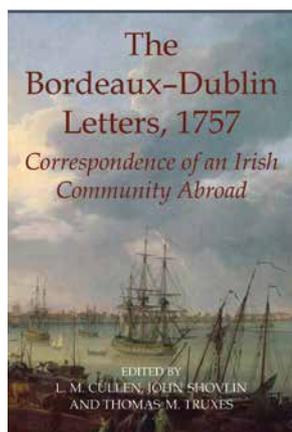


# The Bordeaux–Dublin letters project

## Documentary editing, public history, and scholarly exchange

THOMAS M. TRUXES



In September 2013, the British Academy published an edition of *The Bordeaux–Dublin Letters, 1757: Correspondence of an Irish Community Abroad*. Here one of the volume editors describes this remarkable cache of documents and the project that has brought them to life.

Buried deep in the massive collection that comprises the prize court papers of the High Court of Admiralty at the National Archives is an innocuous bundle labelled ‘Two Sisters – John Dennis’. Its contents relate to an Irish wine ship returning home from Bordeaux during the early phase of the Seven Years’ War, the great mid-18th-century struggle between Great Britain and France.

The documents taken off the *Two Sisters* of Dublin following its capture by a British privateer include a packet of 125 letters (100 of them in English and 25 in French). Most were written by members of the Irish community in the Bordeaux region to family, friends, and business associates in Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway, and other places in Ireland. Eighty-five of the letters were still unopened at the time of their discovery in January 2011 (Figure 1). Nearly all date from the early weeks of 1757, a time of high anxiety in a community cut off from its homeland by war.

The Bordeaux–Dublin letters provide an extraordinary entrée into a long-vanished world. Correspondents range from wealthy merchants in the Irish wine trade, to young Irishmen being educated in France, to Irish prisoners of war incarcerated in the notorious Bayonne Castle. There are sailors, servants, prisoners of war, priests, and clerks – among others. Particularly striking is the strong presence of women, and the voices of ordinary people living lives that will feel familiar to readers centuries later.



**Figure 1**  
The ‘Two Sisters’ of Dublin was captured by a British privateer in 1757 as she returned from Bordeaux with a cargo of wine, spirits and other goods. Impounded with all her contents was a packet of 125 letters. These never reached their intended recipients and lay forgotten in the National Archives until they were discovered in 2011.

## Wine trade

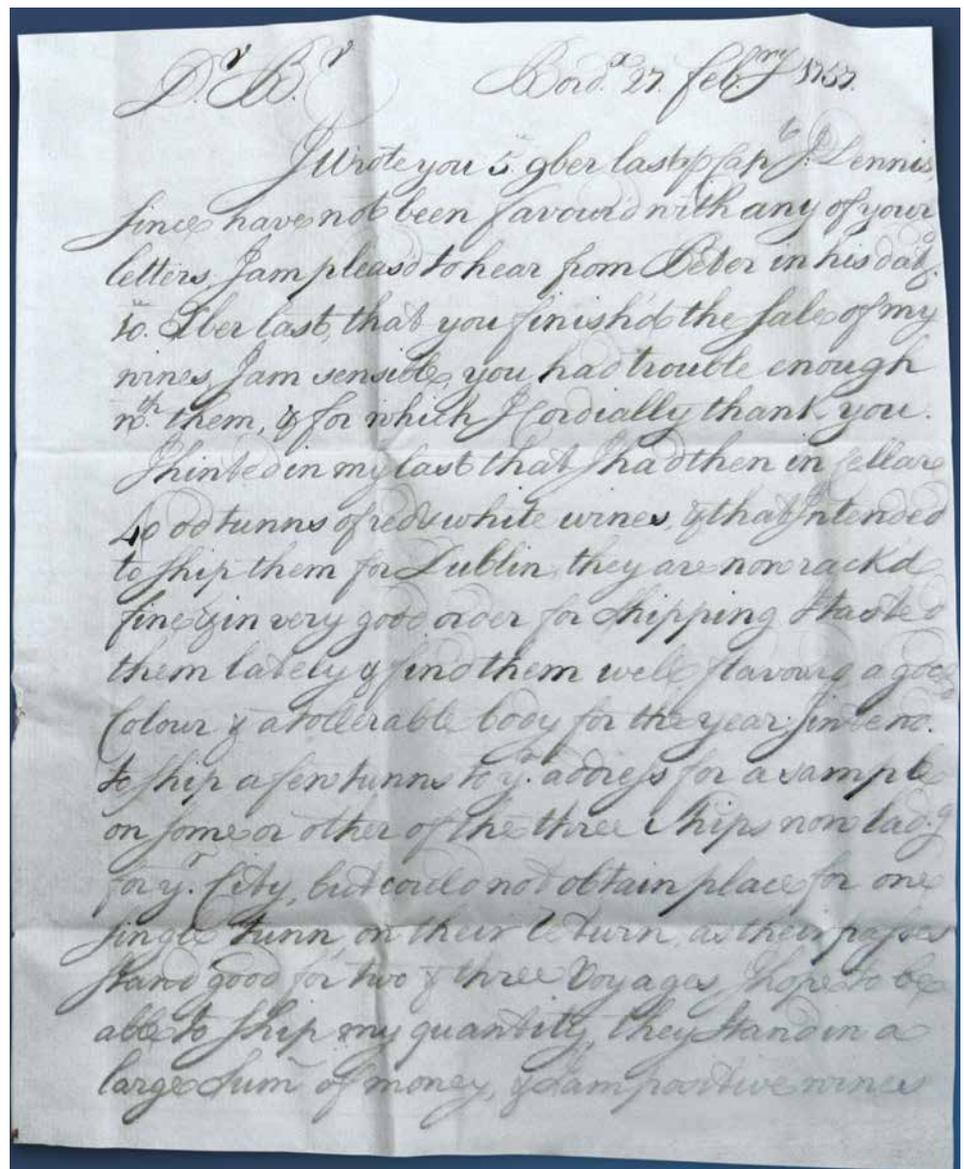
Many of the letters have something to do with Irish involvement in the production and marketing of French wine and brandy. Over the course of the 18th century, Bordeaux's vigorous wine and brandy trade produced a transformation in the city's hinterland and a massive expansion in the acreage planted in vineyards. It also encouraged foreign investment and the formation of colonies of foreign merchants in the city. Most were German and Irish, and situated in the heart of Bordeaux's commercial district. Both Catholic and Protestant interests were well represented among the Irish firms.

War – and an occasional bad vintage – were severely disruptive to trade. James Babe's letter to a Dublin importer is filled with frustrations relating to outstanding debts, the scarcity of shipping space aboard vessels bound for Ireland, and the dangers of wartime shipping. He also discusses strategies to mitigate commercial risk, such as trading through neutral ports, particularly St Sebastian in Spain and Rotterdam in the Netherlands, and monitoring the movements of British privateers through contacts in ports along the French Atlantic coast.

Another Irish wine merchant, Jacques Horish, bemoans not being able to ship the wines in his cellar to Ireland. 'I tasted them lately', Horish told his correspondent in Dublin, ' & find them well flavoured, a good Colour & a tollerable body for the year'. To add to his difficulties, the Bordeaux vintages of 1756 had been severely affected by bad harvests. Horish described it as 'the most wretched & worst [wine] fore upwards 20 years past' (Figure 2).

## Prisoners of war

There is frequent reference in the letters to prisoners of war. During the Seven Years' War, only a few of the POWs confined in the southwest of France were free on parole. Most were incarcerated in the notorious Bayonne Castle, not far from Bordeaux. Those who gained their release – other than by



**Figure 2**  
Letter from Jacques Horish, Irish wine merchant, to Mr Richard Curtis of Dublin, describing the '4000 tunns of red & white wines' that he intended to ship to Dublin.

M<sup>rs</sup>. Elizabeth Nashon  
 Bayonne New Castle Feb. 7 1763  
 D<sup>r</sup>. Constant Maid,  
 Yesterday's joyfully bid your Esteem'd favor dated  
 the 7<sup>th</sup> of Jan<sup>r</sup>. Which you may be certain was no small pleasure  
 to me not thinking that any Object person like me, one that  
 kind fortune has spurn'd from his and adourse has embraced  
 should be remembered by the only Emblem he adores in this  
 transitory life at such a time & in such a place, when those  
 of greater show & life here would scorn the acknowledgement  
 But trust my generous Maid time will come when your own  
 disinterested Labor will make amends for this year's (which I must  
 Commiseration of my sufferings) for indeed it is nothing in  
 this life too a person under Misfortune (can equal to the latter  
 factious Condoliment from a friend does, especially when it comes  
 from the one we most love & most desire to love — but oh —  
 the growing thought of that loss, checks my soul when I  
 pursue the grave Contents & religious advice which at present  
 layes before me in your last so different from the former stile  
 of your Indulgent to me Good Sense, had that Honor to  
 receive a line from you all which are yet in my Custody &  
 the often read Contents (over look'd within my Prospects  
 these ever anxious to remain till will permit me to rescue  
 them in the Dear postcard from whence they came. But in your  
 favor you too love of its due & prayes all the Debt to friendship  
 Friendship that distant title so much beneath the Name of  
 Love — Love did I say; but these are such, but oh —  
 Whacks torment & Displeasur mingled with misfortunes are  
 now my Labour the Dreadful shock is I fear this unlucky  
 Change in my affairs has bereav'd from me the only thing  
 I prize in this life; your Love & changed it to the name  
 of Friendship by Heaven I was certain of that I never  
 more desire to visit the Unhappy place more that was  
 once to me Seat of life — my case here is not so bad  
 as you Immajane I Save'd my Chest & all my Cloaths that  
 I had with me Books & papers & was treated like a Gentleman  
 in this Castle which is very larg we have Beds & Rooms that  
 we hiar (apart from the Common prisoners) has fiars &

Figure 3  
Letter from prisoner-of-war William Fleming to his sweetheart in Dublin: 'Dear Constant Maid ...'

escape – did so through personal intervention or one-to-one prisoner exchanges. If they had no sponsors to arrange their release, prisoners could be separated from their families until the war's end.

In one particularly bitter letter, Richard Exham of Cork rages about the poor living conditions and the duplicity of the French, as well as the fact that he was not promptly provided with paper and ink with which to write home. He is angry at himself for not having escaped when he had a chance: 'All Communication is shut up; we are under the Strictes confinement and have not the Liberty of seeing any person without a guard of Soldiers Round us'.

In contrast, from a room in the Bayonne Castle not far from Richard Exham's, another prisoner, William Nassau Fleming, writes to his sweetheart in Dublin (Figure 3):

My case here is not So bad as you Immajane. I Save'd my chest & all my cloaths that I had with me, Books & papers, & was treated like a Gentleman in this castle which is verry larg. We have Beds & Rooms that we hiar (a part from the Common prisoners), has fiars & Candle light. Eight commanders in a Roome lives merry, as prisoners generally doe, has two larg Squair's to Walk in, & a Billiard table to play at.

## Students

By the 1750s there was a significant Irish presence in educational institutions in Spain and Portugal, France, the Austrian Netherlands, and even central Europe. Deprived of the opportunity to educate their sons at home, Irish Catholic families with the means to do so sent them to the Continent, where they entered colleges and seminaries with close ties to Ireland. As evidenced by the Bordeaux-Dublin letters, southwestern France was an attractive destination for those seeking an education abroad.

J. MacGuire was a student at the Jesuit College in Agen, a town not far from Bordeaux. He supported himself by tutoring the

children in a gentleman's home near the college (earning free room and board plus an allowance of ten livres per month). In 1757 he was in the final year of his studies and in December would enter the Irish seminary in Bordeaux. In a letter to his uncle, Maurice FitzGerald in Ballyhooly near Cork, MacGuire offers advice for a cousin aspiring to enter the Irish college: 'He is to learn the best prose authors', if he is to succeed, 'and exercise his memory in getting them by heart'.

In a letter ostensibly about his lacklustre academic performance, Francis Silvester Bird, a younger Irish student in Bordeaux, digresses into asking his father for new clothes which he cannot afford on his allowance from home. Most of the student letters in this collection are in a similar vein. One is reminded of present-day college students – sometimes homesick, often disenchanted with their work, and perennially broke.

## Parents and children

Some of the most fascinating correspondence in the Bordeaux–Dublin letters is between parents and their children, and by parents about their children. In several, young people studying or working in France write to their families in Ireland with details about their lives or their need for money. A common refrain is concern for the welfare of family members back in Ireland.

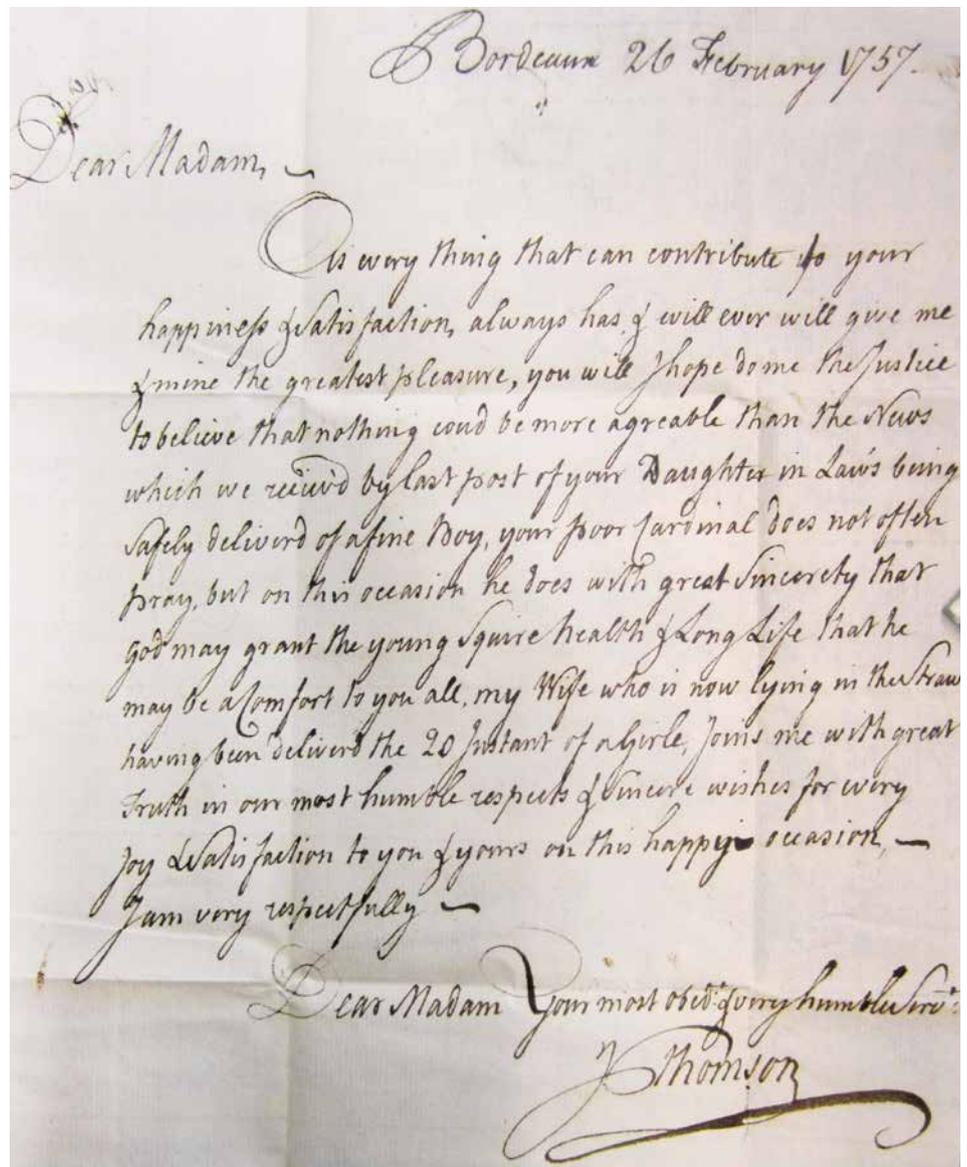
Several letters celebrate the birth of children. In one spirited letter, John Thomson, the chief clerk at one of the leading Irish wine houses in Bordeaux, expresses his pride as a new parent – in this instance that of a baby girl – as he welcomes the newest addition to the family of his employers, the Bartons, a wealthy Irish family racked by intergenerational disputes (Figure 4).

The thoughtful letter of an Irish ship captain, Walter Codd – free on parole as a prisoner of war in Marseille along with his son – to his wife Catherine, at home with their two daughters in Dublin, is a reflection on raising teenagers. ‘Children Run not in direct lines’, he tells his wife, ‘But have a rethrograde motion’. He strives ‘to look on my Child As I wod on any Other Man’s Child’, and is disdainful of the fact that his son is improving much faster at dancing than at speaking French: ‘He is really Idle in regard to The French, But I intend to send him to the Country, Wher he must Speak it or keep his mouth shutt’.

Codd also tells his wife that he will blame her softness and indiscipline if their daughters do not turn out well. ‘I expect they will avoid the too Common Custom of Dublin Girls, Such as Gadding Abroad &c, which is the fore runner of many Evills that attend Girls. They Needle & Improving Books shoud be Theyr great study’.

## Women

The letters to and from women provide a fascinating picture of women’s lives as wives, mothers, friends, con-



**Figure 4**

From John Thomson, responding to news of the birth of his employer’s son: ‘nothing could be more agreeable than the news which we receiv’d by last post of your Daughter in Law’s being safely deliverd of a fine boy, your poor Cardinal does not often pray, but on this occasion he does with great Sincerety that God may grant the young Squire health & Long Life ...’

fidants, and informal businesswomen. Ann Nulty, for example, speaks freely on topics such as servants, clothes, the state of her hair, and the difference between what she wears in France and what might be expected of her in Ireland. She writes to her correspondent in Dublin, Ann Gordon, with the affection of a best friend. In her words, they are ‘Sister Souls’ – a sentiment which would not seem strange to best friends today.

One of the most engaging letters in this collection is from an Irish serving girl, Mary Flynn, writing from the Bordeaux home of an Irish wine merchant, James Babe, where she was a domestic servant. Mary had had little schooling (as evidenced by her distressing spelling and penmanship), but she is vital, cheerful, and a keen observer. To her sister Catherine Norris in Dublin she comments upon everyday comings and goings at the busy Irish residence in Bordeaux:



'First view of the port of Bordeaux, taken from the perspective of the salt works', by Joseph Vermet, 1758, oil on canvas. Image: Paris, Musee de la Marine, © RMN-Grand Palais (rights reserved).

I was working in the parler [when a gentleman] com to me and toke me by the hand [and] bed me welkim seven times and sed he com to the house very afon but never seen me and wondered I never went to see him. The ansur Mr beab mead him was that it was will he saen me ouo self and sead devil wan of me ever me shoud go to see him if thy did not com to see me and that he did not want that thy shoud speek to me tall. My uncel frank was Greatly please att wha he sead. He suped heare the next nite. There was muskc and hear he was danssing till midnit.

Despite being far from home, Mary accounted herself 'as hapy as anny gireal that ever leaft irland'.

This is just a sample of what will be found in the Bordeaux–Dublin letters. The documents are also rich in detail on trade, material culture, food, the operation of foreign exchanges, and Irish clerical education in France. And there is much more. Most striking are the glimpses into the intimacy of family life – and the longing of loved ones to be reunited in a time of war. Publication of *The Bordeaux–Dublin Letters, 1757: Correspondence of an Irish Community Abroad* as part of the British Academy's *Records of Social and Economic History* series has made this intimate look into the private lives of members of an 18th-century expatriate community available worldwide.

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## The BDL Project

Discovery of the Bordeaux–Dublin letters and a large number of supporting documents set in motion an ambitious project to mark the 20th anniversary of Glucksman Ireland House and the Irish Studies programme at New York University (NYU) in 2013. Located in the heart of Greenwich Village, Glucksman Ireland House, NYU's centre for Irish and Irish-American studies, is the site of innovative academic and public programmes, and home of the *American Journal of Irish Studies*.

There are three parts to the Bordeaux–Dublin Letters (BDL) Project: publication of a scholarly edition of the documents at the National Archives; a high-profile public exhibition in New York City; and a by-invitation academic conference featuring leading scholars from Ireland, France, the UK, and the United States.

## Publication by the British Academy

The project began with preparation of the letters for publication in the British Academy's *Records of Social and Economic History* series. *The Bordeaux–Dublin Letters, 1757: Correspondence of an Irish Community Abroad* (volume 53 of the *RSEH* new series) consists of transcriptions of all 125 letters (together with translations of the 25 letters in French). The volume also includes documents associated with the legal proceeding against the *Two Sisters* of Dublin in London's High Court of Admiralty.

The book's introduction tells the story of the ship, contextualises the world of 1757, profiles the Irish community at Bordeaux, and analyses the thematic content of the letters. There are five purpose-made maps, and nine colourful plates featuring the unopened envelopes and images specific to the context of the letters. A comprehensive index will encourage use of the collection by scholars.

The volume was edited by L.M. Cullen, Professor Emeritus of Modern Irish History, Trinity College, Dublin; John Shovlin, Associate Professor of History, NYU; and Thomas M. Truxes, Clinical Associate Professor of Irish Studies and History, NYU, who discovered the documents at the National Archives (Kew) in January 2011.<sup>1</sup>

## Exhibition

The second phase of the project – the Bordeaux–Dublin Letters exhibition in New York City – ran from October 2013 to March 2014, and drew a large number of visitors. Mounted in NYU's main exhibition hall (the Mamdouha S. Bobst Gallery at Bobst Library), the presentation brought the world of the Bordeaux–Dublin letters to life through striking visual imagery set in a magnificent public space.

The gallery, adjoining the library's twelve-storey atrium, was transformed by two dramatic 18-foot tall wall hangings depicting unopened envelopes falling out of the sky. Resplendent in their distinctive calligraphy and pristine red seals, the tumbling letters bear the addresses of recipients in Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway, Waterford, and elsewhere in Ireland – none of whom ever received their mail.

The exhibition was divided into three self-contained sections. The first introduced the world of 1757 and the story of the *Two Sisters'* fateful journey from Bordeaux to Dublin. The second was built on a representative selection of 20 letters, organised around the sorts of broad themes discussed in this article. The exhibit's third section celebrated the impact of the Irish abroad precisely in the period of the Bordeaux–Dublin letters: one subsection of this part of the exhibit dealt with Europe

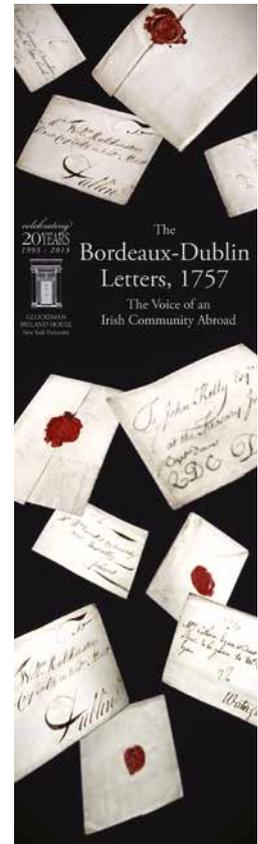
(Great Britain, Iberia, France, and the Low Countries), and the other with America (the West Indies, Newfoundland, the Middle Colonies, and the American frontier).

At the 24 October 2013 opening, Lauren Benton, Dean of New York University's Graduate School of Arts and Science, connected the letters to the historian's goal of bringing the past to life. Barbara Weinstein, Chair of the History Department at NYU, reflected on the 'lure of the archives'. The highlight of the evening was a dramatic reading of excerpts from the letters by three NYU undergraduates.

And on 13 March 2014, the exhibition was the site of an event to launch *The Bordeaux–Dublin Letters* edition, with presentations by the two New York-based editors.

## Conference

The third element of the BDL Project – the Bordeaux–Dublin Letters Conference – took place at Glucksman Ireland House NYU on 24–26 October 2013. It brought together 12 distinguished scholars from Europe and the United States whose work touches on aspects of the letters and the supporting documents. Co-hosts Louis M. Cullen, John Shovlin and Thomas M. Truxes of NYU served as moderators of the conference panels. The six sessions at Glucksman Ireland House were well attended and lively, with plenty of interaction between panelists and the audience.<sup>2</sup> Plans are under way to publish a volume of essays arising from the conference, under the title *France, Ireland and the Atlantic in a Time of War*.



1. Further information about the edition can be found via [www.britac.ac.uk/pubs/](http://www.britac.ac.uk/pubs/)

2. More information about the conference can be found at [www.irelandhouse.fas.nyu.edu/object/ne.bordeauxdublinlettersconference](http://www.irelandhouse.fas.nyu.edu/object/ne.bordeauxdublinlettersconference)