‘Wright By Her Own Hand’: Recipe Exchange and Women’s Kinship Networks in Ascendancy Ireland, 1690–1800

Madeline Shanahan

University of New England, Armidale, NSW

Abstract

From the late seventeenth century, women of the elite classes in Ireland began to share culinary and medicinal information with loved ones across the country and, frequently, across the Irish Sea. This article discusses the practice of recipe exchange in Ascendancy Ireland, drawing on domestic archives primarily in the keeping of the National Library of Ireland. It examines the roles and functions of both letters and family volumes, as well as the relationships between these sources. As the British sphere of influence expanded and more and more women crossed the Irish Sea to marry into Ascendancy families, culinary and medicinal information was circulated regularly and rapidly through letter writing. This information, once ‘approved’, often made its way into bound collections, sometimes passed through families as heirloom objects or gifted upon marriage. Like letters, recipe books allowed women to stay connected across distances, but they also provided connections through generations, and their tangible nature enhanced their value considerably. This article argues that the gendered practice of recipe exchange allowed Ascendancy women to bridge geographical and even generational divides, providing active care for one another and continually reaffirming their kinship networks. Whereas previous studies have focused on broader patterns of cultural, gendered and culinary change, this article will focus on the value and function of recipes in the personal and domestic sphere, exploring how recipe circulation helped women to maintain their connections over generations and expanding distances.

From the late seventeenth century, exchanging, sharing and circulating recipes and domestic knowledge became an important way for elite women in Ireland to maintain their connections to family members and friends from whom they were separated by time and ever-increasing geographical distances. Many of these women were the descendants of the 'New English' who had arrived in Ireland in the wake of the Tudor conquest, while others came directly from Britain to marry into established families. Recipes—known more accurately as 'receipts' until the nineteenth century—allowed them to conjure familiar tastes of home and concoct trusted cures.¹ In a context like Ireland, which was distant, foreign and potentially hostile, such lines of communication were crucial.

This article examines the two primary ways in which recipes circulated between households in this period: through letter writing and by the gifting of heirloom volumes. Letters helped to bridge growing distances and create a sense of immediate daily support for one another. Once the recipes and remedies had been tried, tested and 'approved', they were often committed to bound family collections. Evidence from the National Library of Ireland's collections shows that women carried their family recipe books with them to new homes and continued to add to them over generations. Both letter writing and bound volumes were central to women's role in caring for their families throughout this period. In practical terms, they helped women to access information critical to the health and wellbeing of their families, but they were also an important mechanism for women to maintain connections to family and identity. By writing, exchanging, circulating, recording and archiving culinary and medicinal information, women were able to maintain an active presence in one another's daily lives and were able to bridge both geographical and generational separation. In the context of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Ireland, which was both foreign and politically turbulent, maintaining these connections to loved ones may have provided an important sense of comfort and connection. It was also an important gendered practice that helped Ascendancy women to rapidly entrench English culinary cultures and norms. While previous studies have considered recipes' roles as agents of colonial change in detail, this article will look in finer detail at the value and function they had on a more personal and familial level.²

1 For the sake of clarity, I have adopted the contemporary term 'recipe' in this paper, in line with other leading scholars in the field. See, for example, Michelle DiMeo and Sara Pennell, eds, *Reading & Writing Recipe Books 1550–1800* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

2 Madeline Shanahan, *Manuscript Recipe Books as Archaeological Objects: Text and Food in the Early Modern World* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015).

Debates in Recipe Studies

In order to understand some of the distinct themes that emerge in relation to Irish recipe books, it is useful to look to the broader literature from Britain and the United States, where over the last two decades several major contributions have been made to the field of recipe history. These studies have progressed from using recipes simply as sources that can tell us about food and domestic life, to understanding them as sources that can also tell us a great deal about the lives, worldviews, experiences and relationships of their authors. Janet Theophano's *Eat My Words: Reading Women's Lives Through the Cookbooks They Wrote* (2002) was among the earliest major works addressing women's recipe writing, analysing both manuscripts and printed forms of the genre from the United States and Britain. Whereas previous studies had used recipe books as sources for the study of food, Theophano shows that they were also an autobiographical genre, as well as communal registers through which women maintained collective legacies.³

The dual role of recipe books as places to write about the self and maintain kinship networks is one that has also been progressed by other leading scholars in the field and remains a central theme in discussions of their meaning.⁴ Gilly Lehmann's *The British Housewife: Cookery Books, Cooking and Society in Eighteenth Century Britain* (2003) is another benchmark study. Although Lehmann focuses on printed books rather than domestic manuscripts, her work highlights the cultural and gendered importance of cookery books in Britain, where they became extraordinarily popular and, unlike in other European countries, female authors soon dominated.⁵ Such themes are explored further in Michelle DiMeo and Sara Pennell's edited volume *Reading & Writing Recipe Books 1550–1800* (2013), which contains a number of papers that progress theory relating to household manuscripts more directly.⁶ DiMeo's work on authorship, attributions and

3 Janet Theophano, *Eat My Words: Reading Women's Lives through the Cookbooks They Wrote* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

4 Catherine Field, "'Many Hands Hands': Writing the Self in Early Modern Women's Recipe Books', in *Genre and Women's Life Writing in Early Modern England*, ed. Michelle M. Dowd and Julie A. Eckerle (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 49–63; Sara Pennell, 'Making Livings, Lives and Archives: Tales of Four Eighteenth-Century Archives', in *Reading & Writing Recipe Books*, ed. DiMeo and Pennell, 225–46.

5 Gilly Lehmann, *The British Housewife: Cookery Books, Cooking and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Devon: Prospect Books, 2003).

6 DiMeo and Pennell, *Reading & Writing Recipe Books*.

networks will be returned to in the following discussion, while Pennell's work explores materiality and the life cycle of manuscripts, considering how they help us to understand the world, perspectives and experiences of their authors.⁷ More recently, major contributions by Wendy Wall and Elaine Leong have addressed the role of recipes in early modern knowledge practices, connecting them as sources to early modern humanism and emergent scientific thought.⁸ Whereas recipe books were once used simply for the study of cookery, over the last 20 years they have come to be understood as objects that can tell us as much about their authors as they can about the food they ate.

This body of literature is critical to understanding the history of Irish recipe writing. Many of the patterns in the nature of the collections are the same, but the context in which they were produced was entirely different and has a significant bearing on their meaning. Until very recently, Irish manuscript recipe books have been a critically understudied genre, although over the last decade several significant contributions to the field have been made.⁹ Studies of Irish collections have found that, unlike other European locales, there was no medieval tradition of recipe writing. Unlike Britain, where we find fourteenth-century examples, recipe writing was not introduced to Ireland until the mid to late seventeenth century, increasing steadily in popularity over the course of the Georgian period.¹⁰ Some of the earliest examples are Dorothy Parsons' volume from the Birr Castle Archive, County Offaly, which was kept from 1665 to 1666, and two volumes in the collection of the Smythe Family of Barbavilla, County Westmeath, which appear to have been started in the 1660s or

7 Michelle DiMeo, 'Authorship and Medical Networks: Reading Attributions in Early Modern Manuscript Recipe Books', in *Reading & Writing Recipe Books*, ed. DiMeo and Pennell, 25–46; Pennell, 'Making Livings'.

8 Wendy Wall, *Recipes for Thought: Knowledge and Taste in the Early Modern English Kitchen* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Elaine Leong, *Recipes and Everyday Knowledge: Medicine, Science and the Household in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

9 Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Dorothy Cashman, 'Irish Culinary Manuscripts and Printed Cookbooks: A Discussion', *Petits Propos Culinaires*, no. 94 (2011): 81–101; Regina Sexton, 'Food and Culinary Cultures in Pre-Famine Ireland', in *Food and Drink in Ireland, Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy Section C*, ed. Elizabeth FitzPatrick and James Kelly (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2015), 257–306; Madeline Shanahan, "'Whipt with a Twig Rod': Irish Manuscript Recipe Books as Sources for the Study of Culinary Material Culture, c. 1660 to 1830", in *Food and Drink in Ireland*, ed. FitzPatrick and Kelly, 197–218; Shanahan, *Manuscript Recipe Books*; Madeline Shanahan, 'Dining on Words: Manuscript Recipe Books, Culinary Change and Elite Food Culture in Ireland, 1660–1830', *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies: the Journal of the Irish Georgian Society*, 15 (2012): 82–97.

10 Shanahan, *Manuscript Recipe Books*, 33–36.

late 1670s.¹¹ The authors who wrote them stemmed almost exclusively from the elite classes, including both 'New English' families who came to Ireland directly from Britain in this period, as well as more established families of Gaelic or 'Old English' origins who needed to rapidly adjust to the new social and political order, adopting key elements of English culture accordingly.

Recipe books in Ireland, then, were an imported cultural object introduced directly from Britain. We should therefore not be surprised that most studies have observed close similarities between English collections and those found in Irish archives. With the exception of excerpts in Continental European languages, the genre at this time was written exclusively in English, with no Irish language examples identified to date. Few recipes show distinctly 'Irish' or regional flavours, but rather dishes and remedies we would expect to see in houses of wealthy English families.

What makes Irish recipe books of this period distinct though, and what makes them warrant further dedicated study, is the *meaning* that they held as imported cultural objects. The sudden introduction of recipe writing into Ireland at precisely the same moment that it was undergoing profound political, economic, demographic, social and cultural upheaval is not a coincidence. As an instructional genre, recipe books are affective objects. They did not just reflect changes to culinary and gendered practice but were actively used to bring about that change. In an Irish context, where anglicisation was critical to the maintenance of power and standing, they were not simply sources that told women how to cook, they also entrenched and reinforced new culinary and gendered practices. This article builds on this understanding of recipes as agents of culinary and cultural change, looking more closely at their personal and domestic value and exploring what they meant to the women whose lives and families were involved in this broader colonial project.

11 Dorothy Parsons Receipt Book, Birr Castle Archive, Rosse Manuscript, A/17; Receipt book by unknown author, late seventeenth century, Papers of the Family of Smythe of Barbavilla, MS 11,688, National Library of Ireland (NLI); Receipt book by unknown author, mid to late seventeenth century, Papers of the Family of Smythe of Barbavilla, MS 41,603/2 (2 of 2), NLI.

Context, Class and Culture

In order to understand the meaning and significance of Irish recipe writing, we need to first understand the nature of the world in which these textual objects were produced. The period under review here followed in the wake of considerable violence and turbulence. The sixteenth-century Tudor reconquest of Ireland, the establishment of plantations, the rebellion of 1641, Cromwellian reprisals and Williamite Wars meant that the island had witnessed two centuries of violence, in which all aspects of culture, society, population and politics were restructured. This violence led to the dispossession of many Catholic landholders and ultimately to the wide-scale destruction of many aspects of Gaelic language, culture, religion and customs. The elite classes who rose to power in this period came to be known as the Protestant Ascendancy (or simply the 'Ascendancy') and were drawn primarily from 'New English' families who had come to Ireland from Britain from the sixteenth century on as part of the colonial regime. Some families of Gaelic and 'Old English' (Anglo-Norman) origin were able to maintain power and landholding status—religious conversion and cultural anglicisation were important political techniques for doing so.¹² Historian Jane Ohlmeyer has explained the significant and often overlooked role that women played in this process. Ohlmeyer argues that many established Gaelic and Old English families sought English brides in the hope that they would help their families to absorb English religion, language, customs and, importantly, culture as rapidly as possible.¹³ She cites Sir William Petty, writing in the 1670s, who stated that English brides would 'facilitate the transmuting of one people into another'.¹⁴

The anglicising agenda of the colonial regime in Ireland is critical to understanding imported culinary cultures in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the introduction of recipe writing. New families coming to Ireland from Britain from the early modern period on were able to rapidly entrench their culinary, medicinal and domestic cultures there, in part through the innovation of domestic recipe writing and circulation. As discussed, in the Irish context domestic recipe writing was an early modern innovation and cultural import, with no vernacular or medieval

12 For a detailed discussion of the familial, social and political origins of the Protestant Ascendancy and the anglicisation of the elite classes see Jane Ohlmeyer, *Making Ireland English: The Irish Aristocracy in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Yale University Press, 2012).

13 Ibid., 169–210.

14 Ibid., 170.

traditions. It was introduced as an English-language genre by families coming into Ireland in the midst of considerable turbulence and conflict in the mid to late seventeenth century and became rapidly entrenched as an elite practice in the following decades. Keeping recipe books and collections became an increasingly popular practice in Ascendancy households over the course of the eighteenth century, as English food and foodways became widespread and normalised amongst the elite classes. Importantly though, recipe books and manuscripts were not just sources that reflect this changing gastronomy but were themselves active tools used to help circulate English culinary and cultural norms, as well as new gendered practices.¹⁵

Analyses of the identity of the authors of Irish recipe manuscripts have shown that prior to the nineteenth century they were almost exclusively authored by women, primarily drawn from 'New English' families or those marrying into more established households. This mirrors the pattern in England and Britain more generally, where recipe writing was also a highly gendered activity.¹⁶ In Ireland, while the identity of many manuscript authors is unknown, there are no pre-Victorian examples that were demonstrably authored by a man. All volumes where the name of an author, owner or compiler is given connect them to women. It is of course possible that some of the anonymous authors were male, but the pattern of authorship is consistent enough to say that domestic recipe writing was clearly predominantly a female activity in Ireland, as it was in Britain. This does not mean that men did not have input into the family volume; indeed, there are clear examples showing that they did. Some examples of 'fair copies', discussed in more detail below, may have been penned by male scribes, and there are certainly examples of recipes and cures credited to male doctors or relations as the original source, but there are no Irish volumes clearly attributed to male authors or compilers found to date.¹⁷

Existing research demonstrating the cultural and gendered associations and significance of recipe writing in Ireland, and critical studies from comparable periods in Britain and America, serve as important background here.¹⁸ Whereas they have focused on broader patterns of cultural, gendered and culinary change, this article will now turn to recipes' value

15 Shanahan, *Manuscript Recipe Books*, 31–36.

16 See Lehmann, *The British Housewife*.

17 Shanahan, *Manuscript Recipe Books*, 31–33, 107–10.

18 Shanahan, *Manuscript Recipe Books*; Shanahan, 'Dining on Words'; DiMeo and Pennell, *Reading & Writing Recipe Books*; Lehmann, *The British Housewife*; Theophano, *Eat My Words*.

on a personal and domestic level, exploring how women used them to maintain their connections and familial identity across generations and over expanding distances.

Letter Writing

Anyone familiar with domestic archives dating to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries will know what prolific letter writers gentlewomen were in this period. This was, of course, the only way to maintain regular communication over any considerable distance. As the world expanded, so too did the significance of letter writing. Upon marriage, women could find themselves separated from their friends and families for considerable periods, sometimes for the duration of their lives. Letters were an important way to maintain connections, support and relationships, but they were also a means for sharing critical intergenerational knowledge relating to the running and care of a house and family. Letters containing culinary recipes and medical cures are regular features in domestic manuscript collections from the Georgian and early Victorian period, both in Britain and Ireland. These letters tell us about a woman's connections beyond the household and give us a window into her life, travels, tribulations, expertise and relationships.

The richness of these collections shows us that not only were letters written frequently, but that they were also carefully archived and curated over generations, having sentimental and also very real, practical value. Through letter writing, women could share information that was critical to the safeguarding and wellbeing of future generations. Exchanging recipes and cures in letters enabled women to share the details of their day-to-day lives and concerns and to maintain an active involvement in the care and nourishment of one another and their families. If a woman far from home missed the taste of a favourite cake from childhood or needed to obtain a family remedy for a child's illness, a recipe sent by a loved one gave her all she needed to re-create the longed-for physical object.

Lady Katherine Ranelagh's domestic archives demonstrate just how important the exchange of recipes and medical advice was for family members on each side of the Irish Sea from the seventeenth century. Lady Ranelagh, who was born in 1615 and died in 1691, was the sister of the scientist Robert Boyle and was one of the most celebrated intellectual women

of her generation.¹⁹ Her bound recipe book and her extensive collections of letters are the focus of a detailed analysis by DiMeo, a global authority on recipe writing in this period.²⁰ Lady Ranelagh was, like most women of her class, a prolific letter writer. With friends and relations spanning the globe, examples of her letters survive in archives across the English-speaking world. These collections show that she was the primary medical authority for her large extended family, particularly those in England and Ireland. Family members frequently wrote requesting her advice on health matters and she readily sent words of wisdom, recipes and sometimes even medicines to this very large and dispersed network. DiMeo's analysis also shows that her family actively participated in this medical network too. She did not just send information, but exchanged recipes, and requested advice from her siblings and other members of the large Boyle family.²¹

Collections of letters dating to the eighteenth century show that this exchange of recipes between elite families and their kin dispersed across Ireland and Britain only gained momentum over the Georgian period. A letter from a folder of loose items from the papers of the O'Hara family (one of the few Gaelic-Irish families who successfully retained their estates during the Cromwellian and Williamite confiscations) clearly demonstrates the sentiments of women gifting their recipes to others within their social network. The letter is addressed to a Mrs Trench, who was likely Charlotte Trench (née O'Hara). Charlotte married Eyre Trench of Ashford, County Roscommon, in 1768, but the O'Hara collection includes many of her letters and papers.²² The letter in question, referring to a recipe for 'meath' (mead), is as follows:

Dear Mrs Trench,

I send you a Rect. for Meath, & I fancy it was Mrs Goodwin's as I got it from my Mother's Receipt Book, I sincerely wish it may be of service to your friend, I have many valuable Receipts ... should your friend want them, or anything under my roof, freely send to me, for I am truly yours

Very Affect
E. Lisle²³

19 DiMeo, 'Authorship and Medical Networks', 28.

20 Ibid., 25–46.

21 Ibid., 31–32.

22 Andrew Shields and Victoria Petty, *O'Hara Papers, Collection List 66, National Library of Ireland* (Dublin: National Library of Ireland, 2002), 12.

23 Letter from E. Lisle to Mrs Trench, O'Hara Papers, MS 36,375/1, NLI.

A honey-based alcohol, meath remained a popular drink throughout the eighteenth century, when it was a safer alternative to water in many instances. It was also believed to have medicinal properties and was sometimes thought to assist fertility, so makes regular appearances in recipe exchange networks between women at this time. The example of the O'Hara letter illustrates not just the importance of such recipes, but also the value that women placed upon their culinary and medical knowledge. The gifting of not just personal but familial intellectual property was a significant act that reinforced the bonds of kinship. Here, the author of the letter, E. Lisle, about whom little is known, was gifting the recipe and potential cure to Mrs Trench through a letter format, but she was careful to point out that the original source was her mother's book. This shows us both how recipes were circulated within networks and highlights the value placed upon them. We also see the connections between letters and bound volumes articulated clearly. Letters became the fastest and most dynamic way of circulating domestic knowledge, but the bound volume as an ultimate source lends credibility and authority to the recipe, enhancing its value considerably. The critical factor underpinning this exchange network is trust—in the origins and source of the recipe—and so attribution and traceability is a consistent pattern, a practice that also served to strengthen and reinforce these relationships.

The collection of the Smythe family of Barbavilla, County Westmeath, contains a rich collection of loose recipes and letters, along with several bound volumes. The Smythe family (originally spelled Smyth) came to Ireland during the 1630s. The founder of the Barbavilla branch acquired the family seat in Westmeath in 1670. Along with volumes brought from England, the considerable collection of letters shows how actively the family kept in touch with relations in England and that recipe writing was a central part of this. Through the exchange of recipes and cures the family maintained active involvement in the care and lives of relatives from whom they were separated. We may speculate that such a network must have provided considerable comfort for a family of newcomers during the turbulence of the last decades of the seventeenth century. While traditional histories and estate papers help us to see the political and strategic machinations of such a family, the letters left by women allow us to see how they coped on a personal, domestic and even cultural level.

One particularly touching letter written by 'RC' and addressed to a Mrs Bonnell of Fleet Street includes recipes as well as important news relating to the events of life in this extended family spread across

multiple countries. Mrs Jane Bonnell (née Conyngham) was the wife of James Bonnell, Accountant-General of Ireland. She was also the sister of Katherine Connelly, the wife of William Connolly of Castletown, County Kildare, the Speaker of the House of Commons from 1715 to 1729. Jane Bonnell was a distant relation of the Smythe's and upon her death in 1745 her papers were absorbed into their collection.²⁴ The identity of 'RC' is unknown, but given the initials could relate to either the Conynghams or Connollys. The letter includes recipes including 'Red Marmalade' and 'Quince Marmalade,' followed by a note of apology for not sending it sooner, with the explanation that she had been called away to attend to a Mrs Stanley's labour. The letter also adds that there is 'no news from Ireland'.²⁵ Letters like this give us a detailed window into the lives and relationships of women at this time, showing us how they shared a range of information through them across the Irish Sea, from simple recipes for a favourite marmalade to accounts of friends' labours.

Katherine Cahill's research on the domestic archives of Mrs Mary Delany (née Granville) similarly shows evidence of an active exchange of recipes crossing the Irish Sea. Mrs Delany was born in Wiltshire in 1700 and was the second child of Colonel Bernard Granville and his wife Mary Westcombe. She moved to Ireland after her second marriage to Dr Patrick Delany, where she became a prominent figure in social and intellectual circles in Dublin. During her years spent in Ireland, Mrs Delany was an active letter writer and was particularly devoted to her sister Anne.²⁶ As seen in the example from the O'Hara family cited above, recipes sent between the sisters and her other friends and relations were easily and widely disseminated through letters, but frequently derived from bound recipe books, lending them authority and value. Upon her return to Ireland from a visit to England in 1747, Mrs Delany wrote in her letter home that 'as soon as I get my receipt-book I will send you the isinglass cement'.²⁷ This was a type of glue made from a popular form of gelatine derived from the swim bladders of fish. The archives of the family also demonstrate how cures sent in letter form subsequently made their way into family volumes. On 10 February 1729, Mary sent a recipe to her sister

24 A. P. W. Malcomson, *Collection List No. 120, Papers of the Family of Smythe of Barbavilla* (Dublin: National Library of Ireland, 2006), 5–6.

25 Letter from R. C. to Mrs Bonnell, *Papers of the Family of Smythe of Barbavilla*, MS 41,603 (3), NLI.

26 Katherine Cahill, *Mrs Delany's Menus, Medicines and Manners* (Dublin: New Island, 2005), 4–5, 21–24.

27 Transcribed and cited by Cahill in *Mrs Delany's Menus, Medicines and Manners*, 56.

Anne with directions for preserving the complexion when suffering from smallpox. The letter contains the following strict instructions, bolstered by the involvement of a number of trusted friends and authorities:

As for the rotten-apple water, I sent Mrs Badge to Mrs Clark about it, and she says it is wonderful the quick effect of it and very safe; and that if you use it at all, you should do it night and morning. It must be the rottenest apples that can be had, put into a cold still, and so distilled, without anything besides. But I am under no apprehensions of your being marked, and I dare say your complexion will be better than it ever was.²⁸

Years later, when there was a smallpox outbreak in 1755, Anne made good use of this recipe, which had by then been faithfully copied into her book. She passed it on to their close friend the Duchess of Portland when her daughters fell ill with the deadly disease. Having recovered from any life-threatening symptoms, concern soon turned to the preservation of the girls' complexions. Having sent on the recipe, on 19 February 1755 Anne was happy to report that 'Lady Betty, I believe, will not be marked at all, and Lady Margaret not so much as we apprehended at first'.²⁹ Here we see again, how critical this collective store of knowledge was for the health and wellbeing of a kinship network and how letters were used to disseminate this sometimes life-saving advice across long distances in times of need. We also see the careful archiving and storage of information in family volumes for use over decades and for future generations.

Recipe Books

While recipes shared through letters were a critical way of circulating culinary and medicinal information across households, the physicality of volumes demonstrates a more material and tangible way in which these domestic manuscripts bound families together across both time and space. Many women were separated from their families for long periods—some for the rest of their lives. These volumes were important, tangible reminders of home and loved ones, but they were also repositories for a matrilineal inheritance that could be quite literally critical to the safeguarding of future generations.

28 Transcribed and cited by Cahill in *Mrs Delany's Menus, Medicines and Manners*, 166–67.

29 Transcribed and cited by Cahill in *Mrs Delany's Menus, Medicines and Manners*, 167.

Close analysis of bound recipe books from the National Library of Ireland's collection has indicated that women sometimes took their heirloom family tomes, or, alternatively, transcribed copies of older volumes with them. Known as 'fair copies', these could be specially transcribed, sometimes by professionals, as gifts upon marriage or simply to safeguard the knowledge in an older ageing volume. Importantly, the production of fair copies allowed for multiple editions of an original tome to be circulated through families. In other instances, rather than bringing a volume with them upon marriage they brought their family's knowledge with them—a form of matrilineal inheritance—which was then faithfully added to their in-laws' volume. Collections of letters and loose recipes often formed the basis of bound recipe books, so women inherited a vast bank of knowledge from multiple sources that was of practical, social and emotional value. Unlike loose collections of recipes, bound volumes accrued a physical and heirloom value over time, which eventually surpassed that of the advice and wisdom contained within. These treasured volumes, lovingly added to by generations, contained the accumulated wisdom of female forebears. As discussed in relation to letters, the knowledge they contained could be critical to the health and wellbeing of their increasingly widely dispersed families, but such volumes themselves became cherished reminders of home and loved ones. As instruction manuals they allowed their owner to conjure familiar and comforting smells and flavours; as physical objects they became a tangible connection to family, displaying the handwriting of mothers, aunts and grandmothers and preserving a female genealogy and inheritance.³⁰

As heirloom objects bearing the contributions of people spanning great distances and multiple generations, recipe books became a type of communal place in which familial and kinship knowledge, legacy and networks were maintained over time. Analysis of the National Library of Ireland's collection of pre-Victorian manuscript recipe books indicates that roughly half were added to over decades, rather than being drafted in one episode, while at least 25 per cent of the collection was compiled over the course of at least 50 years. Some examples were added to in different phases for over a century.³¹ The collection of the Smythe family of Barbavilla contains several fascinating volumes demonstrating this pattern of use over time, including two that are among the oldest manuscript

30 Shanahan, *Manuscript Recipe Books*, 125–44.

31 *Ibid.*, 134–35.

recipe books in Ireland.³² One of the volumes within their collection appears to have been brought with the family to Ireland.³³ It includes earlier non-recipe-related documents, such as a property indenture dated to 1564 relating to the Preband of Waltham in England and a 'passport' certifying that the holder was loyal to King Charles II. Recipes dating to the later seventeenth century then follow this earlier section; some later recipes are even added to the margins of the earlier sixteenth-century document. Recipes in the margins include 'How to cure an Ague by Simpathy', 'How to make a drink called shrub', 'Another Cake', 'A Good Cake' and the following recipe for 'A Caraway Cake' (Figure 1):

A quarter of a peck of flower dried a pound of butter a pound of caraway comfits a pint of cream a pint some sake of yest ye yolks of 6 eggs on nutmeg mingle it when you begin to heat your oven and let it rise and when you go to put it in mingle in the caraways.³⁴

Figure 1: Recipe for 'A Caraway Cake'.

Source: Receipt book by unknown author, mid to late seventeenth century, Papers of the Family of Smythe of Barbavilla, MS41,603/2 (2). Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.

The frequent reference to the Povey family name suggests that the primary author of the recipe sections may have been Mary Povey, who married into the family in 1672.³⁵ The reuse of these documents as part of a recipe book may highlight the value of paper in the early modern house. Or, perhaps more persuasively, the value of these family documents,

32 Receipt book by unknown author, late seventeenth century, Papers of the Family of Smythe of Barbavilla, MS 11,688, NLI; Receipt book by unknown author, mid to late seventeenth century, Papers of the Family of Smythe of Barbavilla, MS 41,603/2 (2 of 2), NLI.

33 Receipt book by unknown author, mid to late seventeenth century, Papers of the Family of Smythe of Barbavilla, MS 41,603/2 (2), NLI.

34 Ibid.

35 Malcomson, *Collection List No. 120*, 6.

connected to family history, origins and land ownership, may have enhanced the status of the volume, making it a suitable place to entrust critical family knowledge. Either way, the earlier document was deemed valuable enough to bring to the new seat in Ireland from Britain, and this heirloom became a place to record domestic wisdom for generations to come.

Figure 2: Title page from 'A Collection of domestic recipes and medical prescriptions'.

Source: Contributed to by multiple members of the Inchiquin O'Brien family, started mid to late seventeenth century, Inchiquin Papers, MS14,786. Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.

A late seventeenth- to early eighteenth-century volume from the collection of the Inchiquin O'Briens of County Clare provides us with considerable information relating to precisely how volumes were handed down through families over generations.³⁶ This volume was passed down and added to by at least three, possibly four, generations of women in the family, remaining within their seat of Dromoland Castle. Catherine O'Brien (née Keightley), who was the author of the earlier sections and credited on the elaborate title page, was the first cousin of both Queen Mary II and Queen Anne and had married into one of the most important Gaelic noble families of Munster (Figure 2). A later attribution to her mother, Lady Frances Keightley (née Hyde), who was the youngest daughter of the first Earl of Clarendon and the sister-in-law of James II appears inside the cover, but close analysis of the dated recipes suggests that it is unlikely that she personally penned this volume. It seems more likely that the attribution suggests that this volume is a fair copy of an earlier family tome. In any case, multiple generations of elite and well-connected women marrying in to the Inchiquin O'Brien family had a hand in its production.

The pattern of inheritance in this instance was from mother-in-law to daughter-in-law, meaning that the volume always stayed in the keeping of the mistress of Dromoland Castle. The title page specifies that it was a gift from Mrs O'Brien (likely Catherine) to 'M O'B', likely Mary O'Brien (née Hickman), her daughter-in-law, who added the elaborate title page. Later attributions also suggest that Mary's daughter-in-law Ann O'Brien (née French) also contributed sections. So, in this case, the volume was not taken with female members of the family leaving Dromoland, but rather each new mistress brought their own knowledge from outside and added to this noble Gaelic family's intergenerational repository. New mistresses marrying into the family used this volume as a place to record their own family's knowledge and legacy, and so the volume connected them both to their new family and their family

36 'A Collection of domestic recipes and medical prescriptions', contributed to by multiple members of the Inchiquin O'Brien family, started mid to late seventeenth century, Inchiquin Papers, MS 14,786, NLI.

of origin. In addition to this main tome, the Inchiquin O'Brien family left a collection of at least five other recipe books and folders, which collectively span over two centuries.³⁷

While the Inchiquin manuscript provides an exceptional level of detail regarding its pattern of inheritance, it is by no means the only example from the Irish collection that shows that handing recipe books through a family was a common practice. A volume from the Townley Hall Papers includes precise evidence of how it was passed through the generations within a family. The Townley Balfours came to Ireland during the Cromwellian period and acquired extensive land holdings across multiple counties along with their main seat at Townley Hall, near Drogheda in County Louth.³⁸ Their collection includes several recipe books, including one originally authored by Lady Florence Townley Balfour (née Cole), daughter of the first Earl of Enniskillen. The original inscription in her book reads 'Florence Townley Balfour February the 17th 1800,' but her daughter, presumably Letitia-Frances, based on the initials, has subsequently added a note above stating that it is 'My Dearest Mother's Book LB'.³⁹ Inscriptions like this are evidence that recipe books were not just handed through families as heirlooms, but that they were also added to and reused over decades, remaining an active and ever-evolving part of family life. The physical connection to forebears is paramount, and individual recipes or volumes frequently draw attention to the fact that entries were written in the hand of a friend or relation. A cure entitled 'Pilerwort' in the Inchiquin O'Brien volume has a note added at the bottom of the page stating that 'This is my Ladey Longs one [own] recete wright by her one [own] hand for my Ladey Bronneson'.⁴⁰ The path of exchange between respected, trusted kinswomen clearly added to the

37 Hannah Jane Foster, 'Menus and lists of guests invited to dinner at the Foster Home of Cliffe Hall, Lightcliffe, Yorkshire and domestic recipes and medical prescriptions', 1863–1882; Inchiquin Papers, MS 14,746, NLI; Inchiquin Papers, MS 45,500/12, NLI; 'Miscellaneous personal papers including prescriptions, recipes, remedies and list of wedding presents', 1847–1869, Inchiquin Papers, MS 45,466/4, NLI; Elizabeth O'Brien, Countess of Thomond, wife of Henry O'Brien, 8th Earl of Thomond, 'Recipe book', eighteenth century, Inchiquin Papers, MS 14,887, NLI; Mary O'Brien, 'Book of family recipes with list of pictures at Dromoland Castle in different hand', 1845–1847, Inchiquin Papers, MS 45,466/1, NLI.

38 Sexton, 'Food and Culinary Cultures in Pre-Famine Ireland', 268.

39 Lady Florence Balfour, 'Lady Florence Balfour's book of receipts', started February 17th 1800, Townley Hall Papers, MS 9561, NLI; John Burke, *A Genealogical and Heraldic Dictionary of the Landed Gentry of Great Britain and Ireland* (London: Henry Colburn, 1847), 49–50.

40 'A Collection of domestic recipes and medical prescriptions', Inchiquin O'Brien Papers, MS 14,786, NLI.

authority and the worth of the recipe in this instance, but the specification that this is the donor's own hand enhanced the physical connection to her, adding yet another layer of value.

The physicality of heirloom recipe books, stemming from their handmade nature, the presence of familiar handwriting and later from their signs of use-wear appears to have added to their symbolic value. These elements created a visual, textural and tangible connection to their previous owners. However, as Theophano has observed, evidence from manuscripts kept throughout the transatlantic world demonstrates that the re-transcription of earlier volumes into fair copies was also common in the early modern period.⁴¹ The creation of beautifully transcribed copies of earlier manuscripts could have taken place for a number of reasons. First, a 'fair copy' may have been made if the older volume was becoming too fragile, in order to preserve it for posterity. Similarly, fair copies may also have been made of the loose recipes and letters that accumulated in a house over time. Alternatively, fair copies may have been penned to allow a family's culinary knowledge to be circulated to a wider audience. As daughters married and the family dispersed, reproductions of the family volume would have allowed multiple lines of the family to stay connected to one another. Transcriptions may also have been made as gifts upon the impending nuptials of a daughter, and professional scribes were sometimes hired to pen a 'fair copy' of a recipe book as a gift as part of a dowry.⁴² Upon marriage a woman left her family, and loneliness and homesickness became an inevitable part of life for many. Taking the culinary knowledge of the family with her may have been an important part of a bride's journey, and a comforting reminder of where she had come from, even if the original family volume could not be physically taken.

While a book itself may have come to represent the legacy of an individual or family of origin, it is important to note that most volumes contain entries attributed to a range of members from a much wider social network, further enhancing their value and reach. Tracing patterns of attribution through manuscripts demonstrates that a range of widely dispersed family members from multiple generations all contributed to the manuscripts, as did members of a wider social network and occasionally even cooks and servants. Sometimes their contribution was personally added in their own hand, while in other instances their recipe had been added by the author,

41 Theophano, *Eat My Words*, 88–89.

42 Ibid., 88.

with their name acknowledged as the original source. Indeed, attributions are so common that they can be seen as a critical and indeed defining feature of manuscript recipe books and most contain some information on where recipes came from, be it a friend, family member, servant, professional or published source.

In the National Library of Ireland's collection approximately 75 per cent contain direct evidence of where at least some of the recipes contained within them came from, crediting the original authors. Susan Leonardi explains the significance of attributions in her work on recipes, which she describes as a form of gendered discourse. In her frequently referenced discussion, she traces the etymology of the word itself: 'the root of *recipe*—the Latin *recipere*—implies an exchange, a giver and a receiver. Like a story, a recipe needs to be a recommendation, a context, a point, a reason to be'.⁴³ Recipes, then, are defined by the connection they form between two people. The recipe has value as a gift from someone who is trusted, and its exchange helps to strengthen and affirm the relationship between both parties. The importance of exchange underpins the flourishing of recipe writing in the early modern world and is critical to the history, development and very meaning of the genre in this period. In an Irish context, where there was the very real threat of not just isolation for new brides and families, but active hostility given the political climate, these connections and cultural rootedness became potentially more critical again.

Tracing attributions is also a useful way of understanding the life cycle and origins of a book, and the relationships of its author both within and beyond the household. The attribution of recipes to various gentry and aristocratic families demonstrates the social networks that their authors moved in. When a recipe was attributed to someone, that individual was respected and acknowledged while simultaneously being 'grafted' onto an object representative of a broader, collective identity. By keeping such a register, peppered with the valued recipes of high-status and esteemed friends and relations, a family was also able to demonstrate the wealth and status of their social network.⁴⁴ The Inchiquin O'Brien volume demonstrates this clearly, including entries attributed to a range of aristocrats and members of the gentry both in Ireland and at court in

43 Susan Leonardi, 'Recipes for Reading: Summer Pasta, Lobster a la Riseholme, and Key Lime Pie', *PMLA*, 104 (1989): 340.

44 Theophano, *Eat My Words*, 8.

England. Just a few examples of the many attributions include 'White Ginger Bread Lady Mountalexander', 'A Fine Ginger Bread Dutches of Buckingham' and the following:

Almond Cheese Cakes Lady Powerscourt

Take a pound of sweet almonds lay ym in cold water over night; blanch them & pound them with Orrange flower water to keep ym with out oyling, take a pd of double refined sugar sifte it & you pd them well together & yn take ym up into a large white bason & have ready beaten the yolks of 15 eggs with a pint of good Cream mix altogether with half a pound of Naples bisket grated very fine; yn melt a pound & half of butter & mix it in with it & beat them altogether a quarter of an hour before yu fill your pans. Make a cold crust with a little sugar & the yolks of an egg & roule it very thin before you put it into your pans. Half the quantity is what I usually make.⁴⁵

These attributions demonstrated the status of the family and the powerful circle they moved within and lent authority to the recipes derived from such an esteemed network. Examining the web of attributions also shows the long distances covered and the reach and complexity of recipe exchange networks and the connections between households and collections. Mrs Bonnell's recipe and letter collection within the Smythe papers included letters from Catherine O'Brien of Dromoland referring to a secret loan that she wanted to conceal from her husband and urging Jane to burn the letter, as well as domestic advice.⁴⁶ We see the intimate nature of their relationship—maintained over great distance—in both the sharing of mundane but valued recipes and the most serious of secrets.

In the case of the O'Briens though, there was a conscious effort to form connections given the origins of the family and the need to very clearly reaffirm their status and powerbase. Ohlmeyer has pointed out that O'Brien, the Fourth Earl of Thomond, a close relation of the Inchiquin O'Briens ensured that his sons, grandsons and great-grandsons all married wealthy English brides for this reason.⁴⁷ This was a concerted effort to protect the family's interests in what was a precarious political climate.

45 'A Collection of domestic recipes and medical prescriptions', Inchiquin O'Brien Papers, MS 14,786, NLI.

46 Letter from Catherine O'Brien, to Mrs Bonnell, 9 November 1704, Papers of the Family of Smythe of Barbavilla, MS 41,580/22, NLI.

47 Ohlmeyer, *Making Ireland English*, 186.

We can speculate, then, that the meticulous attributions within the Dromoland manuscript, inherited and added to by subsequent brides marrying in, served to celebrate these ties, actively connecting to and reaffirming the family's increasingly wide kinship network.

In many instances, the precise nature of the relationship to the author is articulated and celebrated through an attribution, again emphasising the authority of the original source and the value of the recipe itself. Mothers, grandmothers, cousins, sisters, aunts and female in-laws are the most frequently cited relations. The Inchiquin O'Brien volume contains numerous recipes attributed to female relations, like the following recipe for a seed cake, which is specifically described as being 'From My Mother's receipts':

To make a seed cake Take a pound and qr of butter, a pd & qr of flour and a pound of sugar, the butter must be beat to a cream, 12 eggs the whites beat to a froth the yolks to a cream a few almonds sliced thin, a glass of brandy or sack & caraway seeds to your liking.⁴⁸

Multiple recipes are also attributed to 'Aunt Keightley', such as the following:

Best Orange Puding my Aunt Keightley

Take half a pound of fresh butter, and beat it wth your hand till it comes to a cream yn strew in half a pound of sugar, by degrees; beating it on, beat ye yeolks of 12 eggs very well by ym selves; & pour ym in by degrees still beating up ye butter & sugar; yn put in half ye peell of a preserved orange shred very fine; & ye peell of a whole raw one don too; after tis boyled or layed in water till ye bitterness is gon; beat ym all very well together & pour it into an earthen dish with puff past rouled very thin round ye sides; half an hour bakes it.⁴⁹

The Inchiquin O'Brien family volume is in no way unique, this practice continued throughout the Georgian period and beyond. A lengthy volume from Creagh Castle, County Cork, started by 1770 appears to have been added to for at least 50 years. It contains entries by multiple authors over time, but most sections were likely written by Judith Creagh

48 'A Collection of domestic recipes and medical prescriptions', Inchiquin O'Brien Papers, MS 14,786, NLI.

49 Ibid.

(née Ussher), the daughter of Arthur Ussher and Lucy Taylor and Dr John Creagh's second wife. In addition to named friends and her wider social circle, we see frequent attributions to 'Cousin Taylor' such as:

To make mince Pyes Cousin Taylors' way

To one tongue put three quarters of a pound of suet, if your tongue be large you may put a pound, three quarters of a pound of Raisins ston'd and cut small, a pound of currants, one nutmeg grated, some cloves and mace, near half a pound of sugar, some salt, the juice of two lemons and some of the peel minced small, six spoonfuls of brandy or sack, citron water if you have it, this mixture I have tried and found very good.

And even attributions to her deceased first husband's family, the Shuldham:

To make Oyster Sauce- Mrs P[----?] Shuldham

Cut the beards of your oysters, put them on a slow fire with their own liquor, a few cloves and pepper, when they are quite dissolved, bottle them close so as not to admit the air- when you want oyster sauce add butter (and melt them) according to the quantity you want at the time.⁵⁰

Other manuscripts highlight both the family connection, as well as the original source of the family volume. A recipe in an early nineteenth-century book penned by Mrs A. W. Baker of Ballytobin, County Kilkenny, states that it was 'recommended in my Grandmother's book'.⁵¹ Entries like this provide precise information about how recipes were circulated through manuscripts within a family. Members of different social classes also contributed to volumes, reminding us of the intimate connections between families and domestic servants. Although they may not have been penned by servants personally, there are numerous examples where their recipes were included and attributed to them. Mary Ponsonby's manuscript, which is largely nineteenth century in date, but which may contain fair copy transcriptions of an earlier collection includes a recipe entitled 'To make turnip soup by Mr Rigby's famous cook.'⁵² A. W. Baker's volume, just referred to, contains 'a receipt for Walnut Catsup got by my

50 Mrs Creagh of Creagh Castle and other contributors, 'Cookbook', c. 1770–1820, MS 34, 953, NLI.

51 Mrs A. W. Baker, from Ballytobin, County Kilkenny, 'Cookery Book Vol. 1st', 1810, MS 34, 952, NLI.

52 Mary Ponsonby, 'Receipt Book', early to mid-nineteenth century, MS 5606, NLI.

GM [Grandmother] from Mrs Costello My Uncle Desart's Housekeeper'.⁵³ This shows us an intricate route into the family volume, acknowledging a chain or network of servants along the way. Such recipes also remind us just how much intellectual property servants contributed to these family volumes and of the close inter-class relationships that formed over the years within a house.

Conclusion

Over the course of the early modern period, exchanging recipes and cures became a powerful way to strengthen familial, intergenerational and kinship networks. This article has examined the role that recipe exchange and inheritance played in Ascendancy Ireland, where elite families were often separated from loved ones across the Irish Sea and where connections played a critical role in maintaining status and even safety in a precarious political climate. Previous research has shown that, from the seventeenth century, recipe writing was one way for elite British women to establish their domestic, medical and culinary cultures in Ireland, but this article has examined the personal dimension of this process, arguing that recipes also played an important role in binding families and friends together in this time of great political, social, cultural and demographic change. While many of the patterns identified are the same in British collections in terms of form and contents, the context in which they were produced was not. Considering recipes as cultural imports and affective objects helps us to understand the meaning that they held for families in the political climate of Ireland at this time. Circulating recipes helped to bring about change in culinary and gendered practice, but they also held cultural and personal meaning for the women and families who kept them. They may have simultaneously been comforting reminders of home in a sometimes hostile and foreign environment, instructive objects that helped to entrench new culinary norms or registers to reaffirm networks, connections and identities in a time and place where they were never more important.

Exchanging recipes, especially cures, through letters was the fastest and most dynamic way for medical and culinary information to be disseminated across ever-expanding horizons. The immediacy of letter writing helped

53 Mrs A. W. Baker, from Ballytobin, County Kilkenny, 'Cookery Book Vol. 1st', 1810, MS 34, 952, NLI.

circulate such knowledge through complex networks, but it also allowed women to maintain contact with one another and a presence in each other's daily lives. Bound volumes also played a role, creating a rootedness and connectedness at a time when families were becoming increasingly dispersed. The shared use of inherited recipe volumes bound together women from different generations and those from different families who were marrying-in. By handing these volumes down through families, using them daily and adding to them over decades, women constructed, strengthened and celebrated their relationships and matrilineal genealogies. As cherished items of property, bequeathing a recipe book may have been a sign of affection, but it was also a gift of valuable practical knowledge. The information contained within, covering subjects from food preservation to infertility treatments, was critical to the health and wellbeing of the family in the future. And, as this vital knowledge accumulated over years and generations, a manuscript may have become deeply embedded with personal, familial and cultural memories. Thus, we see that women cherished the presence of their mother's handwriting and the connection to women from whom they were separated by both space and time. Exchanging recipes, both through letter writing and the gifting of inherited volumes, enabled women to share the details of their day-to-day lives and concerns and to maintain an active involvement in the care and nourishment of one another and their families.

This text is taken from *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal: Number 27*,
published 2021 by ANU Press, The Australian National University,
Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/LFHJ.27.02