

Researching Female *Punch* Writers

In early 2022 I was awarded a Curran Fellowship to conduct archival research into female *Punch* contributors of the long nineteenth century, and particularly the social and professional networks that enabled them to begin contributing to *Punch*. I was particularly interested in researching the differences in the experiences of female *Punch* contributors from the nineteenth century compared to those in the early twentieth century.

From my previous research into this topic, I had found evidence of the importance of social and family networks in bringing female contributors into *Punch* in the nineteenth century, such as [May Kendall](#)'s work being submitted to *Punch* by her friend, Andrew Lang. However, I knew a lot less about early twentieth-century contributors. Based on the little information I had managed to find from published sources, my hunch was that, while most of the examples of women beginning to contribute to *Punch* in the nineteenth century involved an existing male contributor who introduced the women to *Punch* or submitted work on their behalf, new contributors in the twentieth century were less reliant on networks for their introduction to *Punch* and were more likely to have submitted work from outside 'on spec'. The surviving stories of women beginning to submit work to *Punch* in the twentieth century generally describe them sending work in from outside without an introduction, like Jessie Pope's memory of sending an article, 'in fear and trembling, to *Punch*'.¹

It became easier for new contributors to join *Punch* after 1902, when Owen Seaman, who was more open to accepting work from outsiders than his predecessor, took over as deputy

editor. From 1902 onwards there were a lot of new contributors, including more female contributors, and I wanted to learn more about them and their experiences.

Contributors Ledgers

On my Curran-funded research trips, I spent several days looking through the *Punch* contributors ledgers in the British Library, which list the author of each piece, how much they were paid, their address, and sometimes other comments. While the nineteenth-century ledgers demonstrate the importance of social networks for female contributors, as when work by a female author is wrongly attributed to the man who submitted it on her behalf, or marginal notes refer to the male intermediary who has submitted the work, I did not find such notes in the twentieth-century ledgers. However, there were some instances in the twentieth-century ledgers when the same address was listed for more than one contributor, showing that several members of the same family had contributed work to *Punch*. This suggests that, although they became less crucial, social and family networks did not disappear entirely in the early twentieth century.

For example, Joyce Cobb, who had six contributions published in *Punch* between 1914 and 1916, was the sister of the artist Ruth Cobb, who contributed occasional pictures to *Punch* between 1912 and 1917.² Their father, the novelist Thomas Cobb, followed his daughters' example and had five pieces published between 1915 and 1918.³ Unlike with the nineteenth-century networks, I have not found evidence of *Punch* contributors in the twentieth century submitting work on behalf of their family members, but it is probably the

case that they shared their experiences and helped their relatives to submit work and have it accepted.

Correspondence

I spent some time looking at personal correspondence to or from the nineteenth-century *Punch* contributors Lydia Partridge and Caroline Creyke and the twentieth-century contributors Helen Parry Eden and Eleanor Farjeon. I also examined the professional correspondence of *Punch* writers, including Jessie Pope and Ina Garvey, in the archive of the publisher Grant Richards. The letters in this archive refer to book publications rather than periodicals but they do give a general sense of these writers' attitude to their work. Pope's letters give a clear sense of her professionalism and willingness to weigh in on questions such as marketing strategy and cover design.⁴

I was disappointed by the lack of references to *Punch* in Partridge's and Creyke's correspondence, which focused on personal and social engagements rather than their writing.⁵ I got more information from the correspondence of twentieth-century contributors Eleanor Farjeon and Helen Parry Eden, which, in both cases, included at least some information about their work for *Punch* and their professional writing more generally.⁶ The difference in the focus of Farjeon's and Eden's correspondence compared to Partridge's and Creyke's is probably due to the fact that the twentieth-century writers were more dependent on writing for their income, while Partridge and Creyke wrote for *Punch* as a hobby and not due to financial need.

Information about *Punch*'s female contributors is scarce, but what I did find supports my hunch that there was a shift around 1902 in the ways that women began contributing to *Punch* and their experiences as *Punch* contributors. Although there was not a complete transformation after 1902, and family and social connections still played a role, it does appear that, in general, the women who began contributing to *Punch* after 1902 were less dependent on social networks for their introduction to *Punch* and were more professional in their attitude to their writing.

Author Biography

Katy Birch is a Lecturer in Nineteenth-Century Literature at Aberystwyth University. She has previously published work on *Punch*'s female contributors in *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens*, and Alexis Easley et. al. (eds), *Women, Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1830s-1900s* (EUP, 2019). She is currently working on a book about women's writing for *Punch* in the long nineteenth century.

¹ Agnes M. Miall, 'The Humorist at Home: Being an Interview With Miss Jessie Pope the War Poet.' *The Lady's Realm*, 37 (May 1915), 72-75 (73).

² 'Punch Contributors Ledger, 1913-14', London, British Library, Western Manuscripts, Add MS 88937/4/10, fol. 199; 'Punch Contributors Ledger, 1915-16', London, British Library, Western Manuscripts, Add MS 88937/4/11, fol. 128; 1901 census record for Joyce Cobb, RG13/927 fol. 8 p. 7.

³ 'Punch Contributors Ledger, 1915-16', BL Add MS 88937/4/11, fol. 179; 'Punch Contributors Ledger, 1917-18', London, British Library, Western Manuscripts, Add MS 88937/4/12, fol. 160.

⁴ Grant Richards Archive 1897-1948 [microfilm], London, British Library, MIC.B.53/273-344. The letters from Jessie Pope are on reel 67, MIC.B.53/339.

⁵ Bernard and Lydia Partridge Correspondence, Millar Bequest vol. XXXVII, London, British Library, Western Manuscripts, Add MS 54263, fols. 138, 140, 157, 164; Creyke Collection, London, British Library, Western Manuscripts, Add MS 56075.

⁶ Correspondence of Eleanor Farjeon, London, British Library, Western Manuscripts Add MS 88962/2/6; Helen Parry Eden, Letters to Frances and G. K. Chesterton, G.K. Chesterton Papers, vol. LII, London, British Library, Western Manuscripts, Add MS 73237, letters 1-6.