

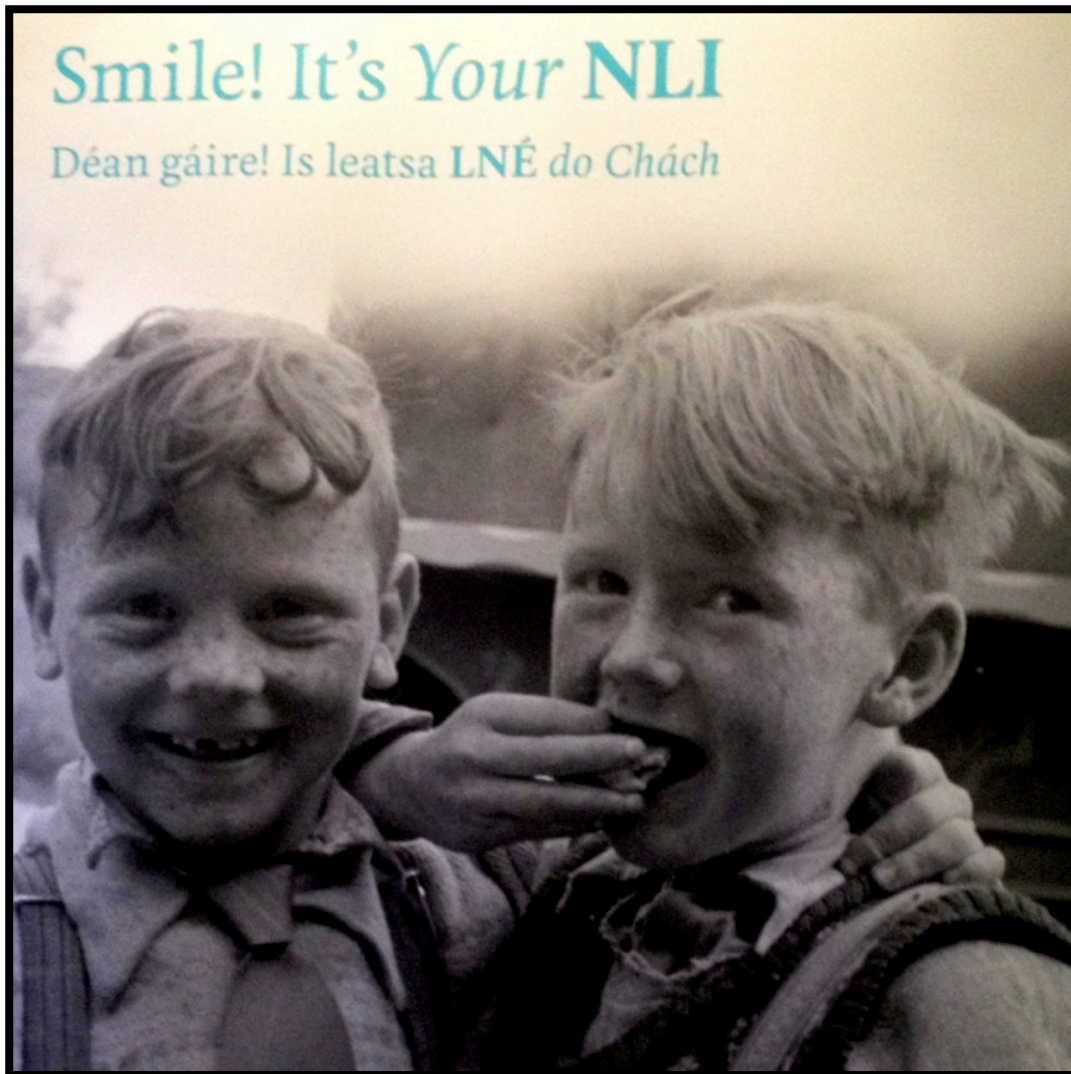
FORUM: IN THE ARCHIVES

SMILE! IT'S YOUR NLI: nine scenes from a sensory ethnography¹

Dara Culhane

To accept sensuousness in scholarship is to eject the conceit of control in which mind and body, self and other are considered separate...

—Paul Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship*



Poster, Dublin, 2014. Photograph by Dara Culhane.

Dara Culhane's current research and teaching brings imaginative and sensory ethnography, memory work, writing, and live performance into productive conversations and debates, and provocative practice. She is currently working on two projects: a manuscript entitled *Encore! Travels With The Ghost of Margaret Sheehy*; and, a solo performance of dramatic storytelling, *Hear Me Looking At You*. Both draw on family stories, archival and private collections of letters and photographs, interviews, conversations, and an ethnographer's diary to explore shifting experiences and analyses of family relationships over time and across space.

SCENE I:

There is no political power without control of the archive, if not memory.
—Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*

To the eye of the beholder, the National Library of Ireland (NLI) presents itself with the imposing authority of imperial power that Derrida warns us about.



The NLI is situated in a compound dominated by Leinster House, an edifice built in 1745 for the Earl of Kildare.

The site/sight reminds us of Eire's past:

England's oldest colony: 800 years.

Now, the Oireachtas (Irish Parliament) sits in Leinster House, from where it governs.

Poblacht na hÉireann (Republic of Ireland).

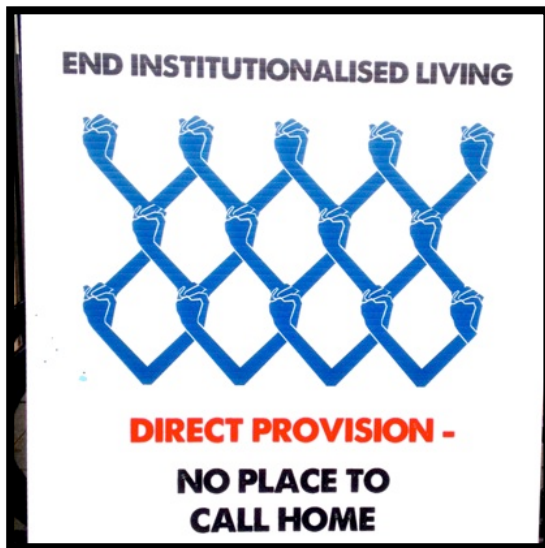
Gardaí (Irish police officers) keep watch at the entrance.

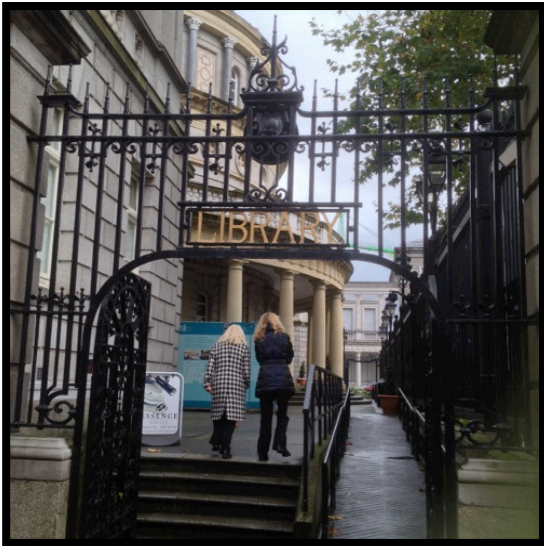
Security guards control electronic gates, allowing some cars in,



and others not.

Almost every day, protesters gather on the pavement outside the gates of Leinster House. They come to call this postcolonial state to account.





The site/sight reminds us of Eire's present:

The Irish Free State, 1922–1937. The Republic of Ireland, 1937–Present: 92 years.

SCENE 2:

I pass through the gate, and continue up the walkway. I open the grand doors onto a marble-floored foyer, ascend the winding staircase, and enter the silent reading room with its polished mahogany tables.

I follow the signs directing me to the desk for “Applicants for Reader’s Tickets.”

The woman at the desk points me to another room, where I fill out forms promising that I will abide by all the rules.

As instructed, I smile hardly at all into the desktop camera.



Renewed Reader’s Ticket in hand, down the stairs, across the foyer, and out the grand doors I go. I make my way past the W. B. Yeats Exhibition poster that is fixed to the wrought iron railing. W. B. remains vigilant, keeping art firmly welded to state power.



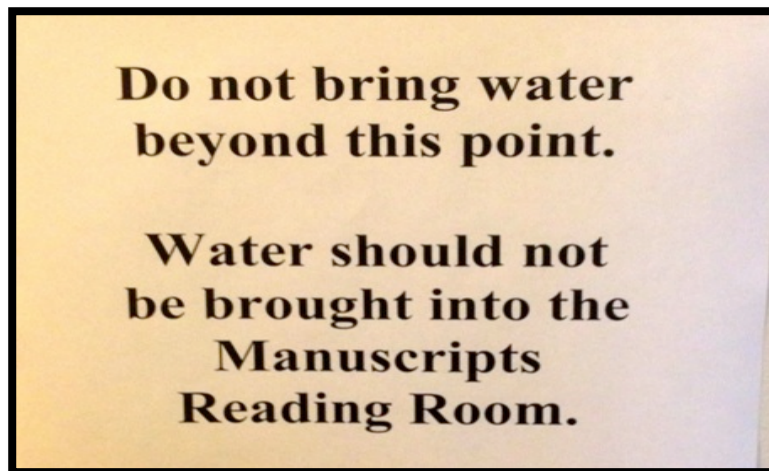
I head down Kildare Street to the Department of Manuscripts.



I enter a tiny locker room where I deposit my coat, my bag, everything except my computer, one notebook, and my iPhone.

I show my Reader's Ticket to the affable, uniformed man at the front desk, and I take the elevator to the second floor.

I arrive at the door to Manuscript Reading Room.



I feel very *disciplined!* In mind and body.

SCENE 3:



Sheehy family, Dublin, circa 1905. Left to right, seated: Father Eugene Sheehy (“the Fenian Priest”), Kathleen Sheehy (Cruise O’Brien), Bessie McCoy Sheehy. Left to right, standing: Hanna Sheehy (Sheehy-Skeffington), Richard Sheehy, David Sheehy (Member of Parliament), Margaret Sheehy (Culhane Casey), Eugene Sheehy, Mary Sheehy (Kettle). Photograph: Dara Culhane, private collection.

Housed here in the NLI Department of Manuscripts are material traces that remain of my grandmother and grandfather, great grandparents, and great aunts and uncles: letters, diaries, shopping lists, notes, scripts, poems, newspaper columns, political treatises, children’s drawings, campaign buttons, photographs, birth and death announcements, and boxes and boxes whose contents are labelled “uncatalogued ephemera.”

Why? Because several members of the Sheehy family were politicians, writers, and suffragists, involved in the struggle for Irish independence from British colonial rule and for women’s equality. Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington and her husband, Francis, in particular, remain well respected as independent thinkers whose work continues to challenge contemporary scholars and activists. Their children and grandchildren have donated family papers, memorabilia, photographs, and miscellaneous records that now number close to 10,000 items, thus creating the NLI’s Sheehy-Skeffington Papers, reputed to be one of the most frequently accessed collections in the manuscript archive.

Three archivists come and go from the central desk in the Manuscript Reading Room. One smiles, tells we readers the rules, and asks, “Will that be all right for you?” Although, of course, I don’t

actually have a choice about whether to obey the rules or not, being asked the question makes me feel I am welcome among friends. Another archivist gives me more forms to fill out should I want to request permission to publish citations or images. Then there is the senior archivist. The first time I came here he asked what my research project was about, and told me that he has been involved in receiving and cataloguing the Sheehy Skeffington Collection for many years. He knows these archives like the back of his hand, and he is always helpful.

I fill out more forms: one for each file I want to access.

I hand in my manuscript request forms.

The image shows three overlapping forms titled "larratas ar Lámhscríbhinn Request for Manuscript". The forms are filled out with handwritten information. The top form is partially obscured by the middle one, which is partially obscured by the bottom one. The bottom form is the most legible and contains the following details:

- Title: larratas ar Lámhscríbhinn Request for Manuscript
- Ls. Uimh/Mss. No.: 24, 119
- Uimh an Bhord/Table No.: 3
- Baillúchán/Teideal Collection/Title: Sheehy Skeffington
- larrthóir (Ceannlitreacha) Requested by (Block Letters): H. D. Culhane
- Síniú Signature: [Handwritten Signature]
- Ticéad Uimh. Ticket No.: 18346
- A thug amach Issued by: [Blank]
- Dáta Date: [Blank]
- Am Time: [Blank]

Then, I wait. I sit at my numbered cubicle, my laptop plugged in, my pencil and notebook ready.

The room is silent, silent, orderly, orderly, watched, watched.

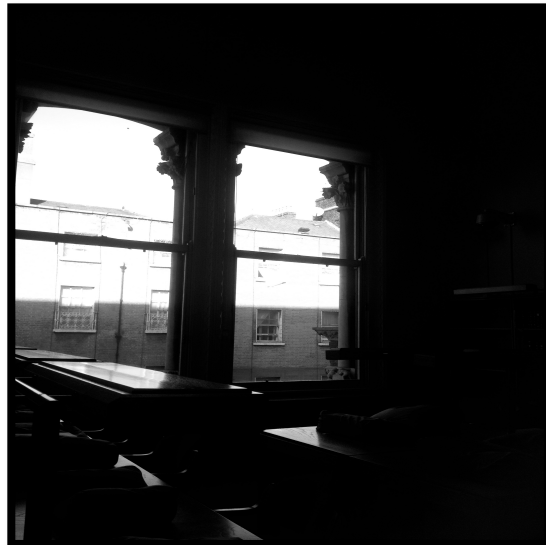
SCENE 4:

The reverent aura in the Manuscript Reading Room is getting under my skin.

Leather-bound guides in the bookshelves line the room: tomes, canons, authorities.



I look out the windows: bricks, chimneys, slivers of sunshine.



Readers sit at long desks. Dour faces pour over fragile bits and scraps of papers: letters, maps, ledgers, photographs, postcards.

Everyone is obeying all the rules that are mounted in front of each reader.

Reader Handling Rules

All library collections are at risk of damage whenever they are used. Manuscripts are unique and irreplaceable, so we ask you to participate in the effort to preserve these collections by following these simple rules. Together with any directions staff may give.

1. FOOD AND DRINK ARE STRICTLY PROHIBITED IN THE READING ROOM.
2. PENCILS ONLY ARE PERMITTED IN THE READING ROOM.
3. PLEASE ENSURE YOUR HANDS ARE CLEAN AND DRY.
4. NEVER LEAN ON A COLLECTION ITEM, REST YOUR NOTES ON IT OR RUN YOUR FINGER ALONG THE LINES OF TEXT.
5. VOLUMES MUST ALWAYS BE CORRECTLY SUPPORTED ON THE CUSHIONS PROVIDED.
6. NEVER APPLY DIRECT FORCE TO OPEN OUT OR RESTRAIN ANY ITEM.
7. SINGLE SHEET ITEMS SHOULD ALWAYS BE LAID FLAT ON THE DESK AND KEPT WITHIN THE CONFINES OF THEIR OPEN FOLDER.
8. DO NOT HOLD ITEMS UP, PLACE THEM IN YOUR LAP OR CARRY THEM AROUND THE ROOM.
9. TRACING OF COLLECTION ITEMS IS NOT PERMITTED UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCE.
10. DO NOT MOISTEN A DIGIT TO AID PAGE TURNING.
11. ITEMS MUST NOT OVERHANG THE TABLE EDGE.
12. READERS MUST FOLLOW THE DIRECTIONS OF LIBRARY STAFF.

My mind's eye sidles out of my head to take a look at myself. Here I am, sitting up straight, feet on the floor, knees pressed together, hands clasped on the desk, eyes looking straight ahead.

Who is this?



A memory flashes up:

It's 1957 and I am six years old. I am a new student at Kinsale National School in Co. Cork, 176 miles south of Dublin. I am trying hard to obey all the rules. I want to belong. I am afraid my differences will show. I haven't been baptized. I have original sin. My mother is a Jew. I haven't done my First Communion. My parents say we are atheists. I come from Canada.

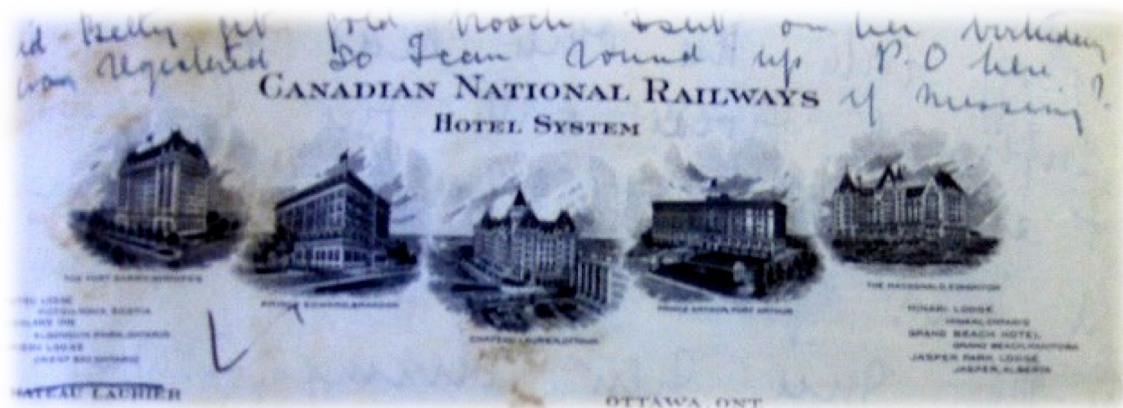
I want to slouch, let my knees fall apart, and put my elbows on the table. I want to write blasphemy and draw dirty pictures in my notebook.



I want to disobey.



My regressive interior monologue is interrupted when the senior archivist approaches me holding a large blue file folder. He passes it to me and I take it in my hands and open it. I see my grandmother's writing on posh Canadian National Railways Hotel System letterhead. Many of her letters are written on fine stationery. I wonder did she ever stay at one of these hotels or eat in these exclusive restaurants? Or was acquiring such letterhead writing paper something she accomplished, and then turned to good use as background visuals for her letters home?



NLI, Sheehy Skeffington Collection, MS 24,117. Letter, Margaret Sheehy Culhane Casey to Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, August 8, 1925. Image published courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.

My dearest old girl

sister, Hanna, opens her letter.

“My dearest old girl,” her salutation to her elder

Your loving
Margaret

“Your loving Margaret,”

her signature closes her letter.

In the blink of an eye I surrender to *everything* that the academic literature I read on “The Archive” so elegantly analyzes and astutely critiques. I am awash in nostalgia, romanticism, mythologies of discovery, delusions of authenticity. I conjure post-remembered sorrows and joys, victories and defeats, desires and repulsions, hopes and fears, questions and yearnings.

Theirs? Or, yours? Archival materials do not speak for themselves!

The literature lectures me from the back of my mind/body.

I imagine my grandmother and my great aunts walking into the Manuscript Reading Room. Waves of affection and respect and gratitude course through my veins when I see them.



The Sheehy sisters, Dublin, circa 1905. Left to right, Hanna Sheehy (Sheehy Skeffington), Mary Sheehy (Kettle), Kathleen Sheehy (Cruise O'Brien), Margaret Sheehy (Culhane Casey). Photograph: Dara Culhane, private collection.

They sit down around me at my desk. Dignified, determined, witty.

I feel as if I feel my heart swelling.

I serve them fine French wine in chipped Waterford crystal goblets.

The reverent aura of the Manuscript Reading Room that had provoked my childish resistance now engulfs me, enfolds me. I handle the fragile papers with oh! so much care. I touch each page gently, gingerly. I don't lift the pages up. I read them, and turn them over. I place them back in the file, exactly as they were.

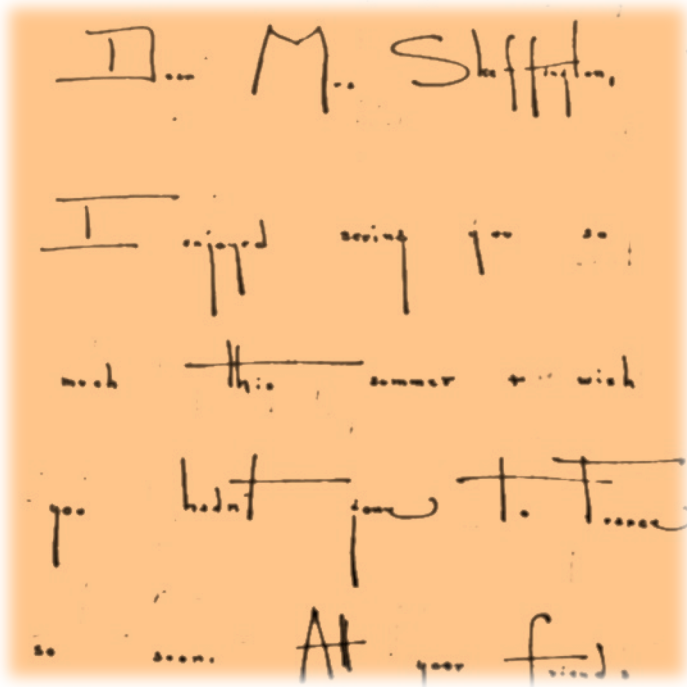
I obey all the rules.

I respect them.

I appreciate them.

SCENE 5:

Handwriting. I look at the notes and letters in the files and I think about the time and the care these writers took to acquire pen and paper, to set aside time to sit down and write, to send their words to another human being for their information, their pleasure, their affection, their correction!



NLI, Sheehy Skeffington Collection, MS 12,434. Acc 3765. Image published courtesy of National Library of Ireland.

What losses the typewriter and computer have wreaked. All our writing looks the same now. A transnational software corporation polices our syntax, autocorrects the brilliant poetry of Irish-English.

I stop on my way home after my first day at the NLI and I buy fine notepaper, envelopes, and a fountain pen. I spend my evenings drinking wine and writing letters to people I love. My handwriting is atrocious. So keyboard retrained are my fingers that they can barely form letters properly anymore. But I am engrossed in the act of doing it: holding the pen, my hand moving it across the paper, considering each word, signing off, folding the letter into an envelope, going to the post office, buying stamps, depositing my communiqué in the green *An Post* box on the pavement, imagining the addressees receiving my offerings, touching this same paper, reading my words, thinking of me.

A week later, I receive a response by email:

“A real letter! Cool! :-> :-X”

SCENE 6:

The acoustic environment of Kildare Street carries the sounds of the demonstrations that go on up the street in front of Leinster House. Music, chants, slogans echo through the huge old windows and into the Manuscript Reading Room, clear as bells on most days.



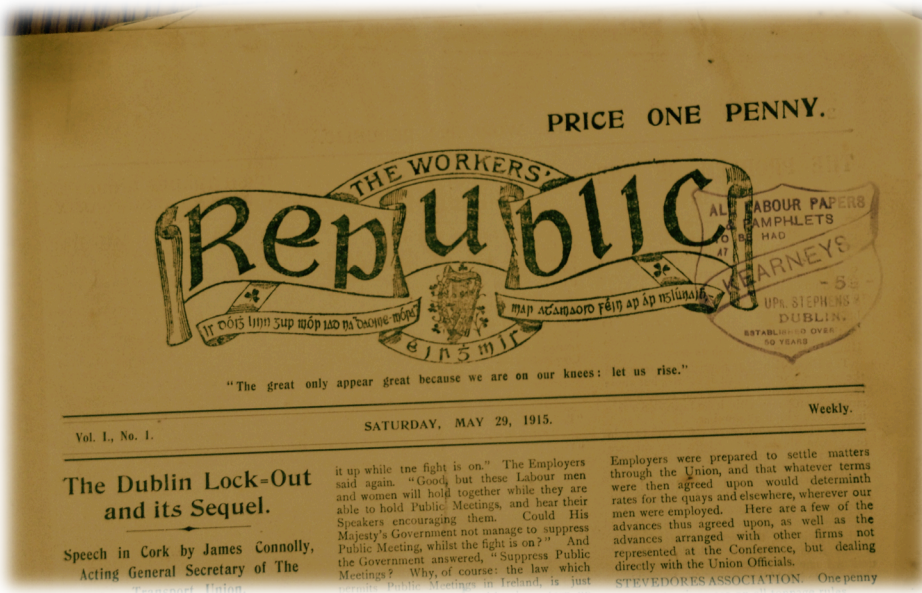
Today an old man has stationed himself in front of W. B. He is seated on a folding chair he has brought along. He holds a hand-written sign.

A LIVING WAGE FOR THE LIKES OF ME!

The old man waits for the tinted windowed cars ferrying ministers and bureaucrats through Leinster House's security gates. When they pass he stands up, brandishes his sign, and roars:

A LIVING WAGE FOR THE LIKES OF ME!

Here I sit, reading petitions, newspaper columns, prose, poems and plays that protest inequality, demand economic justice, and spell out visions of a new egalitarian Ireland, penned so long ago.



NLI, Sheehy Skeffington Collection, MS 12,437. Acc. 3783. Image published courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.

A LIVING WAGE FOR THE LIKES OF ME!

Here I sit, three generations on. Still?

A LIVING WAGE FOR THE LIKES OF ME!

We fight for this most basic tenet of justice. Still.

A LIVING WAGE FOR THE LIKES OF ME!

Here this old man stands, at the gates of power. Still.

Passersby occasionally stop on their way and join him.

A LIVING WAGE FOR THE LIKES OF ME!

They form a chorus.

Still? There is hope. Still.

SCENE 7:

My project—the reason I’m here at the NLI archives—is to read my grandmother’s letters home that she wrote from Montreal between 1922 and 1939, a time she described as living in exile. This came to be because at age forty-two Margaret, a widow with four children, fell in love with a man twenty years her junior, her godson, Michael Casey. When Margaret became pregnant, their families agreed—well, some say they *demand*—that Michael and Margaret leave Ireland promptly. A hasty marriage ensued, and the couple sailed for Montreal where they lived until 1939 when Michael died and Margaret returned to Ireland. My grandmother’s was a politics of the body, of sexuality, and of transgression.

I have always known this story. I was raised to respect my grandmother’s bravery and to admire her courage.

I never met Margaret in the flesh but she has always lived large in my imagination. Margaret was an actress and elocutionist. Interwoven with impressions of her conjured by the story about why she moved to Montreal were visual images of her I looked at in studio portraits that hung on the walls of our homes, and the wild stories my father used to tell about his eccentric mother. Sitting here in the quiet archives reading Margaret’s letters I hear my father speaking her, mimicking her grandiose gestures, her imperious gaze. Margaret: audacious, bodacious, loquacious, courageous. These memory stories dance inside me while I read and trace and speak my grandmother’s letters.

SCENE 8:

I want more. Wanting becomes yearning. I ache to *touch* my grandmother's letters more intimately, to *stroke* her words, to *follow* her sentences one to the other, to *nuzzle* into these old, musty pages. I *long* to know her, as if . . .

Touch is the sensory experience most firmly controlled in The Archive. The Rules. The Surveillance. The Archivists. All are alert to violations of the rules governing touching. The documents are precious. They must not be damaged, sullied by sweaty fingertips, ruined for future generations.

Yes! Yes!

But,

I do so intensely want to . . . BREAK RULE # 4 . . .

N E V E R

RUN YOUR FINGER ALONG THE LINES OF TEXT.

Why such a specific rule about this tiny touch?

I email a friend, an archivist in Victoria to ask: "Do people often want to do this?"

"Yes," he replies. "It's an impulsive thing, I believe. The heart sends the hand, and the hand sends the finger. It's as if we believe we can actually touch the writer this way."

The Rules. I sit on my hands.

I photograph the letters and print the photographs. I buy tracing paper. I spend my evenings drinking wine and tracing Margaret's written words. I speak them aloud as I trace, and I stroke them, wildly, gently, angrily, compassionately, with my fingertips.

I read Margaret writing home describing scenes of a happy family gathered around a dinner table. *I remember stories I've heard about conflicts and betrayals.*

My grandmother writes her marriage as a romantic drama, an epic love story.

My father told tales about violence and infidelities.

Margaret despairs at her son's—my father's—adolescent indolence, complaining that he shows no interest in either studying or working while she struggles to make a living in theatre.

My father told us that he went to work on the docks at age fourteen to put food on the table.

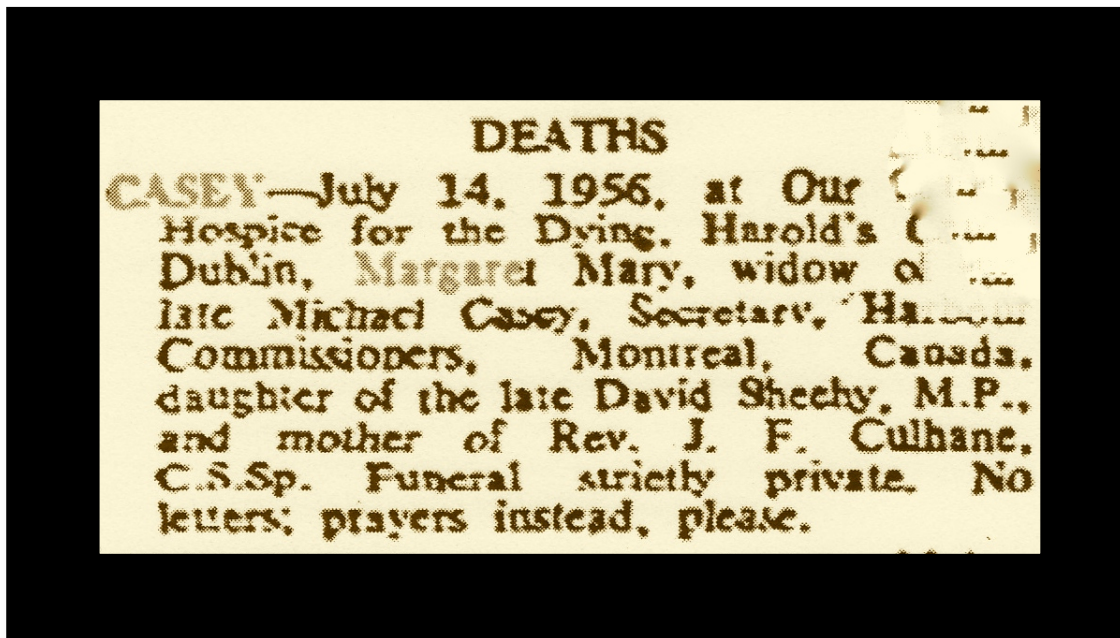
My grandmother wrote and *my father spoke* about the pain of exile, about *longing* for kith and kin, *about dreaming of returning to Ireland*, about *taking pleasure* in each other's *humour and rebellious* spirits, *about visions of new worlds* in the making.

The letters and the stories entangle each other in an endless dance: they join together and move as one body, then separate. They cross over, take other partners, turn their backs, face each other, embrace, dance away again . . .

Margaret: audacious, bodacious, loquacious, courageous.

Margaret: lonely, frightened, humiliated, fragile.

My grandmother: a woman who dreamed of revolution and lived, well, a complicated life.



SCENE 9:

It's a windy, rainy, sunny, windy, rainy, sunny November afternoon on the west coast of Ireland. I'm staying in a cottage in Kinvara, Co. Galway for a couple of weeks, writing.



A neighbour drops by to ask do I need anything from the shops in town. He's driving in and I could come along if so. I invite him in for a cup of tea. He asks am I on holidays? Or? I reply that I'm writing a book about my grandmother. I've been in Dublin the last few months working in the archives with a collection of her letters, I tell him.

“Do you ever feel like a grave robber?” he asks.

“A grave robber?” I’m more than a little taken aback.

“Well, letters are private, aren’t they? Do you think your grandmother ever expected someone would be publishing letters she wrote to her sisters?”

“No . . . But . . . the letters *are* in the ARCHIVES . . . They *are* PUBLIC documents . . . now . . . I have ETHICS APPROVAL . . . I’m an anthropologist . . . I know about . . .”

I’m stammering. I feel my face getting hot. *I never* blush. Why now?

“Ah, haven’t people been robbing graves for centuries?” my neighbour says with a laugh. “I’d say there’s good money to be made in grave robbing.”

“Well, must be off. Thanks for the tea. If you need a lift into town anytime, come around and knock on my door.”



Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all photographs included in this essay are by Dara Culhane, or are in her personal collection.

References

Derrida, Jacques. 1998. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Translated by Eric Prenowitz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Stoller, Paul. 2010. *Sensuous Scholarship*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.