



HOW TEXTS FROM THE PAST CAN SHAPE AND INFORM THE FUTURE

DR ALISON SEARLE, BASED AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS IN THE UK, IS ENGAGED IN A PROJECT THAT ANALYSES 17TH-CENTURY ARCHIVAL DOCUMENTS FROM THREE FAITH COMMUNITIES TO ADDRESS SOME OF THE CONTEXTS IN WHICH CAREGIVING HAS EMERGED. THE FINDINGS WILL HIGHLIGHT HOW HISTORICAL PRACTICES OF PASTORAL CARE AND HOLISTIC WELL-BEING INFORM THE PRESENT

GLOSSARY

ARCHIVAL – relating to an archive, a collection of historical documents

COLONIAL – relating to a colony, where settlers have taken control of/occupied another land

CATECHISE – instruct/teach Christian principles

MISSIONARY – a person sent to promote the Christian faith in a non-Christian country

NONCONFORMIST – a Christian of the Protestant Church who did not conform to the rule of the Church of England

PASTOR – a Christian minister or priest

PRESBYTERIAN – a type of Protestant Christian

In an age where emails clutter up inboxes around the world and we conduct conversations using instant messaging apps, such as Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp, letter writing has decreased in popularity.

However, this was not always the case – and let us be thankful for that, because the letter form can provide fascinating historical insights that shine a light on many aspects of life, society and the people who penned letters in bygone times.

Dr Alison Searle is an Associate Professor of Textual Studies at the University of Leeds in the UK who is acutely aware of the power of letters and other historical documents. One of the key things such texts reveal is context – by poring over archived materials, researchers gain a sense of how certain things were and how they may have shaped how things are now.

However, any textual studies come with a caveat – archival research is complex, in that it involves a history of suppression. We might ask whose documents get preserved, and who can access them? Are issues of survival and access simply about one's personal identity, or part of a broader social world?

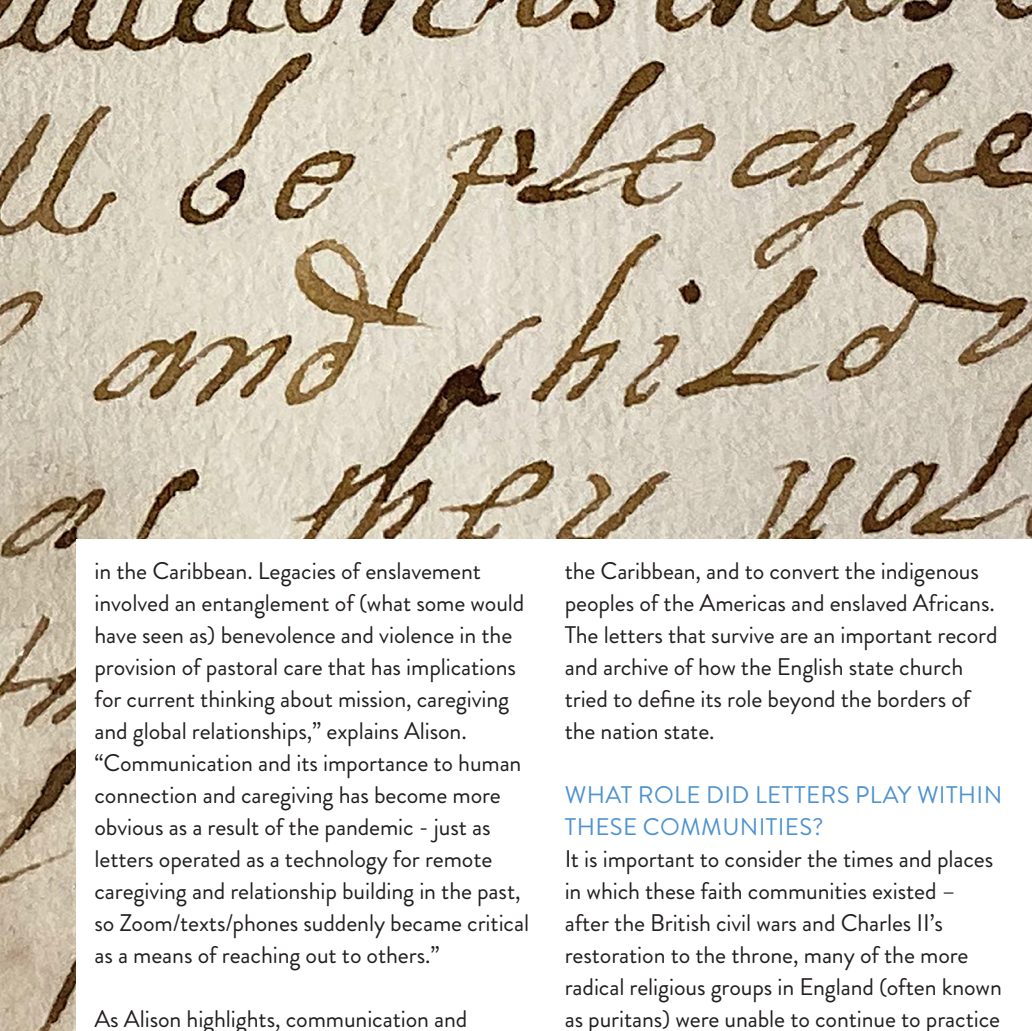
Alison is currently engaged in a project that is focused on the description and analysis of the concept of pastoral care within three faith communities that operated across the British Atlantic between 1630 and 1720. By analysing texts from this period, Alison hopes to understand how pre-modern care practices helped shape and inform those of today.

WHAT IS MEANT BY 'PASTORAL CARE'?

The focus of the project is on pastoral care in historical religious communities separated from one another, either due to oppression by the state, or because of new patterns of transatlantic travel resulting from commercial, colonial and missionary endeavours. In the context of the project, pastoral care describes attempts by these religious communities to provide for the well-being, health and flourishing of the souls, minds, and bodies of each of their members. Alison has partnered with a contemporary faith-based organisation called United Society Partners in the Gospel (USPG), which was founded in 1701, is still active today and forms an integral part of the project.

HOW HAS THE PANDEMIC HELPED CONTEXTUALISE THE RESEARCH PROJECT?

COVID-19 highlighted the importance of spiritual care as a critical component of public health provision. The significant increase in mortality in countries around the world helped bring local communities together and brought aspects of pastoral care into sharp focus, particularly how pastoral care is valued and how it is paid for. "Historically, (the forerunner of the USPG) The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel's caregiving across the Atlantic was resourced by enslaved labour on plantations



in the Caribbean. Legacies of enslavement involved an entanglement of (what some would have seen as) benevolence and violence in the provision of pastoral care that has implications for current thinking about mission, caregiving and global relationships,” explains Alison. “Communication and its importance to human connection and caregiving has become more obvious as a result of the pandemic - just as letters operated as a technology for remote caregiving and relationship building in the past, so Zoom/texts/phones suddenly became critical as a means of reaching out to others.”

As Alison highlights, communication and collaboration are also vital for her research. This project is seeing her work closely with the USPG’s research and learning advisor, Dr Jo Sadgrove, alongside postdoctoral researchers, archivists, digital editors and software engineers.

WHICH THREE FAITH COMMUNITIES IS THE TEAM FOCUSED ON?

The first is Scottish Covenanters, who were a group of radical nonconformists in 17th-century Scotland. Samuel Rutherford was a presbyterian minister who was central to the Covenanters’ oppositional practices and his letters of pastoral care to women and men who were part of this godly resistance network have survived in printed form.

The second faith community of interest is English nonconformists. Richard Baxter was a leader of this group because of his reputation as a godly minister, his prolific writings (which number more than 130 books) and his important networks of influence. Baxter could not preach much after 1660, so he wrote books and letters instead – letters to and from men, women and young people from a wide range of backgrounds survive.

The final faith community is The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (the SPG, which has since evolved to become the USPG). It was founded in 1701, but it was focused outside of England – both to care for English nationals engaged in commerce in North America and

the Caribbean, and to convert the indigenous peoples of the Americas and enslaved Africans. The letters that survive are an important record and archive of how the English state church tried to define its role beyond the borders of the nation state.

WHAT ROLE DID LETTERS PLAY WITHIN THESE COMMUNITIES?

It is important to consider the times and places in which these faith communities existed – after the British civil wars and Charles II’s restoration to the throne, many of the more radical religious groups in England (often known as puritans) were unable to continue to practice within the state church due to its coercive authority structures. Many had to move away – and this persecution and distance required each of these communities to develop forms of ministry and pastoral care that could be exercised through the genre of the letter. This meant that questions about how one should live, or deal with complex situations, or process grief, were explored in a dialogic exchange via letter (remote caregiving rather than face-to-face). In this context, letter writing takes on major importance as a means by which pastors provide care.

WHAT DO THE LETTERS REVEAL ABOUT THE ROLE OF THE PASTOR?

The letters reveal that the pastor’s caregiving role is both extensive and intensive. “They include dealing with cases of conscience, such as the responsibilities of a wife whose husband has contracted a sexually transmitted disease; the fate of a child dying at 17 weeks old; the challenges posed by melancholy, a combination of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual symptoms, which could lead to the real possibility of suicide; whether one should catechise an enslaved person for the sake of their eternal soul, despite the resistance of their master; and whether one could take communion kneeling,” explains Alison. “For SPG missionaries, there were questions about how to run their ministry in their new environment, including how people could be ordained, and dealing with issues such as potential bigamy.”



DR ALISON SEARLE

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FIELD OF RESEARCH

Textual Studies

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RESEARCH

Contributing to present-day thinking about well-being and caregiving by studying pastoral care in three faith communities between 1630 and 1720

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FUNDER

Arts and Humanities Research Council
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WHAT ARE THE LONG-TERM IMPACTS OF THE PROJECT?

Ultimately, any project that analyses historical documents provides a new perspective by looking at them through the lens of the present day. In this regard, the future will always make the past fascinating in different ways. Of course, there is the context of COVID-19, but the Black Lives Matter movement also foregrounds the importance of considering legacies of enslavement which was rife at the times these letters were written.

From a caregiving perspective (which is the chief focus of the project), being able to get a real sense of what constituted caregiving in the 17th century helps us think about what constitutes it now. “In a sense, the letters and exchanges from the early archive have fed into the discussion of how to provide care during the pandemic health crisis,” says Alison. “Conversations with scholars working on selecting, transcribing and digitising the source material (and more specifically the enhanced visibility of the sources through the production of open-access digital surrogates) enabled USPG to explore what care in a global crisis might mean for an organisation positioned in the UK with a duty of care to people all around the world.”

ABOUT TEXTUAL STUDIES

Because textual studies can involve the study and analysis of any written material from any period of history, it is difficult to summarise what you might be studying if you pursue a career in the field. Whether it is carefully turning the pages of a folio edition of William Shakespeare's plays, analysing the manuscripts of some of Emily Brontë's poems, poring over 17th-century letters from three faith communities, or more besides, the choice is yours.

Alison is unequivocal about the appeal of textual studies. "The opportunity to explore manuscripts written by a range of people and organisations from several centuries ago and to piece together the different kinds of stories they allow you to tell about the past, and how it intersects with the present, is intellectually challenging and rewarding," says Alison.

"Thinking about how best to contextualise documents such as letters and make them accessible for a variety of contemporary audiences in order to reflect on how these documents were created, preserved, curated and disseminated, and what this means for our understanding of history and the development of specific literary genres in the present...these are the rewards."

The relationship between historical manuscripts stored in archives and how they relate to present-day concerns will be an issue for future scholars, especially when we consider how these texts will be re-presented in new forms, such as digitally. "I think the Black Lives Matter movement will have a long-term impact on the field. In the course of my own research project, the iconic and iconoclastic toppling of Edward Colston's statue in Bristol

has been a key moment," explains Alison. "A reminder that the presence of these histories casts a monumental shadow in public and urban spaces in very obvious ways and that the past is relevant to and has an impact on the modern day."

Alison also knows that her identity as a white, female, middle-class researcher offers her certain privileges as well as possible limitations.

Does Alison have more or less access to texts than others? Will her reading of those texts be influenced by her own identity? Is this just a question of her 'identity' or does it also reflect the power structures of a broader social world? Textual studies of historical documents have a bearing on our present lives and perspectives, and poses many such fascinating questions.

EXPLORE A CAREER IN TEXTUAL STUDIES

- Alison recommends taking a look at *The Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing*, which contains lots of useful information on the study of book history: www.sharpweb.org/main/
- There is also *Early Printed Books* (www.earlyprintedbooks.com/), *Critical Race Conversations* (www.folger.edu/critical-race-conversations) and the *Early Modern Letters Online Exhibition* (emlo-portal.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/exhibition/uspg/), all of which should whet your appetite and give you an idea of some of what Alison and others in her field are involved with.

ALISON'S TOP TIPS

- 01** Follow what interests you, even if it is difficult to see how doing so will immediately lead to employability or a career. Skills in critical reading, interpretation and telling stories are valuable in many work environments.
- 02** Be open to learning new skills and take any opportunities that come your way. It is important to work with people rather than in competition with them!
- 03** If you're not visible, or someone else's voice is missing, write yourself in or provide a platform for that person to tell their story.

PATHWAY FROM SCHOOL TO TEXTUAL STUDIES

Alison says that there is no direct pathway to a career in textual studies – mainly because it is a broad term that embraces literary criticism, editing, and working with written texts in a variety of media forms. "An interest in the written word, different media forms (manuscripts, printed texts, digital technologies), interpretation, contextualisation and storytelling is central," explains Alison. "Any subject or activity that encourages digital literacy, or promotes an attentiveness to and engagement with other voices and focus on detail will help."

www.prospects.ac.uk/careers-advice/what-can-i-do-with-my-degree/english

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John Chamberlayne Esq at his
house in Petty France

To the Mairmyn
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• HOW DID ALISON BECOME AN EXPERT IN TEXTUAL STUDIES?

WHAT WERE YOUR INTERESTS WHEN YOU WERE GROWING UP?

I loved reading, writing, travelling and walking – especially by Sydney's beautiful harbour and beaches.

WHO OR WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO PURSUE TEXTUAL STUDIES?

I enjoyed English literature, ancient and modern history, and computing studies at school. I continued to pursue these interests in my BA (Hons) degree in English literature, and then in my PhD on the Bible and imagination. Two of my earliest jobs involved editing for an online literary reference work and working with handwritten letters from 17th-century England exploring Richard Baxter's correspondence with women. These experiences taught me the importance of attention to detail, the significance of the material form of a text, and the fascinating ways in which literary texts from the Renaissance and contemporary digital technologies intersect to allow new ways of reading, writing, thinking, imagining and contextualising. I was hooked.

WHAT ATTRIBUTES HAVE MADE YOU SUCCESSFUL AS A RESEARCHER?

An irritating habit of asking question after question after question! A love of learning all I can about a particular piece of writing and its different contexts: how it was produced, how it was received and the ways in which it can be interpreted now. Doing a PhD can be a rather solitary process – it requires self-discipline and detailed commitment to becoming an expert on one particular topic within a discrete period of time (usually three years). However, the attributes that make one successful as a PhD student are not necessarily sufficient to make one successful in different kinds of research projects. In my current work, I am part of a team – the contributions of archivists, digital editors, other academic researchers, and learning partners in non-academic organisations are absolutely crucial to the success of the project. This means that a willingness to listen, to learn, to know my areas of expertise, and my areas of ignorance, are also essential to producing

high-quality interdisciplinary research.

ARE YOU A KEEN LETTER WRITER YOURSELF?

I wrote letters to friends and family as a child and teenager. Now, it's more death by email, but I've been encouraging my 10-year-old son to write to family in Australia (all of our extended family are on the other side of the world, so it's a tangible way to stay in touch).

WHAT ARE YOUR PROUDEST CAREER ACHIEVEMENTS SO FAR?

Getting my PhD when I was 25 and being able to use the non-gendered professional title of doctor; publishing my first book, based on my PhD thesis, in 2008; and learning to work collaboratively with non-academic partners and heritage organisations in a way that brings my work on historical literary texts into direct dialogue and engagement with contemporary concerns of public health and legacies of enslavement.