already stated, if I was going to “manufacture” Butler letters to fill the narrative gaps left by the real letters, the more authentic-looking they were the better. So I chose a two-strand approach with a tightly formed three-line stanza for the modern narrative and prose paragraphs for the letters. But still the narrative seemed to lack the necessary contrast between a strong modern and a strong historic voice.

If I have already described Margaret Butler as possessing a strong and vivid narrative voice, why did I feel it necessary to augment her narrative by creating an entirely new voice and character? In the letters, a combination of lengthy hiatuses and a sense that there was only so much that Margaret Butler would allow herself to tell her relations back home, seemed to detract from the strong sense of an inner life which I wanted to portray in the verse novel. I needed a nineteenth-century protagonist whose journey of self discovery would match that of the twenty-first century protagonist. However, as David Fitzpatrick’s study of emigrant writing has

shown, the conventions of nineteenth-century emigrant correspondence, in which the writers restricted themselves to superficial accounts of their lives and expressed themselves in similar styles and with similar turns of phrase, would not provide the type of emotional and psychological detail I needed for my novel. Fitzpatrick points out that many emigrant correspondents shared a similar need to receive and offer consolation in their letters:

The letter from a distant relative, whether received in Ireland, Britain, America, or Australia, was a token of solidarity and an instrument of reassurance, confirming the durability of long-established familial groups. The likelihood that many correspondents were whistling in the dark gave further urgency to their desire to offer and solicit 'consolation'.³⁶

Margaret Butler's letters show a similar desire to reassure the cousins back home and to gain reassurance that she has not been forgotten; the difficulties of every-day life in Australia and her own inner life are thus rarely alluded to.

In the historical narrative strand in the novel Possession, A.S. Byatt gets around this difficulty by having her correspondents, two prominent Victorian poets, become intimate; as lovers, they have the complete freedom of expression needed to advance the story. There can be no breaches of decorum and so there is no need for the reader to read between the lines or guess what the letter writer was actually thinking. With Margaret Butler's letters, honest as they are about her loneliness and her inability to adapt to her new home, there is still a considerable amount left to the imagination of

³⁶ David Fitzpatrick, Oceans of Consolation 20 .

the reader. Thus the question for me was whether to create an inner life for Margaret through the development of a story line told through her letters, and find some way of overcoming her natural decorum as a correspondent in order to tell that story, or else to find some other way of casting light on her experience.

In my historical research of the period, I came across references to a group of Irish “orphans”, as they were called at the time, who were brought over to Australia on an assisted emigration scheme in 1849-50. These girls, many of whom still had parents back home in Ireland but all of whom resided in poorhouses and state asylums, were brought out to help address the shortage of females, both as domestic servants and potential wives, that afflicted the new colony at the time. One such group, who travelled together from Plymouth on the ship *The Thomas Arbuthnot* on 25th October, 1849, was the subject of an excellent study by Richard Reid³⁷ which, using the Journal of the ship’s doctor, Philip Strutt, as a source, provides a wonderful insight into the experiences of emigrants on the frequently terrifying and arduous voyage out to Australia. Having previously read an account of one young woman’s experiences in a workhouse in Clonmel and the cruelty she suffered there,³⁸ it struck me that I could create an excellent counterfoil for Margaret Butler by imagining an entirely new character, a young woman who came over with the *Thomas Arbuthnot* orphans and who, unlike Margaret, positively embraced the new experience and new country because it rescued her from a life of poverty and cruelty in Ireland. This character, whom I christened “Lizzie”, would be provided with her own narrative and her own voice which would be threaded around the two other narratives. This

³⁷ Richard Reid, *A Decent Set of Girls. The Irish Famine Orphans of the Thomas Arbuthnot 1849 - 1850* (Yass, NSW: Yass Heritage Project, 1997) .

³⁸ Nellie Ó Cléirigh, *Hardship and High Living* 83-4 .

narration would act as a commentary on the events mentioned in the Butler letters but could provide far more detail about the emotional and psychological context for those events.

In order to generate tension in the narrative, I wanted there to exist considerable antagonism between Margaret and Lizzie. I imagined that the older woman would feel threatened by someone from a lower class who exhibited very different feelings about the new environment they both found themselves in. I also wanted to provide a concrete focus for that antagonism, something that might help clarify the issues of commitment and love which were also being explored in the modern narrative strand. So I decided that a relationship should develop between Lizzie and Joseph, Margaret's youngest brother. In the actual archive, Joseph is mentioned only three times throughout, the first in a general sign-off from all the Butlers to all the Forristals,³⁹ the second in a brief sentence informing the cousins that "Joe is doing well at the Auctioneers business – making and spending money. He too is getting stout – He often takes a run up to see us"⁴⁰ and the third, from 1889, where Margaret informs Forristal that "Joe and his family well – He and one of his girls on a visit with us at present"⁴¹. There is one other early reference, in 1860, to three of the brothers being keen to explore the gold prospecting opportunities out at Snowy River⁴² and, although Joseph isn't mentioned, it is reasonable to surmise that he might have been one of that group.

³⁹ Butler 9, 20 June 1867 .

⁴⁰ Butler 11, 2 December 1870 .

⁴¹ Butler 18, 29 November 1889 .

⁴² Butler 8, 29 May 1860 .

So, following up on these various clues, it seemed that Joe might be a suitable candidate for a suitor for Lizzie and that that relationship would cause further antagonism between Margaret and Lizzie. Clearly, a woman of Margaret's class would find it difficult to accept a workhouse girl into her family – her frequent references to the Butlers in her letters seem to indicate a strong strain of family pride – but, in addition, I wished to suggest that she treated the younger children, and Joseph in particular, as surrogate children to fill the vacuum she felt as a childless single woman. So Lizzie's relationship with Joseph would threaten both Margaret's sense of social standing and her assumed parental role within the family. Once the clandestine relationship was disclosed, after Lizzie's pregnancy ensured they could hide it no longer, Margaret would be forced to accept the situation and, ultimately, achieve a wider acceptance of her fate by taking on the responsibility for mothering Joe and Lizzie's daughter, after Lizzie has died in childbirth.

Lizzie would provide me with the opportunity of a third narrator, to counterpoint both the experiences of Margaret, in her limited capacity as correspondent, and of Fiona, the modern narrator, a single woman coming to terms with possible isolation and childlessness. As Fiona is after all a writer, albeit a not very successful one, it seemed appropriate that she should end up writing the Lizzie narrative, once she had read the Butler letters, digested their contents and learned from them. So we should read the Lizzie poems as both a further telling of the Butler story and a way for Fiona to express her own feelings and experiences. We discover that she is a woman who has previously fallen prey to false stereotypes and expectations of what love is and who finds it difficult to recognise and commit to real love when she does, eventually,

find it in the unexpected shape of the academic, Mike Joyce (rechristened Jenkins in the final draft).

The form and positioning of the Lizzie narrative caused me considerable difficulty. My initial idea was to mirror the modern narrative by using the same three-line stanza form and by placing the Lizzie poems in the second half of the book. In this way, the reader would read the Lizzie poems with the benefit of having already read Fiona's poems, and thus understand each narrative better. I even envisaged a situation where one could read the narrative from either end, a sort of reversed narrative. But when it came to assembling the poems into a coherent whole, these approaches seemed clumsy and inadequate and did not allow for the individual narrative strands to illuminate each other. I thought that I would prefer to try to weave Lizzie's voice in at a much earlier stage by introducing her poems, untitled and unattributed, so that initially there might be some confusion about who was talking but that gradually it would become clear who owned the voice and how she fitted into the story. As the verse novel progresses, there is a much tighter fit between the modern strand, the Butler narrative and the Lizzie poems, with each of the poems forming some sort of commentary on the others.

Other thematic links required more fictionalising and invention. The search for gold which became an epidemic in Australia and the United States during the late 1840s and 1850s, seemed to provide me with a good corollary for the search for love being undertaken by my main protagonists. I was curious to know if the many Irishmen who sold all their belongings in the hope of striking it rich in the Australian goldfields saw the irony of seeking out wealth from the earth that had betrayed them

during the Famine years of 1845-1848, an irony Lizzie explores in one poem in her narrative.

The theme of gold also offered a link between Fiona's contemporary experience on Anglesey and the Butlers' experiences in 1850s Australia. As I have already mentioned, an actual historical event seemed to provide a vehicle for this in the shape of a famous shipwreck which took place in 1859 off the north coast of Anglesey. The ship, the Royal Charter, was said to have been carrying gold bullion back from the Australian goldfields en route to Liverpool when it sank off Moelfre, on the northeast coast of Anglesey, during a storm. So strong were the rumours of sunken treasure that divers continue to dive in the area up to the present day in the hope of finding the lost gold; there is also a lovely tradition that the pebbly beaches around Moelfre sparkle with a strange, golden colour in certain lights – indeed, the local place-name for the beach nearest to where the tragedy took place is Traeth d'Or (Golden Beach), although local residents claim they are reluctant to go there, due to its tragic associations. Given this, it seemed appropriate to make Mike, Fiona's modern love interest, an expert on the Royal Charter, and to have the pair visit the scene of the shipwreck at an early stage of their relationship to mirror the quest for love/gold that Fiona is now embarking upon. But having set up the Royal Charter connection, there was a further opportunity to strengthen the link between the Butler narrative and the contemporary narrative by placing one of the Butler brothers on the doomed ship. There is absolutely no suggestion in the letters that this happened in real life or that, indeed, any of the Butlers ever returned to Ireland. However, the opportunity to forge a stronger link between past and present, and to explore the theme of loss and acceptance, seemed too great to pass up.

There were other opportunities to use historical fact for fictive purposes. During my historical research, I also came across a reference to a Welsh farmer called Joseph Jenkins who had emigrated to Australia in the 1850s, when he was well into his middle years. Jenkins spent some 40 years travelling throughout New South Wales and Victoria, settling wherever he could find work and living the hard life of a swagman, or vagrant worker.⁴³ Jenkins was a Welsh speaker, and found himself alienated in most of the places where he tried to settle; having been a successful farmer and highly respected member of his community in Wales, his station declined drastically in Australia and he suffered prejudice and bullying from many of the people he encountered. Unusually for an emigrant, however, he managed to raise enough money to eventually buy a passage for himself back to Liverpool, and he actually died in his home town in the late 1890s. Jenkins spent a particularly miserable time working as the town sweeper in one small New South Wales town. At one stage I considered having Lizzie encounter him during her travels but it seemed too much like a digression from the main action to merit more than a mention in one poem. However, I decided to use his experience to flesh out the currently shadowy character of the Butlers' father in a second draft and also filtered Jenkins's general sense of displacement and alienation into Margaret Butler's experience. Although they achieved very different social strata during their time in Australia, they shared a common view of the land and the people and spent the majority of their time wishing they were back home.

⁴³ Bethan Phillips, Pity the Poor Swagman (Aberystwyth: Cymdeithas Llyfrau Ceredigion, 2002).

I also chose not to foreground a dramatic story which is recounted by Margaret in an early Australian letter⁴⁴ to William Forristal. As I mentioned in the previous section, Margaret describes how her brother William set out on a journey of 1,000 miles to visit the family at Woodlands one Christmas. En route he decided to visit his sister Eliza, who was now at the convent in Ipswich. On his way to the convent, William's coach was held up by bushrangers and, although he was carrying a large number of cheques in the soles of his shoes, he only lost the 10 shillings he was carrying in his pocket. Margaret is quite casual in recounting this story, demonstrating that danger was an everyday event for those who travelled around Australia. However, in order to make it fit with other fictional developments in the verse novel, I had to switch the identity of the brother involved as William had already lost his life in the Royal Charter disaster. I decided to leave it as a rather interesting anecdote told by Margaret to illustrate the strangeness of her life in Australia, rather than as a major vehicle for plot development.

My willingness to abandon historical veracity in the interest of plot development requires further discussion at this point. As I completed the first draft, I found myself increasingly diverging from the content of the original archive, adding new material to original letters and actually inventing new letters to advance the plot and flesh out character development. As we shall see, I would continue this trend in the second draft. It did raise ethical questions for me, however. I grew concerned that I might be seen as “playing fast and loose” with somebody else's history, a fact I have Fiona acknowledge towards the end of the verse novel.⁴⁵ Such ethical questions will become

⁴⁴ Butler 9, 20 June 1867 .

⁴⁵ See the poem on page 160 of this dissertation .

even more pressing when I come to consider publication of the verse novel, at which point it will be important to make clear, in an author's introduction to the work, the demarcation line between fact and fiction.

The completed first draft still left other questions unanswered. It was clear that, despite the introduction of the character of Lizzie, the inner life of Margaret Butler was not yet sufficiently developed to make her a compelling central character or to explain Fiona's fascination with her. I needed to find a way to get inside Margaret's skin and to present her own deepest fears and feelings in a way that the letters would not allow. I also needed to create a stronger sense of Fiona's reaction to the letters in order to explain why she makes the decisions she does at the end of the novel, to end her relationship and to pursue her dreams in Australia.

iii. Commentary on the final draft

In this section, I shall provide a chapter-by-chapter commentary on the completed verse novel as a way of elucidating how I tried to find, in the final draft, solutions to the various creative issues discussed earlier.

Title

The title, In Sight of Home, deserves some explanation as the process of finding it proved particularly difficult. I wanted to explore in the verse novel the concepts of home and identity, and how our ideas of those two concepts can change in unfamiliar contexts. Moving to another country challenged me to reappraise my own ideas of nationality, identity and home. Anglesey had become somewhere where I felt very much at home, and yet at the same time there were differences between Wales and

Ireland, at a cultural, physical and linguistic level, that I wanted to explore. Under certain atmospheric conditions, it is possible to glimpse the Wicklow coastline from the northern tip of Anglesey, so I felt I was undertaking that exploration within sight of home.

What then drew me to Paula Meehan's poem, "Home", which provides the four-line epigraph to the verse novel, was its notion that a woman, particularly a woman writer, could create her own concept of home, could carry it with her wherever she happened to be: "I know when I hear it I'll have made it myself. I'll be home."⁴⁶ I wanted to explore the contrasting experiences of Fiona, Margaret and Lizzie, each of whom is forced by circumstances beyond her control to make a new start, to make a new home for herself in a strange place. Of the three, Margaret is the most reluctant to embrace her new surroundings and to shed her old identity – like Joseph Jenkins, she sees herself as something of a Ruth amid the alien corn and refers to her "alien heart" on one occasion – and yet even she, by the end of the verse novel, has found some sense of peace and identity for herself. Lizzie actively pursues a new start because her old life in Ireland has been so difficult; she has no fear of the unknown because the known has proved so fearful for her. Fiona, whose experiences most closely mirror my own as a modern Irish woman, has a more circuitous route to that discovery. Having previously assumed that home meant staying in Ireland, making a career and a happy marriage, she discovers that the route to fulfilment and to feeling at home with oneself might involve jettisoning those stereotypes entirely and making a new home for herself through her writing. So the challenge was to find a title that accurately encapsulated each of their experiences.

⁴⁶ Paula Meehan, "Home", *Pillow Talk* (Oldcastle, Co. Meath: Gallery, 1994).

Eventually it was William, Margaret's brother, who seemed to offer the solution because he is seen to pay the greatest forfeit for attempting to return to his old home; he is drowned in a shipwreck off the coast of Anglesey, "in sight of home", as the anguished Margaret tells us in a poem in Chapter 26. I decided that this line would give the verse novel its title because each of the three protagonists were, in one sense or other, living their lives "in sight of home" and for each, the measure of success was the extent to which they could make a new home in which their "alien" hearts could feel at peace.

Preface and Chapter 1: The Beginning

I was keen to establish the work's novelistic conventions early and felt that the use of a preface would alert the reader to the fact that s/he should expect fictional devices throughout; a reference to 'the inevitable flashback' in Chapter 4 is also intended to remind the reader that s/he is firmly in the world of fiction. The preface with its short lines and spare detail also allowed me to create the mood of chilly displacement that I wanted to establish throughout the early part of the work. We find ourselves in someone else's home, a place that has been abandoned and yet still has the traces of earlier occupancy:

Somebody's home,
although it has been months
since a curtain was drawn

a light switched on,

The reader does not yet know the location of the house or the identity of the owner but the poetry has already created an atmosphere of displacement that should prepare them for what follows. Nor does the reader yet know the identity of the speaker, although references to logging on and downloading suggests that he or she is someone comfortable with a modern world of technology and jargon.

The five sections in Chapter 1 provide more clues about the speaker's identity and her character and provide the first plot development. They parachute the reader directly into the action as the narrator, Fiona Sheehan, wakes up on New Year's Day and takes a call from the old friend who is to be the catalyst for the major change in her life. We already get a strong sense of Fiona's character as a somewhat disenchanted loner who hates New Year, lives on warmed-up coffee and breakfasts on Christmas cake when she gets the chance. The register is colloquial and snappy, the three-line stanzas quickening the pace and heightening our impression that she likes to see herself as a smart, witty commentator, much like the characters from the 1930s Thin Man movies that she adores. Here, for example, is her description of Roisin Ryan, the last line of the second stanza a deliberately sardonic attempt to deflect her own sense of inferiority:

Beautiful skin (which moisturiser?)
and gravity hadn't begun
to play the tricks it pestered me with.

She had a prosperous air; wore silk,

amber in great chunks at her neck,

Choo-shoes, naturally.

The reader learns in this first chapter that Fiona is a writer, although there is some evidence to suggest that she is not a particularly successful one, having merely published pamphlets. References to “buried treasure” and lost documents prepare us for the discovery that is going to dictate her entire future as a writer and which is foreshadowed in the final stanza of section IV:

The parcel was a snug fit
in my shoulder-bag;
I’d make space for it later.

The “snug fit” is a deliberate echo of Heaney’s famous lines about writing: “Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests, as snug as a gun”.⁴⁷ Like Heaney, Fiona wishes to find a way to mediate her instinct as a writer with the realities of her life. In this chapter, we also learn that Fiona is planning a trip, although the reasons for it are not yet clear. The intention of these poems is to create a sense of immediacy and realism, and to let the reader gradually discover more about her character as the work goes on.

Chapter 2: Meeting the Butlers

Although in terms of the chronology of the story, it will take Fiona some time to begin deciphering the Butler letters, I wanted to introduce the Butlers as quickly as

⁴⁷ Seamus Heaney, “Digging”, lines 1-2, *Death of a Naturalist* (London: Faber, 1966) .

possible in order to establish the parallel threads of the modern and historic parts of the narrative. Thus Chapter 2 includes the first five Butler letters which establish the Butler characters and their motivations for emigrating to Australia. In the actual archive, the first letter chronologically is the one in which Edward Butler writes to his cousin Forristal about the precarious finances of his family's estate and which is the fourth letter to appear in Chapter 2. However I wanted the opportunity to establish Margaret's character more clearly, and so invented the first three letters as a way of foregrounding her sense of alienation and thwarted destiny. Although the actual archive gives no indication of anything other than a cousinly regard between Margaret and Forristal, I felt it would add emotional depth to the verse novel if we were to see that Margaret had in fact been in love with her cousin, but had been prevented from marrying him due to her family's concerns about consanguinity. Thus, she would be travelling to Australia as a woman who had already discovered she had no control over her own life.

As previously stated, in early drafts I had attempted to versify the letters, emulating Anne Stevenson's approach to the family letters in Correspondences. However, in my case, I felt the experiments resulted in little more than pastiche. I wanted the letters to be as "authentic" as possible, in which the real and the imagined would blend seamlessly, and so prose seemed a more appropriate vehicle for them. Although some entire letters, and other large sections of existing letters, have been fabricated, I tried where possible to remain true to Margaret's idiom, and true to the spirit of the original archive. In particular, I had noticed in the transcriptions of the archive letters her fondness for exclamation, repetition and underlining of particular words and phrases. I borrowed the tendency to underline words because it seemed

that, in doing so, Margaret was using the only means available to her to convey the strength of her emotion. One can almost imagine her breaking the nib of her fountain pen, so great is the pressure of her pent-up feelings: “Still, my dear cousin, in my mind’s eye I can see your dear dear face and that brings consolation.” I also took care, in this chapter, to ensure that Edward’s diction and idiom were distinctly different from his sister’s. I imagined him as both a man of the world and an expert in legal affairs and I wanted him to sound worldly, knowledgeable and at times dismissive of his sister. I decided to give him the mannerism of referring to himself and his family in the third person – “the Butlers could make their mark in New South Wales” – to convey this idea of his sense of his family’s superiority.

At the end of Chapter 2, the Butlers have decided to emigrate but their arrangements are not yet fixed. Thus their letters are a good counterpoint to Fiona Sheehan’s state of mind at this early stage; she too has decided she needs a change of scene but hasn’t quite settled on which direction she wants to go.

Chapter 3: Extracts from Fiona Sheehan’s journal 7th January 2003

One of the problems that emerged from earlier drafts of the verse novel was the difficulty in conveying the extent to which the modern protagonist, Fiona, was engaging with, and being affected by, her reading of the Butler letters. In order to make the narratives overlap, and to explain Fiona’s actions later in the plot, I needed to show how she was responding to her reading and research. Initial reactions to the drafts from other readers also suggested that I needed to find a way of providing Margaret with an inner life over and above what was visible in her letters. The creation of a journal for Fiona seemed the best solution to this double problem.

Because she was a writer, it seemed natural that Fiona would use a journal to work out ideas for poems and characters as she went along, much in the same way as I, as a poet, always carry a notebook in which to record ideas and images when they occur. I decided therefore to intersperse the narrative, both modern and historic, with excerpts from Fiona Sheehan's journal. These would allow us to see the workings of her mind and how she was being influenced by the Butler story as the novel progressed.

This approach provided scope for a variety of techniques. Fiona is a poet, so there are drafts of poems in which she explores some of the themes and topics that have arisen thus far. These are intended to be seen as breaks in the narrative, a chance for Fiona to work out for herself the relevance of what she has read for her own life. Thus the first entry of Chapter 3 sees her thinking about what home meant for her in her childhood, and how it trapped her into a false world of fairy tale endings, as her references to the One Thousand and One Nights reveals:

At 31 I bought my own four walls,
eschewed pebble dash for white wash,
chose orchid stems and Persian rugs,
waited for Shahriyar to find the 'burbs.

But at the same time, Fiona is using her journal to draft the early versions of the poems she hopes to write as a result of her Butler research. Although she has not yet been explicit about her intentions, we see from these early journal entries that she is already imaginatively engaging with the material. Her primary concern at this point is to find an inner voice for Margaret Butler and she settles upon poems with little or no

punctuation that are based upon a short, anguished poetic line. It should become clear to the reader that Fiona is investing more of herself in these poems than she actually realises – what poet doesn't? Thus the Margaret who feels frustrated and out of control owes a great deal to Fiona's own current sense of dissatisfaction with her own life – we get hints of this from the notes to herself which she pens in the margins of her journal pages.

Chapter 4: The inevitable flashback

In the appraisal of the verse novel genre that concludes this study, I discuss comments by Lars Ole Sauerberg that part of the success of Vikram Seth's The Golden Gate was its ability to remind readers of other more familiar narrative genres.⁴⁸ As I have previously pointed out, I also wanted the reader to remember that s/he was reading fiction, and felt that using the familiar convention of flashback would achieve that aim. I also wanted a way of filling the reader in on some of Fiona's back history; at this point I would expect the reader to be curious about why she has come to the stage in her life where she is ready to leave her family and friends and to start a new life elsewhere. So this chapter gives the background to her most recent failed relationship as well as a potted history of her disastrous love life. It also provides an opportunity to poke fun at her less than ideal family life; the Christmas setting, so often a pressure point for families, serves to heighten her sense of dysfunction in a comic way. We see that for Fiona, yet again, real life cannot quite match the glamour or allure of the movie depiction.

No need for mistletoe or angel's bells

⁴⁸ For a full discussion of Sauerberg's comments on Seth, pages see 348 - 50 of this dissertation .

until I drove my grudging way
to Bedford Falls.⁴⁹

By the end of the chapter, we are aware that Fiona is profoundly dissatisfied with her life; she is feeling disconnected from her family, unfulfilled in her emotional life and a downright failure in her career as a writer. We are thus prepared for her somewhat radical decision to emigrate. However, before this occurs, the reader is introduced to a new, as yet unidentified character.

Chapter 5: Orphan

Earlier, I mentioned how the decision to create the character of Lizzie was a response to the perceived need to provide a contemporary counterpoint to Margaret Butler's narrative. I decided that the best solution was for Fiona Sheehan to embark upon a cycle of poems that would use the voice of a nineteenth-century workhouse orphan, Lizzie. This chapter provides the first three poems in Lizzie's story, which takes her from her early days in the Loughrea Workhouse to the depot in Plymouth on the eve of her voyage to Australia in 1849. I borrowed from accounts of the assisted emigration scheme for workhouse orphans, as they were known, and imagined in Lizzie a tough and earthy character who, having already suffered hardship and cruelty in Ireland, was well suited to the harsh realities of the new world in Australia. The first poem in the chapter also draws on an account, contained in Nellie O Cléirigh's book about nineteenth century Irish women,⁵⁰ from Eliza Dalton, an occupant of the South Dublin Union in the mid-century, who described the cruelty inflicted upon her

⁴⁹ A reference to the town at the centre of Frank Capra's Christmas classic, *It's a Wonderful Life*.

⁵⁰ O Cléirigh 83-4.

by the Workhouse warden. There is never any self-pity in Lizzie's account of her life; she is a pragmatist at all times and takes whatever opportunities are offered to her:

The Guardian said it was a decent trip
and wouldn't I like to see Australia for myself?

I caught the Master's look and said yes.

The Lizzie poems are in free verse and are more irregular than the other poems in the verse novel. I wanted to depict her as a more free and untrammelled personality than either Fiona or Margaret and so left her poetic utterances deliberately loose and in sharp contrast to the laconic three-lined stanzas of Fiona or the short, staccato lines of Margaret's inner monologue. I was also concerned to ensure that Lizzie's register was distinctly different from Margaret Butler's, and so her language is plainer and she is more concerned with physical and sensual detail. Unlike Margaret, she has absolutely no fear of the new world to which she is travelling; indeed she seems to relish the opportunity of putting behind her the limitations of the world in which she has grown up:

Other girls are weeping
but not I.
I have left no-one behind.
God willing, there will be more chances
in a new world where
nobody goes hungry or dies.

Once again, it is possible to interpret this as Fiona's own desire to escape the limits of her upbringing and conditioning through her creation of Lizzie. However, at this stage in the narrative, the reader is not yet aware that this is another one of Fiona's literary creations; there is not yet a clue to her identity and the reader must decide how Lizzie fits in to the Butler narrative.

Chapters 6 and 7: Getaway and An Emigrant's Preparation

In the short Chapter 6, we return to the contemporary narrative and learn more about Fiona's arrangements for her "getaway". The evocation of Dublin is important here; it is as if Fiona is beginning to see her surroundings with new eyes now that she is in the process of detaching from them:

I walked towards Merrion Square,
passed the Shelbourne with its party-over air,

nodded to the graves
in the Huguenot cemetery –

too early for Hartnett's bluebells

The reference to the Huguenot cemetery in Merrion Row, and Irish poet Michael Hartnett's response to it, works on two levels: firstly as a symbol of exile as the Huguenots were themselves forced to flee the country of their birth to escape religious persecution; secondly Hartnett's poetic response is a clue to how Fiona might choose to imaginatively reinterpret and mediate her own experiences over the course of the

novel. The reader is offered further insights into Fiona's state of mind; the second poem in this chapter presents her as someone who has dropped out of the corporate rat race but who isn't comfortable with her position:

I've recently learned
you're only as big
as the ones who take your calls.

Fiona is beginning to look like a person whose choices are rapidly diminishing; her decision to book her ticket and try out life on the other side of the Irish Sea becomes more understandable in this context, but also somewhat ironic in the context of our reading of the historic narrative, where the characters are faced with journeys to the other side of the world.

The equally short Chapter 7 sees the Butlers coming close to concluding their own travel arrangements. Like Fiona, Margaret also seems to have become more aware of her own immediate environment and there is a good deal of natural description, but much of it is tinged with a realisation that she is going somewhere for which she has yet no words. Having found, in the course of my historical research, a manual⁵¹ intended for early nineteenth century emigrants to Australia, I incorporated references to it in the letter dated 2nd November 1852 in which an astonished Margaret tells her cousin about all the grotesque and strange facts she has been learning about her future destination. I was particularly anxious to quote the manual's comments about the native population which it describes as having "large heads, large lips and wide

⁵¹ The Emigrant's Manual: Australia (Edinburgh: W. and R. Chambers, 1851).

mouths” which are “altogether the reverse of beautiful”. While this seems extraordinarily racist to the modern reader, it is important to remember that contemporary depictions of Irishmen and women in journals such as Punch also showed simian-like characters with large heads and large lips, something which I have Margaret’s brother, William, comment upon. I was anxious to make the point that colonisers have always tended to regard the indigenous populations of the lands they are colonising as sub-human; however, because this was not intended to be a major theme of the novel, I left the reference at that and there is no indication that Margaret comes to any greater understanding of the native Australians once she is living among them. So at this point it provides another indication of the strangeness of her future surroundings, and her fear of the unknown.

Chapter 8: Extracts from Fiona Sheehan’s journal 24th January 2003

In this second extract from Fiona Sheehan’s Journal, we see her further attempts to engage with the subject matter and find a voice for Margaret Butler. But the opening poem is an attempt to capture her own sense of alienation and boredom with her life, her feeling that she is paralysed while life, even imperfect life, is going on without her: “Familiar contempt is better // than this quiet room”. She complains of unnamed ailments, and continues the theme in the next three Margaret poems, in which Margaret is given the same sense of illness, of dissociation from her surroundings. This reaches its climax in the nightmarish “Margaret 6” in which images of Satan and grotesque beasts, fed by Margaret’s own reading about Australia, grip her fevered imagination. The Margaret poems have become a safety-valve for Fiona to explore her frustrations with her own life. From the verse novelist’s point of view, the poems

also allowed me to suggest a deeper psychological depth for my characters without the need for lengthy exposition.

Chapter 9: The Leaving of Dublin

Some exposition was necessary, however, particularly when it came to explaining how Fiona moved to Wales and found a means of supporting herself. Thus Chapter 9, with its title evoking countless emigrant songs of the nineteenth century, is a combination of transition poems describing her letting arrangements and her journey and arrival and more meditative journal entries that explore her feelings. I wanted the ferry journey to be central to this chapter, because it was intended to mirror subsequent sea journeys taken by Margaret and Lizzie. The modern sea voyage is seen as being a short, mechanised and packaged affair (at least on the Dublin Holyhead route!) and yet there are still some constants, like the impressions of landscape on departure and arrival:

The sky changed, horizon taking shape
as mobiles beeped,

announced new ways to keep in touch
as Wales opened up
its snaggle-tooth smile.

But whereas for Fiona the text alerts of mobile phone providers is her first indication that she is in a new jurisdiction, the two nineteenth-century women have no such aids to adjustment. Fiona's journey thus counterpoints the experiences of the two

nineteenth century women voyaging to the other side of the world and the motif of the sea journey will be repeated towards the end of the verse novel, by which stage Fiona will have reached a far greater sense of liberation and enlightenment.

The final journal entries in this chapter reveal that although Fiona has found a new home, she has not yet jettisoned her old sense of boredom, symbolised by sofa-sleeping and TV viewing. And yet she is beginning to sense a way of breaking free of her self-imposed restraints, as the meditation on cat-owning reveals:

She'll show me the dark delight
of fur and sinew, the oh so
delicate crunch of back-bone.

This absorption with the wilder, freer side of Fiona's personality, symbolised by the cat, will find ultimate expression in the creation of the Lizzie poems and the discovery of an inner voice for Margaret.

Chapter 10: Voyager

We return to Lizzie's story with five poems, the first undated, which see her sail to Australia and try to find work in the new colony. The intention with the first poem was to create a sense of a space where time did not exist; Lizzie is approximately half way through her three-month voyage and has lost any notion of where she might be. All she knows is life on board ship and the poem is full of the sensory detail of her experience:

our nostrils fill:
oak tar mixed with sweat,
damp wool, the tang
of vegetables on the turn,
sometimes a hint of rum,
always animal dung.

Her fearlessness is contrasted with the emotions of other girls, terrified of both the journey and their ultimate destination. Lizzie, on the other hand, positively embraces her future and although she will join in with the others in singing plaintive songs about the home she has left, she relishes the notion of a Christmas that “falls in hot, dry weather”. Once in Australia, Lizzie proves to be resourceful and adaptable. She is totally aware of her vulnerability as a woman who is regarded purely as livestock by her new hosts but she does not allow that to damage the new sense of freedom she feels in a land of “open space [. . .] sun and low walls”.

Chapters 11: Getting down to work

The modern narrative resumes with poems showing Fiona’s efforts to tackle the Butler archive and revealing her creative ambitions for the letters. She has already realised their potential but is still treating them as commodities, as a means of getting back into the centre of the Irish literary world where she feels she belongs; hence her reluctance to share her plans with the archive’s owner, Roisin. Fiona has not yet realised the extent to which she is capable of learning from the letters and modifying her own behaviour. Yet once again her journal entry reveals that she is beginning to

learn from her experiences; in this case she is meditating on the cultural and linguistic differences between her new and old homes:

And proof the eye
will fool you:
standing on Mynydd Mawr

looking towards Wicklow
you might be on Bray Head,
looking back at Lleyn.

This particular poem was originally written soon after my arrival in Wales on a visit to the Lleyn peninsula during which I learned that Lleyn is only 27 miles from the Irish coast and was subject to regular raids from Irish pirates in the past – many of the place names in that area still have an Irish component in them. It was only later that I recognised its suitability for inclusion in the verse novel because I believed that Fiona, too, would experience the sense of familiarity and strangeness of a Welsh landscape that is so similar and in such close proximity to its Irish counterpart. It thus seemed to offer an opportunity to explore Fiona's shifting ideas about cultural identity and home. She will return to the idea of linguistic differences highlighting cultural differences in a subsequent chapter.

**Chapters 12 and 13: Point of Departure and Extract from Fiona Sheehan's
journal 3rd February 2003**

By this stage, it was important to get the Butler family over to Australia so Chapter 12 includes five letters from Margaret and Edward describing their last minute arrangements, their voyage to Australia and their initial arrival there. The original archive letters included some references to their arrangements, in particular the request sent by Margaret from Liverpool for additional supplies of tea, quinine and whiskey, but there were noticeable gaps, particularly the lack of any description of the Liverpool-Australia leg of the voyage. Obviously I wanted to include as much detail as possible because I believed that the journey was an important element of each of the protagonists' discovery of their new lives so I had to search elsewhere for a detailed description of what the voyage would have been like in the mid-nineteenth century. Luckily, there were enough accounts of the journey to be able to put together a reasonably credible version of the voyage; the Welshman, Joseph Jenkins, provides a particularly good description of the voyage and I incorporated much of his account into the Butler letters. I felt that it was important that Margaret's take on the experience would be quite different from her brother Edward's; for this reason, although they both describe the journey, Margaret is seen to have spent much of her time below decks as she suffered from sea sickness. It is left to the more worldly Edward to give an account of the crossing the equator rite of passage and a more detailed itinerary of the voyage itself. It is Edward, too, who is the one to announce their arrival in Australia and to give the family's first impressions of the place. Fiona must imagine what Margaret's initial reactions would have been and so Chapter 13 includes three further journal extracts exploring Margaret's anguished reactions to her changing environment. In these poems, the imagery of travelling and the ship's

voyage becomes increasingly claustrophobic, the lines shorter and shorter as if mimicking Margaret's hyperventilating sense of panic:

Must we stay
in this wood
tomb
yet I dread
the jolt
that takes
us further
nearer
what

Fiona's own reactions are included in marginal notes to the journal entries in order to create the impression that she is beginning to re-evaluate her own experience in the light of Margaret's.

Chapter 14: Among lettered folk

In this chapter, Fiona continues her research into the Butler archive and begins to discover links between the Welsh and Irish experiences of emigration. This gave me the opportunity to explore the research process itself as I had found, over the course of the writing project, that my research was constantly turning up new and interesting finds that would send me off in unforeseen and frequently enjoyable directions. The instance of the Royal Charter wreck is a case in point; I had initially discovered the memorial to the shipwreck in Moelfre during an early walk in the area but didn't

uncover the Australian dimension until later on when I researched it. Among other coincidences, I found out that when reporting on the shipwreck for the Manchester Guardian, Charles Dickens had stayed in Beaumaris, where I lived for the majority of this project. I also discovered that the ship was said to have been carrying a fortune in Australian gold, most of it lost for ever. At that point I realised that the event might prove a useful way of linking my Welsh-based modern protagonist with her Australian subject matter; all I needed was a fictional device to link the Butlers with the ship.

The research process also uncovered some fascinating documents which seemed to be able to stand alone as authentic archival material telling its own story. For example, when researching internet-based databases of shipping in Australia in the nineteenth century, I found a service that included transcripts of entire shipping lists and passenger lists.⁵² Imagine my excitement when I discovered that the website included the full passenger list for the Lancaster, the ship which I had already established through the National Maritime Museum in Liverpool to be one that carried the Butler family to Australia in 1854. I thus included the list in its original format in the belief that it would offer a moving testimony of the nineteenth century experience of emigration. Fiona's subsequent reaction to it explores the theme further and helps to put it in perspective. She is beginning to understand the scale of the migration and the fact that identities could frequently change or be altered in the process, as Edward's apparent renaming as Patrick on the list seemed to suggest.

⁵² This database, maintained by the redoubtable Mary-Anne Warner, can be found at <http://mariners.records.nsw.gov.au/index.htm> .

The final two poems in this chapter bring Fiona closer to the ‘love interest’ in the modern narrative. Although this was not strictly necessary to the plot, I wanted to place Fiona in the position of having to consider the option of yet another relationship as a means of self-fulfilment; previously, she had fully bought into received notions of romantic happiness and happy endings and thus had been constantly thwarted in her search for the unobtainable. It seemed clear that the decision that Fiona would ultimately make about her relationship with Mike Jenkins would be the final indication of her growth and maturity as a character. But Mike also offered an opportunity to forge further links between the modern and historic narratives so I decided to make him a direct descendent of Joseph Jenkins, whose account of his period in Australia in the late nineteenth century had provided me with so much material.

Chapters 15 and 16: Wild Colonial Girl and At home at Woodlands

In these chapters, the plots of the two historical narratives begin to converge. In the first, there are three poems in which Lizzie describes her early experiences as a domestic servant in New South Wales. Although she continues to face the same sort of harsh treatment that she had known in the workhouse in Ireland, she refuses to be cowed and demonstrates a canny ability to assess the pros and cons of any situation. I wanted Lizzie to be a survivor and her comment, in the second poem, that “here, you are / what you make yourself” is central to the novel’s theme of what constitutes home and identity. Those who fail in that struggle are the ones least able to adapt to new situations and who demonstrate too close an adherence to old habits, for example Joseph Jenkins, whom Lizzie describes in the poem dated 19th December 1853, and Margaret Butler. In the third poem, Lizzie is brought together with the Butlers

through the intervention of a local priest; her assertion that she will “soon tame” Margaret sets up the central confrontation in the verse novel. Chapter 16 contains two letters from Margaret describing her new home in less than glowing terms and demonstrating symptoms of depression, a clue I had picked up from my reading of the Butler archive and Margaret’s regular references to feeling poorly. She also provides her first, somewhat guarded, reaction to Lizzie, who she tells her relations is “a mean-looking thing”. I wanted Margaret’s attitude to Lizzie to have some element of class-consciousness; she would have been very aware of Lizzie’s workhouse origins and uncomfortable with the more democratic notions of equality in the new colony. But Lizzie’s refusal to be intimidated appears to be her greatest sin in Margaret’s eyes at this stage; Margaret can have no idea that Lizzie will steal her greatest treasure, her youngest brother Joseph, away from her. From now on, the distinctly different register and language of Margaret and Lizzie will come into direct contrast; Lizzie’s constant emphasis on the tangible, concrete and sensual which derives from her sense of being grounded and comfortable in her environment, will act as a counterpoint to Margaret’s more constrained and conventional idiom, which fails to mask the more anguished sense of displacement that we see in her inner monologues.

Chapter 17: Extract from Fiona Sheehan’s journal, 20th February 2003

Fiona’s next journal entry provides further evidence of her creative responses to the Butler archive. Once again I used marginal notes to indicate her uncertainty about the best way to treat the material – we see Fiona querying whether she should introduce a new character and what type of voice she should use for Lizzie – although the reader may already have guessed that the Lizzie poems are also products of Fiona’s imagination. There are four Margaret interior monologues included here. Each poem,

in the same terse, unpunctuated poetry, demonstrates her growing if unwilling fascination with her immediate environment, in particular the harsh landscape of strange trees and even stranger birds. The naming of plants and animals is to take on greater significance for each of the three characters; it is as if by being able to identify them by their proper names, the characters begin to claim ownership over their territory. Thus, in “Margaret 12”, she wanders in a forest and discovers that there are some common threads between the old and the new, but only if she can manage to ignore what is unfamiliar to her:

I could be
by Ballyogan’s
oaks again
if I stop my ears
ignore the laugh
of galah birds.

In previous drafts I had included a marginal note at the end of “Margaret 14” which hinted at the extent to which her own single status is bothering Fiona but excised it in later versions because I wanted to keep the focus on Margaret.

Chapter 18: Walking out

The chapter opens with a journal entry which indicates that Fiona is still preoccupied with the implications of the Butler letters. The first poem takes the ring symbolism of the previous Margaret poems and blends it with the bird references to transform the image from one of freedom to one of restraint – the gold ring becomes a leg tag by

which others can identify the bird and thus, by implication, cast judgement on those, like Fiona, who do not wear a wedding ring:

the tell-tale lack of gold
tagging me like some rare
migrant that's just flown in.

The idea here is to prepare the reader for Fiona's ambivalent reactions to Mike Jenkins' courtship. It is quickly clear that she has embarked on a physical relationship with him, but it is also equally clear that she is very uncertain about the wisdom of doing so. The final journal entry, which describes her first walk with him, is full of references to "wrong turns" and "mis-reading maps"; it seems possible that, having previously invested all her energy and commitment to relationships as a means of self-fulfilment, she is now learning to evaluate them with greater detachment.

Chapter 19: Serving the Butlers

At this point, the two strands of the nineteenth century narrative have completely converged and the reader is given the opportunity to view the Butlers through Lizzie's somewhat critical eyes. In the first three poems, it was my intention that Lizzie's character, and her free and uncensored view of the world, would help us to see through the evasions and formalities of Margaret's official self, as expressed in her letters; so Lizzie tells us that Margaret "wanders around the house in a dream / as if she has lost something valuable" and finds fault with everything. Lizzie, on the other hand, is frank in her rejection of the past: "I would have thought she'd be glad / to shake the earth off that miserable place." Lizzie's take on the recently-arrived father

of the Butlers, who had gone out to Australia before them, is equally enlightening. She regards him as little more than a scare-crow, reminiscent of the spent old men she had seen dying in the workhouse back home in Ireland. Old Mr Butler is thus seen as yet another victim of the emigration experience, although the reader also realises that he had been equally incapable of managing his life when back in Ireland. The third poem, which describes Margaret making flummery (a Victorian sweet dish) for her father, was inspired by a book of nineteenth century Australian recipes which I had come across during my research. It felt appropriate that Margaret's love for her father would be shown through the tenderness with which she prepared this food for him. These poems also suggest the development of one of the novel's sub-plots: the growing attraction between Joseph Butler and Lizzie, which will ultimately threaten the status quo of the entire household.

Chapter 20: Extract from Fiona Sheehan's journal 26th February 2003

This chapter begins with another "found poem", in this case a list of threatened species recorded in an audit of flora and fauna in a region of New South Wales. I wanted to indicate the extent to which Fiona was becoming immersed in her research and beginning to identify more and more with the Butlers' experience. It seemed likely that she would want to find out more about the wild-life in the area, much as I had done in my own research for the project. The list comes from a website I discovered by doing an internet search for Australian flora and fauna.⁵³ Obviously, such research had to substitute for actual experience of the country; never having travelled to Australia, and aware that previous drafts of the verse novel seemed quite

⁵³ The information was taken for the list of figures to a report into a survey of flora and fauna in the Hunter Valley Region. The website address is http://www.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/Cessnock/uploadedFiles/Council_Services/Building_and_Development/Development_Control_Plans/DCP56vol2.pdf as downloaded on 10 August 2006 .

bereft of local detail, I wanted to try to fill the gap by providing real detail where possible. The flora and fauna included here are only a selection from a very lengthy list and were chosen for the sheer musicality or fantastic quality of their names, for example, the Coastal Spurge or the Eastern Falsistrelle, not to mention the Long-nosed Potoroo.

This chapter also includes three further Margaret inner monologues. Here, too, Fiona uses the minimalist form as a way of expressing Margaret's inner anguish and sense of imprisonment. The lines are short and staccato, as if the speaker is again breathing with great difficulty:

that heat
blanches skin
then turns it
into leather

Fiona is also seen to be anxious to exploit her own research, and so feeds in natural detail where possible.

At this stage in the drafting, I was also beginning to draw upon my own personal experiences to a greater degree. Over the course of the project, my father had become seriously ill and had spent several months in hospital. This had been a tremendously upsetting experience and it felt inevitable that it should find its way into my work on some level. Although I resisted the temptation to make the work completely autobiographical – apart from anything else the experience was far too recent and

therefore too raw and unprocessed to be useful – it felt appropriate that in a novel that was exploring the notion of home and identity, the question of parent-child relationships should be part of the exploration. I had already decided to focus on Margaret’s relationship with her father, with its reversal of the child-parent relationship, and found it natural to draw on some of my own, and my family’s, experiences here, as in “Margaret 17” where the daughter settles her father for the night, moisturizing his heels and praying for him. However, throughout the process, I remained uneasy that drawing on recent experiences might unbalance the whole novel and divert it too far away from its original intention.

This chapter also includes four of Fiona’s own poem drafts, in which she continues to explore her ambivalent feelings about her relationship with Mike Jenkins. In her marginal notes, she comments that these are the first poems she has written in months (she is clearly excepting the Butler poems here) and so the reader feels that she is at least benefiting creatively from the love affair. But the imagery she uses in these poems betrays her deep-rooted insecurities. The first plays on the notion of migrating birds to suggest the transience of love, the second uses the Royal Charter shipwreck to hint at the hidden rocks that can scupper any relationship while the third meditates on a bouquet of flowers as a symbol of requited love. The final poem clearly demonstrates that she is already imagining the end of the relationship and preparing herself for it; this is a clear development in Fiona’s personality as up to that point she would have regarded being in a relationship as an end in itself.

Chapters 21 and 22: Bereavement and Extract from Fiona Sheehan's journal 1st

April 2003

One of the most moving letters in the original Butler archive was the one in which Margaret wrote to her cousins in Ireland about the recent death of her father. I wanted to make this a central event in the verse novel, and Chapter 21 includes both that letter and a poem from Lizzie describing the same event. The Lizzie version allows us to sense more of the atmosphere and to decode Margaret's more conventional account. Typically, Lizzie remains sardonic although we should see pity in her summation:

Some chieftain.

Little more than

bleached bones

washed up on the shore.

This imagery foreshadows the subsequent plot development in which William Butler is drowned on the Royal Charter and also reminds us that old Mr Butler had never been more than a victim of circumstances.

This short sequence also forces Fiona into greater disclosure about her own emotional state. In the sequence of Christmas poems early in the verse novel, we had seen her apparent discomfort in her parents' company. In the journal entry included in Chapter 22, we begin to understand some of the reasons for that. We learn that her father, although still alive, had nearly died three years previously. Fiona's reaction at the time had been characteristically immature; although she had rallied around when he was in hospital, she found it impossible to face up to the implications that her

father would some day die. Clearly in this poem I am exploring my own feelings as much as Fiona's, and remain uncertain about whether this is one character development too far in terms of the unity of the verse novel. I feel it might explain, however, Fiona's willingness to up sticks and try out life in a new country. Her ability to face up to her responsibilities will be another indication of the degree to which she has matured over the course of the novel. I also felt that it was important that we should know more about her own background at this point in order to fully understand her creative reaction to Margaret Butler's experiences of bereavement, which is teased out in the two short poems that conclude this chapter.

Chapter 23: Losses and Gains

This chapter advances the nineteenth century narrative. The first poem, in the voice of Lizzie, shows the extent to which she and Joseph have grown close while the next, a rare letter from William Butler, describe the two brothers' experiences on the gold fields of Victoria. Although in the actual archive, Margaret mentions that her brothers are interested in becoming gold prospectors, there is no evidence that they actually did so. It was therefore necessary to use research to provide the details of the type of life they might have lived had they gone to Snowy River or one of the other goldfields. I was attracted to the notion that gold prospecting drew people from all classes and races. As William points out, "in the dirt we all end up looking the same", and people had equal chances to either strike it rich or leave empty-handed. When writing this poem, the image of fruitless digging in clay reminded me of how many Irishmen of the period would have associated this activity with potato-farming and their recent traumatic experiences of famine. I therefore had Lizzie make that explicit comparison in the next poem in which the very earth of home is seen to have turned upon the

people and betrayed them. In Lizzie's world-weary eyes, the pursuit of wealth is as futile as the quest for survival in nineteenth-century Ireland:

break hard ground,
sifting the fill,
holding their breath
for the tell-tale glint
that divides the hungry
from the full.

Chapter 24: Moving in, moving on

By this stage, the connection between the various narrative strands in the verse novel should be well established. It was my intention that, while the modern narrator would be consciously learning from her engagement with the nineteenth-century characters, there should be also be an unconscious absorption of the material that would affect her behaviour and that would be picked up by the alert reader. Thus this chapter, with its focus on the relationship between Fiona and Mike, is intended as an ironic contrast with the relationship gradually forming between Lizzie and Joseph. As we have learned by now, Fiona's previous battle scars have made her shy of commitment and she is extremely ambivalent about her feelings towards Mike. She resists his attempts to progress things further by moving in together; she has not yet learned to look beyond the stereotypes of happy endings and perfect unions that she has previously preferred to the give and take of authentic relationships. However, she is not yet quite ready to make a definitive break with Mike.

The second poem in this chapter is a three-part meditation on an imperfect relationship. The first two parts chart Fiona's gradual disillusionment and falling out of love. The third part, with its imagery of failed sunsets and blanched nature, echoes this mood of disenchantment; it is significant that it is while in this state of mind that Fiona experiences her epiphany, a fleeting glimpse of the Dublin/Wicklow coastline visible on the horizon as the sun sets. This is the first indication that Fiona may have to return home in order to finally face her demons and yet the reference to "Brigadoon" and "sullen screen" makes it clear that Fiona still bases her opinions on the secondary influences of film and make-believe, rather than trusting the experiences of real life. She is not yet ready to learn, and so her determination to end her relationship with Mike (dealt with in the fifth poem) is not yet a sign of greater maturity. The final stanza of this poem, with its reference to logging on, is a deliberate echo of the earlier poem in which Fiona had discovered via email that she had been dumped by Luke; in this regard, her behaviour towards Mike is no better than Luke's had been to her.

The last poem in this chapter sows the seeds for a later plot development. It had been pointed out to me by readers of earlier drafts that I had not sufficiently established Fiona's sense of engagement with the Butler letters and that her subsequent actions seemed a little arbitrary. I decided that the best solution would be to establish a link between her and another descendent of the Butler family, this time someone still living in Australia. That would provide her with the option of exploring the family further by perhaps travelling to the sub-continent. So in this poem, she receives news of a Butler cousin living in Australia who is anxious to track down details of family history. Fiona is characteristically jealous of her own discoveries at

this point; she has not yet gained sufficient self-confidence to feel that she can share what she knows. The remainder of Fiona's narrative will be about the growth of that confidence.

Chapter 25: Births, marriages, deaths

The various narrative strands now begin to weave together more tightly. In this chapter we get a mixture of letters, poems and journal entries charting the major changes that affect the Butler family. We learn via a letter from Margaret of William's death by drowning as a result of the Royal Charter shipwreck. Again, we can only guess at the depth of Margaret's grief as her letter is a model of pious decorum; it is left to Lizzie to show us the sadness of the memorial service and Fiona, with her imagined inner monologue for Margaret, to suggest the desperation of her grief. Here too, we are shown that the notion of home can be as treacherous as any new surroundings. William was undone by his desire to travel home and drowned within sight of it, an irony only too apparent to Fiona's imagined version of Margaret:

I thought
danger
lay here
with snakes
poison bark
hard clay

Margaret's reference to "hard clay" echoes Lizzie's previous description of the "hard / unyielding ground" in which they planted a memorial tree for William, but gradually

Margaret, with the reader, is beginning to place more trust in the hard ground of the new world than the shifting and unfruitful ground of the old. The first section of Fiona's journal is another example of found poetry; it is drawn from the inscriptions on the memorials to those drowned in the Royal Charter shipwreck which can be found in Llanallgo Church on Anglesey, as well an extract taken from church records of Saint Mary's Church, Pentraeth, which I uncovered during my research into the Royal Charter disaster.⁵⁴ Many of the four hundred who drowned were washed up over subsequent weeks on the various beaches on the northeast coast of the island, including Red Wharf Bay, close to Pentraeth. For many, there were no identifying marks and so they were buried, unnamed, in joint graves. I found the church entry particularly moving in its description of the unidentified corpses and felt that it helped convey the sense of tragedy for so many people who lost their relations in this way; it thus heightens the sense of Margaret's powerlessness when she asks Forristal to try to recover the body as the reader realises that his quest would probably have proved futile.

The title of this chapter is "Births, Marriages, Deaths" although they are presented in reverse order. We discover from Lizzie that she has begun a sexual relationship with Joseph and has become pregnant by him. In a previous chapter we saw Fiona meditating on the experience of sleeping in a place surrounded by other people's sounds; the first of the Lizzie poems here echoes this, but in this case the sounds suggest the beginning of a greater closeness for her, whereas for Fiona they had suggested only loneliness. Once again we see Fiona using the character of Lizzie to explore her own preoccupations.

⁵⁴ Taken from a website giving historical information about Anglesey villages. <http://www.mon51.u-net.com/villages/royals.htm> downloaded 12 August 2006 .

Chapters 26 and 27: Extract from Fiona Sheehan's journal 6th May 2003 and

Family commitments

In the previous chapter, Margaret had written to her cousins about the latest family news but had devoted very little space to her youngest brother's marriage to Lizzie.

In the next chapter, Fiona tries yet again to get inside Margaret's head and explore what she would really have been feeling. But it is clear that she is also examining the implications of the story for her own life, in particular the fact that she is childless and what this will mean once she loses her parents.

Fiona also appears to be modifying her stance towards the Butler cousin who has made contact with her from Australia; she now sees the potential of a visit there and, shrewd careerist that she is, decides to forge closer links; her concern in the opening stanza that she might be "making capital / out of someone else's history" is drawn as much from my own, previously stated, concerns about using the Butler archive for creative purposes as it is from Fiona's less scrupulous approach. But it would appear that the writer's imagination will always overtake her scruples; it occurred to me at this point that the e-mail communication between the Australian cousin, Flo, and Fiona might offer an opportunity for further fabrication of documentary evidence in order to create the authenticity I sought; I thus inserted a fictive family tree for the Butlers at this point which the reader learns was sent to Fiona by Flo as an attachment to her e-mail.

In Chapter 27, Fiona is forced to return home for a family celebration and begins for the first time in her life the process of trying to understand her parents and the role

that they have had in her formation. In the previous chapter, Margaret had written to her cousins about some photographs that they had sent. In that letter, the photographs were seen as an unequal substitute for the relations that Margaret has never ceased to miss. Now, Fiona meditates on a show of family photographs during a party to celebrate her parents' wedding anniversary and begins to see beyond her mother's façade into the real loneliness and frustrations that had shaped her life:

but the eyes focus on some distant spot

we can't imagine, the site of alternative
histories perhaps, a darkened room,
a quiet countryside, a frame empty of us.

In this realisation that she may have contributed to her mother's lack of fulfilment, it is clear that Fiona is beginning to reassess her own relationships and to grow as an individual. At this point, she faces the prospect of being a parent herself as she suspects she may be pregnant by Mike; how she addresses this challenge will be the final indication of her maturity.

Chapters 28 and 29: Expectant and In two minds

In these two chapters, the plot of the verse novel moves towards resolution. In Chapter 28 we have the last two Lizzie poems in which the now heavily-pregnant Lizzie describes her experiences. The poems are full of images of drought and aridity; it would appear that Lizzie has become as much a captive of her condition as she was in the workhouse:

The creek has run dry.
It trickles in the centre
of the hollowed bed,
jagged rocks dust-covered,
shrivelled curls
of water snakes.

When we last hear from Lizzie, she is just about to give birth. By now she has become little more than a vessel for the child waiting to be born, although her sense of identification with the world around her remains strong:

I wait, grow heavier,
feel my steps
go deeper in the earth

Of all of the characters, Lizzie is the one most capable to adapting to whatever environment she finds herself in. It seems harsh that such a natural survivor would have died in childbirth and yet her death was necessary to the plot; I wanted to provide Margaret with an opportunity to discover herself through motherhood.

In Chapter 29, Fiona's attitude to parenthood is also tested although she discovers that she is not pregnant. Her sense of disappointment makes her realise what she has missed in not having been a parent. While she meditates on what having a daughter might have been like in the poem inspired by Yeats' "Prayer for my Daughter", she

also reappraises her relationship with Mike. It is important for the conclusion of the novel that she makes her decisions based on a clear understanding of what she wants in her life, and what she does not need.

Chapter 30: Family News

The penultimate chapter ties up the threads of the Butler narrative. Margaret finally appears to have found some happiness in her role as the young Elizabeth's surrogate mother. Her final letters are full of contented prattling about her busy life at Woodlands. Although there are some late fragments in the Butler archive written by Margaret in old age, I thought it appropriate to end the correspondence at the point when her life-long love and correspondent, Forristal, dies. Fiona's final journal extract in this chapter attempts to capture Margaret's grief at this ending, and yet the fact that she is shown not to have realised Forristal was dead can be seen as an indication that the link with her old home had already become frayed; Margaret has finally found peace in her new home.

Chapter 31: Hail and Farewell and Postscript

In the final chapter, Fiona must make her own decisions about what home she will make, and who she will make it with. She now has concrete plans: an invitation to read the poems she has been working on in Sydney. The reference to Joyce in the first poem evokes memories of another writer who recreated his own sense of identity, national and personal, through fiction. Fiona intends to follow suit as she explores further the Butler legacy in Australia.

This only left the resolution of the verse novel's romantic sub-plot. Having experimented with various alternatives, I decided to make it clearer in the second poem that she is meeting Mike at the airport not to resume her relationship with him, but to end it for good. Her new-found belief in her writing and the revival of her creative life indicates that, like the blind woman in Paula Meehan's poem, she has a good chance of making her own home through her own work, not through relationships alone. At this point the reader should have already realised that Lizzie was merely a voice imagined by Fiona but, if not, the evidence is here. The final poem and the postscript reverse the journey she had taken at the start of the verse novel, but it is clear that she is now journeying with a very different mindset. The concept of travel seems liberating now, rather than merely being an escape from a life she was unhappy with:

The waves flatten out as if
there's suddenly space
for all that water

in this place of no coasts,
no harbours,
no moorings called home.

Conclusion

In the first three sections of this dissertation I have discussed my own creative approach to writing a verse novel. In the final section, a survey of the verse novel genre in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I shall attempt to explore the creative

issues faced by other verse novelists, from the earliest examples of the genre through to more contemporary models. My exploration will be more practice-based than theoretical; I am keen to use my own experience as a writer to question the advantages and disadvantages that the genre offered earlier verse novelists and to examine their work and their approach in the context of prevailing literary norms. In this way, I hope to offer some further insight into creative writing practice by focussing on the specific challenges that surround this very particular form, which has its origins in the very beginnings of literature.

4. A SURVEY OF THE VERSE NOVEL

4.1: Introduction

4.2: The Nineteenth Century

4.3: The Twentieth/Twenty-First Centuries

4.4: Conclusion

4.1 Introduction

Stories have always been told through poetry. When Aristotle was writing his Poetics in the fourth century BC, all narrative took the form of either epic or lyric poetry, and the rules established by Aristotle are still used by storytellers to this day. Throughout the history of English literature, poetry has been the natural vehicle for storytelling, from the Old English sagas of Beowulf and The Wanderer, through the metrical romances of the Middle English period to Chanson de Roland and Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. (In Italy, Boccaccio's Decameron had also displayed a serialised approach to story-telling through poetry). Narratives of past heroism were also told through song in popular ballads such as Sir Patrick Spens, Lady Isabel and the Elf Knight and The Battle of Otterburn. Spenser chose epic poetry to celebrate the courtly qualities of the Elizabethan Age in The Faerie Queen. Milton used the epic to retell his history of the fall of man. Marlowe, Chapman, Shakespeare, Drayton, Dryden and Southwell all wrote verse narratives.

But by the middle of the nineteenth century there appears to have been a profound shift in the balance between poetry and prose in terms of narrative. Although narrative poetry was certainly still being written (by poets such as Tennyson and Browning), Victorian poets focused much more on the expression of individual feeling and tended to use shorter poetic forms in order to do so. The novel was now the place where the majority of the reading public sought their stories and the nature of those stories had changed substantially. Thus, when Elizabeth Barrett Browning urged her fellow poets to deal with contemporary matters in their poetry, to “catch / Upon the burning lava of

a song / The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age”;⁵⁵ she was responding to this shift in the relationship between poetry and prose. Much like Tennyson’s *Lady of Shalott*, poets were expected to keep their eyes averted from direct consideration of the mundanities of every day life. Those who flouted that convention by writing poetic narratives that explored contemporary events were treated as oddities.

In this chapter I shall describe the development of the verse novel as a distinct genre and attempt to trace its origins, questioning what happened to cause that sharp division between poetry and narrative in the first place. I shall also examine some examples of the verse novel from the nineteenth century and consider the varied approaches taken by writers to this emerging form. I will then consider twentieth and twenty-first century examples, speculating from a practitioner’s standpoint about the writers’ intentions for their work and seeking to establish what ‘added value’ was achieved through the combination of poetic and novelistic techniques. It is hoped that this exploration will provide further context for the discussion of my own creative practice which preceded this chapter.

⁵⁵ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, Book 1, 215-217, *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Ware, Herts: The Wordsworth Poetry Library, 1994).

4.2 The Nineteenth Century

Twilight of the heroes - Romantic verse narrative

By the early nineteenth century when the Romantics were experimenting with long narrative poetry, the epic in its classical sense was moribund. If we use Maurice Bowra's criterion that the epic is "a narrative of some length" that "deals with events which have a certain grandeur and importance and come from a life of action, especially of violent action such as war",⁵⁶ then Milton's Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained were the last great flowering of the tradition of the literary epic. Stories focussing on battles between Angels and Devils, Greek Gods and mythical heroes, which, to quote Bowra again, are "examples of what men ought to be or types of human destiny whose very mistakes must be marked and remembered," where the heroes "are not meant to be characters so much as examples",⁵⁷ had little place in an Age of Enlightenment, interested in science and the specifics of human experience. Many, under the influence of philosophers such Locke, Voltaire and Hume, agreed with Alexander Pope that "the proper study of Mankind is Man"⁵⁸ and sought writings that focussed on real dilemmas of real men. Although still writing in the epic (albeit mock epic) tradition, Pope himself offers an interesting insight into the relative merits of prose and poetry that may add to our understanding of the approaches of later verse novelists. In "The Design", his introduction to An Essay on Man, Pope states that

⁵⁶ C.M. Bowra, From Virgil to Milton (London: Macmillan, 1945) 1 .

⁵⁷ Bowra 16 .

⁵⁸ Alexander Pope, An Essay on Man, Epistle II, 2, in Maynard Mack, ed., The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope. 11 vols. (London: Methuen, 1950) 3.1: 53 .

poetry had a number of advantages when it came to writing on the theme of human life and manners:

This I might have done in prose; but I chose verse, and even rhyme, for two reasons. The one will appear obvious; that principles, maxims, or precepts, so written, both strike the reader more strongly at first, and are more easily retained by him afterwards: the other may seem odd, but it is true: I found I could express them more shortly this way than in prose itself; and nothing is more certain than that much of the force as well as grace of arguments or instructions depends on their conciseness. I was unable to treat this part of my subject more in detail without becoming dry and tedious; or more poetically without sacrificing perspicuity to ornament, without wandering from the precision, or breaking the chain of reasoning.⁵⁹

Pope's focus is philosophy, not story-telling, and yet, in highlighting the concision and memorability of the poetic line as a means of adding power to his argument, he could be rehearsing some of the reasons used by later verse novelists when justifying their attempts to relate narrative in poetry. For that reason, I think it makes a useful digression.

So, if eighteenth century writers and their readers were now less interested in the mythic and heroic, and more interested in what could be discovered through their own senses, they were clearly looking for new narratives that would deal with their world as they knew it. And the number of those readers was growing during this period. The

⁵⁹ Pope, *An Essay on Man*, The Design in *Poems of Alexander Pope III*.

rise of magazines such as the Gentleman's Magazine and the rapid spread of the circulating libraries from 1740 onwards gave easier and cheaper access to writing that might previously have been too expensive for all but the very comfortably off. In his study of the development of the novel in the eighteenth century, Ian Watt points to the increasing numbers of domestic servants and apprentices who were beginning to read during this period.⁶⁰ The novel, as it evolved throughout the latter half of the century, would offer such readers the perfect vehicle to explore their own world, or at least a world that they might recognise.

Thus, as Watt puts it, “the novel arose in the modern period, a period whose general intellectual orientation was most decisively separated from its classical and medieval heritage by its rejection – or at least its attempted rejection – of universals.”⁶¹ Novelists such as Defoe, Richardson and Fielding dealt, for the first time in English literature, with contemporary subjects placed in real-time settings. They created characters that were recognisable to their readers as multi-dimensional people, not just stereotypes or exemplars, in plots that were non-traditional and realistic. Pamela Andrews and Tom Jones may have elements of the everywoman and everyman about them, but they originate from a distinctly recognisable eighteenth-century class and they interact with social types who would be immediately recognisable to contemporary readers. Though the plots in which they are involved may be contrived and over-reliant on coincidence, they do not depend on divine intervention or magic. Most importantly, the primary criterion of these novels is “truth to individual experience – individual experience which is always unique and therefore

⁶⁰ Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Peregrine, 1963) 43-4 .

⁶¹ Watt 12 .

new.”⁶² These characters have inner lives and their experiences, past and present, form the momentum for the story.

So what were the poets to do in the face of competition from this new arrival on the literary scene? After all, as Watt states, “truth to individual experience” was also an integral part of the Romantic aesthetic:

Romanticism, of course, was characterized by the emphasis on individualism and on originality which had found its first literary expression in the novel: and many romantic writers expressed themselves with particular vigour against those elements in classical critical theory that were inimical to formal realism. In the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads (1800), for example, Wordsworth proclaimed that the writer must ‘keep his eye on the object’ and present the experiences of common life in ‘the real language of men.’⁶³

But the traditional model of a long narrative for the poet - the epic with all its mythic connotations - now appeared anachronistic and redundant; Pope’s mock-epics may have killed them with comedy. And yet, for many poets the shadow of Milton was long indeed and they felt they still needed to test their mettle through a long narrative on an epic scale. Wordsworth’s experience is a case in point. In the Prelude, the long narrative he wrote and revised throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, he discusses this sense of literary inheritance and his sense of being unequal to the task:

Sometimes, mistaking vainly, as I fear,

⁶² Watt 13 .

⁶³ Watt 313 .

Proud spring-tide swellings for a regular sea,
I settle on some British theme, some old
Romantic tale by Milton left unsung;
More often resting at some gentle place
Within the groves of chivalry I pipe
Among the shepherds, with reposing knights
Sit by a fountain-side and hear their tales.
Sometimes, more sternly moved, I would relate
How vanquished Mithridates northwards passed
And, hidden in the cloud of years, became
That Odin, father of a race by whom
Perished the Roman Empire;⁶⁴

However, such lofty aspirations are “Shadowy and unsubstantial”⁶⁵ and the poet soon longs to “take refuge” from “this awful burthen”⁶⁶ and turns instead to a topic he believes that he can fairly deal with – himself:

One end hereby at least hath been attained –
My mind hath been revived – and if this mood
Desert me not, I will forthwith bring down
Through later years the story of my life.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ William Wordsworth, Prelude 1805, Book I, 166-190 in The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850 ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams, Stephen Gill (New York: Norton, 1979) .

⁶⁵ Prelude 1805, Book 1 229 .

⁶⁶ Prelude 1805, Book 1 235, 234 .

⁶⁷ Prelude 1805, Book 1 664–67 .

In Book III, he expands upon his theme:

Of genius, power,
Creation, and divinity itself,
I have been speaking, for my theme has been
What passed within me. Not of outward things
Done visible for other minds – words, signs,
Symbols or actions – but of my own heart
Have I been speaking, and my youthful mind.
O heavens, how awful is the might of souls,
And what they do within themselves while yet
The yoke of earth is new to them, the world
Nothing but a wild field where they were sown.
This is in truth heroic argument,
And genuine prowess.⁶⁸

Thus Wordsworth argues that his spiritual autobiography, his poem about the growth of a poet's mind, is a true successor to the heroic epics of Spenser and Milton because it establishes the poet as the new hero of a humanist age in which man's greatest task is to better understand his world and himself.

Despite the fact that he revised it several times over a forty-year period, it is worth remembering that Wordsworth never aspired to publish the Prelude. It is almost as if

⁶⁸ Prelude 1805, Book III 171-83 .

he saw it as a type of creative journal to which he could return when the creative wellsprings ran dry elsewhere. In a letter to his friend Richard Sharp in 1804, he wrote that “it seems a frightful deal to say about one’s self, and of course will never be published (during my lifetime, I mean), till another work [The Recluse] has been written and published of sufficient importance to justify me in giving my own history to the world.”⁶⁹ Even after he had been made Poet Laureate, Wordsworth still did not believe the world would be interested in his verse autobiography; it was his wife’s and executors’ decision to publish, and title, it after the poet’s death in 1850. But whatever his reluctance to publish, the poem was clearly of primary importance to the poet and one in which he was keen to explore the boundaries of verse narrative, even if the subject of that narrative was himself. But it is possible that the Prelude is more significant in its role as a transitional point between the old epic narratives and the new realistic and inward-looking poetic narratives. Had Wordsworth survived to read Aurora Leigh, he might have recognised and approved of Barrett Browning’s portrait of the development of a woman poet’s mind.

John Keats too was interested in exploring the potential of the long poem to test out his own aesthetic ideas, and was equally committed to narrative, as his tales in verse, Endymion, The Eve of St. Agnes and Lamia, illustrate. He read voraciously, citing Chaucer, Spenser and Shakespeare as particular influences, and tried out the various narrative forms they had employed, including medieval romances and epics. In a letter to his friend, Reynolds, in May 1818, Keats makes excited references to a rare edition of Chaucer he had obtained – “or what say you to a black Letter Chaucer,

⁶⁹ Wordsworth to Richard Sharp, April 29, 1804, from The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth ed. E. de Selincourt, The Early Years, 1787-1805, revised Chester L. Shaver (Oxford: 1967), quoted in The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850, 532 .

printed in 1596: aye I've got one huzza!";⁷⁰ writing to Benjamin Haydon the previous year, he infers that Shakespeare is a "good Genius presiding" over him⁷¹. As Greg Kucick has pointed out, Spenser was particularly influential: "In the poetics of enchantment, Keats's truest presider was Spenser. It was Spenser's 'gorgeousness of the imagery' – especially in The Faerie Queene – [...] that most delighted a young Keats and inspired his desire to write poetry."⁷² However, Keats's relationship with Milton was more ambivalent than that of Wordsworth. He accused Paradise Lost of being "a corruption of our language."⁷³ In the same letter to his brother and sister in law, he went on to declare his independence from Milton's influence. "I have but lately stood on my guard against Milton. Life to him would be death to me. Miltonic verse cannot be written, but is the verse of art. I wish to devote myself to another verse alone."⁷⁴ It is no coincidence, as Kucick argues, that Hyperion, his last long and most Miltonic narrative, was to remain unfinished.⁷⁵

Crucially for this argument, Keats saw the long poem as something that gave scope to his narrative powers and tested his invention. Writing to Benjamin Bailey in October 1817 while in the process of composing Endymion, Keats said:

⁷⁰ LII. To John Hamilton Reynolds, Teignmouth, May 3d [1818], in Sidney Colvin, ed., Letters of John Keats to his Family and Friends (London: Macmillan, 1925) 103 .

⁷¹ X. To Benjamin Robert Haydon, Margate, Saturday Eve [May 10, 1817], in Letters 14 .

⁷² Greg Kucick, "Keats and English Poetry", in Susan J. Wolfson, ed., The Cambridge Companion to Keats (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2001) 18 .

⁷³ CXVI. To George and Georgiana Keats, September 22, Letters 313 .

⁷⁴ Kucick 313 – 4 .

⁷⁵ Kucick 196 .

I have heard [Leigh] Hunt say and [I] may be asked – why endeavour after a long Poem? To which I should answer – Do not the lovers of Poetry like to have a little region to wander in where they may pick and choose, and in which the images are so numerous that many are forgotten and found new in a second Reading: which may be food for a week’s stroll in Summer? Do not they like this better than what they can read through before Mrs. Williams comes down the stairs? A Morning work at least? Besides a long Poem is a test of invention which I take to be the Polar Star of Poetry, as Fancy is the Sails, and Imagination the Rudder. Did our great Poets ever write short Pieces?⁷⁶

Keats clearly saw the writing of Endymion (1817) as a rite of passage: if successful, he would join the ranks of great English poets; if unsuccessful, he would be consigned to the also-rans. The 4,000 line poem is described on the title page as a “Poetic Romance” and dedicated to the memory of Thomas Chatterton, who had achieved a dubious fame through his forgery of medieval poems and who committed suicide at the age of 17. The eponymous hero also has the quality of the “marvellous boy” about him. The tale of a youth in thrall to the Moon Goddess, Diana, and a succession of other youths who fall victim to infatuation, Endymion gave Keats the opportunity to rehearse many of the theories about the nature of truth and art which he would later tease out in the Odes:

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever;
its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep

⁷⁶ Letter to Benjamin Bailey, October 8, 1817, in Letters 34 .

A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.⁷⁷

(Book 1, 1 – 5).

Writing Endymion also allowed him to follow in the footsteps of his literary hero:

Oh kindly muse! Let not my weak tongue falter
In telling of this goodly company,
Of their old piety, and of their glee.
But let a portion of ethereal dew
Fall on my head and presently unmew
My soul; that I may dare in wayfaring,
To stammer where old Chaucer used to sing.⁷⁸

For Karen Swann, Endymion is “suspended between biography and poetry”⁷⁹ in which Keats tests many of his ideas about life and art: “the biographical figure seems revealed in his preciosity, his ambition, his absorption, his overweening love of ‘fine Phrases’ [...] and his trying lapses of taste and judgement.”⁸⁰

The reception to Endymion was harsh, with critics from Blackwoods and the Quarterly magazines being especially virulent in attacking the poem’s “vulgarity”.

⁷⁷ John Keats, Endymion, in Gerald Bullen, ed., John Keats Poems (1906; London, Dent, 1961) Book 1 1-5 .

⁷⁸ Endymion, Book 1 128-134 .

⁷⁹ Karen Swann, “Endymion’s beautiful dreamers” in Wolfson, ed. 25 .

⁸⁰ Swann 20 .

However, by this stage, Keats had himself grown dissatisfied with the poem and saw it merely as a stage towards his greater maturity as a poet. Writing to James Hessey in October 1818, he states:

I have written independently without Judgement. I may write independently, and with Judgement, hereafter. The Genius of Poetry must work out its own salvation in a man: It cannot be matured by law and precept, but by sensation and watchfulness itself – That which is creative must create itself – In Endymion, I leaped headlong into the sea, and thereby have become better acquainted with the Soundings, the quicksands, and the rocks, than if I had stayed upon the green shore, and piped a silly pipe, and took tea and comfortable advice.⁸¹

So Keats was learning from his mistakes and still believed that taking risks with long poems was worth the endeavour. Although poets have long since abandoned the notion that great poets write long poems, we shall see later in this chapter that even contemporary poets see the verse novel as a “test of invention”.⁸²

Byron was also attracted to the long poem as a way of testing his creative limits. However, Byron shared neither Wordsworth’s intense interest in his own psychological or creative development nor Keats’s belief that Greek mythology could provide motifs for an exploration of the relationship between life and art. Ever the realist – he told his publisher George Murray in 1817 that “I hate things all fiction

⁸¹ LXXII – To James August Hessey, Hampstead, October 9, 1818, in Letters 167 – 8 .

⁸² See poet Fiona Sampson’s comments on the challenges of the long poem on page 381 of this dissertation .

[...] There should always be some foundation of fact for the most airy fabric, and pure invention is but the talent of a liar”⁸³ – Byron believed that his contemporaries had gone in the wrong direction in abandoning the Augustan poets’ focus on reality; he frequently cited the debt he owed to Dryden and Pope. W.H. Auden states:

Like him, they were ‘realists’ who, instead of creating imaginary characters and landscapes, described living people and existing things; and, also like him, they were ‘wordly’ – that is to say their primary poetic concern was neither with nonhuman nature nor with their own personal emotions, but with man as a social-political animal, with how men and women behave to each other.⁸⁴

Byron’s great hero, Don Juan, is not the beautiful youth of Keats’s Greek myths, nor, as we shall see, the brave warrior of Walter Scott’s heroic tales; rather he is a very real and fallible human being whose mischievous creator places him in a succession of ludicrous and highly comic situations in order, in the words of Andrew Rutherford, to “tell in fact the story of a representative human life”.⁸⁵ According to Byron himself, the poem was “meant to be quietly facetious upon everything”.⁸⁶ He employed the eight-line stanza or *ottava rima* with great aplomb, finding ample opportunities to poke fun at his contemporaries and to deploy his rhyme scheme with devastating effect. In Canto I we are shown the young hero wandering through the woods in the throes of his first passion for the seductive Julia:

⁸³ George Gordon, Lord Byron, Letter to Murray, April 2, 1817 in The Selected Poetry and Prose of Byron, introduced by W.H. Auden (New York: The New American Library, 1966) 98 .

⁸⁴ W.H. Auden, “Introduction”, The Selected Poetry and Prose of Byron ix .

⁸⁵ Andrew Rutherford, Byron A Critical Study, (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1962) 141 .

⁸⁶ R.E. Prothero , ed., The Works of Lord Byron: Letters and Journals IV (London: 1898-1901, John Murray), IV, 260 quoted in Rutherford 128 .

Young Juan wandered by the glassy brooks,
Thinking unutterable things; he threw
Himself at length within the leafy nooks
Where the wild branch of the cork forest grew:
There poets find materials for their books,
And every now and then we read them through,
So that their plan and prosody are eligible,
Unless, like Wordsworth, they prove unintelligible.⁸⁷

One can sense the enjoyment with which Byron must have written these lines in order to mock contemporaries such as Wordsworth; there is certainly great joy to be had from reading them. One is also struck by the lengths Byron goes to in order to make the poem seem authentic; there is a great exactness in terms of time and place:

‘Twas on a summer’s day – the sixth of June: -
I like to be particular in dates,
Not only of the age, and year, but moon;
They are a sort of post-house, where the Fates
Change horses, making history change its tune,
Then spur away o’er empires and o’er states,
Leaving at last not much besides chronology
Excepting the post-obits of theology.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ George Gordon, Lord Byron, Don Juan, I, XC, 713-720, The Poetical Works of Lord Byron (London: Oxford U.P., 1961) 647 .

⁸⁸ Don Juan, I, CIV, 817-824, The Poetical Works of Lord Byron 659 .

Thus, in terms of verisimilitude and realistic characterisation, as well as its determinedly contemporary setting – Byron makes frequent references to recent scientific advances and inventions, as well as to people in his immediate circle – Don Juan could make a reasonable claim to being closer to our concept of the verse novel than previous epic narratives we have encountered. Indeed, in his study of Romantic verse narratives, Hermann Fischer makes that very case:

Don Juan is a verse novel, much of it autobiographical, where satirical language and verse and the epic poem are used for the sake of effect and expressive force but it is not a poem with an ‘all-embracing interest’ offering an interpretation of the ‘accepted unconscious metaphysic’ of the age of Goethe, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Chateaubriand and Hegel.⁸⁹

However, I would question whether the rather loose nature of Byron’s approach to composition might contradict this notion that Don Juan is a prototype of the verse novel. Although the poet claimed that it had an epic structure – “My poem’s epic, and is meant to be / Divided in twelve books; each book containing with love, and war, a heavy gale at sea”,⁹⁰ he also admitted (though not in print) that there was no particular plot for his narrative: “you ask me for the plan of Donny Johnny [...] I have no plan – I had no plan; but I had and have materials.”⁹¹ As Rutherford points out, Byron

⁸⁹ Hermann Fischer, Romantic Verse Narrative: The History of a Genre, trans. Sue Bollans (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1991) 20 .

⁹⁰ Don Juan, I, CC 1593-1600 .

never planned Don Juan as a whole. His idea for its development and final length changed as he worked, so that it has no plot in the strictest sense of the term – no preconceived narrative complete in itself, informing the whole poem and embodying in concrete form the writer's 'meaning' [...] the larger narrative structure of the work [...] was to portray the corruption of a normal youth by Society and experience [...] to tell in fact the story of a representative human life.⁹²

As we will shortly see, the gradual shift from verse narrative to verse novel centres around the extent to which poets began to incorporate techniques of fiction devised by the early novelists – plot, characterisation, setting, description – into their own poetry. Wordsworth, Keats and Byron each provided a model of how to adapt the epic form of Spenser and Milton to contemporary poetry. For Wordsworth it was the way in which the long poem could be used as an exploration of one's own creativity, for Keats a means of ensuring one's place in the poetic canon and for Byron an exuberant vehicle for poking fun at the foibles of contemporary man. However, I would argue that none of these poets aimed at, nor achieved, outright novelisation (in other words the creation of a poem that centred upon realistic characters involved in a plot, using dialogue and description) in their work.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge had no epic ambitions, although he was keen to explore narrative in most of its forms. His greatest significance is, perhaps, in the influence he

⁹¹ Letter to Murray, August 12, 1819, in Prothero, ed. The Works of Lord Byron: Letters and Journals, IV. 342, quoted in Rutherford 130 .

⁹² Rutherford 141 .

had on other narrative poets; Coleridge's supernatural tales had a profound influence on Shelley and Keats, and "Christabel", in particular, was extremely influential in the career of Walter Scott. According to Fischer, the difficulties that Coleridge had with its composition indicate the extent to which he was entering into a new generic territory:

In the case of "Christabel" it might also be considered whether Coleridge did not have to break off the poem precisely because the content was more than the framework of the ballad could accommodate. The mysterious vision would have had to be developed into a broader-based story, and it would then have been impossible to leave it unresolved as "The Ancient Mariner". In the period 1807 – 1825 a longer romantic narrative [...] had to identify the good and evil forces clearly if it was to win public approval. It had to be rounded off with deliverance, catastrophe, in a wedding or in the breaking of a spell if the average reader was to be interested in it.⁹³

"Christabel" may have been limited by its form, but inspired others to transcend those limitations. Sir Walter Scott claimed that hearing a recital of "Christabel" had given him the idea for a new type of work. Other, less charitable, commentators subsequently claimed that, in The Lay of The Last Minstrel, Scott may have borrowed considerably more than the idea from Coleridge. The story goes that a friend of Scott's, having heard Coleridge read the poem in 1800 (it wasn't published until 1816), recited it to Scott whose expert ear (which he had trained during his work of gathering ballads over the previous few years – he published the collection of

⁹³ Fischer 68 .

ballads, the Minstrelsy, in 1802) enabled him to memorize the entire poem. Then, as Scott composed his own work, he adopted the sprung verse rhythm of “Christabel”, as well as some verbal echoes.⁹⁴ Whatever the extent of the borrowing, intended or otherwise, in The Lay of the Last Minstrel Scott had his first literary hit. A tale set in seventeenth century Scotland, which centres on the fortunes of the House of Buccleuch and which has, as its climax, a confrontation between 10,000 Border Scotsman and an invading hoard of English marauders, it was full of action and excitement and was given a generous reception by critics and readers alike. The diction is deliberately archaic, conjuring up echoes of courtly knights and fair ladies, though with an impeccably Scottish pedigree:

Nine-and-twenty knights of fame
Hung their shields in Branksome-Hall,
Nine-and-twenty squires of name
Brought them their steeds to bower from stall;
Nine-and-twenty yeoman tall
Waited, duteous, on them all;
They were all knights of mettle true,
Kinsmen to the bold Buccleuch.

Ten of them were sheathed in steel,
With belted sword, and spur on heel:
They quitted not their harness bright,
Neither by day, nor yet by night:

⁹⁴ John Sutherland, The Life of Walter Scott. A Critical Biography (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) 101-2 .

They lay down to rest,
With corslet laced,
Pillow'd on buckler cold and hard;
They carved at the meal
With gloves of steel,
And they drank the red wine through the helmet barr'd.⁹⁵

Although to modern readers, such verse might look more like pastiche than poetry, it was enormously popular among contemporary audiences. According to Scott's biographer, John Sutherland, the poem sold an estimated 15,000 copies within five years and its success resulted in Scott being offered an advance of a thousand guineas for his next poem.⁹⁶ Given that sort of financial inducement, he quickly followed this with seven other "metrical romances", as he termed them: Marmion (1808), The Lady of the Lake (1810), The Vision of Don Roderick (1811), Rokeby (1813), The Bridal of Triermain (1813), The Lord of the Isles (1815) and Harold the Dauntless (1817), most of which covered the same territory, tales of adventure set in Scotland's past, featuring the brave exploits of highland heroes. Scott's narrative does not yet tackle the contemporary world (although the politics of seventeenth century Scotland still resonated strongly in certain circles in the early nineteenth century) but his heroes are recognisably human, not god-like; thus he is edging the verse narrative further from the epic and closer to the concept of the verse novel.

⁹⁵ Sir Walter Scott, The Lay of the Last Minstrel, Canto 1, III – IV, 3rd edition (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees and Orme; Edinburgh, James Ballantyne, 1806).

⁹⁶ Sutherland 105.

Although Scott's metrical tales had been popular with his readers, they were frequently harshly reviewed – Francis Jeffrey had written of Marmion in The Edinburgh Review that “to write a modern romance of chivalry, seems to be such a phantasy as to build a modern abbey or an English pagoda”.⁹⁷ However, his penultimate verse narrative, The Lord of the Isles, failed to sell at the level of previous works and was dismissed by some critics as loosely plotted and versified. According to the late nineteenth century critic George Saintsbury, “Scott's immediate inducement to turn from verse to prose was undoubtedly the popularity of Byron, with his consequent loss of favour”.⁹⁸ Sutherland is in agreement, arguing that the success of Childe Harold put Scott's efforts in a poorer light. Byron's glamorous epic made people aware of the potential of verse narrative to provide descriptions of exotic locations – Byron based his narratives on first-hand experience of his travels. In comparison, Scott's work looked parochial, old-fashioned and wooden; he had never travelled outside the British Isles and his descriptions seemed derivative rather than directly felt. Furthermore, the writer was no longer enjoying himself, as Sutherland tells us:

Writing Waverley was fun. Poetry was no longer fun. The Lord of the Isles [...] was agonisingly hard work: “The peine forte et dure,” he told Terry, “is nothing in comparison to being obliged to grind verses; and so devilish

⁹⁷ quoted in Richard Humphrey, Waverley, Landmarks of World Literature Series (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1993) 27.

⁹⁸ quoted in Humphrey 27.

repulsive my disposition, that I can never put my wheel into constant and regular motion, till Ballantyne's [his publisher] devil claps in his proofs."⁹⁹

And, unlike his poetry, Waverley, his first novel, which he published anonymously in 1814, was provoking an extraordinarily positive reaction from readers and reviewers alike. Despite its anonymity, it seems clear that even his earliest readers guessed the identity of the writer. Writing to her niece in September 1814, a mock-disgruntled Jane Austen complained: "Walter Scott has no business to write novels, especially good ones. – It is not fair. – He has Fame and Profit enough as a Poet, and should not be taking the bread out of other people's mouths."¹⁰⁰

Scott always had an eye for the market so perhaps it was as a good career move rather than as a result of aesthetic pressures that made him shift to concentrate on prose writing, although at least one critic, Richard Humphrey, argues that there is more continuity than discontinuity in this approach.

One cannot [. . .] quite agree with the several critics who argue that the lays are 'ballads on the point of turning into novels' or that Scott's historical novel is an extended 'ballad in prose'. What these years show is a continuity of effort to depict the Scottish past culminating in a fruitful discontinuity of the literary form employed.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ H. Grierson, ed. The Letters of Sir Walter Scott, Vol 3, 514, in Sutherland, 171 .

¹⁰⁰ R. W. Chapman, ed., Jane Austen's Letters to her sister Cassandra and others 2nd edn (London: Oxford U.P., 1952) 404 .

¹⁰¹ Humphrey 28 .

Arguing that the novels provided Scott with a greater scope for story-telling because the lays lacked “rich characterization, often achieved through conversation, and achieved right across a socially broad cast”, Humphrey concludes that “Waverley [. . .] is the appropriate new form for a broader vision, for a Scott who now needs more rooms in his verbal museum than the lay or ballad offers to display all the exhibits he considers necessary for this vision of the past.”¹⁰²

This is a useful observation upon which to ponder. In the early nineteenth century, poets had not yet found a model that would allow them to adapt the now well-established characteristics of the novel – realistic, well-rounded characters, dialogue, recognisable contemporary or near contemporary settings and themes that dealt with the topics of the day – to poetic narrative. It is equally useful to remember that it was only when Scott entered the world of the prose novel that he achieved nationwide celebrity. Scott can thus be seen as a paradigm for the shifting balance between poetry and prose, between the verse narrative and the novel.

A Russian digression – Pushkin’s Eugene Onegin

Byron’s Don Juan had been read attentively by the Russian poet, Alexander Pushkin, who believed there was scope to provide a Russian version of the rake’s progress although he was perplexed about the form such a work might take. Writing to his friend, the poet and critic Prince Pyotr Vyazemski in November 1823, he said he was now embarked upon “not a novel – but a novel in verse – a deuced difference”.¹⁰³ He expanded on the theme to the same correspondent a few weeks later, explaining that

¹⁰² Humphrey 28 .

¹⁰³ Alexander Pushkin, letter to Prince Pyotr Vyazemsk, 4 November 1823, quoted in Alexander Pushkin, Eugene Onegin, translated and commented upon by Vladimir Nabokov, 4 Vols (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1964) Commentary 68 .

the work was “in the genre of Don Juan.” He continued: “Publication is unthinkable. I write without restraining myself. Our censorship is so whimsical that it is impossible to shape a course of action – better not to think about it at all.”¹⁰⁴ Undoubtedly Pushkin is more concerned that the content, rather than the form, would fail to please the censor, yet he continues in his correspondence to worry about the rambling nature of the narrative. “I am now writing a new poema”¹⁰⁵ in which I permit myself to babble beyond all limits. Birykov [the censor] shall not see it because he is a fie-baby, a capricious child. God knows when we shall read it all together.”¹⁰⁶

Pushkin seems to have got around this anxiety about form and babbling by introducing into the poem itself the character of the poet narrator, who is at once observer of, and participant in, the plot and whose amused comments about the process of writing remind the reader that he is participating in an artifice:

I’ve drawn a plan and a projection,
the hero’s name’s decided too.
Meanwhile my novel’s opening section
is finished, and I’ve looked it through
meticulously; in my fiction
there’s far too much of contradiction,
but I refuse to chop or change.

¹⁰⁴ Eugene Onegin, Vol. 1. Commentary 69 .

¹⁰⁵ Poema is the term used to describe long narrative poems in Russia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries .

¹⁰⁶ Letter from Pushkin to Baron Anton Delvig, 16 November, 1823, quoted in Eugene Onegin, Commentary, 69 .

The censor's tribute I'll arrange;
I'll feed the journalists for dinner
fruits of my labour and my ink . . .
So now be off to Neva's brink,
you newborn work, and like a winner
earn for me the rewards of fame –
misunderstanding, noise, and blame!¹⁰⁷

The creation of the narrator as a Pushkin-like persona who can directly address his readers in this way, while at the same time relating to other fictional characters in the poem – Onegin is described as being a close friend of his – is a very deliberate narrative strategy, according to Craig Cravens. Cravens points to “two basic types of psychological narration [. . .] lyric and narrative free-indirect discourse” in Eugene Onegin and continues:

The author-narrator overtly employs his own persona and consciousness to endow characters with a psychic life. The narrator modulates his voice, a poetic voice, among different styles and genres, which at different points in the novel both correspond to and help create a character's personality and world view. Through the first-person form, Pushkin is able to project different facets of his poetic personality onto narrated characters to create psychologically persuasive

¹⁰⁷ Alexander Pushkin, Eugene Onegin, Chapter One, LX, 1-14, translated by Charles Johnston (London: Penguin, 1979). I have chosen to quote from Charles Johnston's 1977 translation of the poem because, unlike the Nabokov version, it maintains Pushkin's rhyming scheme and metre .

characters, each with its own dynamics and internal logic, but which are ultimately based on [. . .] Pushkin's own poetic persona.¹⁰⁸

In response to Cravens' argument, it is interesting to speculate on the degree to which contemporary readers found Pushkin's novel, and his characters, more credible because Pushkin used his own, well-known, biography and persona throughout the work. Furthermore, in this context, it is even more intriguing to consider the extent to which modern verse novelists adopt similar strategies. By using, or claiming to use, autobiographical information and real archival material, are they trying to convince their readers of the authenticity of the text at the very moment when they are creating the most artificial of literary artifices, the verse novel? This is a point which I have already explored in relation to my own use of archive material for my verse novel and is something I will further consider when discussing the work of Anne Stevenson and Craig Raine later in this chapter.

Eugene Onegin was published in sections between 1825 and 1832 and then published in complete form in 1833 and 1837; the final edition was published a month before Pushkin's death in a duel. It consists of 5,541 lines which are all, except for 18, in iambic tetrameter. It is divided up into a Preface, eight cantos or chapters divided into 14-line stanzas, and two individual sections of free-rhymed verse: Tatiana's letter to Onegin which comes after Chapter 3 and Onegin's letter to Tatiana which comes at the end of Chapter 8.

¹⁰⁸ Craig Cravens, "Lyric and Narrative Consciousness in Eugene Onegin," Slavic and East European Journal, 46.4 (2002): 707 .

One of Eugene Onegin's first translators into English, Vladimir Nabokov, called Pushkin's composition "first of all and above all a phenomenon of style," pointing out that there is considerable mirroring in terms of location, themes and structural devices.¹⁰⁹ The novelist in Nabokov is responding to the novelist in Pushkin when he continues: "It is in the distribution of the subject matter, the balance of parts, the switches and swerves of the narrative, the introduction of characters, the digressions, the transitions, and so forth that the technique of our artist is fully revealed."¹¹⁰ In his somewhat controversial translation of Eugene Onegin, Nabokov provided a comprehensive glossary and notes on the translation. It is tempting to speculate about the extent to which this scholarly work influenced the composition of Nabokov's own verse novel, Pale Fire, published in 1961.¹¹¹

Pushkin in general, and Eugene Onegin in particular, have come in for considerable attention from formalist critics such as Mikhail Bakhtin and Viktor Shklovsky who regarded Onegin's story as a novel rather than a poem because, rather than a simple linear narrative, it incorporates digressions and switches of perspectives and interpreted tones of voices of the principal characters. According to Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, language is fundamentally multiple in character, given its social function between separate identities: meaning comes not from any one single consciousness but as a result of a dialogue between equal consciousnesses. Thus, in Bakhtin's reading, the meaning in Eugene Onegin emerges from the interplay of all the voices, the narrative interpolations and deliberate digression. As Michael Holquist puts it, quoting Shklovsky:

¹⁰⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, commentary on Eugene Onegin 7 .

¹¹⁰ Nabokov, commentary 16 .

¹¹¹ For further discussion of Pale Fire, see pages 328-32 of this dissertation .

Pushkin's Evgeny Onegin is composed not of the events comprising "Onegin's love affair with Tatyana, but rather the artistic treatment of this fibula, achieved by means of interpolating digression." The assumption here seems to be that we all carry around in our head a narrative scheme for love affairs as they happen outside literature; Pushkin ensures the literariness of his project by "braking" this progression with numerous interpolations that distort the "logic" of love affairs in "real life".¹¹²

For Bakhtin, the difference between the novel and the poem was unbridgeable, and he found many instances in Eugene Onegin to demonstrate his argument:

The differences between the novel (and certain forms close to it) and all other genres – poetic genres in the narrow sense – are so fundamental, so categorical, that all attempts to impose on the novel the concepts and norms of poetic imagery are doomed to fail. Although the novel does contain poetic imagery in the narrow sense [primarily in the author's direct discourse], it is of secondary importance for the novel. What is more, this direct imagery often acquires in the novel quite special functions that are not direct. Here, for example, is how Pushkin characterizes Lensky's poetry [Evgenij Onegin, 2.10, 1-4]:

He sang love, he was obedient to love,
And his song was as clear
As the thoughts of a simple maid,

¹¹² Michael Holquist, Dialogism (London: Routledge, 1990) 115 .

As an infant's dream, as the moon [. . .]

[a development of the final comparison follows.]¹¹³

The poetic images [specifically the metaphoric comparison] representing Lensky's "song" do not here have any direct poetic significance at all. They cannot be understood as the direct poetic images of Pushkin himself (although formally, of course, the characterization is that of the author). Here Lensky's "song" is characterizing itself, in its own language, in its own poetic manner. Pushkin's direct characterization of Lensky's "song" – which we find as well in the novel – sounds completely different [6.23, 1]:

Thus he wrote gloomily and languidly [. . .]¹¹⁴

Put simply, because Pushkin is creating in Lensky a character who writes poetry, Lensky's poetry must not be judged as a piece of poetry but rather regarded as an utterance of the character, as a piece of characteristic dialogue. The imagery chosen by Lensky cannot be taken as the imagery that Pushkin, as poet-author, would himself chose when writing a poem. Rather the images characterize Lensky and tell us more about his personality and his role in the novel, a function more typical of fiction than poetry. However, this point is disputed by other commentators such as Craig Cravens:

One must keep in mind that Pushkin was writing at a time before the great literary developments in psychological Realism. Pushkin's own creation and

¹¹³ Bakhtin's own parenthesis .

¹¹⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse" in Michael Holquist, ed., The Dialogic Imagination by M.M. Bakhtin (Austin: Univ. of Texas P., 1981) 43 .

presentation of consciousness is distinctly Pre-Realistic and [. . .] more lyrically-based than Bakhtin allows. By negotiating among the essentially ‘lyric’ realms of author, narrator, and characters, Pushkin develops his characters psychologically as far as possible within the limits of his literary method, creating characters that appear to exist independently from the author-narrator’s consciousness, but which do not constitute fully-embodied ‘prosaic’ consciousness.¹¹⁵

Cravens’ argument may be somewhat weakened by his assertion that Pushkin was writing during what he terms a ‘Pre-Realism’ period which did not yet have fully rounded psychological prose characters; this may be true of Russian prose at the time, although it seems to ignore the psychological realism of Jane Austen and Henry Fielding, authors whom surely Pushkin would have read. (He had, as we have seen, read Byron in translation.) However, I would agree with his comments on how Pushkin makes use of author, narrator and character to explore psychological development, particularly in the light of my own creative approach to character utterance in *In Sight of Home*. In that, the modern narrator is a poet who uses poetry to create the inner voices of the nineteenth-century characters; it is in the dialogue between each of these voices, real and imagined, that the ultimate meaning of the verse novel lies.

Playing the novelists at their own game – the Victorians

There was an increase in the number of narrative long poems being published in England in the middle of the nineteenth century, and some of these shared many

¹¹⁵ Cravens 683 .

characteristics with prose novels. In his study of the verse novel, Dino Felluga remarks on the conventional wisdom which stated that, “in the middle of the nineteenth century, at the very heart and height of the Victorian period, a peculiar and peculiarly perverse genre, the verse novel, arose in England only to disappear again by the 1870s.”¹¹⁶ According to such arguments, the rise of the verse novel was prompted by the poets’ desire to recover some of the literary ground lost to the novelists since the 1820s. The public’s taste had altered in that period; the mass market preferred novels and readers were no longer queuing up to buy the work of the latest poet superstar, as they had in the days of Byron. As a result publishers grew so wary of publishing first editions of poetry that some, such as Edward Moxon, required poets to underwrite part of the publishing costs of their volumes.¹¹⁷ Thus, with severe market forces against them, poets were forced to either accept their position on the margins or else to fight the novelists in their own territory and indulge the public’s taste for narrative and plot. As Felluga states the argument:

poetry could attempt to play to that market as best it could by exploring those characteristics that made the novel such a popular success (narrative sequentiality, realistic description, historical referentiality, believable characters, dramatic situations, fully realized dialogism and, above all, the domestic marriage plot).¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Dino Felluga, “Verse Novel,” *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. Richard Cronin (Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) 171 .

¹¹⁷ Lee Erickson, *The Economy of Literary Form: English Literature and the Industrialization of Publishing 1800 – 1850* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U.P., 1996), quoted in Felluga 171 .

¹¹⁸ Felluga 171 .

Certainly, when we come to examine the popular verse novels of this period, we shall see in varying degrees the elements of character, dialogue and plot identified by conventional wisdom as characteristic of prose fiction rather than poetry.

However, Felluga goes on to argue that the situation cannot simply be seen as the poets fighting to gain back the territory they had lost to the novelists. The very heterogeneity of examples from writers such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Arthur Clough, Alfred Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning shows the verse novel engaging as much with other contemporary poetic forms as with the contemporary novel:

The verse novel [. . .] engages, overlaps or appropriates other poetic subgenres, including the sonnet sequence (George Meredith's sixteen-line version of the form in Modern Love), the dramatic monologue (Robert Browning's The Ring and The Book) and the epic romance (Alfred Lord Tennyson's Idylls of the King).¹¹⁹

The mid-Victorian verse novel was not only part of a current poetic tradition, but was following on, as we have seen, from past examples of fictional narrative in poetry, through the epics, romances, pastorals, ballads of, for example, Chaucer, Malory and Milton to the picaresque tales of the Romantic poets. This fact was not lost on Victorian commentators, who seem to have seen less of a dividing line between the genres than we do. Writing in 1833, John Stuart Mill saw that "many of the finest poems are in the form of novels, and in almost all good novels there is true

¹¹⁹ Felluga 172 .

poetry.”¹²⁰ So, were verse novels, as Felluga puts it, “a distinct hybrid between two arch-generic forms that had, until this point, been considered as irreconcilable and even antagonistic”¹²¹ or were they, in fact, an example of the poet’s constant desire to experiment and to push back the boundaries of form? Felluga argues that the potential subversiveness of the genre has been largely ignored by literary critics because the critics themselves have been pigeon-holed by their own literary specialism; one could be a specialist in the Victorian novel, or in Victorian poetry, but rarely in both. Thus works where generic boundaries shifted or dissolved altogether were largely ignored because of the critics’ discomfort with the hybrid form. While such a comment might provoke a chorus of disapproving denials from literary critics everywhere, it is indeed true that critical study of the verse novel genre is slight, to say the least. Whether this is because of a lack of expertise, or a lack of interest by critics in an occasionally flawed form, remains to be seen.

Felluga argues that “the verse novel [. . .] seems intent to question [. . .] ideology on the level of both content and form,”¹²² and at least one proponent, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, had much to say about her desire to find a new form to challenge current ideologies.

¹²⁰ John Stuart Mill, “What is Poetry?”, *Monthly Repository* 7 (1833) 60-80, reprinted in F.P. Sharpless, ed., *Essays on Poetry* (Columbia: U. of South Carolina P., 1976) 3-22, quoted in Felluga 172 .

¹²¹ Felluga 172 .

¹²² Felluga 174 .

A new form of kunsterroman – Aurora Leigh (1856)

When she was still Miss Elizabeth Barrett of Wimpole Street, the poet was writing to friends and new acquaintances about her desire to attempt something innovative and challenging. In a letter to her friend and fellow writer Mary Russell Mitford in 1844, Barrett writes that:

I want to write a poem of a new class, in a measure – a Don Juan, without the mockery and impurity, under one aspect, – and having unity, as a work of art, – & admitting of as much philosophical dreaming & digression (which is in fact a characteristic of the age) as I like to use. Might it not be done, even if I could not do it? & I think of trying at any rate.¹²³

Writing to Mitford, she also asks: “And now tell me, – where is the obstacle to making as interesting a story of a poem as of a prose work. [. . .] Conversations & events, why may they not be given as rapidly & passionately & lucidly in verse as in prose –?”¹²⁴

In one of the first letters of her lengthy correspondence with Robert Browning, written in 1845, she says that she wishes to write:

¹²³ Philip Kelley, Ronald Hudson and Scott Lewis, eds., The Brownings’ Correspondence, 14 vols (Winfield, Kan: Wedgestone P., 1984-1998) Vol 9, 304, quoted in Rebecca Stott, “Genre: A Chapter on Form” in Simon Avery and Rebecca Stott, Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Edinburgh: Pearson Education, 2003) 113 .

¹²⁴ Meredith B. Raymond and Mary Rose Sullivan, eds., The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mary Russell Mitford: 1836-1854 (Waco, TX: Armstrong Browning Library of Baylor University, 1983), Vol 3, 49, quoted in Angela Leighton, Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Brighton: Harvester, 1986) 114 .

a sort of novel-poem – a poem as completely modern as “Geraldine’s Courtship”,¹²⁵ running into the midst of our conventions, & rushing into drawing rooms & the like, ‘where angels fear to tread’ & so, meeting face to face & without mask, the humanity of the age & speaking the truth as I conceive of it out plainly.¹²⁶

It would appear that Elizabeth Barrett believed that a new type of poetic form was needed to deal with a new type of subject matter and to allow her to challenge conventions, both social and literary, in the process. It took Elizabeth Barrett another decade to complete the ‘novel-poem’, during which time she had abandoned her sofa in Wimpole Street, acquired a husband, become estranged from her father, emigrated to Italy, given birth to a son and opened herself up to an entirely new and wider world of experience and inspiration.

Aurora Leigh, a verse novel in nine books of blank verse, was published in 1856. It tells the story of the eponymous heroine, a poet, who is brought up by an English father and an Italian mother in Italy in a Wordsworthian idyll of nature, then forced to return to England on the death of her father (her mother had died when she was four years old) to complete her education as a young woman of good birth. A bookish girl, she harbours an ambition to be a poet and rejects the marriage proposal of her philanthropically-minded cousin Romney Leigh, because he tries to convince her that a lady’s correct role is to be an ‘angel of the hearth’ and social helpmate rather than

¹²⁵ “Lady Geraldine’s Courtship”, which has as its sub-title “A Romance of the Age”, is a poem by Elizabeth Barrett of 103 four-line stanzas telling the unconventional story of a noble woman’s desire for, and courtship of, a young poet .

¹²⁴ Philip Kelley and Scott Lewis, The Brownings’ Correspondence, 14 vols (Waco, TX: Wedgestone Press, 1992) Vol 10: 102-3, quoted in Rebecca Stott, “Where Angels Fear to Tread: Aurora Leigh”, in Avery and Stott 205 .

an artist (there are echoes of St. John Rivers' failed proposal to Jane Eyre, perhaps – the Brontë influence will be considered later in this section). Aurora becomes embroiled in Romney's subsequent romantic misadventures with the unscrupulous Lady Waldermar (who loves him and who will go to any lengths to have him, in the best Gothic tradition) and the rustic innocent Marian Earle, whose innocence is ruined by the vicious Lady Waldermar. Aurora, becoming increasingly confused about her own feelings for Romney and frustrated by her inability to write great poetry, retreats to Paris where she rediscovers Marian Earle, now living in poverty with the child she conceived as a result of a rape. Aurora glimpses possible redemption for both herself and for Marian and moves them both to Italy, where they undergo a collective process of recovery, in Aurora's case both spiritual and artistic. The story is completed when Aurora is reunited with Romney, now blinded since his house was set alight by the disgruntled poor he was trying to help (and not by a mad wife he was keeping in his attic), but whose eyes have been opened to the quality of Aurora's poetry and her vocation as a woman and a poet.

This cursory retelling of the plot of Aurora Leigh fails to do it justice and certainly does not convey the fast-paced quality of the narrative, the richness of the language, the eye for detail, the originality of the subject matter or the compelling quality of Aurora's voice. Barrett Browning could capture the essence of a character in a few lines; here she describes Aurora's aunt, a forbidding woman trapped by her own sense of convention:

I think I see my father's sister stand
Upon the hall-step of her country-house

To give me welcome. She stood straight and calm,
Her somewhat narrow forehead braided tight
As if for taming accidental thoughts
From possible pulses; brown hair pricked with grey
By frigid use of life [. . .]
A close mild mouth, a little soured about
The ends, though speaking unrequited loves
Or peradventure niggardly half-truths;¹²⁷

Aurora's aunt, we are told, has lived "a harmless life, she called a virtuous life"¹²⁸ whose main diversions centred on the "poor club", where she could exercise her charity, and a book club which never protected her from the "modern trick / Of shaking dangerous questions from the crease".¹²⁹ This is a well-rounded portrait, the type of characterization which we could expect to find in a novel, but the tightness of the poetic lines here seem to give it an added poignancy because the entire sum of the woman's life can be encapsulated in a few lines of poetry. In fact, although some of the male characters remain little more than ciphers in the verse novel, Aurora Leigh thrives on the strength of the female characterisation. Aurora herself is an independent woman determined to forge a life for herself as an artist. Marian Earle is a rarity in Victorian literature; a fallen woman who is not a victim, she is given a voice and a perspective and grows in self-knowledge throughout the novel. Even Lady Waldemar, stereotypical in some ways in her Lamia-like villainy, is seen to be self-aware and

¹²⁷ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Aurora Leigh, Book 1 267-80, The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning .

¹²⁸ Aurora Leigh, Book 1 287 .

¹²⁹ Aurora Leigh, Book 1 301-2 .

conscious of the complexity of love. Through her female characters, and in particular through her realistic and unidealized treatment of them, Barrett Browning is indeed going where angels fear to tread.

In Aurora Leigh, Barrett Browning remains determined to prove that poetic form is not merely a question of stanza shape and length, but rather a way of embodying an entire spirit and philosophy. In Book Five of the poem she states her claim to experimentation, both in terms of form and subject matter:

What form is best for poems? Let me think
Of forms less, and the external. Trust the spirit
As sovran nature does, to make the form;
For otherwise we only imprison spirit
And not embody. Inward evermore
To outward, –so in life, and so in art
Which is still life. Five acts to make a play.
And why not fifteen? why not ten? or seven?
What matter for the number of the leaves,
Supposing the tree lives and grows? exact
The literal unities of time and place,
When 'tis the essence of passion to ignore
Both time and place? Absurd. Keep up the fire
and leave the generous flames to shape themselves.¹³⁰

¹³⁰ Aurora Leigh, Book 5 224-238 .

In other words, the constraints of traditional poetic form prevent the free expression of “humanity of the age” that Browning was so determined to meet “face to face & without mask”. A freer form was needed. It is tempting to interpret these lines as an assertion by Barrett Browning of the right of poets to follow their own instincts in deciding on an appropriate form for their poetry. One could go further and argue that it is an assertion of the right to say that a poet should follow her own inclination and write in whichever form and on whatever subject she is so inclined. If so, then it is an interpretation with which this writer, at least, is in agreement.

A few lines earlier, the poet narrator, Aurora Leigh, had urged writers to wrench themselves away from archaic subject matter (the type of subject epic poets had written about in the past) and to concentrate on the issues of contemporary life: “Never flinch / But still, unscrupulously epic, catch / Upon the burning lava of a song / The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age.”¹³¹ This dual insistence on the need for poets to be rigorously contemporary in their subject matter and formally experimental seems to have been at the heart of Barrett Browning’s vision of a “poem of a new class”; it is this insistence on being contemporary, on dealing with ordinary men and women and their problems, that seems to mark the real advance of poets into the novelists’ territory during this period.

Rebecca Stott comments that the long poem gave Barrett Browning the scope to explore this new territory. Stott quotes the poet and critic Smaro Kamboureli who, in his exploration of the modern long poem, notes how the form allowed writers to transgress traditional genre boundaries:

¹³¹ Aurora Leigh, Book 5 214-218 .

The diverse compositional nature of the long poem illustrates that generic limits are elastic: they can stretch, extend, or fold within and without. Nonetheless, the long poem transgresses not the limits of a single genre but the limits, the frames, of various genres, such as those of the lyric, the epic, the narrative, the drama, the documentary, and the prose poem.¹³²

Stott agrees that this elasticity of form allows Barrett Browning the scope for “digressive philosophical rumination” but argues that it is Aurora’s own narrative voice that is the unifying factor: “it is the voice of Aurora, with all its variations of mood and tone and introspection [which] unifies the poetry, holds it all together and channels the volcanic energies of the poem.”¹³³ For example, in Book Three we see the newly-established writer Aurora struggling to cope with her literary correspondence:

So open all the letters! let me read.
Blanche Ord, the writer in the ‘Lady’s Fan,’
Requests my judgement on . . . that afterwards.
Kate Ward desires the model of my cloak,
And signs, ‘Elisha to you.’ Pringle Sharpe
Presents his work on ‘Social Conduct,’ craves
A little money for his pressing debts . . .
From me, who scarce have money for my needs;
Art’s fiery chariot which we journey in

¹³² Smaro Kamboureli, *On the Edge of Genre: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991) 100, quoted in Avery and Stott 115 .

¹³³ Avery and Stott 117 .

Being apt to singe our singing-ropes to holes
Although you ask me for my cloak, Kate Ward! [. . .]

My critic Hammond flatters prettily,
And wants another volume like the last.
My critic Belfair wants another book
Entirely different, which will sell (and live?),
A striking book, yet not a startling book,
The public blames originalities
(You must not pump spring-water unawares
Upon a gracious public full of nerves)¹³⁴

There have been previous representations of the woman writer in English literature (for example, by Aphra Behn), but this is perhaps one of the first times we hear a woman writer's voice speaking about the pressures of literary success; Aurora's voice is certainly both witty and dynamic but it also evokes a great sense of authenticity – we believe in her because Barrett Browning has successfully created both an inner world and an external identity for her.

Virginia Woolf responded to that unique voice and sense of a writer's preoccupations in Aurora Leigh. Noting Barrett Browning's low critical reputation in the early 1930s – “fate has not been kind to Mrs Browning as a writer. Nobody reads her, nobody discusses her, nobody troubles to put her in her place”¹³⁵ – Woolf also

¹³⁴ Aurora Leigh, Book III 50-9, 65-72 .

¹³⁵ Virginia Woolf, The Common Reader. Second Series (London: Hogarth Press, 1932) 202 .

comments on the “speed and energy, forthrightness and complete self-confidence”¹³⁶ of the narrative and admires the “sense of the writer’s presence.”¹³⁷ She describes the work as a “masterpiece in embryo” and blames its shortcomings on the limitations of the verse-novel form: “Mrs Browning, convinced of the divinity of poetry, pondered, seized as much as she could of actual experience [. . .] at last threw down her challenge to the Brontës and the Thackerays in nine books of blank verse.”¹³⁸ But blank verse could prove problematic, in Woolf’s view: “Blank verse has proved itself the most remorseless enemy of living speech. Talk tossed up on the surge and swing of the verse becomes high, rhetorical, impassioned; and as talk, since action is ruled out, must go on and on, the reader’s mind stiffens and glazes under the monotony of the rhythm.”¹³⁹ But for Virginia Woolf, Aurora Leigh was not simply an interesting failure:

Thus, if Mrs Browning meant by a novel-poem a book in which character is closely and subtly revealed, the relations of many hearts laid bare, and a story unfalteringly unfolded, she failed completely. But if she meant rather to give us a sense of life in general, of people who are unmistakably Victorian, wrestling with the problems of their own time, all brightened, intensified, and compacted by the fire of poetry, she succeeded.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ Woolf 204 .

¹³⁷ Woolf 205 .

¹³⁸ Woolf 210 .

¹³⁹ Woolf 211 .

¹⁴⁰ Woolf 212 .

It seems that Woolf here is responding to what she sees as an attempt by Barrett Browning to portray faithfully the subjective experience of what it was to be a Victorian woman; in other words to create a more psychologically true portrait than had previously been presented in poetry. If this is the case, then she is recognising in Barrett Browning a creative fellow traveller; Woolf's life's work was, after all, to capture the inner feelings of her characters and to render their subjective experiences with total accuracy. Thus her comments go to the heart of the challenge for many verse-novelists. As poets, they were used to dealing with subjective experience, with the feelings inspired by a landscape or an emotion and the need to express those feelings. The question was now how they could match the heightened language of poetry, of subjective experience of the inner world, with the more prosaic, external requirements of characterisation, plot, exposition and narrative; the seamless blending of the inner and outer worlds would be needed to create a successful verse novel.

Rebecca Stott sees similarities between the approaches of Barrett Browning and Virginia Woolf in trying to invent new literary forms. Stott argues that:

Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Barrett Browning were inventors of new literary forms, but not inventors for invention's sake; they struggled to find new forms because the existing forms did not allow them to do what they need to do; nor did the old forms shape the world adequately. Virginia Woolf's writing made waves; it troubled readers and reviewers precisely because it was sometimes difficult for them to place her work within familiar genres. A work like A Room of One's Own, for instance, had precisely the rambling philosophical elasticity that Elizabeth Barrett Browning hungered for in planning Aurora

Leigh [. . .] Aurora Leigh proves resistant to genre categorisations: it is part autobiography, part biography, part *Kunstlerroman* (a form that describes the development of an artist), part philosophical rumination, part political invective, part religious discourse, and at once both novel and poem.¹⁴¹

The strength of the woman's voice in Aurora Leigh proved irresistible to the new generation of feminist critics that sprang up from the 1960s onwards, many of whom saw Barrett Browning's experimentation with form as a rejection of patriarchal traditions in literature. Sandra M. Gilbert wrote about the verse novel briefly in her seminal work on Victorian women writers, The Mad Woman in the Attic, which she co-authored with Susan Gubar, arguing that "Aurora's self-development as a poet is the central concern of Barrett Browning's *Bildungsroman* in verse, but if she is to be a poet she must deconstruct the dead self that is a male 'opus' and discover a living, 'inconstant' self."¹⁴² In a later essay examining Barrett Browning's political interests, Gilbert argues that Aurora's rejection of England and embracing of Italy is a rejection of patriarchy in favour of the matriarchy represented by an older civilisation. Thus, Aurora Leigh is:

not only a versified *Kunstlerroman* which famously aims to specify the interaction between an artist and the particular 'full-veined, heaving, doubled-breasted Age' (5.217) that created her, it is also an 'unscrupulously epic'

¹⁴¹ Rebecca Stott, "Genre: A Chapter on Form" in Avery and Stott 114 .

¹⁴² Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Mad Woman in the Attic, Second Edition (New Haven and London: Yale U.P., 2000) 19.

(5.215) allegory of a woman artist's journey from disease towards what Sylvia Plath called 'a country far away as health' ("Tulips", *Ariel*, 12).¹⁴³

If we are to agree with Gilbert's thesis of the kunstlerroman (she seems to use the terms "Bildungsroman" and "kunstlerroman" interchangeably, which is surely appropriate given that Aurora Leigh focuses both on Aurora's development as an artist and as a woman), then there are clear links between Wordsworth's Prelude and Aurora Leigh in this focus on the development of the artist's inner life. The main difference is that Wordsworth did not have the novel as a model when writing his poetic memoir. Writing fifty years later, Barrett Browning would have had the benefit of lessons from the Brontës, Thackeray and Mrs Gaskell when it came to characterisation and plot. It is therefore not surprising that, when she came to explore creatively the development of the artist, she would rise to the challenge of blending poetry and narrative in this way. Perhaps she had read too many Victorian melodramas; however, Gilbert argues that the various often tortuous and melodramatic turns of plot which divide Romney from Aurora, only to reunite them at the end of the verse novel, are in fact "important strategies by which the author herself was trying to work out (and out of) the 'problem' of female sexuality by first confronting the engendered world as it is and then re-engendering and reconstituting it as it should be."¹⁴⁴

Rebecca Stott agrees that Aurora Leigh may be seen as Barrett Browning's response to much of the literature that she had been reading:

¹⁴³ Sandra M. Gilbert, "From Patria to Matria: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Risorgimento", in Angela Leighton, ed., Victorian Women Poets. A Critical Reader (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996) 35 .

¹⁴⁴ Sandra M. Gilbert, "From Patria to Matria" 40 .

The poem borrows elements of many mid-Victorian novels and long poems in its discussion of issues and problems of the day: the condition of England, the role of women and the role of the poet. It is a kind of bricolage in this respect [. . .] but it is also [. . .] a method by which Barrett Browning puts her voice into dialogue with other poets, artists and intellectuals of her day. The poem itself enacts a conversation, it is inherently dialogic in form.¹⁴⁵

In her study of Barrett Browning, Angela Leighton points out the debt Browning owed to earlier novels such as Madame de Stael's Corinne and Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre,¹⁴⁶ although Barrett Browning famously denied that she had Rochester in mind when deciding to blind Romney Leigh in a house fire. However, Leighton argues that:

[. . .] the sub-plot, however, remains characteristically and underderivatively Barrett Browning's own. It traces Aurora's quest for two figures, whom she seeks with the lover-like urgency of a poet seeking her muse. The first of these is the father, whose presence is movingly and anxiously solicited, as if in a last appeal by the daughter whose strong consciousness of disinheritance had come cruelly to life. It is this appeal to the past which the poem ultimately rejects and supersedes, in order to free Aurora for her second quest – for a sister.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ Avery and Stott 200 .

¹⁴⁶ Leighton 117 .

¹⁴⁷ Leighton 117-8 .

Leighton argues that, in the end, Aurora Leigh's many structural faults prevent it from claiming the title of a "consistently great poem", but "it does succeed in being a new kind of poem, and of communicating the message of its newness. The passionate, garrulous, hectoring, inspired Aurora discourses on the world before her with the conviction of an imaginative discovery."¹⁴⁸

It is this sense of mission, argument and vitality which both disgusted and enthralled contemporary readers and has continued to engage modern ones. It is worth noting that most contemporary reviewers took issue, not with the poem's form, but with its subject matter and content. Writing in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, William Aytoun, having indicted Barrett Browning for failing to "purge out the grosser matter", went on to make this distinction between the poem and the novel: "All poetical characters, all poetical situations, must be idealised. The language is not that of common life, which belongs essentially to the domain of prose. Therein lies the distinction between a novel and a poem."¹⁴⁹ In harsher language, the reviewer of the Dublin University Review called it "coarse in expression and unfeminine in thought"¹⁵⁰ and Coventry Patmore, writing in The North British Review, said "the story is uninteresting from its very singularity."¹⁵¹ The Saturday Review opined that Aurora Leigh was an illustration of the fact that women could not write poetry: "The negative experience of centuries seems to prove that a woman cannot be a great poet. Those who are curious in intellectual physiology may find it in Aurora Leigh some

¹⁴⁸ Leighton 142 .

¹⁴⁹ William Aytoun, "Aurora Leigh", Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, quoted in Avery and Stott 205 .

¹⁵⁰ quoted in Avery and Stott 8 .

¹⁵¹ Coventry Patmore, "Mrs Browning's Poems and Aurora Leigh," The North British Review, 26 (1857): 454, quoted in introduction by Margaret Reynolds to Aurora Leigh, (Athens: Ohio U.P., 1992) 4-5 .

materials for the explanation of feminine misadventures in art.”¹⁵² A gently feminine harrumph is in order here.

There were some good reviews, however. George Eliot called it “the greatest poem by a woman of genius” while Ruskin said it was “the greatest poem in the language, surpassed only by Shakespeare.”¹⁵³ Margaret Reynolds points out that this was one of Ruskin’s favourite tributes as he said the same of Dante Gabriel Rossetti.¹⁵⁴ But overall, the critical reaction pointed to the invidiousness of Barrett Browning’s position as a woman poet entering areas where she was not expected to go, “where angels fear to tread” as she had written presciently to Robert Browning. And her formal experiments were seen as a symptom of that marginalisation:

While Aurora’s story is in the course of being told, the contradictions doubtless intrinsic to the woman poet’s marginal position lend to the verse novel both the initial impetus for its composition [. . .] and the informing structures, formal and theoretical, which make the poem a power experiment in an alternative and feminine writing. All the techniques (variety of narrative method, ‘round’ as opposed to linear time, narrative unreliability, surprise and challenge offered to the reader’s expectations, repetition and revision, allusion and reflection) which Barrett Browning and Aurora Leigh bring to their writings are suggestive of the disruptive and fluid forms which feminist theory recognizes as the characteristic

¹⁵² G.S. Venables, “Aurora Leigh”, *The Saturday Review*, 2 (27 December, 1856), 776-8, quoted in Reynolds 7.

¹⁵³ quoted in Avery and Stott 8.

¹⁵⁴ Reynolds, Introduction to *Aurora Leigh*, 58, n.28.

(and in some cases, valuable) elements of a female discourse constructed on the margins of conventional literary expectation."¹⁵⁵

Thus, we are back to the marginality argument posited by Dino Felluga earlier in this chapter. Barrett Browning's status as a woman poet, and her somewhat revolutionary attempts to convey the subjectivity of female experience, may have left her on the margins of poetry and prose, but what can we say about other, male poets who wrote verse novels during this period?

A witness to world events – Arthur Clough's Amours de Voyage (1858)

Arthur Clough was interested in the ramifications of contemporary events which were likely to have an historical impact on the lives of real people. Like the Brownings, he was in Italy for some of the climactic events of the Risorgimento and he, like them, responded to those events creatively. However, his response was of a kind very different from the political passion and certainties espoused by Elizabeth Barrett Browning in her Poems Before Congress (1860). Commentators such as A.L.P. Norrington have seen Clough as a tragi-comic figure whose chronic inability to make up his mind had disastrous consequence for both his life and his art.¹⁵⁶ Yet in Amours de Voyage, his epistolary novel in verse set in Rome in 1849, he appears to make a virtue out of that inability to commit by the creation of a thoroughly modern and complex central character, described by critics such as Isobel Armstrong as the Prufrock of the Victorian age.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Reynolds 11 .

¹⁵⁶ A.L.P. Norrington, ed., The Poems of Arthur Hugh Clough (1968; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986) Introduction .

¹⁵⁷ Isobel Armstrong, Victorian Poetry. Poetry, Poetics and Politics (London: Routledge, 1993) 199 .

Though not widely published by the time he came to write Amours de Voyage, Clough had already been experimenting with the verse novel form. In 1848 he published a long poem of some 1,700 lines set in the Scottish Highlands called The Bothie of Toper-na-Fuosich, later renamed The Bothie of Tober-na-Vuolich when the poem was reprinted after his death. It was in The Bothie that Clough first tested out what he called the Anglo-Savage hexameter, the meter which he borrowed from popular nineteenth century poems such as Longfellow's Evangeline (1847).¹⁵⁸ According to Joseph Patrick Phelan, Longfellow's poem gave Clough a "recitative"¹⁵⁹ for his own poem. Outlining the characteristics of the Longfellow version, Phelan states:

Perhaps the most important aspect of Evangeline from the metrical point of view is its demonstration of the centrality of the caesura to the accentual hexameter. The caesura is for the partisans of musical prosody the keystone of the metrical arch, a pure interval which is at once the underlying principle and the support of the entire arrangement. Longfellow's poem provides a practical demonstration of this theoretical axiom. His hexameters literally cannot be read as poetry without the caesura.¹⁶⁰

Phelan goes on to quote the opening lines of Evangeline to demonstrate how they emphasise the caesura:

¹⁵⁸ Norrington, ed. ix .

¹⁵⁹ Joseph Patrick Phelan, "Radical Meter. The English Hexameter in Clough's Bothie of Toper-Na-Fuosich", The Review of English Studies. ns 50.198 (1999): 176 .

¹⁶⁰ Phelan 176 – 7 .

This is the forest primeval. The murmuring pines and the hemlocks
Beaded with moss, and in garments green, indistinct in the twilight,
Stand like Druids of eld, with voices sad and prophetic,
Stand like harpers hoar, with beards that rest on their bosoms¹⁶¹

and then quotes from the description of the dining-hall in the opening book of The Bothie in order to demonstrate how it “exploits the mobility of the caesura and the double accent every bit as fully as Evangeline, and adds a few new tricks of its own”.¹⁶²

Four tables were in it,
Two at the top and the bottom, a little upraised from the level,
These from Chairman and Croupier, and gentry fit to be with them.¹⁶³

In Clough’s version of the hexameter, each of the six feet has a stressed syllable, with each stressed syllable followed, and occasionally preceded by, an unstressed syllable. According to Phelan, in revising the hexameter, Clough was attempting to liberate the metre from what he considered the confines of academic study¹⁶⁴ and, according to Robindra Kumar Biswas, to approach the patterns of spoken speech.¹⁶⁵ However, the

¹⁶¹ Evangeline, 1-4, in L Buell , ed., Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Selected Poems (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988).

¹⁶² Phelan 178 .

¹⁶³ Arthur Hugh Clough, The Bothie of Tober-Na-Vuolich, Book 1, 47-49 in Norrington, ed. 117 .

¹⁶⁴ Phelan 182 .

result was not always fortunate and contemporary readers could be scathing in their rejection of Clough's metrics as being prosaic, a criticism echoed by many modern commentators, though not by Phelan. Certainly to this modern reader at least, the poetry in The Bothie does not seem to trip lightly off the tongue:

It was the afternoon; and the sports were now at the ending.
Long had the stone been put, tree cast, and thrown the hammer;
Up the perpendicular hill, Sir Hector so called it,
Eight stout gillies had run, with speed and agility wondrous;
Run too the course on the level had been; the leaping was over:
Last in the show of dress, a novelty recently added,
Noble ladies their prizes adjudged for costume that was perfect [. . .]¹⁶⁶

The syntax in lines such as “Run too the course on the level had been; the leading was over” seems to be particularly tortuous. However, issues of genre and form, rather than prosody *per se*, are the focus of this chapter and there are more relevant things to say about Clough's approach to narrative form and his constant efforts to push back the boundaries of what poetry should and could do.

Clough gave a great deal of thought to poetic theory and his correspondence with Matthew Arnold, a friend from school-days, gives us an insight into the extent to which his literary thinking diverged from the conventions of the period. Arnold stressed the need for poetry to be elevated and beautiful in an age that emphasised the

¹⁶⁵ Robindra Kumar Biswas, Arthur Hugh Clough: Towards a Reconsideration (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972) 270 .

¹⁶⁶ Arthur Hugh Clough, The Bothie of Tober-Na-Vuolich, I, 1-7, in Norrington, ed. 116 .

functional and factual and which Arnold considered “unpoetical”. Clough, like Barrett Browning before him, responded that poetry could play a role in the real world. In his 1853 essay “Recent English Poetry”, he commented on how the novel was now the more popular form for Victorian readers because it dealt with the details of every day life and asked whether modern poetry

should deal, more than it presently does, with general wants, ordinary feelings, the obvious rather than the rare facts of human nature? Could it not attempt to convert into beauty and thankfulness or at least into some form and shape, some feeling, at any rate, of content – the actual, palpable things with which our everyday life is concerned;¹⁶⁷

Such arguments provide a clear echo of Barrett Browning’s desire to make poetry out of the dilemmas of real people, a desire which was to come to fruition in Aurora Leigh. They were also echoed by other commentators such as John Sterling who had, as early as 1842 in his essay on Tennyson in The Quarterly Review, called on poets to produce “a creative survey of modern life”.¹⁶⁸

Amours de Voyage does indeed attempt to deal with the dilemmas of real people and modern life, and experiments with the epistolary form in order to do so. It tells the story of a young intellectual, Claude, who, visiting Rome during the turbulent days of 1849, meets a family of English tourists, the Trevellyns, and finds himself gradually attracted to one of the daughters of the family. His prevarications and reluctance to

¹⁶⁷ Arthur Hugh Clough, “Recent English Poetry”, quoted in Biswas 228 .

¹⁶⁸ Quoted in Rod Edmond, Affairs of the Hearth: Victorian poetry and domestic narrative (London: Routledge, 1988) 34 .

commit himself to any course of positive action in pursuing the lady, although it becomes clear that his beloved, Mary, would be a good match for him, form the basis of the plot. The story is told through a series of letters, the majority written by Claude and a few written by two of the Trevellyn daughters. The letters are divided into five cantos, with each canto being framed by an elegiac stanza.

Once again, we have a poem more concerned with the inner state of its protagonist than with the external requirements of plot. The letters give Clough wide reign to explore the complexities of his main character, who, like Eliot's Prufrock, is self-mocking, self-aware and conscious of his limitations, and to set that exploration in the context of an age where material concerns such as the requirements of the marriage market highlight the difficulties faced by those who prefer the intellectual and spiritual sides of life. As Biswas puts it: "Unable to bring his bloodless love affair to any kind of conclusion, his futile sojourn in a Rome echoing with martial conflict becomes a paradigm of the critical intellect's lonely, private, and questioning progress through an age which set such a high premium on public certitude."¹⁶⁹ The letters allow Clough to explore those questions in great detail. Here again we must also ask whether the fact that the letters are in verse, rather than prose, provides an added value or additional charge to the reader. I would argue that the choice of poetic form allows, in the more introspective letters, a rhythmic repetition that heightens the intensity of the feeling, as we can see in this example where Claude writes to his friend Eustace about his despairing love for Mary:

She doesn't like me, Eustace; I think she will never like me.

¹⁶⁹ Biswas 300.

It is my fault, as it is my misfortune, my ways are not her ways?
Is it my fault, that my habits and modes are dissimilar wholly:
'Tis not her fault, 'tis her nature, her virtue, to misapprehend them:
'Tis not her fault, 'tis her beautiful nature, not ever to know me.
Hopeless it seems, –yet I cannot, though hopeless, determine to leave it:
She goes, –therefore I go; she moves, –I move, not to lose her.¹⁷⁰

The repetition here suggests Claude's turmoil and the probability that he has been going over the same arguments again and again; it creates an almost hypnotic effect on the reader.

Clough does not provide his protagonist with a happy ending in Amours de Voyage. Unable to declare himself to Mary Trevellyn when in her company, Claude finally decides to go in pursuit once it is too late to actually track her down and we leave him, resigned to his fate, already engaged in the process of denying his feelings and preparing himself for the lonely life of the pursuit of knowledge, rather than of love:

After all, do I know that I really cared so about her?
Do whatever I will, I cannot call up her image;
For when I close my eyes, I see, very likely, St. Peter's,
Or the Pantheon façade, or Michael Angelo's figures,
Or at a wish, when I please, the Alban hills and the Forum, –

¹⁷⁰ Arthur Hugh Clough, Amours de Voyage, Canto II, XIII, 285-291, in Norrington, ed. 196.

But that face, those eyes, – ah no, never anything like them;¹⁷¹

This bleak, self-conscious ending is a striking and arrestingly modern conclusion to the poem. Biswas argues that the epistolary narrative form is the perfect vehicle for this disturbing iconoclasm: “The letter form, approaching the intimacy and directness of private self revelation, can place us sufficiently close to the cutting-edge of Claude’s consciousness to involve us in the involutions, the hesitations, the revisions, and the circuits of his responses.”¹⁷² Or, as Isobel Armstrong puts it, the letter form cuts out the need for a conventional narrator because the reader, in reading the letters, is providing his or her own commentary:

The letter form decisively marks off the different dialects in the poem, and differentiates the language and values of the speakers [. . .] Since each letter is modified and realigned by the next, there is no authoritative narrative voice in the poem. It becomes a series of documents which the reader edits – and re-edits – as one letter succeeds another.¹⁷³

In writing about *Amours de Voyage*, Dino Felluga argues that using the verse novel form was an essential part of Clough’s questioning of Victorian poetic convention: “It could be said that the verse novel, through its juxtaposition of opposing generic conventions and expectations, helped to foreground the contingency of all values and the ideological nature of all formal choices”¹⁷⁴ But before closing on Clough, it is

¹⁷¹ Arthur Hugh Clough, *Amours de Voyage*, Canto V, VII, 156-161, in Norrington, ed. 218 .

¹⁷² Biswas 311 .

¹⁷³ Armstrong 133 .

worth noting John Goode's assertion that it is a simplification to see Amours de Voyage as a novel in verse: "Claude isn't primarily important as a 'character' – he is a writer of letters."¹⁷⁵ As our exploration of the verse novel form continues, we will see other examples of work where letters, and letter-writers, are important vehicles for characterisation and plot, and which invite the reader to provide his or her own commentary on their contents.

The truth, the whole truth – The Ring and the Book (1868-9)

Robert Browning had been experimenting with verse narratives, dramatic monologues and history throughout his career and, as a result of some of the negative criticism he received, may have regarded himself as being on the margins of British poetry. However, critics such as G.K. Chesterton¹⁷⁶ and Richard Altick¹⁷⁷ argue that his verse novel, The Ring and The Book, was a work of genius and certainly contemporary critical reaction was very positive.

Browning published the first part of his great Roman murder mystery in 1868 (it was published in four volumes by Smith, Elder in November and December 1868 and January and February 1869), seven years after the death of his wife and eight years after he first discovered the source material on a second hand book stall in a market in the Piazza San Lorenzo in Florence. The story of his discovery of the old volume, entitled Romana Homicid an Maritus possit occidere Uxoren Adulteram (translated

¹⁷⁴ Dino Felluga in Cronin, Chapman et al 180 .

¹⁷⁵ John Goode, "Amours de Voyage: The Aqueous Poem" in Isobel Armstrong, ed., The Major Victorian Poets: Reconsiderations (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969) 277 .

¹⁷⁶ G.K. Chesterton, Robert Browning (London: Macmillan, 1951) 167 .

¹⁷⁷ Richard D. Altick and James F. Loucks II, Browning's Roman Murder Story. A Reading of "The Ring and The Book" (Chicago, U. of Chicago P., 1968) .

roughly as “A Roman case of Homicides about whether a Husband may kill an Adulterous Wife”),¹⁷⁸ containing documents (legal pamphlets, defence and prosecution arguments) pertaining to a famous Roman murder trial from 1698, is well documented, not the least in the poem itself, where Browning introduces his treasure, which became known as The Old Yellow Book, with characteristic flourish:

Here it is, this I toss and take again;
Small-quarto size, part print, part manuscript:
A book in shape but, really, pure crude fact
Secreted from man’s life when hearts beat hard,
And brains, high blooded, ticked two centuries since.¹⁷⁹

Browning may have found the book in 1860, but it took a number of years before he actually wrote the verse novel based on it. There is no reliable explanation of the reason for this delay. According to Altick and Loucks, there is evidence that he conducted painstaking research into the background of the case in Rome and London but there are few references to it in his letters, or those of his wife. Once he had returned to London after her death, he continued to do little work on it, although the number of times he retold the story to friends over dinner would seem to suggest that it had captured his imagination.¹⁸⁰ Still, he was not yet ready to tackle it creatively and tried to persuade a number of his writer friends, including Trollope, Tennyson,

¹⁷⁸ Stefan Hawlin and T.A.J. Burnett, eds., The Poetical Works of Robert Browning, Vol. 7, The Ring and the Book – Books 1 – 4 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) ix .

¹⁷⁹ Robert Browning, The Ring and The Book, ed. Richard D. Altick (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981) Book 1, 85-89 .

¹⁸⁰ Hawlin and Burnett x .

and Charlotte Ogle (author of the 1855 novel, A Lost Love) to take it on.¹⁸¹ One might speculate that the critical mauling he had received for Men and Women (published in 1855) had made him somewhat reluctant to publish again; he was also grieving for his wife and looking after his young son. However, the final impetus to begin work on it was when another acquaintance, Mrs Eric Baker, told him she had discovered another account of the Franceschini murder trial, and this became the secondary source material for Browning's poem.

Having planned out his poem, Browning began the work of making it as historically credible as possible. It was important to him that his readers treated the source documents with the utmost seriousness and believed in their veracity. So in the opening stanzas he quotes the title page verbatim, providing us with an outline of the resulting poem's structure as well as a handy introduction to his subsequent approach.

So, in this book lay absolutely truth,
Fanciless fact, the documents indeed,
Primary lawyer-pleadings for, against,
The aforesaid Five; real summed-up circumstance
Adduced in proof of these on either side,
Put forth and printed, as the practice was,
At Rome, in the Apostolic Chamber's type [. . .]¹⁸²

¹⁸¹ Hawlin and Burnett x .

¹⁸² The Ring and The Book, Book 1 143-149 .

Browning is determined to be accurate down to the precise details of the typeface used. We shall see that this passion for verisimilitude is an integral part of his artistic purpose: to show how truth can be relative, in other words dependent on whose version of the story is being told (not unlike Clough's view of the contingency of men and women's reactions to each other). Browning shows this relativity through a precise recreation of historical detail. As John Killham puts it: "What better 'argument' in support of the point could be adduced than being able to show that the fiction is also fact, attested by authentic documents. This no doubt explains the artistic reasons Browning had for maintaining that the art-object, his poem (symbolized by a ring), was made from the gold of crude fact."¹⁸³ Furthermore, as Roger Sharrock points out, Browning was determined to ground his documentary evidence in a wealth of historical detail: "On the whole Browning's attitude to historical fact may be said to be at the opposite pole to that of the imaginative writer who cuts through detail and circumstance and boldly embraces a glaring anachronism if it will enable him to catch at the essential spirit of an historical situation; for Browning the spirit always inheres in the detail."¹⁸⁴

The poem's structure is comparatively simple. It is divided into twelve books, each of which represents an aspect of the murder trial of Count Guido Franceschini, accused of the murder of his wife Pompilia. Each of the protagonists is given the opportunity to give his or her version of events, including Pompilia, whose deathbed testimony lies at the emotional heart of the poem. In the first book we are provided

¹⁸³ John Killham, "Browning's Modernity" in Isobel Armstrong, ed., The Major Victorian Poets. Reconsiderations 163-4 .

¹⁸⁴ Roger Sharrock, "Browning and History" in Isobel Armstrong, ed., Robert Browning (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1974) 77-8 .

with opening statements from the trial, interspersed with direct appeals from Browning, Pushkin-style, to his readers (“Well, British Public, ye who like me not”¹⁸⁵) in which he tells them what to expect. This only half-mocking reference to his readership gives us some idea of how marginalised Browning believed himself to be in the late 1860s and suggests that his preparedness to experiment with form may have come from a recognition that he might as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb. Some of this commentary sheds interesting light on the method of a verse novelist using historical source material:

Do you tell the story, now, in off-hand style,
Straight from the book? Or simply here and there,
(The while you vault it through the loose and large)
Hang to a hint? Or is there a book at all,
And don't you deal in poetry, make-believe,
And the white lies it sounds like?¹⁸⁶

His answer to this self-posed question is “yes and no” as he continues, in one of the most famous metaphors in the poem, to explain how the poem contains both the real material of gold and the artifice of the artist who shapes the gold into a ring; thus the essence of the book is both “lingot truth” combined with “something of mine”.¹⁸⁷

What's this then, which proves good yet seems untrue?

¹⁸⁵ *The Ring and The Book*, Book 1 410 .

¹⁸⁶ *The Ring and The Book*, Book 1 451-456 .

¹⁸⁷ *The Ring and The Book*, Book 1 459-462 .

This that I mixed with truth, motions of mine
That quickened, made the inertness malleable
O' the gold was not mine, – what's your name for this?
Are means to the end, themselves in part the end?
Is fiction which makes fact alive, fact too?¹⁸⁸

By seeming to involve the reader in every stage of the evolution of the work, Browning is implicating the reader in its findings. In asking whether it is ever possible to know the truth of anything, he causes the reader to question his or her own assumptions about fact and fiction. As Clyde Ryals puts it, contemporary readers were being presented not with truth but with “the ‘documental drama’ from which they must discover it for themselves.”¹⁸⁹ And, according to G.K. Chesterton, through the building up of successive monologues, “Browning is endeavouring to depict the various strange ways in which a fact gets itself presented to the world,”¹⁹⁰ in other words, a Victorian take on the philosophy of contingency. For Chesterton, one of the essential truths of the poem was the very randomness of its story's discovery in the first place: “It pays to existence the highest of all possible compliments – the great compliment which monarch paid to mankind – the compliment of selecting a form for it almost at random.”¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁸ The Ring and The Book, Book 1 700-705 .

¹⁸⁹ Clyde De L. Ryals, The Life of Robert Browning (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996) 169 .

¹⁹⁰ Chesterton 160 .

¹⁹¹ Chesterton 168 .

In their critical reading of The Ring and the Book, Richard Altick and James F. Loucks point out the tri-partite structure of the poem, commenting that the entire story is “encircled by the ‘ring’ of Books 1 and [. . .] 12”.¹⁹² They state:

The chief key to the poem’s structure lies in the three triads (plus one additional monologue in which Guido reappears) into which these ten internal books are divided. The first triad (2-4) involves chiefly an exposition of the externalities, the events of the case; the second (5-7) shifts emphasis to character, and the third (8-10) to theme [. . .] Thus there is a continuous upward progression toward a revelation of the ultimate significance of event and character.¹⁹³

Hawlin and Burnett point out the over-arching ring metaphor, describing Browning as a master jeweller making his ring/poem out of the ore/historical documents: “The metaphor is reinforced by other images: the poet is a ‘resuscitator’ of dead voices, a ‘mimic’ like Elisha in the Second Book of Kings, laying his vital being on the corpse of the historical past till ‘flesh waxed warm’”.¹⁹⁴ Browning’s own description of how he came upon the design for the poem suggests a more organic composition: “My plan was at once settled [. . .] I went for a walk, gathered twelve pebbles from the road, and put them at equal distances on the parapet that bordered it. Those represented the twelve chapters into which the poem is divided; and I adhered to that arrangement to the last.”¹⁹⁵ One must treat Browning’s pronouncements with a little

¹⁹² Altick and Loucks 38 .

¹⁹³ Altick and Loucks 39 .

¹⁹⁴ Hawlin and Burnett 3 .

¹⁹⁵ Robert Browning quoted in Rudolf Lehmann, An Artist’s Reminiscences (London: Smith, Elder, 1894), quoted in Ryals 158-9 .

suspicion, particularly when they ascribe glibness to what was clearly such a lengthy and well thought out process for him.

While Altick and Loucks are impressed by Browning's "Dickens-like particularity of character"¹⁹⁶ and the realism of his *mise en scène*, they are firm in their denial that The Ring and the Book is in fact a verse novel. Arguing that it possesses attributes of several literary genres but belongs to none, they state:

The Ring and The Book has some points of similarity to the novel, notably the deep interest in psychological revealment, change and motivation. Yet it lacks immediate conflict: the characters are deliberately isolated [. . .] and they are limited to describing only past events as they remember them. The plot is mainly in the past, and the situations represented in the successive monologues are but the aftermath of the important events [. . .]¹⁹⁷

It is worth pausing to consider just how many novels published by the mid-nineteenth century could be described as showing a "deep interest in psychological revealment, change and motivation". It is arguable whether Thackeray, Gaskell or Dickens had consistently created characters with any real degree of psychological depth, or asked their readers to understand the motivations of those characters at any profound level. Certainly, these novelists do not seem to have been primarily concerned with attempting to convey the subjective experiences of their characters; Becky Sharp is indeed a multi-layered and psychologically complex character, but does Thackeray

¹⁹⁶ Altick and Loucks 6 .

¹⁹⁷ Altick and Loucks 8 .

ever show us the world through her eyes? Are we invited into the inner recesses of Lady Dedlock's mind, or that of Little Dorrit? Altick and Loucks' description of The Ring and The Book sounds more characteristic of the Modernist novel of Woolf or Joyce or, at the very least, the novel post-Middlemarch. Is it possible, then, that Clough and Browning chose the hybrid form of verse novel because only poetry could provide them with the subjective focus that they were seeking? But experimenting with form had its risks. Isobel Armstrong argues that The Ring and The Book's inherent repetitiveness has put many readers off: "Browning did not intend the poem to be read primarily for the story; the repetition is so undisguised, the facts are made so clear. It is not a work governed by what John Holloway has called the 'trajectory' of the narrative."¹⁹⁸

Certainly it is hard to disagree with these critics that a poet more intent on story-telling would have structured the work very differently, choosing to foreground the actual narrative and dramatising the action, rather than concentrating on the versions of the story told by the participants after the event. This is precisely the argument made by Henry James, who in his essay "The Novel in The Ring and The Book" written first as an address to the Royal Society of Literature in celebration of the centenary of Browning's birth in 1912, concentrated on the similarities between the novel and the long poem and put forward the artistic approach he himself would have taken if he had written The Ring and The Book as a novel. Like Woolf, James was a novelist who focussed more on inner states of consciousness than on external requirements of plot so it is significant that he recognised a similar subjectivity in Browning's work.

¹⁹⁸ Isobel Armstrong, "The Ring and The Book: The Uses of Prolixity", in Armstrong, ed., The Major Victorian Poets: Reconsiderations 177 .

Yet there is a fascinating ambivalence in much of what James wrote about Browning. In a review of one of Browning's later poems, "The Inn Album", James writes of the poet's "wantonness, his wilfulness, his crudity, his inexplicable want of secondary thought"¹⁹⁹ before going on to praise his generosity of spirit and vision as if they were part of this same wantonness and wilfulness. His praise of The Ring and The Book is equally double-edged:

"The Ring and the Book" is so vast and so essentially gothic a structure, spreading and soaring and branching at such a rate, covering such ground, putting forth such pinnacles and towers and brave excrescences, planting its transepts and chapels and porticoes, its clustered hugeness or inordinate muchness, that with any first approach we walk but vaguely and slowly, rather bewilderedly, round and round it, wondering at what point we had best attempt such entrance as will save our steps and light our uncertainty, most enable us to reach our personal chair, our indicated chapel or shrine, when once within.²⁰⁰

For this reader, James's sentences frequently have the same serpentine and architecturally baroque qualities he ascribes to The Ring and the Book. However, the most interesting aspect of James's comments is that while he recognises the complex and novelistic qualities of the poem, he believes that Browning's approach, the unwieldiness of the structure, the multiplicity of perspectives, gets in the way of the

¹⁹⁹ Henry James, "The Inn Album", The Nation, 20 Jan. 1876, reprinted in Henry James, Literary Criticism. Volume One: Essays on Literature, American writers, English writers (New York: The Library of America, 1984) 782 .

²⁰⁰ Henry James, "The Novel in "The Ring and the Book", Quarterly Review, July 1912, reprinted in Henry James, "The Novel in The Ring and the Book", Literary Criticism 791 .

telling of a darn good story. He tells us that he has always regarded The Ring and the Book as fiction of the historical type albeit “tragically spoiled” and argues that it “might have yielded up its best essence as a grateful theme under some fine strong economy of prose treatment.”²⁰¹ Arguing that in its current state it is “not at all [. . .] an achieved form, but [. . .] a mere preparation for one,”²⁰² James proposes that the solution to the lack of unity of situation and focus would be to provide a central character – he suggests Caponsacchi as the most suitable hero – through whose perspective the entire story would be told. He also suggests disposing of some of the more peripheral characters, such as the prosecuting and defence counsels and the Pope. In other words, he proposes the recasting of The Ring and the Book as a Jamesian novel. Most significant, from our perspective, is James’ description in this essay of Browning’s method: “To express his inner self [. . .] and to express it utterly, even if no matter how, was clearly, for his own measure and consciousness of that inner self, to be poetic.”²⁰³ So is James suggesting that Browning wrote The Ring and the Book, a story crying out for novelisation, in poetic form because he was a poet and that poetry was the medium in which he chose to express himself? That may be part of the answer, but not the entire point, surely. However, while I am more convinced by arguments that Browning saw in poetry the potential to express psychological complexities not yet visible in contemporary fiction, I also agree with Henry James that Browning faced difficulties when attempting to combine poetry with character, plot, structure and dialogue (in other words, the classic elements of the novel). Those difficulties are an important reminder of the constant risk facing verse

²⁰¹ Henry James, “The Novel in The Ring and the Book,” Literary Criticism 792 .

²⁰² Henry James, “The Novel in The Ring and the Book,” Literary Criticism 797 .

²⁰³ Henry James, “The Novel in The Ring and the Book,” Literary Criticism 801 .

novelists. In attempting to blend the genres of poetry and novel, they are in danger of failing to reach the minimum standards of either. I have already discussed the difficulties I faced in constructing my own verse novel, and we shall shortly see that dilemma is also apparent, to varying degrees, in the work of some other twentieth and twenty-first century verse novelists.

4.3 The Twentieth / Twenty-First Centuries

All quiet on the literary front – the verse novel in the early twentieth century

It would be wrong to suggest that there were no verse novels written in the early to mid-twentieth century. Indeed, a search of library catalogues such as the WorldCat database reveals a surprising number of somewhat obscure examples: Donna Juana, by Eileen Hewitt (1925);²⁰⁴ The temptation of Anthony, by Isidor Schneider (1928);²⁰⁵ 14th street, a novel in verse, by Percy Shostac and Kurt Wiese (1930);²⁰⁶ Forsaking all others: a novel in verse, by Alice Duer Miller (1933);²⁰⁷ Each to the other; a novel in verse, by Christopher LaFarge (1938);²⁰⁸ Through the emerald: a modern novel in traditional verse, by Marjorie Sanborn (1939);²⁰⁹ The dust which is God, a novel in verse, by William Rose Benét (1941);²¹⁰ The seventh hill, an historical novel in blank verse, by Amy Woodward Fisher (1942);²¹¹ Sam, a novel in verse, by Francis Hartman Markoe (1943);²¹² and Take it to the hills: a novel in verse, by Zella Varian Price (1945).²¹³ It is fair to say that none of these writers achieved lasting literary fame and it is also worth noting that all but two of these verse novels

²⁰⁴ Eileen Hewitt, Donna Juana. A novel in verse (London: Routledge, 1925).

²⁰⁵ Isidor Schneider, The temptation of Anthony (New York: Boni and Liverright, 1928).

²⁰⁶ Percy Shostac and Kurt Wiese, 14th street, a novel in verse (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1930).

²⁰⁷ Alice Duer Miller, Forsaking all others: a novel in verse (London: P. Allan, 1933).

²⁰⁸ Christopher LaFarge, Each to the other; a novel in verse (New York: Coward-McCann, 1938).

²⁰⁹ Marjorie Sanborn, Through the emerald: a modern novel in traditional verse (Portland, Maine: Mosher Press, 1939).

²¹⁰ William Rose Benét, The dust which is God, a novel in verse (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1941).

²¹¹ Amy Woodward Fisher, The seventh hill, an historical novel in blank verse (Caldwell, Id: Caxton printers, 1942).

²¹² Francis Hartman Markoe, Sam, a novel in verse (Southampton, N. Y.: Shelamar editions, 1943).

²¹³ Zella Varian Price, Take it to the hills: a novel in verse (Boston: B. Humphries, 1945).

(Donna Juana and Forsaking all others being the exceptions) were published in the U.S. Does this indicate a greater popularity of the form among American readers and writers, or simply a less blanket rejection than among British writers of a literary form associated with the deeply unfashionable Victorians?

Before considering in greater detail the possible reasons for the abandonment by established writers of the verse novel form in the first half of the twentieth century, it is worth pausing to examine one rare example from the early part of the century. At least one, admittedly minor, English poet stayed loyal to the form, publishing several verse novels as part of his large literary output. Gilbert Frankau (1884 – 1952) published his first poetry collection while still at Eton and is probably best known today for the poetry collections he wrote about his experiences as a soldier during the First World War, The Guns (1916), The City of Fear (1917) and The Judgement of Valhalla (1918). According to Alyson Pendlebury, his poetry was of a jingoistic, Kipling-influenced, kind that made him unpopular in the trenches.

Frankau's war poetry tended to glorify combat, and to reflect civilian fantasies of warfare rather than the soldiers' experience. This and his dedication to writing made him unpopular with some of his fellow-combatants, and the trench journals include a number of attacks on him, in doggerel, in which he is accused of shirking his military duty in favour of his writing career.²¹⁴

After the war, Frankau became increasingly political and wrote a number of novels which explored themes such as immigration, psychoanalysis, Jewish identity and anti-

²¹⁴ Alyson Pendlebury, University of Southampton. "Frankau, Gilbert." The Literary Encyclopedia. 27 Nov. 2002. (The Literary Dictionary Company. 23 November 2005). <http://www.litencyc.com> 4 July 2006.

Semitism (Frankau was born a Jew although baptised an Anglican). His interest in politics burgeoned and he flirted with fascism, founding the nationalist journal Britannia in 1928 and writing an article in the Daily Express in 1933 titled “As a Jew I am not against Hitler”.²¹⁵ However, Frankau gradually withdrew his support for fascism as the Nazi party became established in Germany, and he was still writing patriotic hymns of support for the troops during the Second World War.

Frankau’s verse novels included One of Us (1912), Tid ‘Apa (What does it matter?) (1915), One of Them (1918) and More of Us (1927) and seem to have been quite popular with contemporary readers, if the number of impressions for individual editions is anything to go by. The copy of One of Us to which I refer was published in 1912 and was in its third impression by 1914; it comes complete with a selection of “rave reviews” from the Daily Telegraph, The Star and the Evening Standard, among others. The Evening Standard review gives us a good idea of what to expect:

There is a great satirist in our midst. One of the finest satirical poems in the language. We see Mr. Frankau a Gilbertian Byron, an irresistible, passionate, life-giving Byron, armed with the more delicate weapons of a Gilbert.²¹⁶

A blend of Byron and the librettist of The Pirates of Penzance may seem a bizarre concept to the twenty-first century reader, but the reference captures the odd mix of innocence and ribaldry in this poem. It is a novel of eighteen cantos of eight-line rhyming stanzas, prefaced with a dedication and concluding with an epilogue. The

²¹⁵ Pendlebury 3 .

²¹⁶ Evening Standard, Review, quoted in Gilbert Frankau, One of Us, A Novel in Verse (London: Chatto & Windus, 3rd edition, 1914) 175 .

language is deliberately archaic, seeming to want to echo the language of the great epic poets of the past rather than to keep pace with the poetic register of his own contemporaries. In the dedication, Frankau makes clear his literary debt to the author of Don Juan:

But Byron, most to thee, than whom no rarer
Spirit is found upon Elysium's plain !
To-day, none know thy 'Childe' and none thy
 'Lara'
Thy Hebrews are melodious in vain ;
For many mark the falling price of Para,
Yet none the fall of Parisina slain,
Save only I, what hour, to midnight's chiming,
I search thy cantos for forgotten rhyming.²¹⁷

His hero, Jack, is a recognisably Byronic hero, although his succession of failed romances seems to owe more to the picaresque novels of Fielding than the Romantic epics of Byron. Despite the archaic register, One of Us also has a very definite period feel to it; Frankau's characters whisk about in automobiles, voyage on transatlantic liners, romance American stock-broking heiresses and mix with the demi-monde of actresses in London and Paris.

This is not great literature, but it is a surprisingly readable verse novel; Jack's romances are dispatched with admirable speed and economy and with a great deal of

²¹⁷ Gilbert Frankau, Dedication, One of Us 17 – 24 .

humour. In Canto IX, having fallen for the heiress Alice, Jack subsequently becomes embroiled with an unnamed “low-voice charmer, specious, subtle, svelte” from whom his worldly-wise mother wishes to rescue him. She sends him to Paris on an errand to visit his sister, and this is how Frankau describes his departure:

Who would not leave the trickiest of tweeded
Charmers to languish in her Joyous Gard,
And fare, with all the billets that he needed,
Where Maxim’s revellers madden, many-starred ?
Not Jack ! He girded up his trunks, and speeded
Far from the temptress that his parents barred.
She, to escape her from the social pillory,
Wedded a ponderous Colonel of Artillery.²¹⁸

Frankau seems to delight in concocting outrageous rhymes (pillory, artillery), a predilection he shared with Byron.

The plot mixes farce with tragedy. Whilst in Paris, Jack has a number of other emotional adventures and completely neglects to visit his sister. He returns to England, meets yet another temptress, gets deeper and deeper in debt to the point where he is ready to take the only honourable way out of his dilemma by ending it all when he is saved by a last-minute and highly convenient reprieve; his wealthy aunt Ermyntrude has died and left him his fortune. This plot twist gives Frankau an opportunity to comment, Pushkin-like, on the tastes of contemporary novel-readers:

²¹⁸ One of Us, Canto IX 152 – 160 .

Benignant ruler of the puppet-play,
Thine be my thanks for this astounding luck !
The canto closes: wouldst thou have me say
If Jack had flinched or soothly had the pluck
To dare the madly-contemplated way
And rise, in one great moment, from the ruck?
Truth is, that public whom we bards deride,
Yet pander to, is tired of suicide.²¹⁹

Despite the Evening Standard's comments, there is little or no biting satire in One of Us. Frankau's intention is to amuse rather than to challenge his readers. Jack is a playboy and rake but a not very dangerous one; he is portrayed as more victim of seductresses than as serial seducer himself. Although he comes close to disaster more than once, he is always saved in the nick of time. One of Us reads like Don Juan given a P.G. Wodehouse make-over; there is little in it to trouble readers about the harsh realities of life. However, such innocence could not be sustained in literature written after World War I, when the awareness of suffering and the human capacity for cruelty found expression in a rejection of old narrative strategies and a new concentration on experimentation and form, on the fragmentation of experience rather than on the attempts to impose a false coherence through plot and narrative.

²¹⁹ One of Us, XVI 113 – 120 .

Critics such as Geoffrey Thurley²²⁰ have commented on the rejection of both Romantic and Victorian values that characterised the Modernist period in England. Lytton Strachey, with his debunking of various Eminent Victorians, set the tone for polite and not so polite sneering, while Eliot and Pound and the critical schools of I.A. Richards and William Empson, focused the poet's mind on a rejection of past narrative approaches in the pursuit of image and irony.

The critical writing of T.S. Eliot was particularly influential in shaping how contemporary poets regarded the legacy of Victorian poets such as Tennyson and Browning. Seán Lucy points out that there is much evidence that Browning influenced Eliot's earliest work²²¹ and that Browning's dramatic monologues eventually filtered through into the monologues in The Waste Land as well as the Choruses of Eliot's later poetry and verse dramas. Eliot's contemporary and soon-to-be collaborator, Ezra Pound, also saw the influence. In his review of Eliot's Prufrock and Other Observations,²²² he commented that "the most interesting poems in Victorian English are Browning's Men and Women [. . .] the form of these poems is the most vital form of that period of English"²²³ and continues: "Since Browning there have been very few good poems of this sort. Mr Eliot has made two notable additions to the list. And he has placed his people in contemporary settings, which is much more difficult than to render them with medieval romantic trappings."²²⁴ However, when mentioning Browning, Eliot could be harsh, pointing to the lack of a unified

²²⁰ Geoffrey Thurley, The Ironic Harvest: English poetry in the twentieth century (London: Edward Arnold 1974).

²²¹ Seán Lucy, T.S. Eliot and the Idea of Tradition (London: Cohen & West, 1960) 185-6.

²²² Ezra Pound, "Prufrock and Other Observations, by T.S. Eliot", Poetry 10 (August 1917): 264.

²²³ Pound 264.

²²⁴ Pound 264.

sensibility and focus in his work and claiming that he “ruminated” rather than thought associatively.²²⁵ In his essay discussing the possibility of reviving the form of poetic drama in the twentieth century, Eliot dismissed the efforts of nineteenth century writers to innovate successfully, stating it was a problem of form:

The nineteenth century had a good many fresh impressions; but it had no form in which to confine them. Two men, Wordsworth and Browning, hammered out forms for themselves – personal forms, The Excursion, Sordello, The Ring and The Book, Dramatic Monologues; but no man can invent a form, create a taste for it, and perfect it too.²²⁶

In another essay, “The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism”, Eliot questioned whether anyone now read Browning for pleasure and argued that the very length of Browning’s long poems worked against him:

It may be that for some periods of society a more relaxed form of writing is right, and for others, a more concentrated. I believe that there must be many people who feel, as I do, that the effect of some of the greater nineteenth-century poets is diminished by their bulk. Who now, for the pure pleasure of it, reads Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats even, certainly Browning and Swinburne and most of the French poets of the century, entire? I by no means believe that the ‘long poem’ is a thing of the past; but at least there must be more in it for the

²²⁵ T.S. Eliot, “The Metaphysical Poets,” in Frank Kermode, ed., Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot, (London: Faber, 1975) 65 .

²²⁶ T.S. Eliot, “The Possibility of a Poetic Drama”, The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism (London: Methuen; New York: Barnes & Noble, 1960) 62 .

length than our grandparents seemed to demand; and for us, anything that can be said as well in prose can be said better in prose. And a great deal, in the way of meaning, belongs to prose rather than to poetry.²²⁷

Although Eliot is talking here about long poems in general rather than the verse novel in particular, the comment that “anything that can be said as well in prose can be said better in prose” certainly challenges the notion that the nineteenth century verse novel allowed poets to achieve something greater than they could have done separately through poetry or prose. For Eliot the result was flabbiness, not added value. (It is worth remembering, however, that he restricted his comments to Robert Browning and appears to have had little to say about the other, and arguably finer, verse novelist in the family). A champion of conciseness, Eliot thus attempted to condense his entire vision of a collapsed civilisation into a mere 400 lines in The Waste Land; for the Modernist poet, compression, as F.O. Matthiesson points out, was everything:

With the example of the nineteenth century behind him, Eliot naturally felt that, if the long poem was to continue to exist, there must be more to distinguish it than length, that its energy must be increased by the elimination of everything superfluous. To convey in poetry the feeling of the actual passage of life, to bring expression to the varied range and volume of awareness which exists in a moment of consciousness, demanded, in Eliot’s view, the strictest condensation. Above all, the impression of a fully packed content should not be weakened through the relaxed connectives of the usual narrative structure [. . .] Poetry alone, through its resources of rhythm and sound, can articulate the concentrated

²²⁷ T.S. Eliot, “The Use of Poetry and The Use of Criticism” in Kermode, ed. 93 .

essence of experience, and thus come closest to the universal and permanent;
but it can do so only through the mastery of a concentrated form.²²⁸

While Eliot focused on form, his Waste Land collaborator Ezra Pound had plenty to say about the appropriate subject matter for the Modernist poet. He couldn't have been further from Elizabeth Barrett Browning in his belief that poetry should have little to do with the issues of contemporary life. In an essay written in 1913 he states that new poetry "is not a criticism of life. I mean it does not deal with opinion. It washes its hands of theories. It does not attempt to justify anybody's ways to anybody or anything else."²²⁹

Thus, for the Modernist poets, the early twentieth century was a time to experiment with form and image, to describe the essence of poetry as a distinct and very different art form to prose, and to eschew the narrative tendencies of a previous age in order to explore literary forms that might more suitably express the fractured consciousness, the subjectivity of a post-war society. There was little recognition, other than in Virginia Woolf's response to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, that the verse novelists of the nineteenth century had already been exploring that very subjectivity in their own work. There was clearly little desire to emulate the example of writers that they felt were now hopelessly out-dated.

²²⁸ F.O. Matthiesson, "The Achievement of T.S. Eliot" in C.B. Cox and Arnold P. Hinchcliffe (eds) T.S. Eliot The Waste Land. A Casebook (London: Macmillan, 1968) 113-4 .

²²⁹ Ezra Pound, "The Approach to Paris," The New Age, 2 Oct 1913, quoted in Richard Hoffpauir, The Art of Restraint. English Poetry from Hardy to Larkin (Newark, N.J. and London: Univ. of Delaware P. and Associated U.P., 1991) 14 .

A literary revival – Vladimir Nabokov and Pale Fire (1962)

Most of the verse novels which I will be considering for the remainder of this chapter were written in the last quarter of the twentieth century. However, one somewhat eccentric example, Nabokov's Pale Fire (1962), straddles the early and late periods and is an interesting dramatisation of the writer's response to the conflicting relationships of poetry and prose.

I mentioned earlier in this chapter that Vladimir Nabokov's translation of Eugene Onegin was published, in four volumes, in 1964. It is an enormously erudite enterprise, complete with translation, glossary, commentary and detailed notes on the translation, although the translation itself attracted harsh criticism for its abandonment of Pushkin's own metrical structure. Nonetheless, it is tempting to regard Pale Fire, which consists of a 999-line poem in four cantos complete with a scholarly, if deeply suspect, commentary, as Nabokov's mischievous response both to Pushkin's great work and to the academic circus in which acts of scholarship must sometimes participate.

In Pale Fire, a renowned U.S poet and university professor, John Shade, writes his last great work before being mistakenly murdered by an assassin sent to kill Charles Kinbote, the deposed king of the Balkan state of Zembla, who has been living under an assumed identity and teaching at John Shade's university. The poem, itself titled "Pale Fire", appears, on face value, to be a Wordsworthian meditation on the poet's life and, in particular, the impact that the death by supposed suicide of his only daughter has had on him. It is, as I have said, divided into four Cantos but its form is

not very regular; each Canto has stanzas of different length although the rhyme-scheme of aa bb remains consistent throughout. One wonders what Bakhtin might have made of the quality of the poetic utterance of the poem itself, and how Shade's 'song' might equate with Lensky's poems in terms of a dialogic analysis of the work. Certainly it is a verse novel in which we learn to distrust each character's utterances.

Pale Fire, the verse novel, is divided into four parts: a Foreword, written by the editor, Kinbote; the poem itself, also titled Pale Fire, written (allegedly) by John Shade; a 177-page Commentary by Kinbote; and an Index, also written by Kinbote. In the Foreword, Kinbote explains the context of how the Shade manuscript came into his hands and gives the reader tips on how to read the poem which, he points out, makes little sense without his detailed commentary:

Let me state that without my notes Shade's text simply has no human reality at all since the human reality of such a poem as his (being too skittish and reticent for an autobiographical work), with the omission of many pithy lines carelessly rejected by him, has to depend entirely on the reality of its author and his surroundings, attachments and so forth, a reality that only my notes can provide.²³⁰

Much of the comedy in Pale Fire derives from our dawning realisation that Kinbote is the most unreliable of narrator / commentators. As we read through the poem and refer to Kinbote's exhaustive notes, we come to understand that his reading of the poem bears no relation to the actual words on the page; Kinbote has imposed

²³⁰ Vladimir Nabokov, Pale Fire (1962; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973) 25 .

his own, possibly delusionary, narrative of deposed kings and desperate assassins onto the poet's innocent text. For example, in Canto One, the poet opens with a traditional evocation of landscape and refers to the effects of a recent snowfall:

And how delightful when a fall of snow
Covered my glimpse of lawn and reached up so
As to make chair and bed exactly stand
Upon that snow, out in that crystal land!²³¹

These lines read as a pleasant if somewhat exclamatory and not particularly original evocation of a snowy landscape. But here is Kinbote's note for the reference to "crystal land" in line 12:

Perhaps an allusion to Zembla, my dear country. After this, in the disjointed, half-obliterated draft which I am not at all sure I have deciphered properly:

Ah, I must not forget to say something
That my friend told me of a certain king.

Alas, he would have said a great deal more if a domestic anti-Karlist had not controlled every line he communicated to her!²³²

²³¹ Pale Fire, Canto One 9 – 12, 29 .

²³² Note to Line 12, Canto One, Pale Fire 62 .

Kinbote's reference to the "domestic anti-Karlist" is to Shade's wife, Sybille, who clearly had seen through Kinbote early on and had attempted to protect her husband from him. As we read further, we come to question whether excised lines from the draft actually exist or are, rather, symptoms of Kinbote's delusion. They are certainly a frightening indication of the power of the editor/critic over the author, as Kinbote had already warned us in his Foreword: "To this statement my dear poet would probably not have subscribed, but, for better or worse, it is the commentator who has the last word."²³³

Nabokov delights in playing with the reader but I believe his ultimate purpose in Pale Fire was a serious one: to remind us that all interpretations are potentially unreliable and that we, as readers, should take responsibility for our own reading of a text. In the words of David Lodge, Nabokov may have intended Pale Fire to demonstrate "that it is a mistake to judge or interpret a literary text by seeking evidence of the author's intentions outside the text."²³⁴ And, by using the device of the verse novel, which by its very nature plays with the reader's expectations of what poetry and prose should deliver and which counterpoints the poetic and prose narratives, Nabokov reinforces that point. Having used the Preface to make sure that his readers would read the poem side-by-side with the prose commentary, Nabokov ensures that we cannot read the poetry without being aware of the completely ludicrous notation that accompanies it. Thus we do not read the poem for the pleasure of reading good poetry; rather we read it as part of a wider process of understanding

²³³ Pale Fire 25 .

²³⁴ David Lodge, The Practice of Writing (London: Secker & Warburg, 1996) 162, quoted in Maurice Couturier, "'Which is to be master' in Pale Fire", Zembra website, <http://www.libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/coutpf.htm> 4 July 2006 .

the unreliability of interpretation. This would not have worked as well if Nabokov had presented us with just the long poem, or else with a prose novel about the shady doings of academics (no pun intended). The poem and the prose notation are vitally important to each other. Thus, rather in the way that Browning used the various testimonies in The Ring and The Book, or Clough used the different correspondents in Amours de Voyage, Nabokov has produced a tremendously entertaining exploration of the contingent nature of truth in which the reader learns that she can trust neither the poetic nor prose voices contained in the piece.

I wonder whether Nabokov would have felt vindicated in his argument of the ultimately self-referential and unreliable nature of academic commentary by the plethora of academic commentaries on Pale Fire that have appeared since the book was published, particularly those that have centred on the issue of the true authorship of the novel and whether Shade was a character created by Kinbote or Kinbote invented by Shade. Internet discussion groups such as the NABOKV-L have drawn responses from prominent scholars such as Brian Boyd and Maurice Couturier,²³⁵ all vehemently debating the issue of authorship. One feels that Charles Kinbote might feel comfortable among such heated debates, but Nabokov might have stood outside and laughed.

History in letters – Anne Stevenson’s Correspondences (1974)

There has been comparatively little academic debate generated by later examples of the verse novel form and, indeed, little uniformity about those writers’ own self consciousness about engaging in that form. The poet Anne Stevenson does not, for

²³⁵ Their papers and many others can be found on the Zembla website at <http://www.libraries.psu.edu/nabokov>.

example, describe her 1974 poetry sequence, Correspondences, as a verse novel. In an essay written in 1978, she refers to “a long poem that later became Correspondences”²³⁶ and describes the narrative structure of the poem without making any specific reference to its novelistic qualities, although she does later talk about its fictional qualities.

Stevenson found her inspiration in an archive she had come across of letters from a prominent New England family. She uses a combination of imagined letters, journal entries and occasional newspaper articles to tell the story of a family of New England puritans whose fortunes rise and fall according to the times. And yet Correspondences has what Neil Roberts describes as “blockbuster’ narrative material”,²³⁷ concentrating as it does on an entire family history in letters, covering the period 1829 to 1968, and including a sweep of American history told through the domestic sphere of six generations of the Chandler family. Tiina Sarisalmi believes that the accuracy of the history and the precision of the genealogy is an important factor in giving Correspondences its overall coherence:

[Stevenson] presents a very accurate historical framework in which different representatives of the Chandler family, male and female, are given voices of their own. Correspondences begins with a detailed genealogy of the Chandler family starting from 1772. It lists conscientiously all the generations (even the ones not playing any part in the drama) up till the 1970s and works as a frame of reference in which the individual poems and other textual fragments co-exist.

²³⁶ Anne Stevenson, “Writing as a Woman” in Mary Jacobus, ed., Women Writing and Writing about Women (London: Croom Helm, 1979) 167 .

²³⁷ Neil Roberts, Narrative and Voice in Postwar Poetry (London and New York: Longman, 1999) 3 .

Each poem [. . .] is connected to the others in the genealogy through its linearity in time and through the notion of descendance. In this way each poem exceeds its limits. The texts overlap, get intertwined, and make up a fragmentary history, or a story, a narrative structure.²³⁸

As Sarisalmi points out, the accuracy of the historical setting for this fictional story also gives Correspondences the note of authenticity that turns the personal voices contained within the poems into compelling testimonies of American life.

Within and against this monological his/story the individual poems or, rather, the letters in verse and the fragments of journals function as a challenge to the hypocritical jargon of the ‘official truth’ and reveal pieces of individual tragedies behind the façade. They seem to tell another story, other versions of history, and thus open gaps and uncover discontinuities in the intertext of the dominant discourse. But what also happens in Correspondences, as a counter-effect to the shattering of the traditional monuments of history, is the monumentalization of the Chandler family, particularly the Chandler women. When the private family archives of letters and journals are made public, the individual becomes general, the personal becomes national, memories become monuments.²³⁹

Stevenson did indeed want to give her readers a better understanding of American life by presenting personal experiences in the context of larger historical events.

²³⁸ Tiina Sarisalmi, “A Woman of Letters: History vs. Fiction in Anne Stevenson’s Correspondences – A Family History in Letters”, in David Robertson, ed., English Studies and History (Tampere, Finland: Univ of Tampere, 1994) 150–51 .

²³⁹ Sarisalmi 151–52 .

According to her own account, the genesis of Correspondences came from a private desire to make sense of own her troubled upbringing, the failure of her first marriage and her coming to terms with her own mother's death. Stevenson's mother, like the Chandler woman in Correspondences, had sacrificed her own creative aspirations when she resigned herself to an unhappy marriage. Stevenson states that she also wanted to understand and explore the context of the apparent breakdown of stability in American society and the mental breakdowns symptomatic of that loss of stability which some of her compatriot writers were undergoing. The discovery of the archive of letters seemed to provide her with the narrative framework she was seeking for that exploration:

I had found an archive of letters from well-known American families in the Schlesinger Library, and reading them, I decided I could use them in a poem. The only way to fight the madness of the present was to gain some understanding of the past. I discovered a trunk of family letters in my sister's basement in New York, and these, too, profoundly moved me. [. . .] I don't know when it occurred to me that my poem should take the form of letters. I think the family letters themselves suggested it; their language was already poetry, Victorian, distant. Why had no one thought of writing an epistolary poem before?²⁴⁰

Stevenson does not seem to be aware of Clough's Amours de Voyage at this point, although that is an understandable omission, given the massive difference in scope of both works – Clough covers a brief episode involving British tourists in Rome while

²⁴⁰ Stevenson, in Jacobus, ed. 168–9 .

Stevenson tackles six generations of the same family. However, it might have been interesting to hear her comment on the potential for different perspectives offered by that Victorian example of epistolary verse narrative. It is also noteworthy that she should have found within the language of the letters a form of poetry. Certainly, my own experience of the cache of Butler letters, as well as my reading of other emigrant letters during the nineteenth century, suggested a range of rhythms and poetry that I tried to use in my own verse novel.

As I have previously stated, I was drawn to Correspondences because I was struck by how Stevenson used the epistolary form to advance her narrative; the letters span a long time period which meant that there were often lengthy hiatuses in the narrative, yet Stevenson retains a strong sense of chronology and uses the gaps to encourage readers to imagine the untold story for themselves. For example, towards the end of the narrative, we are offered a letter dated 3 September, 1945 from the poet, Ruth Arbeiter, to her lover, the writer Major Paul Maxwell, in which she bemoans her fate as a dutiful wife and mother, ever destined to be thwarted in the search for true love:

Dearest, what more can I say?

Here, among my chores and my children.

Mine and my husband's children. So many friends.

And in between, these incredible perspectives,

openings entirely ours in the eddying numbness²⁴¹

²⁴¹ Anne Stevenson, Correspondences 64 .

This is immediately followed by a letter dated 2 May, 1954, written by Ruth's daughter, Kathy, to her mother, while Kathy is hospitalised in an asylum in New York suffering from post-natal depression. We immediately realise that the daughter has had to pay the price of her mother's frustrated self-sacrifice to duty:

God knows I have fought you long enough ...
soft puppet on the knuckles of your conscience, or
dangling puritanical doll made of duty and habit
and terror and self-revulsion.
At what cost
keeping balance on invisible threads?
At what price
dancing in a sweater set and pearls
on the stage sets of your expectations?²⁴²

Kathy's letter, which is among the most Plath-like of voices in the Correspondences sequence, underlines the poet's theme that the pressures placed by a puritanical society on man and women to sacrifice themselves in the name of some false sense of duty caused untold havoc throughout the generations. The imagery is intense and wonderfully sustained; the puppet-turned doll is the perfect metaphor for the woman who has lost control of her own destiny.

Stevenson uses a variety of forms for her letter poems. Some, like the letter dated 21 October, 1936 from Paul Maxwell to Ruth Arbeiter, are in prose; the majority, like

²⁴² Stevenson 65 .

the one quoted above, are in free verse and use a variety of stanza forms. In fact, Stevenson frequently uses the stanza form as a method of characterization. A letter dated 23 June, 1832 from the run-away Reuben Chandler to his disapproving father, is in three-line stanzas which slope across the page in an approximation of Reuben's troubled state of mind:

My dear father,
That I write, sick,
from a convent in New Orleans

may distress you less
than that I write at all.
Pray for my soul.²⁴³

As we have seen, Kathy Chattle's letter to her mother is of a looser structure, switching from anguished stream of consciousness to the type of school-girl rhyming understandable in one who has been locked up in an asylum:

Yes she was a nice girl!
Yes she was good!
Got married. Had a baby.
Just as she should.²⁴⁴

²⁴³ Stevenson 16 .

²⁴⁴ Stevenson 65.

Kate Clanchy has commented on Stevenson's skill at characterisation, pointing out that "each letter is a tour de force, suggesting not only character and motivation, but the history behind the character, the history which becomes, in fact, the character."²⁴⁵ Stevenson's talent for creating believable characters through the use of poetic form was to be an important model for my own approach to characterisation in In Sight of Home.

Although Anne Stevenson's private life was sometimes turbulent (she has been married four times and suffered a near mental breakdown after her first marriage), she was critical of the overly confessional school of American poetry out of which she emerged during the 1950s and 1960s, having apparently little in common with the obsessive self-analysis of Plath and Sexton, although she was to prove a tough but compassionate biographer for Plath. Yet she was a product of the same society, and felt compelled to find her own creative response to it. The critic Alan Robinson, commenting on the influence of Sylvia Plath and her creation Esther Greenwood in The Bell Jar on the women characters in Correspondences, notes that "in the self-projects of Correspondences and its related poems Stevenson attempts to analyse these intolerable psychological pressures and to work out a strategy for survival."²⁴⁶

I find it fascinating that Stevenson discovered in the epistolary verse narrative a way of processing her own direct experience by exploring it through fiction. As she states in her 1978 essay:

²⁴⁵ Kate Clanchy, "A lifetime's symphony," The Guardian 5 November 2005 .

²⁴⁶ Alan Robinson, Instabilities in Contemporary British Poetry (London: Macmillan, 1988) 166 .

I should add [. . .] that the ‘facts’ pertaining to the Chandler family in my poem differ from those pertaining to my own family in history. The nearer I came to my time and to people I knew, the more imperative it seemed to me to get feelings right but to invent ‘facts’. Apart from the embarrassment of taking family skeletons out of the cupboards before the flesh is off, so to speak, fiction has to be more obvious than life. A reader has to see reasons for feelings in behaviour.²⁴⁷

Later in this chapter, I shall compare this view of family history with Craig Raine’s subsequent treatment of his genealogy in History: The Home Movie. But in the meantime it is worth considering whether this desire for poets to explore and mediate their own direct experience by writing poetry through fiction is a major impetus in the creation of late twentieth century verse novels. It certainly resonates with my own experience of writing a verse novel, drawing on elements that are autobiographical but having the freedom offered by fiction to explore them in a narrative that is not my own, yet retaining, through poetry, the sense of a direct and truthful utterance.

The joy of rhyme – Vikram Seth’s The Golden Gate (1986)

Vikram Seth’s verse novel, The Golden Gate, appears to use its poetic form for the sheer exuberance of the undertaking. The opening lines of this tale told in 13 chapters and 590 sonnets observe the formula used by every story-teller since the dawn of time – “Dear Reader, once upon / A time, say, circa 1980, / There lived a man.”²⁴⁸ – and

²⁴⁷ Stevenson in Jacobus, ed. 173 .

²⁴⁸ Vikram Seth, The Golden Gate 1.1 lines 2-4 .

we are immediately immersed in the narrative of a group of young people living during the Northern Californian computer boom of the 1980s.

There is an obvious debt owed to Pushkin's Eugene Onegin in the particular use of the narrator's direct address to the reader, as well as in his subject matter, the lives and loves of the San Francisco yuppie set, which allows Seth to act as an observer of their foibles and pretensions with as clear an eye as Pushkin had for his own contemporaries. However, I am inclined to agree with the critic Joanna Durczak that his tone is indulgent and generous towards his characters,²⁴⁹ more generous perhaps than the satirist Pushkin desired to be. Durczak notes that Seth's use of form seems to underpin his attitude to his subjects: "The lightness of his verse persuasively communicates his perception of the yuppie culture as shallow and superficial, although not as dangerously erosive of individuals' personalities and social instincts as many believed it to be."²⁵⁰ Although Durczak does not acknowledge Pushkin's influence here, it clearly extends beyond subject matter to language and form, as Seth freely acknowledges in the first five sonnets of Chapter 5. Digressing from the narrative in true Pushkin style, Seth warns us of the dangers he faces in writing his tale in verse:

An editor – at a plush party

(Well-wined, -provisioned, speechy, hearty) ...

... seized my arm: "Dear fellow,

What's your next work?" "A novel ... " "Great!

²⁴⁹ Joanna Durczak, "A Prophecy That Came True: Vikram Seth's The Golden Gate", American Studies, 18 (1999): 105 .

²⁵⁰ Durczak 107 .

We hope that you, dear Mr. Seth –“

“... In verse,” I added. He turned yellow.

“How marvellously quaint,” he said,

And subsequently cut me dead.²⁵¹

Seth is clearly, if comically, aware that his commitment to this hybrid literary form might marginalise him in the publishing world; indeed, it appears to be fair comment, given the fact that although he published eight collections of poetry during the 1980s, he did not achieve wide renown until the publication of his prose novel, A Suitable Boy, in 1993. Yet in The Golden Gate he justifies his experiment in form with great wit and exuberance, matching his argument with the rhythm of the form:

How do I justify this stanza?

These feminine rhymes? My wrinkled muse?

This whole passé extravaganza?

How can I (careless of time) use

The dusty bread molds of Onegin

In the brave bakery of Reagan?

The loaves will surely fail to rise

Or else go stale before my eyes.

The truth is, I can't justify it.

But as no shroud of critical terms

Can save my corpse from boring worms,

I may as well have fun and try it.

²⁵¹ The Golden Gate 5.1 5-14 .

If it works, good; and if not, well,
A theory won't postpone its knell.²⁵²

The tetrameter, he continues, is a “marvelous swift meter”²⁵³ which has been unjustly neglected in favour of “Tyrant of English”,²⁵⁴ the pentameter, and, before returning to the narrative, Seth urges his reader to reacquaint himself with the master of this particular form:

Reader, enough of this apology;
But spare me if I think it best,
Before I tether my monology,
To stake a stanza to suggest
You spend some unfilled day of leisure
By that original spring of pleasure:
Sweet-watered, fluent, clear, light, blithe
(This homage merely pays a tithe
Of what in joy and inspiration
It gave me once and does not cease
To give me) – Pushkin's masterpiece
In Johnston's luminous translation:
Eugene Onegin – like champagne

²⁵² The Golden Gate 5.3 1-14 .

²⁵³ The Golden Gate 5.4 5 .

²⁵⁴ The Golden Gate 5.4 4 .

Its effervescence stirs my brain.²⁵⁵

Effervescence is a quality one comes to associate with Seth's own writing in The Golden Gate, although it has not been to the taste of all readers. In his study of the long poem, the critic Ben Downing accuses Seth's use of the tetrameter and rhyme of creating some examples of "crass collision" and argues that The Golden Gate has not aged well:

Seven years after its publication, The Golden Gate already seems like a mildly amusing artefact of that excessive time when (in its own words) "the syndrome of possessions" reached epidemic proportions, and when AIDS had yet to cast the darkest portion of its shadow over San Francisco. Seth's sonnets are best suited to light subjects and mock-heroic catalogues [. . .]²⁵⁶

Downing goes on to criticise Seth's handling of weightier matters, such as the proliferation of nuclear weapons, as resulting in "patches of wretched writing".²⁵⁷ Yet I would argue that the very buoyancy and speed of Seth's adaptation of the Onegin tetrameter underlines, as Lars Ole Sauerberg points out, one of The Golden Gate's other major themes: the need to make haste and not to miss out on life's opportunities. "There is hardly more to be got out of this stanza than that the breathlessness clearly conveyed by the rhythm is a matter of a need to hurry."²⁵⁸ In the penultimate sonnet,

²⁵⁵ The Golden Gate 5.5 1-14 .

²⁵⁶ Ben Downing, "Big City, Long Poem", in Parnassus: Poetry in Review 18.1 (1992): 221 .

²⁵⁷ Downing 222 .

²⁵⁸ Lars Ole Sauerberg, "Repositioning Narrative: The Late-Twentieth-Century Verse Novels of Vikram Seth, Derek Walcott, Craig Raine, Anthony Burgess, and Bernadine Evaristo", Orbis Litterarum, 59 (2004): 449 .

the hero, John, grieving for the death of his close friend and former lover, Janet, is reminded of this need to seize the day by a note from another former lover, Liz, with whom he has fallen out, and who has had a child by another man:

*It says, Dear John, We have a son.
We hope that you'll be his godfather.
We've called him John. We would far rather
Have you than any other friend.
Please speak to us, John. In the end,
We'll all be old or dead or dying.
My mother died two weeks ago.²⁵⁹*

The theme of carpe diem is one Pushkin thoroughly developed in Eugene Onegin, and it is a further indication of the extent of Seth's debt to the Russian master, but also an indication of the seriousness of his artistic intent. He should not be so readily dismissed as a chronicler of outdated social tropes.

One of Downing's other criticisms, that Seth's attempt to blend poetry and fiction has impaired both the quality of the poetry and the effectiveness of the novel structure, is worth longer consideration. Downing argues that, although there is a great fluency of writing in The Golden Gate, this fluency results in something close to glibness, and writing that fails to meet the standards of either poetry or prose:

²⁵⁹ The Golden Gate 13.51 4-14 .

For smoothness has been achieved only at great expense. In order to accommodate novelistic sweep, the poetry has been stripped of its focused intensities; very few individual sonnets could stand on their own foundations. Equally, the fiction has been severely simplified and reduced to fit into the sonnet's fourteen-line containers [. . .] Despite Seth's ambition, The Golden Gate is neither good poetry nor good fiction. In attempting to bridge two genres, it falls between them. Instead of buttressing and enabling each other, the verse tends to hobble the narrative, the narrative to compromise the verse. The genres, in Seth's hands at least, are like an arranged marriage: not deeply compatible.²⁶⁰

In the end, this is a subjective judgement and, like all such judgements, can only be rebutted by an equally subjective opinion. In my opinion, The Golden Gate works aesthetically because it tells an entertaining narrative in language that is a joy to read. Here, for instance, is Seth's pithy portrait of single career girl, Liz. We note how he manages to include strong imagery, good characterisation and neat plot development within the one stanza:

Yet Liz, sweet Liz, a little lonely,
Sequestered in her city flat
(Unlike her student days), with only
The trusty Charlemagne, her cat,
A fearsome tabby, as companion –
Felt, as she swam the rapid canyon
Of her career, while crocodiles

²⁶⁰ Downing 223 .

Nibbled her toes with savory smiles,
That there must be some happy medium
Between a legal partner's life
And being a legal partner's wife.
O loneliness – or else, O tedium!
And so one day she hit upon
The personal ads and, through them, John.²⁶¹

One has to admire the cheeky rhyming of 'medium' and 'tedium', and the delightful image of the corporate canyon filled with crocodiles. The reader is also neatly poised for the next plot development: Liz's meeting with John. Within this one stanza, Seth cleverly meets the demands of both poetic form and narrative structure.

However, Downing's views are an important comment on the pressures under which writers that chose to combine poetry and fiction must work. When writing a verse novel, one must strive to achieve the best of both worlds in terms of producing a compelling narrative written in language that achieves the focussed intensity expected of poetry. And while there can be some compromises made along the way – for example there may be less space for character development or digression – as we have seen in the case of Robert Browning, the verse novelist cannot afford to fall between two stools in his/her attempt to achieve the compression of poetry and the expansiveness of plot. I have already outlined, in previous chapters, the various

²⁶¹ The Golden Gate 2.33 1-14 .

artistic challenges I faced in my own attempt to combine a comparatively loose narrative with a tightly packed poetic form.

Before leaving this discussion of Vikram Seth, it is worth considering one other aspect of the reader reception of The Golden Gate. In his discussion of the late twentieth century verse novel, Lars Ole Sauerberg argues that most contemporary readers who approach the genre are not aware of the long tradition of verse narrative in which it appears, and therefore bring to their reading their own literary preferences and preoccupations. They will thus respond to what they recognise in the given text:

Most general readers are not acquainted with the parameters of literary history, and their reactions will, arguably, be conditioned by what they are used to as readers of contemporary fiction, perhaps even more generally by narrative as such informing both novel and film, and by reference to the lyrics of popular music. To them the presentation in verse of what, in all other respects, read like novel narratives will probably be an experience whose success depends on the persuasiveness of the elements of the individual text that function as justification of a 'strange' mode of writing.²⁶²

Sauerberg suggests that The Golden Gate persuades its readers to stay with its poetry through its resemblance to that other familiar narrative form, the situation comedy:

Lay readers not initially scared off by the 'strange' lay-out of the text will recognize both the world described (Californian rich and smart-set) and the

²⁶² Sauerberg 440 .

anecdotal structure of the sit-com dialogue as a homology to the setting and the punch-line final-couplet structure of Seth's sonnets respectively.²⁶³

I think it is true that Seth's setting and characters would certainly have been equally well suited to a prose novel or, indeed, a TV comedy. For example, here's a scene where John is having dinner with his old friend Jan:

The food arrives as soon as ordered.
Impressed and ravenous, John relents.
His chopsticks fasten on beef bordered
With broccoli. Enticing scents
Swim over the noise, the greasy table.
Two bottles each of beer enable
Small talk and large, in cyclic waves,
To wash their shores, and John behaves
At last less stiffly if not sadly.
"How are the cats?" "Just fine." "And You?"
"Great." "And the sculpture?" "Yes, that too."
"Your singing group?" "Oh, not too badly.
But I came here to hear your song.
Now sing!" "Jan, I don't know what's wrong. [. . .]"²⁶⁴

This sort of dialogue could be found in any contemporary situation comedy, and would certainly be accessible to readers less familiar with Pushkin and more

²⁶³ Sauerberg 449 .

²⁶⁴ The Golden Gate 1.22 1-14 .

comfortable with Friends. Yet the versification lifts it to another level. It scans elegantly and is perfectly metrical. John orders ‘beef bordered with broccoli’ which in itself is nothing unusual; the fact that ‘bordered’ rhymes with ‘ordered’ two lines previously makes the lines sing. Furthermore, the rapid staccato-like to and fro-ing of the dialogue fits neatly into the metrical arrangement, demonstrating the added value provided by the versification. Therefore, Sauerberg’s statement is an intriguing insight, particularly in the light of comments earlier in this chapter that the nineteenth century verse novelists were attempting to gain back their readership by taking on the territory associated with the more popular prose novelists. Perhaps some poets will always look for ways to refer in their own writing to the “norms” of contemporary culture in order to persuade their readers of their own continuing relevance.

The Australian version – Dorothy Porter’s The Monkey’s Mask (1994)

The scope and sheer readability of Seth’s The Golden Gate clearly encouraged some poets interested in narrative to explore the potential of the verse novel. In his study of the late twentieth century Australian verse novel,²⁶⁵ Christopher Pollnitz argues that verse novelists (or “poet-novelists”, as he terms them) are like precocious youngsters taking an interest in the rules of the new game they are inventing, and quotes by way of an example, the 1994 verse novel Solstice by the poet Mart Rubinstein, who is clear about his literary influences. Describing the activities of a Danish backpacker browsing at a bookstore, Rubinstein writes:

With true delight she finds the most

Impressive rhyming book to date,

²⁶⁵ Christopher Pollnitz, “Australian Verse Novels”, Heat ns 7 (Artarmon, NSW: Giramondo 2004): 229 – 52 .

Through which she thumbs and reads, engrossed:

It's Vikram Seth's The Golden Gate.

Responsible for the revival

Of history's most proud tradition

Of epic poems, its arrival

Fulfils its chivalrous ambition

To reinstate the sonnet form

Unto its former glory, saving

Tetrameter, too, from the storm

Of faceless history, and paving

The way for others on the list

(At least one is known to exist).²⁶⁶

Pollnitz is slightly dismissive of Rubinstein's "imitation of Seth", claiming that his "characters lack the intensity, the capacity to shock, that may be expected of the Australian genre"²⁶⁷ and arguing that other writers have a much stronger claim as inventors of the Australian verse novel. Among other early examples he quotes Les Murray's 1980 collection, The Boys Who Stole the Funeral, which was subtitled A Novel Sequence, and which Murray's own biographer Peter Alexander had claimed as the origin of both American and Australian developments in the genre;²⁶⁸ Alan Wearne's "Out There", a sequence of nine monologues relating the tale of a self-mutilating high-school student and modelled on Browning's The Ring and The Book;

²⁶⁶ Matt Rubinstein, Solstice (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1994) quoted in Pollnitz 230 .

²⁶⁷ Pollnitz 230 .

²⁶⁸ Pollnitz 231 .

and Dorothy Porter's "Rat Tower" sequence, which was included in her first poetry collection, Little Hoodlum (1975). According to Pollnitz, Porter herself stated that "Rat Tower" was modelled on Robert Southey's narrative poem "God's Judgement on a Wicked Bishop" and he points out that its protagonist, Hatto, combines many of the traits to be found in later Porter sociopaths such as the eponymous hero in Akhenaten.²⁶⁹

Convinced of the influence that Browning had on Porter, Pollnitz argues that she has found a way of escaping the more baneful parts of his shadow:

Before Wild Surmise (2002), Porter constructed all her fictions from the protagonist's interior monologues. Borrowing Projectivism's short, stepped lines and typographical tricks, Porter frees her free verse from the look 'Old Hippetty-Hop o' the accents' gave to his pages of blank or rhymed verse, but in the course of a fiction her single speakers display egos as distended as any in Browning's portrait gallery.²⁷⁰

Like Pollnitz, I am also interested in the way Porter has exploited both the conventions of the novel and post modernist poetry to create work which is both immediate and engrossing. She has, to date, written four verse novels – Akhenaten (1991), The Monkey's Mask (1994), What a Piece of Work (1998) and Wild Surmise (2002) – which makes her among the most prolific of the verse novelists under consideration here. The Monkey's Mask has proven to be one of her most popular

²⁶⁹ Pollnitz 231 .

²⁷⁰ Pollnitz 231 .

works, going into several reprints during the 1990s²⁷¹ and the novel's heroine, Jill, a private eye with a Chandleresque style of repartee and the appropriately soft centre masked by a tough exterior, is an engaging central character.

The Monkey's Mask is divided into twelve chapters, each comprising a series of titled poems. As when reading a good detective story, we are drawn immediately into the action with the first poem introducing us to our heroine and her line of work. But the poetry also ensures that we are also immediately immersed in the inner world of the protagonist; the short, snappy lines, the language drawn from pulp fiction, the imagery drawn from rock-climbing, the fact that she is talking to herself in the mirror, combine to suggest a character who likes to talk tough but who has a vulnerable streak:

“Jill”

I challenge the mirror

“how much guts have you got”

I like my courage

physical

I like my courage

with a dash of danger.

In between insurance jobs

I've been watching

²⁷¹ “A Bibliography of Dorothy Porter”, The Australian Society of Authors website, http://www.asauthors.org/web_of_poets/Porter/bibliography.html, 19 January 2006 .

rock climbers
like game little spiders
on my local cliff

I've got no head for heights
but plenty of stomach
for trouble²⁷²

Throughout the verse novel, Porter's style is spare, her heroine's tone of voice suitably laconic and the use of imagery comparatively rare. And yet there is something about the tightness of the short poetic lines that drives the narrative forward, making us want to turn the page and discover the story.

The Monkey's Mask has all the intrigue, passion and suspense of a detective film noir. Investigating the death of a missing young woman, Jill Fitzpatrick finds herself becoming fatally entangled with the girl's university tutor. Dr. Diana Maitland could have stepped right out of the pages of Farewell My Lovely; in the poem "Diana", Jill tells us:

The door reads
Dr. Diana Maitland.

I knock twice

²⁷² Dorothy Porter, The Monkey's Mask 3 .

she's thirtysomething

maybe forty

her hair honey-blond

streaks

falls in her eyes

she pushes it back

with a fidgety

nail-bitten hand

she's got eyes

that flirt or fight

she's gritty

she's bright

oh christ help me

she's a bit of alright!²⁷³

One could find this kind of character description in a prose novel but the fact that it is versified gives an entirely extra dimension. Once again, the shortness of the lines reinforces the snappy, hard-bitten persona of the speaker; the rhyme scheme that

²⁷³ The Monkey's Mask 27 .

allows the combination of 'fight', 'bright' and 'alright' is witty and sharp. Porter is clearly enjoying the challenge of maintaining her strict rhyming scheme while developing characters and advancing the plot.

Readers of this genre of detective novel will have already picked up the femme fatale tendencies exhibited by Diana Maitland and for much of The Monkey's Mask we are teased with the suspicion that the woman Jill is falling for may have murdered the girl Jill has been hired to find. Much of the interest in the piece lies in Jill's struggle with her feelings for the woman who may be her chief suspect. Searching Diana's office, Jill is haunted by a sense of betrayal:

The stairwell

the handset

of the blue phone

even the jerking lift

are all terrible

with her smell

as if her hair

is spilling into my nose

every silent minute.²⁷⁴

Once again, the intensity of the imagery, the fact that the phone's handset and the lift are "terrible with her smell" lifts the writing above the prosaic and increases the impact on the reader. The lineation – the short, staccato lines that mirror the jerkiness of the lift – further sharpens the effect.

The final denouement, in which Diana's somewhat creepy husband, Nick, is uncovered as the actual murderer, may feel like something of a let-down, but it satisfies the reader's expectations of an appropriate conclusion for this detective story. Indeed, as Pollnitz points out, there are several other deliberate clues in the text which indicate that Porter wants her readers, at least those readers already familiar with the detective genre, to understand the tradition in which she is writing:

Porter rings bells for detective thriller aficionados: the murdered girl, Mickey Norris, gets her first name from Spillane's Mike Hammer series, her surname from Raymond Chandler's The Big Sleep (1939); and Jill is the same age as Philip Marlowe in the Chandler classic.²⁷⁵

These inter-textual references remind us of Sauerberg's previous comments about the success of verse novels depending on "the persuasiveness of the elements of the individual text that function as justification of a 'strange' mode of writing".²⁷⁶ Does

²⁷⁴ The Monkey's Mask 211 .

²⁷⁵ Pollnitz 243 .

²⁷⁶ Sauerberg 440 .

this suggest that Porter's, and other verse novelists', success depends on the extent to which they make the reader remember other genres and forget they are reading poetry at all? Perhaps not. Surely the pleasure of reading Seth or Porter is to realise the skill with which they adapt a poetic form to their narrative purpose, in other words how they stake out their ground on a territory that neither poetry nor prose could capture on their own? I would, however, agree with Pollnitz's comment that "the detective plot and hard-boiled diction build up the personality of Jill Fitzpatrick, the most complete of Porter's characters."²⁷⁷ Indeed it was the quality of the hard-nosed narrator with a tough and slangy diction that so attracted me to The Monkey's Mask, and which I sought to adapt to my own heroine, Fiona Sheehan.

Although tending to be severely critical of Porter's depiction of lesbian love and what she finds to be a general tone of women-hatred in the verse novel, novelist Finola Moorhead, reviewing The Monkey's Mask, notes the effectiveness of the form, while questioning its ultimate sincerity:

The Monkey's Mask is very easy to read. It is formally slick; a derivative, lesbian-porn "thriller" sped-read for you. Liberally spaced, most of the verses have about three words a line. Each poem ends crisply with a verbal punch, allowing the reader to feel the quite genuine power of poetic form handled with craft. This spare writing is contrasted with the pieces of the dead girl's writing which is rendered in italics, has long lines and is emotional. The shallowness of

²⁷⁷ Pollnitz 243 .

this device is supposedly excused by genre, but it is a three card trick: there is genre, a prose form, and two types of poetry: in which are we to believe? ²⁷⁸

I would question why Moorhead believes that the reader has to make a choice between the prose and poetic forms contained in The Monkey's Mask in the first place, but there is a more fundamental point here that needs to be addressed. Having suggested that The Monkey's Mask is an example of a specific genre (the detective story) rendered through poetry, it is significant to this discussion that Moorhead focuses on the relative positions of poetry and prose within the piece to identify where the true heart of the story lies. In particular, she concentrates on the treatment of the murder victim's poetry, which is included in the sixth chapter of the novel, and which is printed accompanied by a laconic commentary by the narrator and her chief antagonist. Because these poems' subject matter (an abusive relationship) elicits sympathy in the reviewer, Moorhead regards them as the emotional centre of the story and castigates Porter, and her other characters, for being disrespectful towards them: "This girl is a real poet and would have developed, had she not been murdered, into a worthwhile writer."²⁷⁹ In doing so, Moorhead seems to forget that these poems are, in fact, merely the utterances of a created character, as true a representation of Porter's own voice as Lensky's was of Pushkin's.

The very fact that the murder victim was an embryonic poet is just another aspect of Porter's characterisation. One wonders in passing whether Porter had Nabokov in mind when consigning the young writer to her fate; there is a surprising incidence of

²⁷⁸ Finola Moorhead, "Dorothy Porter, The Monkey's Mask", Southerly (Magazine of the Australian English Association), 55 (1995): 177-8.

²⁷⁹ Moorhead 183.

poet murders in the verse novels under consideration. But does this example of mistaking a character's voice as a piece of authentic utterance, rather than simply as a fictional device, point to the potential power of the verse novel to convince the reader of its veracity in a way fiction cannot? In one respect the verse novel is the most artificial of forms, a hybrid; yet because the reader is so conditioned to expect truth in lyric poetry (the poetic 'I' cannot lie, apparently), when a piece of fiction is told through verse, and poems are used as part of its content, the reader may believe it more readily and become more involved with its characters than if he or she were reading prose fiction

Documenting history – Craig Raine's History: The Home Movie (1994)

To what extent can we believe in the poetic "I" or the documentary evidence provided for us in Craig Raine's verse novel, History: The Home Movie? We have already referred to the fact that the work shares a number of characteristics with Anne Stevenson's Correspondences. There is a similar focus on family history as a way of exploring issues of identity and inheritance and Raine adopts a similarly pseudo-documentary approach, although in this case it is the cine-camera lens, not the letter, that is the medium used to tell the story. Raine traces the history of two families whose fates become inter-twined through marriage over the course of the twentieth century. The Pasternaks and the Raines experience their own private triumphs and failures against a backdrop of the major events of European history, allowing Raine to place his exploration of his family narrative within a much wider social and political context. As Lars Ole Sauerberg states, it is "the genocide of European Jewry that is

the central pivot in Raine's narrative, tracing its causes and effects in a wide variety of attitudes, tendencies and behaviour, national and individual".²⁸⁰

History: The Home Movie is a verse novel made up of eighty-eight poems, including a prologue, which cover the period 1905 to 1984, and which are preceded with two pages of the Pasternak and Raine family trees. We have already seen how Stevenson's use of genealogy in Correspondences imbued the work with a greater sense of historical veracity and the family trees have a similar impact in Raine's verse novel, a point I registered when deciding to use a family tree in my own verse novel. The poems are of varying length but of similar form: they use an unrhymed and irregular trimeter-based three line stanza which heightens the sense of a fleeting image or movie still. For example, the opening poem takes us to the Pasternak family dacha by the Black Sea, where we are introduced to Rosa Kaufmann, whom we know, by referring to the family tree, subsequently becomes Craig Raine's Great Aunt by marriage:

Pince-nez like the letter g,

Rosa is seated, upright

at the upright piano,

letting her fingers rummage

for a few slow bars

of Brahms and Schubert

²⁸⁰ Sauerberg 452 .

in its open drawer,
before she finds Rachmaninoff,
whose head develops

slowly, stroke by stroke,
crew-cut, severe, three-quarter face,
on the easel in the studio.²⁸¹

Raine's use of short stanzas incorporating intensely visual imagery catapults us directly into the action, much in the way that old camera footage presents us with an initial impression of a scene before we entirely understand what it is we are looking at. Some critics have been less convinced by the effectiveness of this form. For example, poet and critic Sean O'Brien comments that "History: The Home Movie does invite doubts [. . .] about the wisdom of writing the whole thing in short-lined triplets, for though these may legitimately aspire to the momentum of prose, they also seem confining and repetitive."²⁸² But I would argue that the stanza form, the spare language and the heightened imagery – that glorious g-shaped pince nez for example – create that sense of a distilled impression, miniature brush-strokes that combine to form an overall and compelling picture.

History: The Home Movie was not the first time that Raine used this cinematic / documentary approach in his writing. The intensely visual quality of his writing has always been noted. In his review of the narrative poem "In the Kalahari Desert", Sven

²⁸¹ Craig Raine, History: The Home Movie 3 .

²⁸² Sean O'Brien, The Deregulated Muse (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1998) 221 .

Birkerts refers to the “campy newsreel” quality of the poem and notes how the characterisation is emblematic, drawn from “a hundred feature films”.²⁸³ In *History*, Raine uses this approach with great effect, though with a greater emphasis on fully-rounded characterisation. It is as if he has found a way to exploit the taut precision of the poetic image for its narrative potential. For example, in the poem titled “1926: A Short Stretch of Nothing”, we catch a glimpse of Raine’s paternal uncle, Jimmy, in a particularly private moment. Again we note the visual detail, as the lens of Raine’s poetry pans over the scene:

Streaked, freaked, spattered, dribbled,
the henhouse hardens
like a painter’s studio.

Jimmy Raine’s harem of hens,
pluck-plucking at banjos:
c’est la vie bohème.

A bottle of Empire sherry
wears its tipsy wig
of candle grease askew.

He is absorbed in himself,
pressing his prick
like a spring

²⁸³ Sven Birkerts, “Craig Raine’s ‘In the Kalahari Desert’”, *Ploughshares* 13.4 (Winter 1987): 154 .

back into his body.

Whoops, it buckles

sideways and he begins again

until it dwindles

to a second bellybutton.

Quickened, it slowly

extrudes, foreskin crinkled

like the unforced crown

of rhubarb shoots.²⁸⁴

These may be the stills from the film of a home movie camera, but they are also the result of a covert surveillance. Raine's clever approach allows him to focus on his characters in their most private moments, without having recourse to issues like evidence or proof for his particular history. But it also allows him to use utterly precise imagery – the guano, the candle grease – to reinforce our imagining of Jimmy's own masturbatory act. This is a poet's heightened use of visual imagery, yet it also reinforces our notion of the character of Jimmy and his role in the narrative. Poetry and fiction are working in glorious union.

According to Sauerberg, Raine, like other verse novelists, has been careful to ensure that his readers find a familiar frame of reference in digesting this strange hybrid form :

²⁸⁴ History: The Home Movie 76 .

With home movies as an alternative source of entertainment and information to potential book readers, providers of media material have long since introduced infotainment, with the fictionalization of the factual as a very popular and, hence, routine production recourse. Nothing works better for history to be made alive than to introduce focused individualism, preferably with all kinds of romantic, melodramatic, sordid, or prurient detail. This is exactly what Raine does in his narrative [. . .]²⁸⁵

One must also remember that Raine, like his readers, is a child of the mid-twentieth century and has grown up with the proliferation of mass-media approaches to information provision. It is therefore not surprising that he has chosen to adapt the latest technological devices in his writing.

Raine's desire to fictionalise poetic experience has been noted by Ian Gregson, who comments that "in Raine the post-modernist impulse struggles with a realist impulse to mirror the world in all its complexity."²⁸⁶ Describing Raine's sensibility as "the most profoundly novelised in contemporary British poetry,"²⁸⁷ Gregson argues that Raine has always been wary of the lyric impulse of revelation and finds ways to displace that through fictionalised poetry, stating that "Raine has always mistrusted lyric selfhood, his poems constantly imply it is claustrophobic and distortive: the form of these dramatic works averts those dangers in advance."²⁸⁸ Yet again we see the

²⁸⁵ Sauerberg 452 – 53 .

²⁸⁶ Ian Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism. Dialogue and Estrangement*, (London: Macmillan, 1996) 16 .

²⁸⁷ Gregson 21 .

²⁸⁸ Gregson 18 .

verse novel providing the poet with greater freedom to explore themes than might have been possible through a purely lyric mode.

Searching for roots – Bernadine Evaristo

There has been an apparent increase in the popularity of the verse novel form at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. In the UK, Bernadine Evaristo,²⁸⁹ Glyn Maxwell,²⁹⁰ Deryn Rees-Jones²⁹¹ and Fiona Sampson²⁹² have each published works which combine poetry and narrative in ways that are implicitly or explicitly novelistic. Experimentation with form has become an integral part of post-modern literature with influences and inputs coming from a huge diversity of sources, including text messaging, music, computer programming and science. It is thus not very surprising that some modern writers have chosen to explore this particular hybrid. But from the practitioner's viewpoint, the form's new popularity raises once again the question of what added value the blending of poetry and fiction brings to a work. Before trying to answer that question by looking at some of these works in greater detail, it is worth noting Joy Alexander's explanation of the equally sudden popularity of the verse novel form among contemporary children's writers. Children's tales in verse are not a new development; generations have grown up with the versified narratives of Rupert Bear, among others. However, reflecting on the sudden increase in children's verse novels in the later part of the twentieth

²⁸⁹ Bernadine Evaristo, *Lara* (Tunbridge Wells: Angela Royal Publishing, 1997) and *The Emperor's Babe* (London: 2001, Penguin/Hamish Hamilton). Her latest work, *Soul Tourists* (London: Penguin, 2005), is described as a "novel with verse" although it is more of a prose narrative with occasional poetic interludes .

²⁹⁰ Glyn Maxwell, *Time's Fool* .

²⁹¹ Deryn Rees-Jones, *Quiver* .

²⁹² Fiona Sampson, *The Distance Between Us* (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 2005) .

century, Alexander comments that we are living through a digital revolution that has resulted in a revival of orality and a greater awareness, in texts, of the narrative voice:

This increased awareness of the narrative voice in turn raises the potential for personalised subjective narration and for reading constructed as intimate conversation or even as eavesdropping. The verse-novel is an appropriate vehicle for these covert emphases. Free verse accentuates the oral dimension. The writer is able to craft the verse as though orchestrating it for reading aloud. She can shape the rhythm, position the line-break so as to add emphasis, vary the pace through the line-length, or borrow and exploit poetic devices such as repetition, caesura and enjambment. Equally, readers are more likely to experience the words as sound as they read. [. . .] Writers who select the genre of the verse-novel rather than plain prose re-conceive their narrative more explicitly as spoken text and oral rhythms assume greater significance.²⁹³

Although Alexander is writing about children's literature, her comments about the orality of the modern verse novel seem particularly appropriate when considering Bernadine Evaristo's work. Evaristo began writing at drama school where she was drawn to dramatic poems and monologues that allowed her to explore the question of what she has termed the "untold stories that have been sewn out of the Great British Narrative".²⁹⁴ Her first two verse novels, *Lara* (1997) and *The Emperor's Babe* (2001) are each plot-driven, highly oral narratives in which the heroines explore issues of identity and the role of the woman in her historic setting. *Lara* tells the story of a

²⁹³ Joy Alexander, "The Verse-novel: A New Genre," *Children's Literature in Education*, 36.3 (September 2005): 270 – 71 .

²⁹⁴ Bernadine Evaristo, in interview on the Extracts, New Writing Essex University website, <http://privatewww.essex.ac.uk/~extracts/InterviewBernadineEvaristo.htm>, 3 July 2006 .

mixed-race heroine, the daughter of a London-Irish mother and a Nigerian father, and her gradual awakening to the call of her own culture and ethnicity; The Emperor's Babe centres on the story of the daughter of Sudanese emigrants who tries unsuccessfully to free herself from the shackles of race and gender in Roman Empire-controlled London.

In each verse novel, the voice of the characters is the driving force of the narrative. In Lara, most of the sections are about a page long (20 to 24 lines) and divided among fourteen chapters each referring to a specific year, although the narrative goes back and forward chronologically. Lars Ole Sauerberg notes that the scansion of the poems suggests the strong influence that performance may have had on their composition; these are poems to be recited rather than read:

The verse may at first sight appear to scan somewhat irregularly, but as soon as the reader realizes the importance of spoken performance playing off against a somewhat hurried speech rhythm and begins to experience the text accordingly, the text unfolds its full rhythmical potential as narrative engine complementary to the narrative drive.²⁹⁵

The performance element of the work can be seen in the many instances of dramatic monologue in the verse novel. For example, here is Edith (Lara's grandmother) bemoaning her daughter's disobedient attraction for the Nigerian, Taiwo:

Disloyalty slimes into my kitchen like slugs at night,

²⁹⁵ Sauerberg 457-8 .

Dissension in the ranks! I won't have it, not from anyone!
Mice breed more mice if you don't cheese and snap 'em
so I told Leslie to keep his interfering opinions to himself!
I've been bleached, boiled, scrubbed, rinsed, wrung
out and crucified on a washing line to blanche and stiffen.
I could never love darkie grandchildren [. . .]²⁹⁶

Edith's character is skilfully drawn and her voice is utterly believable; Evaristo's imagery is drawn from Edith's domestic environment ("bleached, boiled, scrubbed") and there is a wonderfully dramatic energy to lines such as "Mice breed more mice if you don't cheese and snap 'em" – one can imagine the poem being performed with great flourish. Passages such as these display both the novelist's skill for characterisation and the poet's ability to condense and arrange the words for optimum dramatic impact.

Throughout Lara there is a hypnotic quality to the writing, and a precision to the choice of words that we would expect from a poet, as we see in this section where we meet Lara in her pre-pubescent stage:

Tank tops, Curly Wurlys, blue mascara, Top 20,
T.Rex, Jackson 5, Bowie, Slade, the Sweet, the 70s
spun Lara into the kaleidoscope of teeny bop,
at Eltham Hill Girls she torpedoed chewing gum
on entering, hitched her skirt on exiting, tissue-padded

²⁹⁶ Lara 38 .

her non-existents in the upstairs loo, and choked
over smoke at lunchtime behind the Jubilee Gardens.²⁹⁷

The description is precise, the condensing of the somewhat prosaic details of tank tops and T-Rex forming a complete portrait of the young teenager. Yet elsewhere, when Lara is coming to terms with her own cultural inheritance, the language becomes more heightened, the imagery more intense:

when the downpour abates,
I head for the waterfall at Cachoera do Taruma, descend
its slippery banks, strip off, revitalised by icy cascades,
I am baptised, resolve to paint slavery out of me,
the Daddy People onto canvas with colour-rich strokes,
their songs will guide me in sweaty dreams at night.
I savour living in the world, planet of growth, of decay,
think of my island – the ‘Great’ Tippexed out of it –
tiny amid massive floating continents, the African one
an embryo within me [. . .]²⁹⁸

Sauerberg argues that unlike prose writers such as Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, Zadie Smith and Monica Ali who have chosen the realist prose novel convention to explore issues of post-colonial ethnicity, Evaristo’s use of poetry places a greater emphasis on the impact her words create:

²⁹⁷ Lara 61 .

²⁹⁸ Lara 140 .

Evaristo's choice of verse lends substantiality to words in themselves, whereas the prose of realist fiction tries to create an illusion of getting to the facts 'behind' language. It is this attention to the verbal as the construction site for meaning rather than as its translucent filter that explains why the lyrical, with its dependence primarily on metaphor becomes such a natural part of Evaristo's style [. . .]²⁹⁹

Thus the verse novel gives her the freedom to explore issues of meaning and identity in a more immediate and more internalized way than a prose novel might have done. In the prose novel, post-modern readers have learnt to distrust the narrator or to at least question his or her motives. In Lara, we are shown the world through the subjective experiences of Lara, her parents and her grandmother, and each of their lyric voices, the imagery and metaphor used to flesh out their utterances, helps to build our belief in their world. They may be mistaken in their attitudes, but they are true to them and the poetry reinforces that sense of truth.

This sense of poetic truthfulness is less evident in Evaristo's second verse novel. The Emperor's Babe adopts a more obviously novelistic structure than Lara, divided as it is into ten chapters with a prologue and epilogue. In this case, the heroine, Zuleika, controls the narrative and it is her voice – witty, sassy and very modern – that provides the narrative drive. For example in the poem titled "Sisterfamilias (Relative Values)" we see Zuleika squaring up to her patron's sister:

²⁹⁹ Sauerberg 459 .

A girl certainly knows
where she stands when a Grand Matron

of Rome-cum-Orgy Queen
comes a-visiting this quaint little town

or dump depending on her alcohol
intake or stage of pre-menstrual tension.

The Divine Antistia
was Felix's younger sister, twice married,

twice widowed, stinking rich
and top of the A list of every feast

between the Palatine Hill
and palazzos of Neapolis.³⁰⁰

The register is modern (some jokey Latinisms are the only acknowledgement of the novel's historical setting), colloquial, not image-laden and as such totally appropriate for a young London girl about town. But, unlike Lara, Zuleika is not given to introspection and she is far more likely to comment on the behaviour of others than to dwell on her own activities. As a result, The Emperor's Babe feels more plot-driven and far less meditative than Lara. The poetry does not contain the lyric charge that

³⁰⁰ The Emperor's Babe 51 .

allows us to get inside the characters' heads or under their skin. There is also far greater emphasis on dialogue, which advances the narrative but which once again lessens the poetic intensity. For example in this poem "Post Mortem", which takes place a few days after Zuleika has performed her poetry in public for the first time, we are given this exchange:

'Za Za, you were da bomb.'

Venus landed two smackers on my cheeks.

'Star of the show, girlfriend!'

Alba gave me a body-popping hug.

'Thanks but that's a bit rich considering
neither of you listened.'

'Oh but we did,' they replied, looking as pleadingly
earnest as two liars could.

We were in the atrium, two days later,

I moved to the edge of the fountain,

where Medusa spat on my neck.

'No, you didn't,' I hastily wiped away an escaped

tear before others cottoned on and followed.³⁰¹

These lines feel prose-like, rather than poetic; the dialogue-laden language is quite flat and conversational and the stanza form of unrhymed couplets makes the lines seem quite loose. Significantly, it is only once this formal convention breaks down towards the end of the novel, when Zuleika has been betrayed by her Roman husband and is dying from the poison he has forced her to take, that the language becomes heightened and the poetry more intense:

My limbs rot inside my kid-leather curves,
dainty goatskin sandals lead me
across the cubicula to my dresser,
my mind hobbles, my legs so light,
they defy gravity, almost.

A bone phoenix handle, a looking glass,
its wings hold up my silver polished world,
but I shift in and out of existence
for I cannot focus.

Hungry for air, my tissue absorbs my liquids.
Must breathe deeply
to survive; the stench of a decomposing corpse
is mine. My body accepts

³⁰¹ The Emperor's Babe 210 .

the prison of bones, its decay.³⁰²

This intensity is maintained when, for the first time, the voice of a modern narrator is heard in the Epilogue, in which Evaristo explores the imaginative leap that has taken her into her character, Zuleika:

Now is the time. I glide to where you lie,

look upon your pink robes, ruched,
décolleté, a mild stir with each tired breath,
pronounced mould of your face, obsidian
with light and sweat, so tranquilla

in your moment of leaving. I slip
into your skin, our chest stills, drains
to charcoal. You have expired, Zuleika,
and I will know you, from the inside.³⁰³

I would argue that the predominant structure of *The Emperor's Babe*, with its two-line unrhyming couplets, conversational dialogue and formulaic characters, provides the reader with fewer opportunities to identify with the protagonist and to get to know her from the inside. In ensuring that the novelistic necessities of plot, character and dialogue are attended to, Evaristo fails to exploit the poetry in order to explore the

³⁰² *The Emperor's Babe* 237 .

³⁰³ *The Emperor's Babe* 253 .

subjective consciousness of Zuleika. For that reason, for this reader at least, The Emperor's Babe is less satisfying to read.

New arrivals – Deryn Rees-Jones and Fiona Sampson

I shall conclude this survey of the verse novel with brief examinations of two of the most recent examples. The poet Deryn Rees-Jones published her verse novel, Quiver, in 2004. Divided into three sections, it is made up of fifty-six poems of varying lengths, forms and styles. As in Porter's The Monkey's Mask, there is an element of the detective story in this tale of a writer, Fay Thomas, who becomes embroiled in a murder investigation after she discovers the body of her husband's lover. However, unlike Porter's story, this is very much a work of meditative exploration rather than a who-dunnit; here plot is less important than the heroine's search for some understanding of herself and her efforts to decode the signs that offer clues to her world. The opening poem, "Cemetery", sets the tone of exploration:

I've learnt to run, like an adult learns to sing,
the arpeggios of the body's muscles,
the biomechanics of the human scale,
forcing a life to be suddenly spoken,
a finger pressed to an ivory key, a note that issues
from an opened mouth, as if God or the gods
were already there, endorphins pulsing through
the system,
the body's flux when contained in movement,
your hard-earned place in the world

on hold [. . .]³⁰⁴

As an opening poem, “The Cemetery” has a double purpose. It introduces us to the heroine and her preoccupations and establishes the mood of quiet introspection. It also, quite functionally, provides the first plot development with the discovery of Mara’s body:

It’s a body I know from snapshots, old albums
carrying histories, other lives, other selves.
William and Mara. Mara and Will.
There at the mouth, carved like a seraph’s,
a dash, a dart, an outpost of blood.
Her eyes are ash-pits in saintly expression
like Christ’s on the cross in an incense-fuelled church [. . .]³⁰⁵

The imagery is vivid, the language heightened; rarely has a murder victim’s discovery been written about so lyrically.

For the remainder of the verse novel, Fay will have to contend with various attempts to make her lose her “hard-earned place in the world” and each poem, with its delving into the meaning of love, memory and family inheritance, acts as a facet of her exploration of what her place in the world is, or should be. Many of the poems are

³⁰⁴ Deryn Rees-Jones, “The Cemetery” from Quiver 9 .

³⁰⁵ “The Cemetery”, Quiver 10-11 .

self-contained enough to have an existence outside the narrative, for example, the beautiful “Sky Canoe”:

Sometimes this bed without love, this
settling to sleep like children,
hand-in-hand, knees fitted into knees,
the radio on low, our books, clothes,
daily lives strewn carelessly about the floor

is both more and less than I can bear.³⁰⁶

and yet the overall narrative framework is cohesive enough to allow the reader the double enjoyment of appreciating the often delightful poetry and a thoughtful, challenging plot. As Ian Gregson states: “Rees-Jones’s poems at their best enact this urge to decode while at the same time stressing the difficulties, even impossibility, of authentic interpretation – and also how much emotional intensity is invested in this need to understand.”³⁰⁷

Rees-Jones’s protagonist is full of questions, wondering in the poem “White Nights,” “Is every tragedy so closed?”³⁰⁸ and in the poem “Doubting Will,” “And how do we come home”.³⁰⁹ She describes herself as a contemporary doubting Thomas

³⁰⁶ “Sky Canoe”, *Quiver* 16 .

³⁰⁷ Ian Gregson, “The new poetry in Wales. Deryn Rees-Jones and Owen Sheers,” *Poetry Wales*, 40.3 (Winter 2004): 7 .

³⁰⁸ Rees-Jones 58 .

³⁰⁹ Rees-Jones 54 .

“slipping his hand / into the wounded side of God.”³¹⁰ The detective story genre allows Rees-Jones a framework to explore these questions, yet allows her equally to subvert that genre by refusing to provide a closure to the case. As Gregson states:

Rees-Jones mingles detective story with other generic references and thereby mocks the simplifying effect of the detective story plot, its reassuring structure in which an initial mystery leads to a thorough solution. For her, the questions about knowledge which are associated with the hermeneutic cannot be quite placed because it has a mysterious relationship to the self; her clues are implicated in those complex subject/object questions which have perplexed poetry since the Romantics.³¹¹

It is arguable whether Rees-Jones would have been able to explore such questions in the same way through poems unconnected to the plot structure that the verse novel provides. Although her intention is to subvert the genre, that genre is an integral part of her creative exploration.

Fiona Sampson’s verse novel, The Distance Between Us, does not adopt an obviously novelistic structure but divides itself into seven sections, or scenes, as the poet herself states. Each scene contains two poems which tell the story of a failed love affair. However the verse novel makes no attempt to be chronologically linear and there is a very suggestive interplay between short poems which seem to set a scene, for example “The Orpheus Variation”

³¹⁰ Rees-Jones 47 .

³¹¹ Gregson, “The new poetry in Wales” 7 .

Who'd believe, meeting us now,
that once we saw daylight undress each other

our skin smooth and cool as tiles:
that our breath stirred the leaves

in each other's hair?³¹²

and longer poems which act as a more in-depth meditation on Sampson's subject
matters of relationships and the possibility of one person ever really knowing another,
for example "Cante Jondo":

Here are two people walking in a desert:

with a lift of her hair

his hand

all of it flows towards them,

bones thighs whatever the hills represent

then like a gully turning

everything flows back,

dark slopes

the alignment of sky.

³¹² Fiona Sampson, The Distance Between Us 11 .

Here they are.

Two people

just coming to a halt.³¹³

The plot reveals itself, not through any obvious outline of characterisation or event, but rather through our gradual recognition of the shifts occurring in the relationship which each subsequent poem reveals. As Sarah Crown puts it: “the collection’s sense of itself as a novel is thematic rather than narrative.”³¹⁴ According to Sampson herself, The Distance Between Us is thus not like a classic realist novel in verse, such as The Golden Gate, but is rather “closer to a film”³¹⁵ in its juxtaposition of scenes that tell the overall story.

In Sampson’s view, the requirements of fiction and poetry in a verse novel require careful blending:

When I planned the book I thought I’d have a different metre, and perhaps tense, for each narrator – characterisation through voice like writing a script – but it was too schematic. The tension I think is to achieve the drive and intensity of lyric verse alongside the large arc of narrative. So neither seems unnecessary.³¹⁶

³¹³ The Distance Between Us 12 .

³¹⁴ Sarah Crown, “A good distance apart”, Review, Saturday Guardian, 27 May 2006 .

³¹⁵ Fiona Sampson, in an e-mail response to author, 25 April 2006 .

³¹⁶ Fiona Sampson, e-mail response to author .

In a recent interview with Bernadine Evaristo,³¹⁷ Sampson expanded on the theme, stating that one of the enjoyable aspects about writing The Distance Between Us was the scope it gave her to work on an extended project and to meet the challenge of “sustaining lyric intensity” (a nice echo of Keats’s earlier comment about the long poem being “a test of invention”). She went on to say that her intention was to “frame scenes and voices which struggle with big questions of intimacy and distance – the ones we all have in our private lives and the other, public ones which have to do with identity and ‘belonging’ in this globalising world.”³¹⁸ But Sampson is frank about the challenges faced by writing such a work. In another interview, with the Romanian critic Lidia Vianu, Sampson provides a fascinating insight into the particular challenges of the verse novel form, admitting that writing The Distance Between Us was the most difficult writing she had done, explaining that “it requires the concentration of lyric verse, without offering the same chances for epiphanies. Much of the time is spent in redrafting which feels thankless, incremental and not at all poetic when you are in the middle of it.”³¹⁹ Having myself faced the challenge of melding the fictional characteristics of plot, dialogue and characterisation to the intense lyricism of poetry, I can fully empathise with Sampson’s frustrations.

4.4 Conclusion

This survey of the verse novel over the past two hundred years has tried to demonstrate that each verse novelist has approached the challenge of balancing the

³¹⁷ Fiona Sampson Interviewed by Bernadine Evaristo, Poetry News, Spring 2005 4 .

³¹⁸ Poetry News 4 .

³¹⁹ In interview with Lidia Vianu, Oxford, December 2002, published in Romania Literara, July 2003 and reprinted on Lidia Vianu’s website, http://lidiavianu.scriptmania.com/fiona_sampson.htm. 4 July 2006 .

conflicting needs of poetry and prose in different ways, shaped by both their own artistic preoccupations and their own sense of the role of poetry at the time that they were writing. We have seen how narrative poetry, which for thousands of years had held sway as the principal vehicle for story-telling, became marginalised and rarefied once the novel had established itself as a prose alternative for the growing audience for books. In this context, poets had to forge a new place for themselves and their work and began to experiment with poetic form and content.

Although Wordsworth cannot be accurately called a verse novelist in the true sense, his Prelude, focussing as it did on the development of the poet's mind, represents an interesting transition between the epic period of myth and heroism and a new age with its humanist focus on the inner lives of men and women. One could certainly make an argument for the Prelude as an early version of the kunstlerroman. Poets such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Arthur Hugh Clough took the genre one step closer to the realistic setting of the novel by using verse narrative to present the subjective experiences of their poetic protagonists in a recognisably narrative structure, achieving at times a psychological subjectivity rarely seen in the novel until the Modernist works of Woolf and Joyce. Robert Browning, although held up at times as representing the worst excesses of the Victorian age, taught Modernist poets such as Eliot and Pound some valuable lessons about the power and flexibility of the human voice in poetry. The Modernists, and the Post-modernists after them, bequeathed a legacy of experimentation with form and structure that served well the new generation of verse novelists towards the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Of course, this summary presents too seamless and neat an account of the varying fortunes of the verse novel over the past two centuries. It does not address the advantages or disadvantages of writing in the genre. We have already seen, both in the consideration of individual verse novelists and in the commentary on my own creative process that preceded it, how different writers have grappled with the difficulties of melding poetic intensity with the expansiveness frequently required of fiction. Not all have been equally successful. Nor does this summary address one fundamental motivation which, having approached the writing of a verse novel myself over the past three years, I might also ascribe to other verse novelists past and present. That is simply the desire, because one is a poet, to tell stories and to use poetry, as the most natural element, to tell those stories. I believe that in the end, writers will choose the form with which they feel most comfortable, or else will try to push a familiar form to unfamiliar lengths in order to explore the potential of language. As a practitioner of the verse novel, my primary motivation is to discover the extent to which I can use poetry to explore my world through narrative. Through poetry, I can achieve a synthesis of experience, a lyrical release; through narrative, I can position that synthesis, that release, within a coherent framework of story. It is my belief that other verse novelists have explored the creative tensions between poetry and prose narrative in a desire to discover their capacities as poets and story-tellers. Although fraught with danger, it is a genre that offers endless possibilities to test their invention.

**5. APPENDIX A – LETTERS FROM THE BUTLER ARCHIVE. ACCESS
NUMBER 4205, NATIONAL LIBRARY OF IRELAND, DUBLIN.**

had not the price of his beer
 in his supper, nor you
 dont suppose I would let
 him go without either
 being the son of his father
 (oh no) he had a blow out
 that night, and for some
 days after, and he got
 a few situations of rather
 a kind, and he was
 obliged to give them up
 being physically unable to keep them
 there is no use of fellows of his
 kind being out here

We want men of good strong
 Constitution and ability
 otherwise they are better at home
 there is no idle head here
 all must work and work
 well and be sober

(1) From E[dward] Butler (51 Camden St.)

My dear Forristal

[184?]

I have received your letter in reference to the state of affairs at Pleaberstown. I conclude that what has been done is the best and the only way open under the circumstances.

With regard to my father I intend shortly seeing what is best to be done in his case, and getting that best thing done at one. It is nonsense to have him remaining much longer as he is. If no other course be open let him come home at the same time that Green is bringing the [ejectment]. We must then be [provided] against any course it is possible for creditors to take by having the bond for £200 in readiness and Green ready to seize for a years rent. This would cover the whole property and leave nothing for creditors behind.

There is no use applying to the [Wards] for a reduction, except for the present year and with the purpose of blinding them to our intention to give up the place. The land is not worth the head rent - not within 2s-6d an acre of being worth it. But I think it would be worth applying to them for a reduction to make the appearance of our being inclined to remain as we are.

With regard to my own affairs, it has been a very tedious process to find out how the [return] actually stands. There are two difficulties only in the way, which will delay any conclusion for a couple of weeks more. In the first place Duffy and McGrath have not yet been able to arrange the matters in dispute, and in the second that old William McGrath let the property go seriously into debt. I have nearly enough at my back to buy it out, and it is pretty clear to me that they must sell. But I must bide my time. They had the most extravagant notions of the value of the property and the price they might obtain until I investigated it laboriously point by point and point and showed them they were in debt. I have succeeded in bringing them down to the level of facts, and at this point we are now for the present at a standstill. If necessary I intend to wait and watch my opportunity for a couple of months until they be compelled to sell at a lower price which they will have to unless some other capitalists step in, of which there does not appear any likelihood.

Love to Aunt Bessy and the little ones.

Yours always

(2) From Marg. Butler (Pleberstown, Co. Kilkenny)

Nov. 2 1853

My dear Forristal

Enclosed I send you a letter from Edward let me know what you think of it .. I send you 3-6 for the last transaction.

Joe arrived safely about (torn here) o'clock.

You [had?] not complain when you got home so well; and escaped such tremendous rain. hope all things went on well when you were out. I was very uneasy on Saturday knowing you were so anxious to get home. Joe told me Aunt Bessy was going to set out to look for you on Monday if you had not returned. I fear it is a long time until she lets you offer again - for your life don't let her know what Mrs J[?] done or she might be practising on you. Will you write to Dublin for the book and tell Mr. [Egan?] to direct it to me to be left at Thomastown Station house. I expected Eliza home with Joe. [] [Jnr?] home tomorrow. I will look for the books for Martin today and will send them with your [] tomorrow. I often think who will I have to write to when I am far away from you. My best and warmest to Aunt B and children

(3) From Margaret Butler (Pleberstown)

25 Feb 1854

My Dear Forristal,

William got your note yesterday. I am glad you are coming tonight there will [be] [some]one waiting you at the bridge. Bring 1/2 gl. of spirits and 1 lb. of [snuff?] with you.

I am surprised at not having heard from Ballyogan. Could there be a disappointment.

Nothing strange here - preparing fast to be off May God grant that all for the best.

All here unite with me in warmest love to you Aunt Bessy, Margaret and Kitty.

Yours ever most affectionately

(4) From Margaret Butler (Pleberstown)

No date

I send you 1s 1d. Send me 1/4 of the best tea.

I will expect Aunt Bessy on Wednesday and will meet her at the bridge. We have not heard from [Bern's] since; and in consequence have not made any movements.

I heard on yesterday that a young man from the next parish has written from Australia saying that he is working on the roads, and that my father is steward at £2 a day. I (hardly?) credit it, I think he would have written saying so.

My best love to all.

Yours most affectionately,

(5) From Margaret Butler (at Liverpool)

19 March [1854]

My ever dear Forristal,

Here we are and will have to remain another fortnight at least. What will become of us? ... never have I passed such lonely hours and I would give worlds to be [Irish ?] again. For the first time I have walked out today and went to see the ship which is to bear me away from all that my heart holds dear in this world. Home! home! home! country, and all my dear friends that are torn from me perhaps for ever and ever. I can scarcely credit it sometimes all appears as a dream.

We arrived about 9 o'clock on Saturday none of us even in the least sick the sea was so calm we got beds on board for [I/G] each which was a great relief to us; how I spent my time since I could not tell, [] about a house that is crowded to suffocation I am told there are 100 persons here, but no matter where I am my heart and thoughts are ever ever with you and the dear dear children and shall I ever again behold them. We often speak of our darling [], the duck man. Write on receipt of this and let me know how you all are.

My dearest friend excuse me for writing you this dull dull note but I cannot help it, if it pleases God that I shall arrive safe and that prospects brighten I shall write you a cheering letter.

I cannot restrain my tears when I am in the act of writing that sad word of farewell. Farewell my dear Forristal. All here unite etc.

Your affect. and loving Margaret

(6) [B] Butler (at Liverpool) to Aunt Bessy

28 April [1854]

My ever dearest Aunt Bessy,

Your affectionate letter which we had this evening caused many sad and painful reflections particularly the [several] from the poor little children. My dear and good sweet M. my quiet gentle Ellen dearest William and little darling Duck Man over and over I have kissed your fond letter.

My dearest Aunt from what you say about poor little Johnny I am afraid the [house?] won't answer him. You ought to send him to Ballyogan for a while you ought to be cautious what sort of food you give him it might be some mis[management?].

My dearest Forristal, Margaret is sick with a cold only for that she would have answered your letter today. You say there are numbers leaving Ireland but you can have no notion of it the crowded docks of Liverpool there you would say what will become of poor Ireland. Oh how often and how fervently do we wish you had made up your mind to come with us.

I don't think we will leave sooner than the 19th May that is exactly a month after the time that was advertized it is a great mistake to engage a [] before you come over here. Its the case with any person who does so. All unite with me, etc.

[p.S.] I request of M.E.W. and Duck man to send me a lock of hair.

7) Margaret Butler to her cousin Forristal

Liverpool, 9 May 1854

My dear dear Forristal

I received your letter on yesterday morning which I was expecting for the last few days. Why don't you write oftener? What do you think. This infernal ship will not leave for another week perhaps for a fortnight. We are terribly annoyed. The expense of living here and all the time told..... when we could nearly half way there. O how we do wish to be at home again to take one walk in the country and see the fine green fields this place does not agree with me. You should go for miles into the country and get good air and that we want badly I have a lightness in my head for the last ten days. I blame the bad air confinement and noise. Will I ever again have peace and quiet. I will not have it here.

Whatever, we often spend hours speaking of you and family. Don't say that we shall see each other again for I fondly fondly cherish the hope we shall. The thought often delights me lothing could persuade me to the contrary.

I have not heard from Ballyogan since I wrote them though Uncle Martin [wrote] and to William he wrote I will drop them a few lines. Send them immediately. If you have any time let me know.

My dearest friend I send my best and warmest love to my dear Aunt Bessy. .. etc.

Yours ever faithful, Margaret

[P.S.] Send me a paper not The National I got that on Sunday.

P.S. William desires you to send a sack of potatoes with the butter and 2 gal. of spirits.

You can pack it in the middle of the sack of potatoes.

(8) Margaret Butler to "My ever dearest Forristal, Aunt Bessy, Uncle Martin and cousins" .

From Woodlands, Australia.

29 May 1860

I received yours of the 8 March on the 14th of May - ten days before my dear Father's death.

He died on 4th May and was interred on 7th - in the burial ground of Berrima about a mile from this town.

I mentioned before his health had been declining for the last two year. Still we had hopes that he might be with us that he might with care linger on for some years. God willed otherwise.

The first great change he got was in January - after Edward's, his wife's and my return from Sydney

- from that time he had been sinking [desperately]? - so much so that we thought he would not live till Easter. His and our kindest of the kind friend Father Magginnis (from Kilkenny) visited him on Holy Thursday and heard his last confession. On Good Friday he administered the last sacraments to him whilst sitting in his arm chair - we all kneeling in the room- it was a Holy! a Solemn! and a touching scene!! - [He] the only one amongst the group unmoved.

He lingered and lived on from the bed to the fire for some weeks - wasting and [] until he was [returned?] to a perfect skeleton. Whilst he was [awake?] his whole time was spent in prayer and pious reading - preparing for death - for he well knew he was dying - betimes I used to read for him "[Lirganasi's?] preparation for death" (which my dear Aunt Ansty send me). His death was truly edifying - no mortal could be more patient or perfectly resigned -in his most painful and trying moments his only words would be "Blessed be the Holy will of God in all things!

I thought he would die on the first of May for he often told me his mother and sister died on that day (Edward married on that day) Uncle William died in May and we said for this country on 20th May. Strange coincidences.

As his end was approaching he looked the very impersonation of death - its rigid seal stamped every look and motion - every lineament and member - he seldom spoke nor did not wish to be spoken to unless through necessity. He retained the perfect use of all his faculties to the last.

On Thursday morning 3rd of May he fell into a dull death like slumber and continued so during the day and night. We all aroused on Friday morning between two and three o'clock with the sad tidings that they thought Father was dying. We all assembled in his room, recited the prayers for the departing - gathered round his bed - pressed our

hands on his temples and pulse. No indication of life! Still no agony or death struggle! In that calm placid sleep his soul had been summoned into the presence of his Maker!!! where I hope and pray he is enjoying the happiness of the just.

Now a few words about ourselves and I must conclude.

We are all in the enjoyment of good health thank God. Edward is getting on well. He has the situation of Crown prosecutor in the District court of Sydney. It interferes very little with his business - for which he has £500 a year. His wife is a fine, tall, dashing-looking woman. I can't remember anyone at home that would give you an idea of her. Her hair is [wavy?] and something darker than Aunt Ansty's. They have no children yet.

We are all living together still. We have built some additions to the house lately - two good sized rooms which will be parlour and drawing room - four good bedrooms - a store room and kitchen with an oven and [marly] flaged.

I suppose you have seen by the papers an account of the new gold fields that have been discovered in this colony - called "the Snowy river diggings". It is about 100 miles from us. Three of the boys intend going there early in Spring (which will be September) and for the first time try their luck on the diggings. I was sorry to hear of the toiling life poor [John] Commons has had and he so unadapted for it - and poor Mary Mrs Commons - in your next say how she is. Ah! my dear friend what truth is the words - "All is not Gold that glitters" .

I now must hasten to conclude for you see I have run my space short.

Adieu a fond adieu to you my dearest kindest Forristal, Aunt Bessy, Uncle Martin, Mag Ellen, Willy and my loved pet [John]. etc. etc.

... read this for [Billy Butler and family] and tell him we received his letter a few days after Fathers death.

William, Joe, Mike, Thomas, Mary, Bridget, Kate and Eliza unite with me in the fondest feelings of love and affection to you and all enquiring friends

... Magg.

(9) Marg. Butler to her cousin Forristal

Woodlands, Australia

June 20, 1867

My ever dearest Forristal, Uncle Martin and friends,

All your letters dated Oct 20th came safely by the [Da??] mail. To hear of your well doing, your pleasant meetings and merry makings is always a pleasure to us. Next to seeing you it is the greatest - the sole remaining one of all the fond ties that once bound us. To share in such [scenes] is one of lifes sweetest pleasures and what happiness can I wish to friends that I love so dearly greater than that they may live long in their peaceful calm enjoyment.

It is almost beyond my fancies reach to believe that all my little cousins - the Forristals and Joyces are now no longer children - but blooming maidens. My sweet gentle little friends may your path be smooth and bright and may you be the pride and joy of your dear parents life. What a pity that there are no little Baglins and that all My dear Aunt Ansty's affections should be centred in her good man. God be with the good old times!! How I would wish to see her and joke her on subjects that we often had a hearty laugh over. . .

William set out on his long journey - more than 1000 miles - to pay us his long promised visit on St. Stephen's Day or as they call it here Boxing Day. He rode his own horse "Garry" to Rockhampton. From there to Brisbane on the steamer. Called to see the Bishop Dr. [Quinn] - then to the convent to see Eliza. She was in the convent in Ipswich - on his way there the coach was stuck up by bushrangers. They were all unarmed only a Bank Clerk who had a large amount of notes. The poor fellow let fly the notes and hid his revolver. William hid some cheques he had in his boot and got off with the loss of 10s. Eliza was delighted to see him. They spent the whole day together - talking over old times - laughing merrily and joking - in which all the nuns joined occasionally.

And in the overflowing kindness of his generous nature when he was parting he left them a remembrance in the shape of a £10 note. Poor Eliza is well and happy. He sailed from Brisbane and arrived in Sydney quite unexpected. He stayed there about a week. He then set out again and by rail and coach came within two miles of Woodlands. About midnight Mike rode to meet him with a horse and he reached here about 1 o'clock in morning. The joy and [? ?] of our meeting was intense - equal to the love we bear for that good brother. I never saw him looking better unchanged in every respect as when we last saw him... .

separate page: continuation of (9)?

occasion - Mike was [] He left here the morning before on his faithful old charger "Jacob" and made his 58 miles journey to Gouldsburn in good time. The two Dr. Quinns were there Bishops of Brisbane and Bathurst and Dr. Murry Bishop of Maitland. Two brothers and a first cousin - three as eloquent, as fine and as dignified looking divines as could be seen in any part of the world! And they are Irishmen.

The ceremony - grand and imposing - the dinner - glorious - [champaign] flowing like water and sinking bumpers of real Irish Whiskey punch.

The railway to the Iron Mines was opened on the 1st of March. It is now within four miles of Woodlands. I have not taken a trip on it yet - Australian railways and cities have no interest for me a poor exile of Erin!!

My life passes in the same dull routine as usual. I get up early. I pray a little. I dust out my bedroom and the dining room. Manage the dairy, sew a little, read a good deal, a little of all sorts and sometimes I can do nothing but think and then my thoughts flyaway with me to far off lands and far off times thousands and thousands of miles away!! I scarcely ever lie a night on my bed that I don't in my dreams revisit that sea beaten shore. But Alas! in a far foreign land I awaken. And sigh for the friends who can meet me no more!

My garden comes in for the greatest portion of my care and toil. I dig, I plant I crop, I shade from cold and sunshine but its shrill ungenerous nature yields me only a scant sickly return. I fancy the soil knows that I bear an Aliens heart towards it.

Won't you be glad to hear that I have become a ["Squator"?] - I have three fat lambs! Three fat cats and poor Eliza's fat Maggie [and] Jacko. You will laugh when I say I love them but I do intensely. In fact I love all animals better than Australian mankind - or woman either.

I think I have now raked up all the news of any interest. Be [] to my little scraps of sentiment. Remember how barren my [] life is in [] and how limited the extent of my wanderings.

Mary, Bridget, Kate and Mike unite with me ... etc.

(10) (Part of letter from) Margaret Butler to her cousin Forristal

Woodlands, Australia

28 May 1868

My dearest Forristal, Uncle Martin and aunts,

I received your kind letter dated 15th Nov by the January Mail. How shall I describe the joy and pleasure it gave us to receive a visit, though only on paper, from so many of our sweet [] pretty cousins! How fondly and lovingly we welcomed them after their long and favourable voyage to Australia and Woodlands. You should see us after dinner. // This flying from hand to hand around the table, each having their admirer but none of us could trace the slightest resemblance to the children from whom we parted fourteen long years ago with the exception of Margaret. She retains the same frank, good-natured face we all so well remember. Thomas and I admire Ellen's face very much. It is highly intellectual. In fact, Thomas has actually fallen in love with it. So he consoled himself by placing his own likeness beside it in the album. Margarets [] must be a pretty girl but how unlike the first pretty little Maggie of long long ago and where has the little Willy flown to? Him whom I so often carried about in my arms. How hard to recognise him in the sedate young man now away from you and doing for himself.

We missed John's (I fancy he is too grown for Duck Man any longer) he who was our own pet and remained with us to the last until the old home was broken up and forsaken! Tears drop from my eyes as I write these lines at the recollection of that bitter parting from him, Home, friends and country! Few there are my own loved friend who mourns over friend forsaken as I do.

In remembrance of the many pleasant hours that you and I spent together my own dear old Forristal I will ask you to send me yours and Bessy's likeness and I beg of Uncle Martin and Aunt Ansty the same kind favour...

P.S. The last Butler baby is named Alice. Pray excuse blots and mistakes.

(11) Margaret Butler to "My ever dearest Forristal, Uncle Martin and Aunts"

Woodlands, Australia

2 December 1870

I have many apologies to make for my [] forgetfulness. There is such a dull sameness in my life that each letter seems only a repetition of the former, but why don't any of you write that have so much to communicate that would interest me. So much! - but though neither of us has written for some time past, I know we love each other dearly as ever.

I was much disappointed in your likenesses. Uncle Martin and Aunt Bessy were the only ones any way like. Aunt Ansty would look much better with her bonnet off and you know Forrestal they did not do justice to a handsome man like you! Do get them taken again and add to them my dear friends Mrs Jones and the dear friend that I never saw Mr. Baglins. I trust in God you are all well, doing well and in good health. Edward and family are well. His little daughter Alice died last October twelve months of whooping cough. I was glad to know her spotless soul [] to the Bosom of its Creator! - he is blessed with another daughter and son since last I wrote to you. The names Florence a year and seven months old and William a fine little baby of seven months. Edward is getting stout. He is now one of the leading barristers in Sydney and M.P. for the County of Argile. Eliza is well. William went to see her last January. How I would like to see her but I suppose I never shall in this life.

William left Queensland in January, you can fancy how glad we all went to see him. He stayed with us at Woodlands until after Easter. Edward got him a temporary "billet" from Government. "Appraiser of [Runs]" for which he was paid £500, the squatters were so well pleased with his valuations that [they] gave him a public [], and an English Gentleman there drove him to see a great sheep station belonging to a [Mr?] [Orr?] grandson of the Great Patriot Orr!! O! my country what a sad history yours has been in suffering, hoping, and Enduring!!

Joe is doing well at the Auctioneers business - making and spending money. He too IS getting stout - He often takes a run up to see us.

You will be surprised to hear what Thomas is at for the last twelve month. He has been Editor and part proprietor of the "Freemans Journal" the only advocate in this colony for Irishman and Catholics. Dr. Quinn the Bishop of Bathurst bought out the late proprietors.

He and Edward prevailed upon Thomas to take the management of the whole concern. He felt diffident at first but with a little assistance from Edward and a few others, he got on very well. He has first rate abilities and is a nice young fellow. He removed his office to more respectable quarters and has purchased a new printing press. I must send you an occasional [copy?] of the Journal though I fear the only interesting item connected with it will be that it is conducted by a Butler!

Mike and us old girls are going the round of our diurnal and annual motion at Woodlands our health is pretty good, we have few cares, and an abundance of all we require. We fatten pigs for our own use. We kill our own beef and mutton - a sheep nearly every evening. But they are scarcely half the size of sheep in Ireland and we get all our stores in large quantities from Sydney.

I think I told you before this climate knows no medium. Since January last it has been one continual downpour - the floods has prevented Mike from sheep washing yet. He has over 2000 sheep.

Things are very much changed for the worse since we came to this country. The gold fields are not so productive and droughts and floods has ruined thousands of thriving settlers. Labour and every commodity has fallen in the market. Butter that used to be from [1s?] per lb now from 3d to 6d. There is a gentleman near us who milks 60 cows and gives nearly all the milk to the pigs! That beats Iverk!

We milk enough to supply us with butter.

My own dear old Forristal, in the very act of writing those lines your letter dated New Ross Sept. 15th comes to hand. How it pains me to have you say that you said any thing to offend us - you could not - or - you would not. Since first we knew you we loved and esteemed you and will to our latest day - forgive me for my late reassurances and for the future I promise to write more regularly.

We were glad to hear from Margaret's letter that you are all so well and happy. Since I read it my mind is quite unsettled thinking of you - and O! such a longing to see you all once more in this life!!

We are so thankful to the dear girl for sending us so much news, and all the changes that has taken place by births - deaths and marriages. For the future I shall be anxiously looking out for a letter from her with an account of a certain ladies marriage.

Martin [Langdon?] came to see us lately. He did well at the diggings in New Zealand. Pat is doing well in [Morpeth?]. He has three children now.

William, Mike, Mary, Bridget and Kate unite with me in a thousand fond remembrances to you dear old Forrestal, Aunt Bessy, Margaret, Ellen, William and the dear boy Jolm. My dear Uncle Martin etc. etc.

Magg Butler

P.S. I am sending you Williams and Joes likeness - I did once try to get my own but I looked so ugly and was taken so badly I would not send it. I fear time won't make me handsome.

(12) From Margaret Butler to "My dear Forristal, Uncle Martin and friends"

Darling Point, Sydney

Dec 1, 1873

I hope you will excuse me for not writing sooner. I was waiting until I could announce to you Edwards appointment to the Chief Justiceship - but his friend Parker betrayed him!

I am sending you the papers, they will give you a full account of the whole proceeding.

I have been in Sydney since July taking care of the little motherless children. There is no change since last I wrote to you. We are all well.

I had a long letter from my dear old friend J. Moore some short time ago. He mentioned you all and said you were well.

I intend to write soon again so I hope you will excuse this short note.

All the Butlers unite with me, etc.

(13) Margaret Butler to Forristal

Sydney

19 June 1879

My dearest Forristal, Aunt Ansty and friends

I have to make a great many apologies for my long silence. I was hurt at your not having written and told me of Mrs. Moylan's death and said they don't care to send me any of the home news.

I am sending you a copy of the "Freeman and the Herald" with the full account of Dear Edward's sad and sudden death!

I can only say it has stunned us all - and we can hardly realise that he is gone from us for ever! Though his death was awfully sudden! I hope he was not unprepared. He was good, kind and charitable and the account of his death and funeral will show you how he was respected by all.

His seven children are at Woodlands. The elder ones - poor things are crushed with sorrow! and they have reason - they have lost a good father. May God give his Dear soul rest! a prayer in which I know you all, relations and friends will join.

I hope you my Dearest old friend Aunt Ansty and all the young people of your and the Joyce family are well - give my very warmest love to them all - to our Dear old friend Billy Butler and a kind remembrance to all our Dear old friends.

Farewell my loved old friend, dear old Forristal. Though I don't write often I love you truly and believe me yours ever affectionately ...

P.S. Excuse these few lines. I cannot write!

Fragment 2 pp.

(14) Margaret Butler to Forristal

Woodlands

7 March 1883

My dearest old Forristal and friends,

Your very welcome letter reached me in January. Your well known hand send a thrill of fond memories to my heart. Never think or say that 'Mag Butler' forgets you - nor the many, many pleasant days and hours that I have spent with you and my dear Aunt Ansty. I was so sorry to hear of her illness, it is a great trial and cross to her who had been so active during life - health and strength must fail sooner or later - soon we must all follow those who are gone before us. May God give us Grace to [sanctify] the sufferings He sends us in this life by Holy patience and resignation!

What a light and merry heart was hers. Gloom or sorrow could not [infect?] in her cheerful divinity - give her my fondest love and sympathy.

I was glad to hear that you and your dear family, Mrs [Joice] and family are all well. How pleasant to have all the dear old friends within visiting distance.

There has been a change in our family circle lately - on the 25 of January last Mike was married to a Miss Annie [Cordrant] Second/ /daughter to our nearest neighbour [two miles distant). Mr [Cordrant] whose station adjoins Woodlands - he is very respectable but a Protestant! which was a very sore point with me I can assure you. I was told that she promised to become a Catholic and on that condition a dispensation was give to have them married in the Catholic church in Berrima. Tom was best man. There...

(15) Margaret Butler to "My dearest Forrestal"

Woodlands

27 Nov 1885

Some five months Tom promised to send you The Freeman's Journal with the sad news of the death of Mike's dear wife. She died at Pomoroy on the 21st of June a few days after the birth of a second daughter. It was a great sorrow to him poor fellow and to all of us.

In Australia there was not a happier home than theirs. Every thing that would give happiness to man and woman. She was only a girl in appearance and would have passed as an older sister to her two little daughters.

Tom was up there the day before she died, I immediately after. The eldest child just beginning to walk and to [] and call her "Mam, Mam". It was a sad, sad scene and renewed the sorrows of a life time.

After the funeral the house was closed up, Mike coming to Woodlands with us, his eldest girl staying with her grandmother a couple of miles from us, the baby left at Pomoroy to be nursed by a kind good young woman, wife of the manager who has been with Mike since he got Pomoroy. Last month - October - Mary and I went up to see the baby, a fine little child and looking as if her foster mother had been taking good care of her. We slept in Pomoroy house, the unlocking and opening of doors sounded so loud and so lonely, went through the rooms and saw all that was once "Anne Butlers" just as her dear hands had arranged them. In the drawing room her grand piano - she was an exquisite pianist - and a fine little cradle half finished. Outside roses, shrubs and trees in a full spring [riot?] of bloom and beauty. With a thousand tongues all cried aloud Vanity of Vanities! All is []!

Mike has been very prosperous and successful [has] 11 thousand acres at Pomoroy - not all paid for yet - beautiful house and garden - principally a sheep station from 5 to 10 thousand sheep - a few hundred head of cattle and tillage to supply the station with hay, potatoes and vegetables.

All the world over, life's chequered seems of pain and pleasure.

God has sent poor Mike a great affliction - life and happiness extinguished in his once happy house.

(16) Letter to Forristal from ... [Butler], Melbourne [The City Brewery] 18/8/1887

My Dear Forrestal

(page 1) I have much pleasure in acknowledging the receipt of your kind letter and recognising that well known signature of yours - but at the same time I must confess it gave me a Sting (re. J.D. [Howlett]). He called on me last February and introduced himself and from (conversation) I ascertained (sic) who he was. Then he was destitute without a bob,

(page 2) had not the price of his bed or his supper. Now you don't suppose I would let him go without either being the son of his father - (oh no) he had a blowout that night, and for some days after. However, he got a few situations of rather a hard kind and was obliged to give them up being physically unable to keep them. There is no use of fellows of his [stra] [company] out here. We want men of good strong constitutions and ability otherwise they are better at home there is no idle [blood?] here all must work and work well and be sober).

(page 3) On the second occasion of his calling he went over matters (this wise). He expected remittance from his father by every mail for the purpose of paying his expenses in the country, or if he did -like the place he could go home again. However, mail after mail arrives and no remittance, of course all the time I supplied him with money seeing no chance of money coming here he said that his father might have sent it to Sydney (600 miles away) he said that if he got to Sydney he had a friend there named Galvin who he would stay with until he heard from home and also that he was to get letters of recommendation to persons

(page 4) then that he would get him an appointment in the Post Office or other government offices - I gave him money to go and after about 3 weeks I received a letter from him saying his friend Galvin had gone and that he was penniless and starving begging of me to send him some money which I did - (his letters are about the best... and each had real curiosities). He next turns up in Melbourne and gets another situation which he keeps [for] a week. He then proposes to go home. Capt. Black was here at the time and would have brought him back, only, he was going to South America and the road was too long. He next engages to go by a sailing vessel to Liverpool.

(letter incomplete)

(17) Margaret Butler to "My dearest Forrestal, Aunt Ansty and friends"

Woodlands

6 April 1889

Though have not written for a long time, I have not forgotten you. Illness prevented me at Xmas time and it is only now that I am feeling in my usual good health.

I had a severe attack of diarrhoea, but medical attendance, a trained nurse and kind care pulled me through. There is nothing strange in the way of family news since my last. All are well. The only changes [that] mark the passing years have behind them.

For the last 18 months, there has been a great drought in Australia which has caused great damage in the shape of bush fires. We had a severe visitation from them. The earth like tinder and the sun scorching, smoke and fire raging in all districts, looking as if the infernal regions were burning.

We had our full share of them, on and off. They had been on Woodlands over six months, burning grass and fuming, which to replace cost over £150. Mike, his neighbours and half from the township had been out for days and nights, in some places cattle and sheep were burned, the smoke [] them.

We had some rain last Jan. None since and at present every thing is as dry as it was at Xmas - our Summer.

As you can imagine the drought has caused a general depression in the colonies.

There is an old English man - he had been a convict - living near us. He says since '37 there has not been such a drought, when flour went up to £100 a ton - 2lb loaf, 1s 4d - butter, 5s per lb. - eggs 6d each and one small fowl for table 8s. He was a government man and cook with a small []-man in Sydney at the time. Many a long yarn has been spun about the good old convict days! in which he had been flogged only once.

I want to [] as I have nothing very entertaining in the shape of news.

Now - with pleasure - I will turn from the weather and its consequences to you my dearest dear old friend and enquire why you have not sent me a line for such a long long time?

I hope that you, my dear Aunt Ansty and all friends are well.

It was a surprise... (letter incomplete)

(18) Margaret Butler to "My dearest Forristal, Aunt Ansty and friends"

Woodlands

29 Nov 1889

Xmas and another new year are close at hand. I hope this will have a safe and speedy passage from Sydney and give you and all a fond Xmas Greeting and countless kind wishes for a Happy New Year, from me and all of the name of Butler.

Your letter came some 5 months ago and it gave us great pleasure to hear you and all friends were well. I would have written as you requested but another sad death in our family circle upset me, so I put off writing to the usual Xmas time.

I sent you a "Freeman's Journal" with the account of the death of "Nellie Butler" Edward's second eldest daughter - his favourite many supposed - a bright clever girl - good and virtuous and by word and act a guide and comfort to her brothers and sisters.

She got a bad attack of inflammation inwardly and after pulling through for a fortnight in intense pain the doctors said she was out of danger. A sudden change came and she died on the 16th July, the Grand Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

The Priest that attended her said her death was a happy one. He had never seen anyone so perfectly resigned - May her dear Soul rest in peace.

Mike and I went to Sydney and the next day she was laid beside her Father and Mother in Petersham cemetery a few miles outside the city.

Young Joyce was at the funeral. I was not speaking to him that day, I remained in Sydney for a couple of months and saw him a few times. I had a long chat with him about you all Ballyogan and New Ross - etc. etc.

He was staying at a boarding house and said he was on the look-out for something to do. Tom had written to a few of the colleges asking for a professorship for him but did not succeed. The last time he came he said he had got an offer from a doctor in Western Australia as an assistant and that he had accepted it. He promised to come out again before he left and evening after evening I had been expecting him. I thought time pressed him and that he had gone - A fortnight and more passed and we heard that he was still at the boarding house and a lady friend of mine and his had a chat with him there a few weeks ago, that was the last I heard of him and he has not been out to see Tom or the young Butlers since I left Sydney.

I asked and [] that he should come and see and stay on a visit with us, but from what you and Aunt Ansty impressed on me, I thought it better that he should try and get a billet while in Sydney as there is no chance of getting one here that would suit him.

We were sorry that he did not take the offer from the doctor. It would give him experience and help him to something better. Many qualified doctors have had small beginnings III Australia.

When I asked him to come see us he promised, but I have not seen or heard from him since. When you write let me know if you have heard from him! He told me he had written home.

Early in last June Edward's second wife died. She went into the Catholic hospital and had an operation performed - lockjaw came on and she died a young woman - 34 years of age - ten years and two days after Edward - She became a Catholic before he married her and three years ago she went back to the Protestant(s) again and of course took the girl now 13 years old.

After her death Tom brought the case before the Equity Court. He to be guardian of the child and to have her brought up in her father's religion. The Judge in that Court gave decision in his favour, but the mother's family appealed and three hostile and bigoted Judges were against him and decided to have her given over to her mother's Protestant relations to be brought up a Protestant.

Now I have given you the only news in our circle since my last - all are well - Tom at the farming - William in N.Z. - Joe and his family well - He and one of his girls on a visit with us at present - Mike and his children well - he at Pomeray looking after the shearing, we had great [work?] with a strike this time - nothing but Strikers here every week in one or other of the [colonies].

Now I will conclude...

(19) Margaret Butler to William Forristal

13 Feb 1894

My very dear William,

Your letter and paper with the sad news of your dear Father's and my most beloved friend's death reached me late in January.

That nice tribute to him in the New Ross Standard from childhood to the grave brought him old times and scenes to memory.

I was surprised to hear of his great age - over a hundred ! - And for nearly forty years my correspondent ever kind and true he was, and I, my brothers and sisters loved him with an affection which time nor distance has never changed, and how to the end he as fondly and faithfully remembered amongst those of our dear departed !

It was a great consolation to hear that the closing of the evening of his long and eventful had been so calm and peaceful, with all the attendant consolations of religion. The Holy [Sacrament?] and Offices in the Church, the respect shown to his memory by friends and townsmen when being laid to his last rest amidst old familiar scenes, the township in which he had been born over one hundred years ago !!

We were very glad to hear that you, my very dear cousins, are well and left comfortably off.

My dear Aunt Ansty, the only remaining old relative now in the Old Land. I was pleased and happy to hear that she, the Joyces and all other friends are well. I hope Ellen, Mrs. Williams, and her family are well. We were very sorry to hear of her husband's death. I wrote to Miss L. Joyce after getting the sad news from her. Let her know that I have not heard from her brother since.

All our family are well and write with me in fondest love to you William, John, Ellen and family, my dear Aunt Ansty and the Joyces ... etc.

(20) From Margaret Butler to Ellen (Forristal?), Mrs. Williams

Woodlands Feb. 15, 1900

My dearest Ellen,

Your letter came a few months ago, and I must ask you [to] forgive my delay in writing - not through forgetfulness of you, but I am not such an active and fluent penswoman as I once used to be. You must remember that I have passed the human "record" - three score years and ten!

Your long silence made me feel anxious about you and all friends, but reading of marriage and birth gave great pleasure to us all. Give our warmest congratulations and best wishes for long happiness in the married life to Mrs - you did not tell me her new name - and to William and Mrs Joyce, a Father's and Mother's joy in their little daughter.

All the Butler cousins that you know and don't know are well. I am sorry that I have no photos to send you this time. Mike and his two girls - Margery and Mildred - had their likenesses taken in Sydney some time ago, but they were so badly done I wouldn't send them - no pleasure to get or send a bad likeness and they were taken at one of the best places in Sydney. Do you remember Mike? He is the finest looking of all the brothers, his girls have been at the Dominican convent for more than 5 years. They have great taste for music and play the piano very well. Marjory, the eldest, plays the violin most beautifully.

Hearing from the old familiar places: Ballyogan now so much improved, New Ross, etc. etc. that recalls so many pleasant recollections never to be forgotten; and in dreamland so often revisited!

Dear old Pleberstown, have you paid it your intended visit. For "Auld Lang Syne sake".

When next you write mention over again the names of your sons and daughters. The married one, did she live in Ross and her new name? The kind girl that wrote to an unknown old cousin in Australia? The son in Tipperary town? How well I remember passing through it in that historic year of bright hopes and sad failures 1848! - on my way to Galway to see Edward.

Though last but not least tell me all about your dear loved self. To us you are always and ever the gentle little Ellen of many fond memories, now happy I hope in good sons and daughters.

I will conclude with fondest love, etc.

P.S. I hope you will excuse all mistakes grammatically and otherwise. I feel so pleased with your promise to write to me - a new link to the chain that was broken but the death of your dear father - whom I loved so well.

Tom Joyce is living in Sydney I don't know how he is situated but I heard that he has enough to live comfortably. Has he ever written to his brothers or sister?

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