

THE USES OF IMMIGRANT LETTERS

Conference at the GHI, May 18–19, 2007. Conveners: Wolfgang Helbich (Ruhr University, Bochum), Anke Ortlepp (GHI). Participants: Susannah U. Bruce (Sam Houston State University), Volker Depkat (University of Regensburg), Bruce Elliott (Carleton University, Ottawa), Stephan Elspaß (University of Augsburg), David Fitzpatrick (Trinity College, Dublin), David Gerber (University of Buffalo), Walter Kamphoefner (Texas A&M University), Ursula Lehmkuhl (Free University of Berlin), Maria Irene Moyna (Texas A&M University), Joe Salmons (University of Wisconsin, Madison), Suzanne Sinke (Florida State University).

This workshop took place against the background of two related events: the 2003 Carleton Conference “Reading the Emigrant Letter,” which was hosted by Bruce Elliott and included presentations by David Fitzpatrick, David Gerber, Wolfgang Helbich, Walter Kamphoefner, and Suzanne Sinke; and the recent publication, in English translation, of the second volume of German immigrant letters, edited by Walter Kamphoefner and Wolfgang Helbich, *Germans in the Civil War: The Letters They Wrote Home* (Chapel Hill, 2006). With one eye on the past and the other on the future, workshop participants set out to evaluate the editing and other work done with immigrant letters in the past, and to assess the uses that scholars—within and outside the historical profession—might make of such letters in the future.

Bruce Elliott kicked off the discussion with an assessment of the Carleton Conference: “Limits, Opportunities, and Ways Forward.” Along with the accomplishments exemplified in the conference volume he co-edited with David Gerber and Suzanne Sinke, *Letters Across Borders: The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants* (New York, 2006), Elliott identified a number of aspects of immigrant correspondence that deserved greater attention: intertextuality, photos and other enclosures, the impact of changing communications, media, postal and informal delivery systems, and differing archival practices between countries. In a related vein, David Fitzpatrick offered some “Utilitarian Perspectives” on the editing of immigrant letters, identifying different constituencies for such editions—family historians and other general readers, linguists, scholars of immigration and ethnicity, and other editors—and pointing up their various and sometimes conflicting demands on letter editions with respect to access, attractiveness, utility, and more. In his view, all constituencies profit from a contextualization of letters through research in local history sources, and some of the compromises necessary for attractive publica-

tion can be mitigated through web publication of full, unedited texts of all letters.

Three other papers took a narrower focus on a subset of immigrant letters of three different nationalities. Wolfgang Helbich rescued from obscurity "Karl Larsen, 1860–1931: Pioneer of Modern Immigrant Letters Editions." This Danish writer was the first to publish both an edition of common soldier and civilian letters (from the German-Danish war of 1864) and of letters of ordinary Danish immigrants to the United States. In both instances, he followed and promoted many of the editing "best practices" that have become the consensus standards for historians of the last generation. Walter Kamphoefner argued on the basis of internal and external evidence that German immigrant letters were "The Real Guidebooks," and that the chain migration they induced exercised a constraint on overly optimistic writings, leading most writers to offer a nuanced portrait of conditions in America rather than euphoric immigration propaganda. Susannah Bruce presented in essence highlights of her recent book and the evidence on which it was based in her paper "Exploring the Motivations of Irish Catholic Volunteers in the Union Army, 1861–1865, Through Their Letters." Although cautioning against the tendency to "see every Irish-American soldier as a Fenian," she finds "Irish support for Irish interests" as essential in understanding the "blended familial, cultural, and national influences that defined their identity." Thus the Irish letters, like the German letters edited by Kamphoefner and Helbich, cast doubt on the claim that the Civil War was the great "melting pot" that promoted assimilation and eradicated nativism and ethnic prejudice.

Four papers laid out or argued for "New Approaches to Reading Immigrant Letters," above all cultural history approaches. Suzanne Sinke, who has worked with both Dutch and German women's letters, presented "Evaluating Gender as a Category in Nineteenth-Century Immigrant Letters." Her work shows how cultural norms and gender expectations influenced the degree of assertiveness and homesickness expressed in men's and women's letters, respectively. But one of her most striking findings was the interaction of gender with age. Young, single women generally enjoyed the less restrictive women's roles in America, and "tended to write letters that were much more akin to the letters of young, single men than to those of married, older women," the latter being particularly prone to feelings of loneliness and isolation. Volker Depkat and Ursula Lehmkuhl presented similarly structured papers. Both began with theoretical concepts of cultural history en vogue since the "cultural turn," and then attempted to apply these theories to an analysis of groups of letters that have come to light through Lehmkuhl's new project collecting letters in the former East Germany (see <http://www.auswandererbriefe.de>). In both instances, letters loom large as re-

flections, and even as tools, of personal identity formation. And in both cases, writers continued to view and portray themselves as an integral part of the same family in spite of their separation. David Gerber took the opportunity to present both a defense of the thesis and an explanation of the methodology of his recent book, reconstructing the process by which he arrived at his conclusion that "immigrant letters are not principally about documenting the world, but instead about reconfiguring a personal relationship rendered vulnerable by long-distance, long-term separation." In doing so, he acknowledged his intellectual debt to the pioneer of letter editing, Charlotte Erickson, but noted the different conclusions he reached on the basis of much the same evidence.

In the interest of interdisciplinary dialogue, three linguists who work with immigrant letter evidence were invited to the workshop. They presented representative examples of their work and the linguistic potential of letter evidence in three languages, nicely translated for historians. Stephan Elspaß, a pioneer of "language history from below," demonstrated how letter texts, in contrast to texts from the educated elite, sometimes show relics of earlier language periods, while at other times anticipating tendencies now found in current spoken vernaculars. These texts were "relatively unaffected by official standards" set up by grammarians and schoolteachers in the nineteenth century. Salmons extended this approach to the English used by German immigrants, investigating how, when, and how well they learned English, as well as what kind(s). The examples he presented show evidence of the influence of non-standard German and English on the English letters written by immigrants. Some Germanisms were transitional, but he showed evidence that some survive to the present as highly distinctive forms. Maria Irene Moyna explored Spanish-English interactions in a California ranching community that had parallels to an immigrant situation, even though the Spanish speakers became a language minority without moving due to population influx in the wake of the Gold Rush and annexation by the United States. The letter evidence she presented from an ethnically mixed ranching household "questions the superimposition" of English upon the Hispanic population. Instead, there was a "complex process of drawing and re-drawing of allegiance lines," with Spanish persisting throughout the nineteenth century as the language of ranching regardless of the nationality involved.

The final section of the workshop consisted of a roundtable discussion, with comments by Stephan Elspaß, David Fitzpatrick, David Gerber, Walter Kamphoefner, and Suzanne Sinke serving as springboards for further exploration. There was general consensus between the historians and the linguists on the mutual benefits and common interests of the two disciplines in working with immigrant letters. Most of the panelists also

agreed on the value and importance of contextual information, which Fitzpatrick's words dramatized: "The editor must temporarily become a family and local historian." On the question of whether more collections of immigrant letters are needed, participants noted that some major immigrant nationalities are still without a published "national" anthology of letters. However, the digital revolution has opened up a range of possibilities as to the form such collections and publications might take. While the future of book-length publications might be open to question, participants generally agreed on the desirability of web publication of complete texts of letters with full search capacity, linked to digital page images of original texts. All panelists came away convinced of the importance also of reading between the lines of letters, even as they remained divided on just how to do so, or what theoretical perspectives were helpful in the process.

Walter D. Kamphoefner