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Letters in anthropological research: the Harvard-Irish Survey 1930-1936[i]

Abstract

This article examines a selection of the professional and private letters associated with the social anthropology strand of the Harvard-Irish Survey (1930-1936). These research letters contribute to the historiography of the first visit to Europe in the 1930s of an American team of anthropologists and archaeologists engaged in a multi-disciplinary study of a 'modern' society. How letters are deployed, who writes to whom, what is relayed, requested or refused reveals the deployment of a novel research strategy by anthropologists Arensberg and Kimball. Letters to and from research informants reveal not only the anthropologists' requests but informant voices, perspectives and practices – material that informs ethnographic observations on Irish town and country life. The complexities of informant-researcher relationships are also highlighted. A narrative approach to the analysis of research letters is introduced.

Key words, Arensberg and Kimball, Ireland, letter, research informant, narrative

Anthropologische Forschungsbriefe: Harvards Irlandstudie (1930-1936)

Abstract

Dieser Beitrag untersucht eine Auswahl an professionellen und privaten Briefen, die

mit der sozialanthropologischen Schule der Harvard-Irish Survey (1930-1936) in Zusammenhang gebracht werden können. Diese Studienbriefe tragen zur Historiographie des ersten Besuchs einer amerikanischen Gruppe von Anthropologen und Archäologen bei, die mit einer multi-disziplinären Untersuchung einer "modernen" Gesellschaft befasst waren. Wie die Briefe zu verorten sind, wer wem schreibt, was davon betroffen ist, nachgefragt oder zurückgewiesen wird - diese Fragen bilden den Rahmen einer ganz neuen Forschungsstrategie der Anthropologen Arensberg und Kimball. Briefe an und von Informanten ihrer Studie verraten nicht bloß etwas über die Fragestellungen der Anthropologen, sondern eben auch etwas über die Einstellungen, Perspektiven und Praktiken jener Informanten - all das ist, Material, das uns ethnographische Beobachtungen des irischen Stadt- und Landlebens liefert. Der Beitrag stellt so klar heraus, wie komplex die Beziehung zwischen Forscher und Informant ist und bietet zudem einen narrativen Zugang zur Analyse von Forschungsbriefen.

Schlüsselwörter: Arensberg, Kimball, Irland, Brief, Informant, narrativer Zugang

Lettres en recherche anthropologique : l’enquête Harvard-Irlande de 1930-1936

Résumé

Cet article analyse une sélection des lettres privées et professionnelles associées au courant d’anthropologie sociale de l’enquête Harvard-Irlande (1930-1936). Ces lettres de recherche étayent l’historiographie de la première visite en Europe dans les années 30 d’une équipe américaine d’anthropologues et archéologues employés à une étude multidisciplinaire de la société « moderne ». La façon dont les lettres sont distribuées, leurs auteurs ainsi que leurs destinataires, les informations communiquées, requises ou refusées, révèlent l’application d’une nouvelle stratégie de recherche mise en place

par les anthropologues Arensberg et Kimball. Les lettres envoyées aux informants, ainsi que les réponses reçues, dévoilent non seulement les demandes des anthropologues mais aussi les visions, voix et pratiques des informants. Ces données offrent des observations ethnographiques sur la vie dans les villes et dans la campagne irlandaises. Ces documents soulignent également la complexité des relations entre informants et chercheurs. Cet article développe une approche narrative à l'analyse des lettres de recherche.

Mots clés: Arensberg et Kimball, Irlande, lettre, informateur, récit narratif

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Introduction

Amid the remains of documents and photographs in public and personal archives scattered throughout the US lie the professional correspondences and personal letters of the Harvard-Irish Survey research team. These traces of a large research expedition span the years and continents from the inception of that project in Harvard in the early 1930s to many years later, long after the archaeologists and anthropologists had taken their leave of friends and informants in Ireland, long after the publication of influential journal articles and books. The published works of the Survey have achieved some notoriety, shaping the evolution of Irish archaeology and social anthropology. While the physical anthropology publications receive less attention, *Family and Community in Ireland* (1940, 1968, 2001) by Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball is a renowned, controversial, classical and frequently cited ethnographic study of Irish rural family and community life.

Focusing on the social anthropology strand of the Harvard-Irish Survey (1930-1936), this article critically examines the status of unpublished professional and private letters from the archives, examining their contribution to the historiography of the first visit of an American team of anthropologists and archaeologists to Europe in the 1930s.[ii] How letters are deployed in the Survey, who writes to whom, what is relayed, requested or refused brings insight to the dynamics of researcher relations, the deployment of a novel research strategy and a focus on infomants' voices, perspectives and practices in service of the Survey. A narrative approach to the analysis of archival letters is introduced.

Two slim brown paper folders, frayed with age, one labelled Ireland *(Correspondences)*, the other Ireland *(Miscellaneous Material)*, lie on my desk. Bundles of correspondences on thin, yellowing, brittle sheets of paper of various sizes, neatly labelled and categorised, lie inside. Arranged in alphabetical order by sender, held by a thin tissue of transparent paper, the name of each author is carefully typed on the outside of every bundle. Some letters are type-written on headed note paper, letter characters paler here, darker there, reflecting the uneven spread of ink on typewriter ribbon or the varying force of finger striking typewriter keys. The day, month and year are duly noted, the address of the recipient clearly placed on the top, left hand corner of the page, followed by a singular *Dear Sir*. The content is closely crowded onto the page, utilising all available space, signed off with the flourish of a handwritten signature, bold in blue ink. Handwritten letters in pencil on pages torn from school copy books have their places in the archive too, carefully numbered page by page.

Some bundles of letters are substantial, indicating regular exchanges of correspondence, perhaps maintaining old or building new relationships. Others are once-off invitations to attend events or a kind acknowledgement for books received from secretaries of learned societies and State bodies. The personality and character of the writer is suggested by the quality and shape of the paper, the colour of the ink, the size and form of the handwriting, the forceful expression of ideas, the colloquial use of language, the formality of tone, the regretful refusal, the polite inquiry, the gossip conveyed, the rude interjection, the news of the day. The immediacy of the voices and the urgency of the content is as compelling as the materiality of the physical presence of the letters, working to dissolve the illusion of time between now

and then. The author of the letter has touched the page as I do now. As pencil gives way to ink or blue colour to red, I muse that longer letters may have taken a number of days to complete, the author interrupted, distracted by the pressing mundane. Preserved for over eighty years, these aged, fragile letters were intended by Arensberg and Kimball to be kept and read at some future time, perhaps by themselves or by an unknown person. I have acquired survey letters, diaries and documents from public and private archives.[iii] Transcribing and reading these letters aloud provokes the imagination and pushes the mind into a different space, time, era.[iv] What can they, these writers of letters, tell us, the unintended recipients, the not-addressed audience? How can these letters informs us about the experiences of the unseasoned young American anthropologists, Arensberg and Kimball, as they set about their research tasks in the towns and countryside of 1930s Ireland? What else can we learn from such material?

Letters in an archive

The letters of the Harvard-Irish Survey archive grouped by intent or missive purpose reveal that the bulk of the correspondence pertains to the professional and organisational aspects of initiating, managing and maintaining a large research expedition abroad over a long period of time. As such the letter is an important medium of professional exchange and ongoing contact. These include letters between the main architects of the Survey, Earnest Hooton[v] and William Lloyd Warner[vi] as they seek funding from sponsors, clarify the rationale of the Survey, involve other significant academic and influential players and plan comprehensive media campaigns in the US and Ireland. The aim of the latter is to broadcast the intention to undertake ‘a scientific study of a modern nation’ while preparing the local people to

accept, for the long duration, groups of American anthropologists and archaeologists living and working in their midst.[vii]

Many of the letters in the archive are written on one side of the Atlantic ocean, intended for a reader on the other side. Warner reports regularly to Hooton from Ireland during his initial foray in 1931 and 1932, during which time he attempts to make a preliminary survey of the 26 counties of the Irish Free State. He settles on County Clare on the west coast of Ireland as the most suitable location for a detailed study of Irish society. He may have been somewhat influenced by Eamon de Valera, head of the Irish Free State government and whose party, Fianna Fáil, dominated Clare politics. Clare was also much visited by Irish and European scholars; writers and artists in search of inspiration and authenticity might also extend a welcome to anthropologists from the next parish – America. Clare was also an area in which collectors from the Irish Folklore Commission had worked (Lysaght 2009).

Much of the correspondence between Arensberg and Kimball moves between the US and Ireland as they negotiate their contacts with the Irish town and country people, preparing the way for each other as one arrives or the other leaves the field. They exchange observations, ideas, anlaytical schema and plans for lectures and publications. There is long period covering exchanges between them, commencing in the 1930s. Their letter relationship is affectionate and considerate. They pay careful attention to each other's thoughts and ideas, taking time to work out an understanding of new cultures and communities. Though their letters always contain gossip, inquiries about the well-being of family and adventures of friends, the bulk of the content is a dialogue of ideas. Both Arensberg and Kimball sketch out theoretical

interpretations and rehearse readings of events in their letters to each other, asking questions and expecting answers. Replies are gratefully acknowledged, and systematically interrogated; reasons are given for rejection, acceptance or expansion on the other's suggestions. These intellectual exchanges are mediated by the slow passage of the time taken to write, send, read, respond and dispatch the letters across the ocean. In the 1930s the material conditions of the postal system were such that, borne by ship, it took two weeks for a letter to travel from the west coast of Ireland to the east coast of the US. The practice of corresponding through letters, begun in Ireland, was maintained throughout their professional lives, even when Arensberg and Kimball lived and worked together in New York city. Insights into their intellectual development and career paths, their support for each other's work as they contributed to the growth of anthropology in the US, are evident in these letters.

Acquiring letters of introduction from those who could ease their way in Ireland was a preoccupation in the early stages of the Survey. In this they were particularly sucessful given the fractious, volatile political context of a society in the aftermath of the War of Independence (1919-1921) and post-Civil War (1922-1923)[viii]. Bishop Fogarty and Eamon de Valera, representing opposing political positions, had extended their verbal and written approval to the project which could now procede with episcopal and political blessings. As the local director, Warner was anxious that the presence of the three research teams (archaeological, physical and social anthropological) should not cause any offence. He writes- *I got the letter I wanted from de Valera signed on offical stationary and I have used it in the proper quarters and kept it out of sight in other places. I had a long talk with the Bishop some time back and found him a very agreebale and nice person. He is a violent antagonist of de*

Valera's and it is rather difficult to talk him since he persists in discussing politics, and one does not like to be too agreeable with some of the remarks made by him since they are likely to be repeated, but on the other hand one does not want to appear as pro de Valera in the eyes of the Bishop. I think though that the interview was sucessful.[ix] Warner noted that Arensberg excelled in making local, influential contacts and he writes to Hooton that Arensberg …*made a great number of contacts which have proved invaluable in the work we are doing at the present time…I discovered that Meeghan, the Town Commissioner here, is a person who is one of the most popular men in Clare and has been instrumental in making it possible for us to start work immediately on the very things that would have taken us months ordinarily to have accomplished and did in Newburyport…Meeghan, incidentally was a find of Connie's.*[x]

Letters of introduction allowed Arensberg and Kimball to access and recruit a wide range of informants from all classes and professions, entrepreneurs and civil servants, property owners and labourers, town dwellers and country folk alike to be of service to the Survey. In a letter home Arensberg describes his first week in Ireland. *I had a very pleasant week in Dublin but I don't know how profitable it was from the standpoint of the job I am supposed to do here. Nevertheless it was filled with a great variety of calls upon people. It seems I have quite a connection here and the traditional Irish hospitality doesn't fail. I saw two professors, three civil servants, a judge, a senator, a student, lots of them, some fox-hunting aristocrats, some stout-drinking democrats, and the United States chargé d'affaires, so you can imagine I wasn't without companionship.* [xi]

Séamus Ó Duilearga of the Irish Folklore Commission (1935-1937) provided an extensive range of contacts and letters of introduction for Arensberg and Kimball. Ó Duilearga wrote directly to people in Clare with requests either to provide accommodation or to put the anthropologists in touch with people who were knowledgable about local customs, mores and folkways. One of these was Stiofán Ó hEalaire/Stephen Hillary, a reknowned story-teller and 'Ireeshin' (a keeper of the Irish tradition), who had provided more than 150 oral tales to the Folklore Commission. Arensberg describes his meeting with him in his field notes. Stiofán's sight was poor and he was ill. *An old man, dressed in very ragged and shabby clothes, sat huddled over a small turf fire, whose smoke finding no chimney, filled the house. The house had the basest appearance, though a dilapidated and half empty dresser was there. I introduced myself. Stephen was very glad, had had a letter about me from Delargy, was pleased to see me said he...Delargy said I was looking for raths and forts – Stephen would be glad to show them to me some fine day.*[xii] Ó Duilearga's /Delargy's letter endorses Hillary's lore and local knowledge, emphasising the value of his contribution to the American research. Despite his frail health and indigent circumstances Hillary is happy to be of service to the Survey.[xiii]

Other letters in the archive are written as official reports to Survey directors in Harvard, outlining main activities, meetings, locations, progress, observations and concerns of the newly arrived anthropologists in Ireland. Much of their time is spent meeting and talking with a wide range of people from all sectors of Irish society. The rich and detailed empirical content of these letters, though preoccupied with figuring out the network of local and familial relationships within households, on farms, in the market, church and public house, between kin, neighbours and friends, augur the

larger themes of farm family, economy and community, with which Arensberg and Kimball became consumed. In the first year of field work, understanding the Irish class system, and the connections between political party allegiances, professional and informal associations and class mobility, is a preoccupation of the anthropologists – indeed one that persists throughout their time in Ireland. Despite extensive correspondence, their general analyses of the class system is not now known, as the later published work and their reputation is focused on the small farmer class in the main. Arensberg writes to Warner and Kimball from Clonmel, Co Tipperary, November 27th, no year noted. Clonmel offers a point of contrast to Ennis and their investigations there. *It is now month since I left you all and about time to make a general report of what has happened…Well here I am back again in Clonmel for a continuation visit. The first time I stayed three days and drove round most of the time with Paddy Meghen who was making inspections of his new bailliwick here. I met various people including a bankmanager, the county engineer, a local doctor, a dispensary doctor, the home assistance officer…I am scheduled to-morrow for intensive investigation of the rate books and am going with the agricultural officer and get in with a few farmers. I haven't much control over the selction so far, having to take what comes, but in the town I begin to know my way about as I have already charted the whole place out and with the help of several editions of the newspaper and Thom's Directory of Ireland I have a pretty good index to those in business and in the professions and in official position which makes the whole of the upper middle and lower upper classes. It is too early to tell what will come of it and interviewing has just begun, but from a geographical point of view it becomes clear that the set up as far as segregation of business place, residence, type of house, type of shop and so on the same conditions pertain as in Ennis…The tie-ins between country and town are*

much the same, there is the same finger development and as far as one can tell from newspaper obituaries and from interviews there is the same type of drift inward and in-marriage into shops etc.[xiv] These letter 'reports' provide an insight not only into theoretical interests but also into the everyday practices of the anthropologists observing and familiarising themselves with the culture, economy, religion, class structure and politics of Irish society.

Letters of introduction are also a feature of the private correspondence. The embossed calling card with the lavishly printed name of the owner is enclosed in a diminuitive but heavy cream envelope, introduces Arensberg 'who is spending the holiday season alone in Ireland. Another recipient is urged to 'show him some fun'. Arensberg's family background is one of industrial wealth and property ownership and the resultant network of familial connections were made available to him in Europe. A letter of introduction to author, physician and prominent member of the Irish literary revival movement, Oliver St John Gogarty, for example is in the archive. The private and personal letters home to parents, family, loved ones and friends reveal the displacement keenly felt as the young Arensberg resigned himself to a long, cold winter in Clare, aware of the intellectual, physical and emotional challenges of coming to know and understand a culture both similar and strange. The expression of intimate thoughts is reserved for those who will read his regular missives from a hopefully sympathetic disposition. *Dearest Peggie…Meanwhile I must admit that I do miss you and you especially out of all the things that I left behind, like the very devil. You'd laugh if you could see me, especially in the dejected privacy of my own hotel room. It is so cold in the morning that I lie awake quite a time, trying to make up my mind to put the feet out and on the floor. I sleep every night curled around a hot*

water bottle of metal, a godsend but a poor substitute for better things. It is totally unresponsive as you can imagine though not impassive – because by morning it has turned a terrible metal cold.[xv] The anticipation of receiving letters from home is recorded, reminding us of a different era in which news travelled slowly, and the extent to which the anthropologist was physically and socially remote from all that was familiar. *It is just a month since I set sail and since we had that glorious day together in New York and yet it seems a terrible age… I don't go into Clare (Ennis) for another week, so I don't know what has happened to anyone, not having had a single letter of any sort. They are piling up in Ennis, at least I hope so, for I want to have a regular feast when I arrive there a week from now and read them all.* [xvi]

Insert illustration 1 here

Fig 1: Letters of Introduction, Photo Anne Byrne.

The personal demands on adopting the role of the anthropogist in a new setting are revealed as Arensberg describes the contrast between his private and public personae. *I have finally settled down in Ennis and hope to get something definite accomplished. I will be here now for the next two months probably. It is going to be difficult, partly through my own psychological difficulties, partly because of intrinsic ones. But it will be over soon and I'll have the satisfaction at least of having tried my best…Through the day I am alright but as always here I am driving myself to take hold of a person or situation so that it will be of use to my work or else I am sitting around exhausted, alone and ruing the day I ever set out. I'm afraid I am over-colouring the picture, its really not too bad and everybody is very pleasant to me. But I wonder sometimes what*

impression I must make, a fellow consumed with energetic good fellowship, full of interest, ready to listen to anybody on any subject, and the next glum, speechless (for after a day of it, fatigue leaves me so tired stuttering sets in, worse than ever before, a bad sign) and retiring – for after the day of it I'll hide out, seeking privacy for thoughts and my own life.[xvii]

On another occasion, Kimball writes about the difficulty of accurately recording the richness of the stories he is told, depending only on his memory. *This skethchy account is the result of one of the greatest disappointments I felt in this work. Here was Danny giving me word for word his whole interpretation of the ritual and symbolism of the mass, and I wasnt able to take it down, and fondly thinking I could remember it the next day, I discover to my horror that this is about all that is left of it except the nebulous impressions which must serve to set off another train like this one some day, to be better recorded.*[xviii] Though there are exceptions, in this period in which social anthropology is growing as an academic discipline, anthropologists and other researchers did not usually write about their methodology in practice. The trials and challenges of fieldwork or the revealation of internal dispositions, sentiments and thoughts was not encouraged. Through an analysis of letters in the archives, this history can begin to be appreciated.

Narrative analysis of letters

Though widely used as sources in historical, literary and biographical research, the problematic status of letters as reliable, representative documentary evidence of relationships, practices or even as referential accounts of events in time is much written about (Stanley 2004, Jolly and Stanley 2005, Halldórsdóttir 2007). What can

the researcher make of a letter? What is the basis for interpreting the meaning of the account? Having only one side of the correspondence, working with partial and incomplete stories, having little biographical information on the lives of the correspondents, not knowing how to decode what the in-text and personal judgements and references to persons, places or events might mean or how to gauge the relationship between correspondents, pose significant challenges to researchers interested in letters. Ethical dilemmas arise concerning the lack of direct consent from the author to use the contents of a letter for research, despite the collection being placed in an archive. Revealing the identity of the author of letters or those written about, particularly if they are not public figures, is also problematic.[xix] Halldórsdóttir (2007) notes that relatives can be concerned about what is written about their forebears; the sensitive researcher will respect the signatory, the adressee and the topic of the letter evaluating what information is relevant for the research. Other shortcomings of using letters in research include the unavoidable clumsiness of language as expressed in text; letters are empty of the dynamic, immediate, interactional and non-verbal cues we rely on so heavily in making an interpretation of what is said and meant. A letter written in 1930 but read in 2009 provokes immediate interpretation in the context of the present. Caution is advised. What is not known about the history, relationship and social contexts of the author and recipient of the letter is far greater than what can be inferred from text on a page.

Stanley (2004) frames the letter and correspondence as text and an interpersonal process of communication.[xx] For Stanley, letters mirror features of all social interaction, being dialogical: communications between people based on turn-taking and reciprocity. They are also perspectival; …their structure and content changes

according to the particular recipient and the passing of time. Letters have emergent properties, with own preoccupations, conventions, ethics, a form that is universally recognizable but which can be subverted by individual practice.[xxi] Given these characteristics, a narrative approach to the analysis of letters analysis is useful. Slow to filter into the social and human disciplines, the importance of narrative and storied ways of knowing for framing, understanding and interpreting experience and organising knowledge of the world is now widely recognised (Cortazzi 2001, Bruner 2002, Mishler 1986). Hinchman and Hinchman (1997) advise that narrative (stories) in the human sciences should be defined provisionally as discourse with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way for a definite audience and thus offers insights about the world and/or people's experiences of it (xvi). A narrative can also be undertsood as a story with a plot involving a change in the situations or fortunes of a main character. Accordingly, the three key features of narratives are chronological, meaningful and social.

Narratives commonly found in texts and talk are part of the ongoing effort to make tentative, contingent sense of an experience or to share knowledge. Approaching the narrative analysis of letters as both a produced text and on-going interpretive process provides the opportunity to focus on the roles of narrative participants in constructing accounts and in negotiating perspectives and meanings (Cortazzi, 2001, 384). Advising researchers to pay attention to the functional, contextual and performative aspects of narrative, Cortazzi (2001) outlines four reasons for doing narrative analysis as part of ethnographic research. The first is a research concern with approaching the meaning of experience from the narrator's point of view. Secondly, narrative analysis can support an orientation to the representation of voices, majority and minority or

aspects of speech that reflect corporate, organisational, professional interests as well as private, personal or familial interests. Narrative analysis offers the insider's view of a situation or professional occupation, proffering a public profile to the human qualities of personal or professional practices. This aspect emerges in the evaluations of stories which may stress such humane values as love, dedication, patience, enthusiasm, sacrifice, struggle through hard work and humour (Cortazzi, 2001, p387). Fourthly in doing narrative analysis, the techniques and strategies that writers use to tell their story are brought into awareness.

Despite shortcomings and complexities, letters are useful texts with which to work, particularly over a series of interchanges. Interested in the voices, professional and personal perspectives of correspondents, in how research relationships are co-constructed and manipulated and in the human qualities evoked in writing relationships, I focus on a category of Survey letters that deserve closer scrutiny. Both Arensberg and Kimball engaged in a research strategy that may have been novel in its time – the use of the letter to gather additional data from informants after the anthropologists had returned to the US to write their doctoral theses and publications.[xxii] The bulk of these letters are written from 1933 to 1937 with one or two in the 1950s and one from 1976. What kind of information did the anthropologists seek and from whom? How effective was this request to engage informants in further research and letter-writing activities? What responses did they receive? What were the local and personal consequences of this strategy to enagage informants in missive relations? What can be learned about field work relations?

Missive Relations

Writing to Kimball from the Queen's Hotel in Ennis, Arensberg comments, *You seem to be spreading sunshine and light with your letters to various people here, four or five of them seemed pretty gleeful at getting letters from you.*[xxiii] Kimball has returned to the US to make sense of the material gathered on town and country life in Clare and writes to informants seeking further information and clarification on observations and events. A small farmer, writing in 1936, explains credit relations between shopkeepers and farmers from his own experience. *You asked me what is meant by gombeenism. Well I will tell you. Supposing you know you know the most of the shopkeepers in Ennis. I will give you myself for instance I am dealing with say Malones I could be dealing there for years their was a bill of five pounds in me there. I used pay two pounds raise couple of bags the bill was up again to five another day I would pay the five. I wanted stuff they would give stuff that would raise the bill again and so on I was never clear. They wanted me to leave them my whole years produce and why not when I was not clear. If I went to town for a half sack of flour and got it at a shilling cheaper at any other house and they to find it out I would have an attorney letter before a week when I did not leave the money to themselves they are all right going robbers so the finish up of all of them is to go to the bad and to the devil because they are not being honest so that is gombeenism.*[xxiv] His letter details his customary obligation to the credit system and the consequences in law should he default on his debts. He vividly communicates his indignation for shopkeepers charging excessive rates to debtors, who are obliged to continue to trade with them – precisely because of the obligation of their debts.

As proprietor and owner of *The Copper Jug*, public house, grocery and stable yard for country people coming to sell at the markets and buy from the merchandisers of

Ennis, Edward Kerin was a significant informant for Survey team members, who took regular refuge in his hostelry. Kerin introduced the country men and women, urging them to tell their stories to the anthropologists. Kerin advised Arensberg and Kimball on the villages and townlands to be visited and the possibilities of accommodation to be found in the remoter parts of Clare. Kerin is a regular and willing correspondent with both Arensberg and Kimball from 1933 to 1936.[xxv] *Dear Mr Arensberg, I wish to acknowledge the receipt of your letter and I must assure you that I felt very happy when I read it through. One thing I felt especially was: you showed sincerity and friendship in a marked way right throughout your epistle. You spoke as it were from the heart and your spirit seemed to be in every line.*[xxvi]

The substance of Kerin's long and richly descriptive letters concern the apprenticeship system, the employment of shop assistants, marrying into a shop, and rituals associated with walking the shop, descriptions of the lives of single women as shopkeepers, shopkeeper-customer etiquette and the economic and familial relationships between town and country people. He explains why shopkeepers prefer to recruit country lads as apprentices. *Some employers will not take a Towns boy – reason; being polished up and cultured a bit, the country lad gets preference, (1) he can be more easily bent to the employers will, in doing many small jobs outside of his new calling (2) it is expected that people will give their trade where the boy is employed and also his folk will canvas their friends to support the House. In other words its better business to get in the country lad.*[xxvii] Young men between the ages of 19 and 20 sought to serve their time in the drapery, grocery, hardwear and chemist shops of Ennis, learning a new trade for a period of three to four years. Legal contracts were signed, the parents paid a fee of 30 to 60 pounds to the owner of the

business and the apprentice received 5 shillings a week for his labour. He usually lived with his employers who were in *loco parentis.* Kerin was in no doubt that the indentured apprenticeship system *was a very good one* particularly for controlling and restraining young men as *other wise he was a free lance to run away when he choose to go, (away) back home where he was perhaps not wanted, or join the army or become a corner boy. In such cases (runaway) the employer can have the lad brought back by force if necessary or by law.*[xxviii] Through his correspondence Kerin, like others, is pleased to be of service to the anthropologists. *Don't spare me if I can be useful at any time to you. It will be a pleasure to me only to look up anything you want in reason.*[xxix] Based on their own experiences and observations, they provide insider information and *in situ* examples of ongoing communal relations from a distinctive and personal perspective. Perhaps this was the first time small farmers and shopkeepers had been requested to observe the lives around them from an anthropological perspective. Bishop Fogarty also supplied Arensberg with information on priests' salaries and clerical matters. Arensberg and Kimball provide the questions, the writers of letters lived the answers. We can only assume that on reading these first-hand verbatim accounts of lives observed at close quarters Arensberg and Kimball knew that they had struck a seam of gold.

Insert illustraion 2 here

Fig 2: Informant letters. Photo Anne Byrne.

However not all of the correspondents were as keen to comply with these missive requests. Dermot Foley, director of the county library, explains to Kimball - *Well*

there you are. I didn't reply to your letter requesting photographs– deliberately. I couldn't hold a camera and apart from that it was a tall order. Oh! Much too tall. What the devil were you thinking about anyway? You couldn't imagine me asking a fellow to talk on that list and get a 20% result, could you? And even if I did he'd want Trade Union wages which I should say you would not smile on. Your plan should have been to write to the Clare Champion and get them done there. I know you wanted those pictures badly, but it was out of the question as far as I was personally concerned.[xxx] Foley was a regular correspondent whom the anthropologists had befriended, well situated as he was in local and national literary and cultural society. Foley forthrightly and with humour refuses to do research on their behalf. Turning the request around, he seeks to secure US funds to support an Irish literary periodical. *By the way I am about to ask you a favour. In fact its not a favour now that I think of it as you will be interested. There is a new magazine coming out next month called Ireland To-Day. I became interested in it, after a tout of theirs told me that their would be no kow-towing to Church or State. Of course I've heard all that before but I put them on to Frank O'Connor, Seán O Faoláin etc and they will write for the paper. It is a good opportunity for intellectual Ireland (God help it!) if it can be worked at all….What I want you to do is to see if anyone around Harvard would spend a bob on it. It would be something on the lines of the Irish Statesman – George Russell's paper – though it remains to be seen whether it will be as good.*[xxxi]

The extent of the demands made of informants can be gleaned from a draft of a letter from Arensberg to George O'Brien on the Irish banking system. In addition to looking for a list of published works and reports on banking, he asks a series of questions on the differences between banks and agricultural credit corporations, the

conditions under which loans are extended to farmers, types of collateral security required, the consequences for banks in extending credit to farmers and shopkeepers, a list of the directors and owners of banks, where shares are held and an analysis of the relationship between Irish and English banks. Arensberg asks O'Brien for the names of managers *and oral sources* with whom he could talk about this, *so intimate a part of banking procedure and experience.*[xxxii] O'Brien replies that the Banking Commission itself is seeking such information. In these two instances, the correspondents candidly refuse the onerous invitation to become missive informants to the Harvard-Irish Survey. Why they decline we can only conjecture. Their perceived relationship to the anthropologists, based on similarity of class, occupation and income, may have been primarily social and cultural, a class-based interaction in the clubs and societies of Ennis. Arguably, they refused because they could; and with the knowldege that their social, friendly relationships with the anthropologists did not depend on acquiesence to the request.

So for those informants who continued to supply Arensberg and Kimball with detailed insider information about town and country life, what was the incentive or motivation? For Danny Bourke, the prospect of being an informant presented an opportunity to add to his set of social relationships and perhaps to improve his limited economic prospects in 1930s Ireland. In describing his work among the people of Ennis , in a letter home, Arensberg portrays his impressions of Bourke. *My job here is to live with them, observe them, and work with them – in fact I'm sort of reporter at large with a scientific kink, and it is an engrossing job which keeps me running from high to low among them, from the local bishop, a benign old prelate given to unexpected and sometime embarassing, for his parishoners) political outbursts, and*

the district judge, a clear eyed young puritan, to Bourke, labourer and handyman at fairs, who though he rolls his eyes up to heaven in conversation and is devout enough to be a daily communicant, has an inexhaustible fund of local anecdote, history, scandal and opinion…[xxxiii] Becoming an informant to the Survey provided Bourke with an opportunity to weave himself into a social and professional setting from which he might otherwise be excluded because of the constraints imposed on someone of his class by Ennis society. Bourke possibly began to re-value his own stock of mundane knowledge, understanding that his extensive networks of contacts, insider perspective on labour disputes, union affairs and the stories about his own community were much valued by the visiting Americans. When the anthropologists left, the relationship with Bourke was carried on through letter writing.

From his letters it is clear that Bourke had much to relate and was a willing, literate informant to the Survey. Writing in black ink, in sloping clear manuscript on cream paper cropped to a standard size, he describes himself as union secretary, active in the local labour union. He provides privileged access to an urban work- and occupational setting unfamiliar and closed to the anthropologists. Bourke's letters contain detailed reports of particular incidents, focusing on the conditions of labour and the thinly-veiled political hostilities between the opposing forces of the Civil War. His first letter opens with an account of a dispute involving unionised and non-unionised workers in which blows are exchanged, followed by prosecutions and a trial. He outlines the circumstances which led to a three day strike, a closure of the council quarry at the centre of the dispute and the attempts to find a reasonable solution to the affair. Bourke discretely checks that Arensberg is acquainted with all the facts surrounding the violent death of the son of a union member, the custodial

sentences imposed on the assailant and the consequent effects in the county elections. He brings news of the the first meeting and composition of the urban council. Bourke's reports of incidents are without judgement, refraining from evaluation. The first letter is concluded with an extension of greetings to other members of the Survey in the US and a revelation about his romance and plans to marry. He conveys his attachment to Arensberg and his willingness to be of service to the Survey. *Well now Mr Conrad I would like to have the option of calling you by your first name without the prefix but I must respect convention for the moment although I know you have no use for it. I always felt happy in your company and will at all times be only too pleased to be of service to you in anything you require me knowing that on your part that it is reciprocal.*[xxxiv] Bourke reminds Arensberg that theirs is a relationship based on mutuality. What it is that he expects or is promised in exchange for information on current affairs is not clear at this point in the correspondence. In signing off he reminds Arensberg of his forthcoming marriage while admitting to a reluctance to write about his personal life. *I am sorry that I have not something thrilling to relate hoping that you will not find the epistle too dry. I will now leave it to Mr Kemble to tell you all concerning my romance as you know I am a bit shy in expressing my delicate affairs on paper or we will have a long chat when next we meet. I have reserved the two drinks that I was to have from you last Christmas until we meet again…*[xxxv] But it is the coda, the last sentence in the letter, that provides the clue to understanding Bourke's missive intentions. Capturing the underlying theme of the letter, evoking the relationship between anthropologist and informant, Bourke has not forgotten the two drinks Arensberg promised him. He waits in expectation of the anthropologist's return to Ireland.

A number of months later, the proportion of event reports compared to personal news is inverted in the second letter. Though Arensberg has not yet replied Bourke informs him that *I was expecting that we would have you back again this winter. I hope to see you in Ireland again.*[xxxvi] He provides news of the building of the labourers' cottages in Ennis, the first introduction of unemployment assistance for workers, and he explains the basis of 'means testing' to qualify for the new social welfare schemes. Bourke provides Arensberg with first-hand news of the establishment and practices of the welfare institutions of the new state. This second letter reveals biographical details of his personal circumstances rather than further information on social conditions. *I am sure Mr Kemble has already informed you that I am about to change my condition in life this year. Well to be candid I am intended to get married on November 14th with Gods help. I felt I should let you know as I am sure you will be interested in my welfare. It is about time for me although it is a serious undertaking more especially when one is not too well placed with regard to worldly goods. However we have got to trust in Gods goodness and do the best we can.*[xxxvii] The theme of mutual interest in one another's affairs is repeated in this letter. Bourke consistently expresses interest in the welfare of Survey team members, wishing them *the best of good luck and success.*[xxxviii] He expects that this interest is reciprocated.

There is a break in the archive record and by the third letter dated September 1935 it is clear that Arensberg is in correspondence with a request to Bourke to identify the names of all current members of the labourers' union. Having conveyed good wishes to Arensberg and his new bride on behalf of himself and his wife, Bourke complies with the request. He also provides an account of the progress of the slum clearance schemes and his eagerness to improve his own poor living conditions.[xxxix] Houses in

the clearance areas are without water, sanitation or lighting, providing only very basic shelter for many families. He recalls the time when Arensberg visited him and though ashamed of his circumstances he allows that the anthropologist has a broader understanding of individual and social conditions. *They are now preparing to start to build 250 more houses in Second Clearance Area. I am included in that. I was not entitled to one of the present cottages as I am not in First Clearance Area. My wife felt very much disappointed as we are very anxious to get out of the locality we are in at present. I had to trample on human respect the day I brought you down to visit us. However you understood the nature of things.*[xl] This is a prelude to the remainder of the letter. Bourke hopes that Arensberg is satisfied with the information supplied and reminds him of his reliance on friends for paid work. *It may be a little while before we meet again. I am not as you know permanently occupied however I can manage alright with the various little remunerative jobs from my friends from time to time*.[xli] He also passes on an indirect admonishment to Kimball, while wishing him well. *Give my best to L. Warner and Mr Kemble he never wrote to me, however out of sight out of mind. I hope he is well.*[xlii]

The final letter in the archive has no date but judging from the contents it is likely to have been written in 1936. Bourke is no longer in the informant's role and supplies no new information in this letter. He seeks acknowledgement from Arensberg that he received the list of union members as requested. He presents his complaint at first through his friends. *My friends here are very much surprised at no little appreciation been shown to me for information that I supplied you with while on your research work at Ennis*. He gives an examples of another assistant to the physical anthropologists of the Survey whom he knows, who was *handsomely rewarded for*

services. And then on his own behalf he directly requests *some recompense. I am sorry to find myself obliged to bring this to your notice but circumstances make it so and I would be really obliged should you bring it to the the notice of your authorities that a man in Ennis in poor circumstances rendered you some service that is worth appreciation. Mr Kemble one day remarked at the Hotel that ye would send me a present on the occasion of my marriage but that was all I heard of it on his going away it was a cold goodbye. I never heard from him since.* Bourke ends this letter trusting that Arensberg will understand the request and re-iterates his offer to be a trusted informant to the Survey in the future. *I trust that you will not think this ill of me but I would be very grateful should you secure for me some recompense as I need it very much at present. Should you do so you may count on me for any further information you may need from time to time.*

A trajectory of Bourke's role as informant can be gleaned from his professional and personal biography – at least to the extent that can be known from an analysis of his letters to Arensberg. His location as secretary to the labourers' union endows him with privileged knowledge and insight into the internal workings of the union and the power of group solidarity. He is also aware of the role of the union in engaging with public and institutional structures and relations that regulate and influence the recruitment and wage conditions of working men. The labour dispute and three-day strike that he refers to in his letters, for example, focuses on union disatisfaction with recruitment of non-unionised labour by the county council at the local quarry. The professional context in which Bourke operates seeks to improve conditions of employment for the working classes; and to move away from grace and favour and the use of influence as a basis for recruitment, particularly by public bodies. And yet

he finds himself precisely in this relation with the anthropologists of the Survey; a relation he seeks to renegotiate as reciprocal without knowing whether the reward, monetary or otherwise, will be forthcoming. In order to request some recompense, Bourke reveals more and more of his personal biography, his intimate affairs, to justify his request for money. We learn of his constant movement from address to address, his journey towards marriage, his poor economic prospects, his impoverished living conditions, his initial disappointment at not being rehoused as expected and his reliance on his friends for paid work. Throughout the series of letters his repeated and muted attempts to request some form of payment for information provided are evident. By the final letter, there is a change in the balance from local Survey relevant information to personal information and a distinct alteration in tone. He finally finds the wherewithall to ask directly for financial reward for the information provided.

His motivation in becoming a missive informant could be read as driven by his poor economic circumstances, being largely unemployed and having to provide for a family. Perhaps he does not want to lose face or the status conferred by his new-found identity vis-a-vis others? He has discussed his situation with his friends and acquaintences, sharing his intention to write to the anthropologists to seek recompense. Perhaps his motivation to write and request payment for services rendered is based on his understanding of social relations as having reciprocal elements – even if it is only a few drinks at Christmas – reciprocity as a means to preserve his self-respect and sense of his own worth. In his letters, he is concerned to maintain his valued relationship with the anthropologists and retain his identity as Survey informant. Bringing to bear his understanding of reciprocity in social relations

and attention to the human values of trust, friendship, co-operation and willing service on behalf of another, he actively seeks to persuade the anthropologists of his deserving case. He works hard to realise a perceived opportunity. The outcome is unknown.

A *caveat* is necessary at this point. It is clear from the enthusiasm of those who either received letters from or provided letters of introduction and ongoing research information to the anthropologists that Arensberg and Kimball skilfully initiated and maintained warm field work relations with research informants. Many informants commented on their close personal relations with the anthropologists offering to be of service to the researchers as reflected in the phrase *'don't spare me'*. Bourke is no exception to this. While it is tempting to conclude from his letters that he may have been treated unfairly, we have no way of knowing whether or not this is the case. He is not alone in requesting payment for information collected – other missive informants made similar requests of the Americans. But it is the vividness and immediacy of the letter form that provokes emotional and moral responses; on reflection, it becomes clear that, in this case at least, we simply lack sufficient evidence to justify them. Perhaps this particular exchange indicates certain flaws in Arensberg's and Kimball's field relations; but perhaps it does not - we do not know enough about this particular correspondent to tell. This highlights the particularity of working with material of this kind. Letters are extraordinarily illuminating within the range they cover, but this range can be patchy and uneven, full of light and shade. Nonetheless they are a valuable research reservoir, powerfully evocative of the community of events and relationships in which the Harvard-Irish survey was embedded.

A focus on a selection of the professional and private letters of the anthropologists reveals the importance of the correspondence to the initiation, maintenance and evolution of research relationships of the Harvard-Irish Survey. An examination of the contents of the letters reveals they are deployed in the service of the Survey for practical and utilitarian purposes (eg. seeking funds, descriptive reports of research activities completed, planning next steps, analysis of interviews). Letters of introduction are sought from influential persons as a seal of approval for the work of the Survey and to secure informed local contacts. Collegial and intellectual relationships evolve through the medium of the letter. Theoretical schema and arguments for the analysis of Irish society are rehearsed and worked out through the exchange of letters. A more emotional, personal register is evoked in the letters home.

By engaging research informants in missive relations, Arensberg and Kimball deployed a novel research stategy in their ethnographic study. Research informants continued to provide the anthropologists with detailed accounts of Irish town and country life. A narrative analysis of the letters reveal informants' perspectives and immediate concerns, the situated knowledges of the workings of a particular profession or practice, described in terms of own experience and often in vernacular speech. We learn too of the pressing economic and social circumstances for those at the bottom of the class system and of the socio-demographic and political contexts in which the anthropologists carried out their work. All informants were keen to preserve their relationship with the anthropologists. Such was their impact on the local population. The skill, warmth and perhaps imperfections of the anthropologists' field work relations are evident in the letters but caution is advised when reading

letters not addressed to us. Though the selection of and contact with informants is crucial for providing insider information on the observed group or community, little attention is usually paid to informant voices, perspectives and practices. These letters also fill that gap to some extent.

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[i] I wish to acknowledge Ricca Edmondson and Colm Byrne for generous advice and the IRCHSS Senior Research Fellowship (2006-7) scheme which supported the research from which this article is drawn.

[ii] For a detailed discussion and theoretical overview of the historiography of the Harvard-Irish Survey, see Byrne, Anne, Edmondson, Ricca and Varley, Tony, 2001, 'Arensberg and Kimball and anthropological research in Ireland', Introduction to the third edition in Arensberg, Conrad M., Kimball, S.T., *Family and Community in Ireland*, Ireland, CLASP Press: 1-101.

[iii] See for example archives held at the Peabody Museum Harvard Univerity, Teachers College Columbia University NY, the Newberry Library Chicago and Rockefeller Archive Center NY.

[iv] All letters are transcribed here as written including spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors.

[v] Professor Earnest Hooton (1887-1954), Anthropology Department, Harvard University, was the director of the Harvard Irish Study and is considered to be the founder of physical anthropology in the US.

[vi] William Lloyd Warner (1898-1970) was responsible for the Survey in Ireland. He is the instigator of community studies in the US, first devised in Newburyport.

[vii] Extract from a letter by Eamon de Valera, leader of Fianna Fáil, the party that came to power in 1932. His motivation for supporting a 'scientific' study was mirrored in the extensive efforts deployed by the Irish State to create a national culture and a distinctive Irish identity. The revival of the Irish language and Gaelic games, for example, were part of that project.

[viii] The Anglo-Irish Treaty (1921) marked the end of the War of Independence, a conflict between the Irish Republican Army and the British Government in Ireland. Northern Ireland subsequently opted out of the Irish Free State. A Civil War quickly followed, led by pro and anti-Treaty factions, ending with the defeat of the latter.

[ix] Cited in Byrne et al, pXL. Warner to Hooton, July 26, 1932. Correspondence Box 21.6, Hooton 995-1, Peabody HU.

[x] Cited in Byrne et al, pXL11. Warner to Hooton, July 26, 1932. Correspondence Box 21.6, Hooton 995-1, Peabody HU.

[xi] Letter from Arensberg to Walsh, Nov 27, 1932, VG Arensberg, Private Collection NY.

[xii] Extract from Irish Field Diaries of Conrad Arensberg, Book 1, 14-19 March 1933, Interviews pp 8-76 transcribed by Anne Byrne from VG Arensberg, Private Collection NY.

[xiii] There is some overlap between the collecting activities of the Irish Folklore Commission (IFC) and the Harvard-Irish Survey. Both were interested in oral accounts of folklore, customs and traditional practices in Clare. Though the IFC and Ó Duilearga informally supported the Survey, no formal academic partnership evolved. The Swedish ethnological survey of Ireland conducted by Ake Campbell and

Albert Eskerod was conducted under the auspices of the IFC; see Patricia Lysaght, 2009 for an excellent account of the IFC in Clare.

[xiv] Letter from Arensberg (not signed) to Warner and Kimball, Nov 27th no year, VG Arensberg, Private Collection NY.

[xv] Letter from Arensberg to Walsh, Dec 9, 1935, VG Arensberg, Private Collection NY.

[xvi] Letter from Arensberg to Walsh, Nov 27, 1932, VG Arensberg, Private Collection NY.

[xvii] Ibid.

[xviii] Interview, p35, December 13 and 15 (no year). Box 2, Folder 7, Ayer Manuscript Collection, the Newberry Library, Chicago.

[xix] Correspondents' names have not been altered in the letter excerpts utilized here.

[xx] Stanley, 2004, p202-203.

[xxi] Ibid, p217.

[xxii] While letters are used as evidence and source material for a number of classical ethnographic studies (see Thomas and Znaniecki, 1918-1920), engaging a range of informants to provide specific information over a period of time appears to be a distinctive research strategy of the Harvard-Irish Survey.

[xxiii] Letter from Arensberg to Kimball, Jan 29, 1935, VG Arensberg, Private Collection NY.

[xxiv] Letter from Callinan to Kimball Jan 25, 1936, VG Arensberg, Private Collection NY. Part cited also in Arensberg and Kimball op cit. p404.

[xxv] A letter written in 1976 to Arensberg from other members of the Kerin family is also in the archive.

[xxvi] Letter from Kerin to Arensberg Dec 9, VG Arensberg, Private Collection NY.

[xxvii] Letter from Kerin to Kimball Jan 26, 1935,VG Arensberg, Private Collection NY.

[xxviii] Ibid.

[xxix] Ibid.

[xxx] Letter from Foley to Kimball, May 11, 1936, VG Arensberg, Private Collection NY.

[xxxi] Ibid.

[xxxii] Draft letter from Arensberg to O'Brien, nd. VG Arensberg, Private Collection NY.

[xxxiii] Letter from Arensberg to Walsh, Dec 21, 1932, VG Arensberg, Private Collection NY. Also cited in Byrne et al, pXLIX.

[xxxiv]Letter from Bourke to Arensberg, Jul 6, 1934, VG Arensberg, Private Collection NY.

[xxxv] Ibid.

[xxxvi] Letter from Bourke to Arensberg, Oct 27 1934, VG Arensberg, Private Collection NY.

[xxxvii] Ibid.

[xxxviii] Ibid.

[xxxix] The slum clearance schemes continued in Ennis until the 1970s.

[xl] Letter from Bourke to Arensberg, Cornmarket, Ennis, Sept 20 1935, VG Arensberg, Private Collection NY.

[xli] Ibid.

[xlii] Ibid.

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