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## Naming and shaming? Telling Bad Bridget® stories

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COMMENT

## Naming and Shaming? Telling Bad Bridget® Stories

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### Abstract

The Bad Bridget project centres on Irish-born female criminal suspects in North America from 1838 to 1918. Its title derives from the common occurrence of the forename Bridget in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Ireland, and its application as a collective name to Irish women in the US. The 'Bad Bridget' title seemed to capture our focus on the individual, as well as the diverse experiences of the girls and women on whom the project is based. While we hesitated about using the title initially, lest 'bad' suggest a shaming of behaviour or individuals, or 'Bridget' a judgement on Irish heritage, we decided that the benefits of the collective name outweighed potential drawbacks. This article expands on the idea that a name can imply shame. It focuses on our use of real forenames and surnames instead of pseudonyms (or other anonymisation alternatives) to identify individual girls and women in our project outputs to date. The article makes the case for the use of real names in this context, exploring in turn our roles and responsibilities as historians, archival and scholarly expectations, our responsibilities towards our subject matter, and our audiences (including the descendants of the Irish girls and women suspected of criminal behaviour).

**Keywords:** anonymisation; pseudonymisation; genealogy; crime; women

In 2016, four years after the publication of Elaine Farrell's *Infanticide in the Irish Crown Files of Assizes, 1883–1900*, an edited volume of petty sessions witness statements, she was contacted by Will Robinson, a genealogist and historian based in the US. When researching his own family history, Robinson had discovered that his great-grandmother's sister, Jane Quigley, and her father Owen Quigley (Robinson's great-great-grandfather), were named in Farrell's Irish Manuscripts Commission volume. As far as Robinson was aware, nobody from that generation had revealed to their descendants that Jane and Owen

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had been accused of concealing the birth of Jane's newborn baby in Roscommon in 1896. Having read the transcribed witness statements, Robinson observed that the case offered 'a vivid glimpse of her (and her father's) life as well as the repressive environment of the period'.<sup>1</sup> In naming Jane and Owen Quigley, Farrell's volume filled gaps in this family history. It provided the context for descendants to comprehend the accusation of concealment of birth that Robinson had first encountered in a digitised prison register on a genealogical database.

A year prior to this exchange, in 2015, we were awarded Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funding for our project, 'Bad Bridget: Criminal and deviant Irish women in North America, 1838–1918' (AH/M008649/1). This research predominantly focuses on the cities of Boston, New York and Toronto, examining the various crimes of which Irish-born girls and women were accused and for which they were institutionalised. To date, the project has resulted in a book, a podcast series, numerous talks, and other written outputs.<sup>2</sup> In 2021, we successfully secured AHRC Follow-on-Funding (AH/V011391/1) and worked with colleagues at National Museums NI to develop a Bad Bridget exhibition at the Ulster American Folk Park in Omagh, County Tyrone.<sup>3</sup> The exhibition opened in 2022 and will remain *in situ* until 2025.

The title of the project and subsequent outputs stem from the common occurrence of the forename Bridget in Ireland in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and its application as a collective name (along with the more derogatory variant 'Biddy') to Irish girls and women in the US. The 'Bad Bridget' title seemed to capture our focus on the individual, as well as to encapsulate the diverse experiences of the many Irish-born girls and women on whom the project is based. It also alludes to perceptions of the Irish abroad, although our aim is to reclaim the name to show the complexities of Irish female migration, rather than to use it in a historically pejorative manner. While we hesitated about using the title initially, lest 'bad' suggest a shaming of behaviour or the individuals themselves, or 'Bridget' a judgement on their Irish heritage, we ultimately decided that the benefits of the collective name outweighed potential drawbacks.

This article expands on the idea that a name could imply shame. It focuses on our use of real forenames and surnames to identify individual girls and

<sup>1</sup> Will Robinson to Elaine Farrell, 6 September 2016 (shared with permission).

<sup>2</sup> This includes, Elaine Farrell and Leanne McCormick, *Bad Bridget: Crime, Mayhem and the Lives of Irish Emigrant Women* (Dublin, 2023); Bad Bridget Podcast (2020); articles in *Irish Independent*, 27 January 2023; *Irish Times*, 20 February 2019; *The Conversation*, 13 March 2020; and more than forty public and academic talks across the UK, Ireland and North America.

<sup>3</sup> We worked largely with National Museums NI's Liam Corry, Andrew McDowell and Victoria Millar. The exhibition includes illustrations by Fiona McDonnell, scents developed by Tasha Marks, almost 150 objects, and character totems with listening posts. The exhibition script was written by author Jan Carson. Listening posts include imagined monologues voiced by actresses (Margaret Cronin, Bronagh Donaghey, Isabelle Martin, Carly McCullough, Lucy Rafferty and Maggie Villarini), accompanied by bespoke soundscapes and music developed by Franziska Schroeder and Catriona Gribben.

women in our Bad Bridget project outputs to date. In this article, we reflect on our roles and responsibilities as historians in sharing details of girls' and women's pasts. The first section explores the choices historians make when working with the life stories of individuals in their research. It considers the factors that inform such scholarship generally, as well as the choices we made (and continue to make) in the Bad Bridget project. The second section examines the nature of the sources upon which our research is based, both those housed in archives and those made accessible online, and how this informed decisions on naming. The third section focuses on the issue of consent when researching historic individuals, particularly our roles and responsibilities when dealing with deceased subjects. The final section examines the audience response, and how naming decisions were informed by audience considerations. This section also reflects on potential descendants of the girls and women named in our Bad Bridget outputs, who form part of this audience. This article explains the various reasons why we identified by name in our outputs the historic women and girls we encountered through our Bad Bridget research.

As references to scholarship in this article indicate, other historians are also currently grappling with related ethical and moral questions in their research. This article engages with recent reflections on the use of historical individuals' names in outputs, and how this can inform their visibility or invisibility.<sup>4</sup> Such discussions are predominantly situated in social, medical, crime or family history research in the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but these issues are not unique to these fields nor time periods. This article also centres on the role of the historian, building on research that explores historians' use of particular case studies and individual stories, their engagement with sources made available for genealogical purposes, and their emotional responses to the individuals they encounter in their research.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, this article encourages reflection on the ways in which we as historians engage with historical subjects and particularly the choices we make in naming or anonymising the individuals we encounter.

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<sup>4</sup> Recent examples include: Justin Bengry, 'Difficult Stories and Ethical Dilemmas in Family History', History Workshop Podcast (2021), <https://soundcloud.com/historyworkshop/difficult-stories-and-ethical-dilemmas-in-family-history> (accessed 1 Nov. 2023); Julia Laite, 'The Emmet's Inch: Small History in a Digital Age', *Journal of Social History*, 53 (2020), 963–89; Laura Nys, "'I am F. B.': Historians, Ethics and the Anonymisation of Autobiographical Sources', *Paedagogica Historica*, 58 (2022), 424–38. For discussion on the use of names and self-names in relation to historic transgender individuals, see Leanne Calvert, "'Came to her dressed in mans cloaths": Transgender Histories and Queer Approaches to the Family in Eighteenth-Century Ireland', *History of the Family*, 29 (2024), 112–13.

<sup>5</sup> On historians and emotions, see for example, Katie Barclay, 'The Practice and Ethics of the History of Emotions', in *Sources for the History of Emotions*, ed. Katie Barclay, Sharon Crozier-De Rosa and Peter N. Stearns (2021), ch. 3. For a discussion of empathy in writing, researching and teaching history, see Sara Fox, 'Archival Intimacies: Empathy and Historical Practice in 2023', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 1 (2023), 241–65. On the selection of sources, see in particular 257–9.

### The historian's choice

Historians are regularly confronted with the challenges of distilling vast amounts of primary and secondary source material into textual, aural or other outputs, and are thus required to make decisions on what to include and exclude. Historians often make choices about the added value (or not) of either quoting, citing or referring to certain primary or secondary sources, influenced by multiple personal or practical factors, including their desires to keep the reader or audience engaged, preferences for one source or author above another, word restrictions, or the need to progress or bolster an argument.<sup>6</sup> These decisions inform our writing of history, although we might not always be overly conscious of the factors that influenced these choices, or spend much time in making them.

Because the Bad Bridget project is heavily based on the individual stories of girls and women, we became very conscious of this act of decision-making when selecting case studies for inclusion in our outputs. Over the course of our research, we have encountered thousands of individuals in the historical records of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Boston, New York and Toronto. This large sample rendered decision-making difficult on both an emotional and practical level. The Bad Bridget exhibition at the Ulster American Folk Park focuses on the experiences of only six main individuals. Our co-authored monograph, *Bad Bridget: Crime, Mayhem and the Lives of Irish Emigrant Women*, identifies by name just over 200. Most of the girls and women we have encountered in our research, therefore, have not yet been mentioned by name in our outputs. Of those who feature, some were selected because aspects of their life histories were representative in some way, or shared commonalities with other women's stories. Delia Jones, for instance, whose story opens our co-authored monograph, was a typical Irish emigrant in many ways, hailing as she did from the west of Ireland and migrating as a teenager to the east coast of America to her sister who had funded her passage.<sup>7</sup> Other cases were chosen because they were rich in source material: petitions for clemency from Marion Canning's father in Mohill, County Leitrim following her imprisonment for theft in 1891, for instance, provide a fascinating glimpse of the lived realities of an Irish immigrant in New York's sex industry and an insight into transatlantic relationships.<sup>8</sup> Regional focus also shaped decision-making because of our need to highlight experiences in the three North American cities upon which the project is based, as well as to include migrants from different Irish counties. The desire to point to the diversity of crimes, ages and backgrounds of the collective Bad Bridget likewise informed decisions.

We also felt the pressure to preserve in writing or otherwise, however fleetingly, these historic Irish inhabitants about whom little was hitherto known.

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<sup>6</sup> See also Franca Iacovetta and Wendy Mitchinson, 'Introduction: Social History and Case Files Research', in *On the Case: Explorations in Social History*, ed. Franca Iacovetta and Wendy Mitchinson (1998), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Farrell and McCormick, *Bad Bridget*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 30–3.

McCormick has a particular fondness for the above-mentioned case of Marion Canning, which explains why it has featured prominently in the Bad Bridget podcast, book and exhibition. Katie Barclay has written persuasively about the emotional response to archival research.<sup>9</sup> She explains: 'I do not know how to write the history of the family without some attempt to form a relationship with the subjects whose inner lives I wish to access.'<sup>10</sup> This connection to historic individuals whom we encountered as part of the research adds an emotional aspect to this act of decision-making.

As part of our desire to reveal the complexities of Irish migration to North America through the lens of criminality, we decided, after much deliberation, to identify the girls and women in our records by name where the archives allowed. In doing so, we rejected the alternatives, which were to assign pseudonyms or fictionalised names, or to refer to individuals by their initials. We have several reasons for doing so. Female criminals are often 'othered'.<sup>11</sup> In the nineteenth century, some Irish women who came before North American courts were dehumanised, or described in animalistic terms.<sup>12</sup> In her analysis of anonymisation in historical writing, Laura Nys argues that 'In naming we recognise people as individuals who are part of the human community and acknowledge their identity.'<sup>13</sup> In using real names in our Bad Bridget outputs, we aim to draw attention to the realities of the migratory experience for the millions of Irish-born girls and women who crossed the Atlantic Ocean, through the individual stories of those who ended up on the wrong side of the law in North America. Catherine Griffin, until recently a New York public defender, recognised this effort to acknowledge these real girls and women when she commented that the Bad Bridget project 'returns their humanity'.<sup>14</sup>

In his Proclamation on Irish-American Heritage Month, 2022, US President Joseph Biden observed:

For centuries, Irish Americans have played a crucial role in helping define the soul of our Nation, and today, nearly 1 in 10 Americans proudly trace their roots back to the Emerald Isle. With hope and faith in their hearts, the first immigrants from Ireland crossed the Atlantic in search of liberty and opportunity. ... The story of Irish Americans has always been one of strength and perseverance through adversity. Many Irish immigrants arrived on America's shores to escape the Great Famine, only to face discrimination, prejudice, and poverty. Despite these hard times, they embraced their new homes in every corner of America ... and helped build and fortify our Nation into what it is today. Irish Americans expanded the American middle class, building ladders of opportunity

<sup>9</sup> Katie Barclay, 'Falling in Love with the Dead'. *Rethinking History*, 22 (2018), 460–1.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 460.

<sup>11</sup> See Anne-Marie Kilday and David Nash, *Beyond Deviant Damsels: Re-evaluating Female Criminality in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 2023), especially ch. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Farrell and McCormick, *Bad Bridget*, 237–9.

<sup>13</sup> Nys, 'I am F. B.', 433.

<sup>14</sup> Catherine Griffin, as part of 'Bad Bridget: Live Podcast', Cashel Arts Festival, 16 Sept. 2023.

that future generations could climb. They became teachers, firefighters, police officers, labor leaders, farmers, business owners, and more.<sup>15</sup>

The glossy US-published *Irish-America* magazine, which describes itself as ‘a celebration of the growing resurgence of Irish heritage among Irish Americans here today’, notes its ‘emphasis on the enormous achievements of distinguished and diverse Irish and Irish Americans such as superstar and humanitarian Bono, former president of Coca-Cola and chairman of Allen & Company Donald R. Keough, comedian Kathy Griffin, and silver screen legend Maureen O’Hara’.<sup>16</sup> The girls and women who feature in the Bad Bridget project do not easily fit this popular narrative of successful Irish migration to the US. Using pseudonymised names in our outputs would further reinforce this idea that poor or criminal Irish female immigrants to North America should be forgotten, or pushed to the shadows behind the ‘successful’ identified by name or referred to in these excerpts. In their study of First World War pension files, Jessica Meyer and Alexia Moncrieff observe that individual life histories, including names, can be an act of ‘memorialising individuals by making them historically visible’.<sup>17</sup> In naming, we pull from the anonymous mass of immigration to North America some individual Irish-born girls and women and return them to the historical narrative.

Meyer and Moncrieff argue that not to use the stories of particular individuals in scholarship ‘may deny visibility to marginalised groups whose histories deserve to be told’.<sup>18</sup> In our view, these Bad Bridget accounts should be told, even though some of the individuals involved committed atrocious acts. In her biography of Norman Douglas, a known pederast, Rachel Hope Cleves argues that the topic of ‘adult-child sex’ is ‘taboo’ and ‘discomforting’ but that the history of sexuality ‘cannot avoid an entire range of human behaviour’ solely on the basis that ‘it arouses feelings of disgust’.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, as Paula Backscheider has noted, ‘Biographers do, after all, write the lives of people they consider monsters or repellent human beings’.<sup>20</sup> Even the histories of Irish immigrant women who committed the most violent crimes can offer insights into the complexities of their lived experiences and the wider contexts in which they operated. Antrim-born Sarah Jane Robinson, accused of poisoning several

<sup>15</sup> Joseph R. Biden Jr, ‘Proclamation on Irish-American Heritage Month, 2022’ (28 Feb. 2022), [www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room](http://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room) (accessed 6 Dec. 2023).

<sup>16</sup> See [www.irishamerica.com](http://www.irishamerica.com) (accessed 6 Dec. 2023).

<sup>17</sup> Jessica Meyer and Alexia Moncrieff, ‘Family not to be Informed? The Ethical Use of Historical Medical Documentation’, in *Patient Voices in Britain, 1840-1948*, ed. Anne Hanley and Jessica Meyer (2021), 70.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 80-1.

<sup>19</sup> Rachel Hope Cleves, *Unspeakable: A Life beyond Sexual Morality* (Chicago, 2020), 6-7. See also Julia Laité, ‘The Marginal and the Monstrous: The “Voices” of Prostitutes and Traffickers in Modern History’, <https://manyheadedmonster.com/2015/07/08/the-marginal-and-the-monstrous-the-voices-of-prostitutes-and-traffickers-in-modern-history/> (accessed 23 Sept. 2023).

<sup>20</sup> Paula Backscheider, *Reflections on Biography* (Oxford, 1999), 39, cited in Jill Lepore, ‘Historians Who Love too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography’, *Journal of American History*, 88 (2001), 142-3.

members of her family, including her husband, her sister, and her son, offers such an example. She and her sole surviving son maintained her innocence, but she was found guilty of murder in 1888 in Boston and sentenced to death.<sup>21</sup> Her story is revealing of financial strain and family relationships, as well as forensic science advances and attitudes towards female criminality. Following a campaign by the suffragist movement, which criticised the extension of the death penalty to a woman whose gender had had no input in forming the legislation, Robinson's sentence was commuted to life in prison. She died in custody at the age of sixty-eight.<sup>22</sup>

Given our subject matter, we also had practical reasons for using real names. Any alternative would have meant that individuals mentioned in our outputs could have required multiple pseudonyms. Firstly, many Irish inhabitants at this time used variations of their forenames or pet names interchangeably.<sup>23</sup> Secondly, our focus is on immigrants, many of whom adopted new names in North America as a means of assimilation or as part of their new lives abroad. Thirdly, many had criminal convictions and with that, multiple aliases.<sup>24</sup> And fourthly, they were women, who typically changed their surnames on marriage or long-term cohabitation. For example, the aforementioned Delia Jones was registered as Bridget at the time of her birth in County Mayo but went by the variant, Delia. At some point after migration to the US and marriage, she adopted the name Stella Weymouth. But she also had other aliases, including Stella Johnson.<sup>25</sup> Other women who were assigned the forename Bridget at birth changed their names in the US due to the negative associations of the name.<sup>26</sup> It would be challenging, if not impossible from an onomastic perspective, to assign multiple names to girls and women like Delia Jones without losing the specific nuances of their given and chosen names.

Fictionalising only the names of criminal suspects in our outputs (as opposed to witnesses, legal officials and other bystanders) would also require a judgement about the type of behaviour that was criminal. This would not be straightforward, and not solely because we are not legal professionals.

<sup>21</sup> *Boston Globe*, 29 June 1888. See also Farrell and McCormick, *Bad Bridget*, 247–9.

<sup>22</sup> *Boston Evening Transcript*, 31 Oct. 1888; *Boston Globe*, 5 Jan. 1906.

<sup>23</sup> For discussion of these practices in early-modern Ireland, see Clodagh Tait, 'Namesakes and Nicknames: Naming Practices in Early Modern Ireland, 1540–1700', *Continuity and Change*, 21 (2006), 313–40.

<sup>24</sup> On the use of aliases by those with criminal pasts, see, for example, Elaine Farrell, *Women, Crime and Punishment in Ireland: Life in the Nineteenth-Century Convict Prison* (Cambridge, 2020), 27–8; Wolfgang Helbich and Walter D. Kamphoefner, 'The Hour of Your Liberation is Getting Closer and Closer ...', *Studia Migracyjne-Przegląd Polonijny*, 35 (2009), 43–58; Richard W. Ireland, 'The Felon and the Angel Copier: Criminal Identity and the Promise of Photography in Victorian England and Wales', in *Policing and War in Europe*, ed. Louis A. Knafla (2002), 53–86 (especially 60); Maria Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish society, 1800–1914* (Cambridge, 2007), 49.

<sup>25</sup> Case file of Stella Weymouth (Delia (Bridget) Jones) (Massachusetts Archives, Massachusetts Reformatory for Women, Inmate case files, HS9.06/series 515, #11095).

<sup>26</sup> Margaret Lynch-Brennan, 'Ubiquitous Bridget: Irish Immigrant Women in Domestic Service in America, 1840–1930', in *Making the Irish American: History and Heritage of the Irish in the United States*, ed. Marion R. Casey and J. J. Lee (New York, 2006), 333.



Legislation has changed so that some of the behaviours that were punished in the nineteenth or early-twentieth centuries are not prosecuted in the same way today. For example, several Irish-born teenagers and young women were prosecuted for the crime of stubbornness or waywardness. Drogheda-born Elizabeth Fingliss was two months short of her twentieth birthday when her father brought her to court on a charge of stubbornness in 1915, because she had run away to New York with a travelling salesman. She was sentenced to two years in prison.<sup>27</sup> And what of the women who were imprisoned for vagrancy? It was, as Saidiya Hartman has observed, ‘a status, not a crime’.<sup>28</sup> To change the names of all those arrested or brought before North American courts would thus be to equate poverty with premediated criminal offences such as serial killing.

It is also the case that not all of the Irish-born girls and women suspected of illegal behaviour in North America were guilty. The records are often too fragmentary to distinguish between perpetrators and innocent defendants.<sup>29</sup> It was in a suspect’s interests to present herself in a sympathetic manner, and to argue her innocence. One resident in a New York brothel in 1866 (whose name was not given in the original source) was asked why she did not seek employment elsewhere. She explained: ‘I have no recommendations to get a place with a family and not clothes enough for a store.’ A policeman rejected her statement and those of her associates, saying ‘Oh that’s all talk ... they wouldn’t work for no consideration.’<sup>30</sup> It is difficult from these conflicting views to judge the unnamed woman’s situation. Yet it would be unwise to dismiss her claim, and the claims of other women in our research, as untrue. It is similarly impossible to judge the accuracy of verdicts from more than 100 years ago. Just because an individual was tried or has a criminal file with their name on it does not mean that they were guilty of a crime.<sup>31</sup> In the case of an immigrant population, erroneous convictions have the potential to be relatively numerous. In the middle decades of the nineteenth century especially, stereotypes of the Irish as drunken, slovenly or uncivilised persisted.<sup>32</sup> In 1866, for instance, a newspaper report described the inhabitants of one brothel in Five Points, New York as: ‘brazen-faced, bloated, debauched young creatures, uncomely, unattractive and uneducated. They are mostly

<sup>27</sup> Farrell and McCormick, *Bad Bridget*, 95.

<sup>28</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives: Beautiful Experiments* (2019), 243.

<sup>29</sup> Adrian Bingham, Lucy Delap, Louise Jackson and Louise Settle, ‘Historical Child Sexual Abuse in England and Wales: The Role of Historians’, *History of Education*, 45 (2016), 425.

<sup>30</sup> *New York Times*, 21 Jan. 1866.

<sup>31</sup> Stephen Robertson, ‘What’s Law got to do with it? Legal Records and Sexual Histories’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 14 (2005), 62.

<sup>32</sup> See for example, Ciara Breathnach, ‘Immigrant Irishwomen and Maternity Services in New York and Boston, 1860–1911’, *Medical History*, 66 (2022), 8–10; Deidre Cooper Owens, *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology* (Athens, GA, 2017), 90; Hidetaka Hirota, *Expelling the Poor: Atlantic Seaboard States and the 19th-Century Origins of American Immigration Policy* (Oxford, 2017), especially chs. 4 and 5; Kevin Kenny, ‘Race, Violence, and Anti-Irish Sentiment in the Nineteenth Century’, in *Making the Irish American*, ed. Casey and Lee, 364–78.

Irish. I saw but two faces that showed intellect.<sup>33</sup> In the next brothel, the author observed a single 'intelligent woman in the room ... the rest of them were unmistakably ... from the fatherland of the Fenians, every soul of them, but she looked like an American born'.<sup>34</sup> Margaret Connors was described as a 'weird looking' Irish woman when she appeared in court in Brooklyn in August 1879 accused of being a fortune teller. A servant who testified against her was contrastingly described as a 'pretty and intelligent girl, evidently of American birth'.<sup>35</sup> It is impossible to determine how views or stereotypes of immigrant and non-immigrant populations fed into guilty verdicts against innocent individuals.

### The openness of archives

In 1998, Franca Iacovetta and Wendy Mitchinson wrote of historic individuals: 'In uncovering their agency we face a paradox: our legal obligations as researchers to protect the privacy of individuals in the past can lead us to write the marginal into history by writing their names and faces out of it.'<sup>36</sup> Since our research focuses on the period from 1838 to 1918, most of the records upon which the project is based are older than 100 years and are thus open to the public without any legal requirements to change the names of those mentioned. This facilitates the writing of marginal Irish female immigrants into history, alongside their names. It is also highly likely, given the time period, that the girls and women identified over the course of our research are now dead.

For some of the individuals, the records upon which our research is based related to the worst point in their lives: the 'rock bottom' of an alcohol addiction; the horror attached to getting caught for infanticide or abortion and their secret unwanted pregnancy being exposed; the desperate poverty that compelled some women to engage temporarily in the sex industry or to steal to make ends meet. For others, the crime that we first discovered was merely one in a long career of illegal activity. We aimed in our outputs to handle and present each case sensitively, while at the same time doing our job as historians. To that end, we referenced all our primary and secondary sources in our trade book, enabling other scholars to follow our trail through the archives and repositories should they so wish. Many of these references include individuals' names, since that is how they are filed or identifiable in collections. Omission of names is sometimes a condition of using particular archival collections, but since this did not apply in our case, we saw no reason not to reference.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup> *New York Times*, 21 Jan. 1866.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Brooklyn Times Union*, 28 Aug. 1879.

<sup>36</sup> Iacovetta and Mitchinson, 'Introduction', 6.

<sup>37</sup> Some historians have taken the decision for ethical or other reasons to override scholarly and disciplinary conventions by omitting references, or by providing minimal detail that can largely prevent others locating those specific files in the archives. On this subject, see, for example, Sarah-Anne Buckley, *Cruelty Man: Child Welfare, the NSPCC and the State in Ireland, 1889-1956* (Manchester, 2013), xix; David Wright and Renée Saucier, 'Madness in the Archives: Anonymity,

Lack of referencing can also raise issues of accountability.<sup>38</sup> In his discussion of history methodologies, Tom Griffiths writes: 'Footnotes are not defensive displays of pedantry; they are honest expressions of vulnerability, generous signposts to anyone who wants to retrace the path and test the insights, acknowledgements of the collective enterprise that is history.'<sup>39</sup> Referencing also allows other researchers to build on published scholarship through the identification and analysis of additional sources.

While most of our Bad Bridget research was archival, information on many of the girls and women in our study is also accessible through digitised sources.<sup>40</sup> The booming business of family history from the 1970s has resulted in vast amounts of digitised sources becoming available online, or via a library or archive.<sup>41</sup> And this remains ongoing; records are available online now that were accessible only in North American archives when we began the Bad Bridget project. Easily searchable digitised records, often made available by specialist archivists or genealogists, bring significant advantages to historians tracing individuals. Julia Laite has pointed out that her subjects 'walked on and off my stage. Stage left: the start of the police file, court case, or home office correspondence in which I found them. Stage right: the file's end. Digitization means I can chase them off the archive's page.'<sup>42</sup> We chased some of the individuals identified in our Bad Bridget project through digitised institution registers, newspapers, and birth, death and marriage records, which allowed us to supplement criminal records, and to gain some insight of the lives of individuals before and after the crime of which they were suspected. In his discussion of the ethics around queer history, Justin Bengry has similarly pointed to the benefits of online family history sources in allowing historians to move beyond mad, bad or sad unidimensional historical figures.<sup>43</sup>

Open access digital archives can make attempts to hide the identities of historical individuals very difficult. As Daniel Grey has argued in the case of defendants and victims in nineteenth-century English and Welsh sexual assault cases, the 'information in newspaper articles (along with published law reports or similar documents) is already in the public domain' and for well-known cases 'anonymity is redundant'.<sup>44</sup> Some of the Irish-born suspects we encountered in our research are likewise already in the public domain.

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Ethics, and Mental Health History Research', *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association/Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 23 (2012), 71–2.

<sup>38</sup> For a discussion in ethnography, see Erica Weiss and Carole McGranahan, 'Rethinking Pseudonyms in Ethnography: An Introduction', *Americanethnologist.org* (accessed 1 Oct. 2023).

<sup>39</sup> Tom Griffiths, *The Art of Time Travel: Historians and their Craft* (Carlton, Victoria, 2016), 163.

<sup>40</sup> This includes Family Search; Find my Past; Ancestry.com; Newspapers.com; the 1901 and 1911 Irish census; and Irish Civil Records.

<sup>41</sup> Tanya Evans, 'Secrets and Lies: The Radical Potential of Family History', *History Workshop Journal*, 71 (2011), 49.

<sup>42</sup> Laite, 'The Marginal and the Monstrous'. For similar reflections on the potential of the digital turn, see Tom Hulme, 'Queering Family History and the Lives of Irish Men before Gay Liberation', *History of the Family*, 29 (1), 62–83.

<sup>43</sup> Bengry, 'Difficult Stories and Ethical Dilemmas'.

<sup>44</sup> Daniel Grey, "'Monstrous and Indefensible'? Newspaper Accounts of Sexual Assaults on Children in Nineteenth-Century England and Wales', in *Women's Criminality in Europe, 1600–1914*, ed. Manon van der Heijden, Marion Pluskota and Sanne Muurling (Cambridge, 2020), 191 n. 9.

Lizzie Halliday, for example, was the first woman to be sentenced to death in the US by the electric chair. She had her own Wikipedia page before the Bad Bridget project came into being.<sup>45</sup> But just because information is already in the public domain does not mean that it should not be handled sensitively.

### The subject's consent

Anonymisation, which includes pseudonymisation or the use of initials or numbers, has come to be expected in certain fields. Historians commonly anonymise twentieth-century victims of sexual assault, or victims or survivors of historic institutional abuse.<sup>46</sup> Clóna Rattigan anonymised defendants in her study of twentieth-century infant murder and concealment of birth, 'given the sensitive nature of such material'.<sup>47</sup> Oral historians too often anonymise participants, particularly in relation to sensitive issues where confidentiality is important. For instance, Laura Kelly assigned pseudonyms to interviewees in her study of contraception in twentieth-century Republic of Ireland, unless they had requested otherwise, and changed the name of partners, relatives or other bystanders who happened to be mentioned in interviews.<sup>48</sup> Good practice guides advise that interviewees should be permitted to view their transcripts post-interview and, depending on the project, to remove any details that they wish.<sup>49</sup> But what happens when the individuals upon whom the research is based are dead? As Jessica Meyer and Alexia Moncrieff note, the deaths of subjects 'leave them unable to provide informed, un-coerced consent' to inclusion in a historical study.<sup>50</sup> These 'historical subjects cannot give consent from beyond the grave'.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Lizzie Halliday Wikipedia entry, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lizzie\\_Halliday](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lizzie_Halliday) (accessed 23 Oct. 2023).

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Leanne McCormick, Sean O'Connell, Olivia Dee and John Privilege, *Report into Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries in Northern Ireland, 1922-1990* (Belfast, 2021), 12-13; Olivia Dee, 'Navigating Cultures of Silence with Survivors of Northern Irish Mother and Baby Institutions', *Oral History*, 51 (2023), 81-91; Lindsey Earner-Byrne, 'The Rape of Mary M.: A Microhistory of Sexual Violence and Moral Redemption in 1920s Ireland', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 24 (2015), 75-98.

<sup>47</sup> Rattigan used initials for individuals mentioned in sources held at the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, which was an archival requirement because the records were closed, and first names and initials of surnames for defendants tried on the other side of the Irish border whose case files are in the National Archives of Ireland and are open to the public. See Clóna Rattigan, *What else could I do? Single Mothers and Infanticide, Ireland 1900-1950* (Dublin, 2012), 28.

<sup>48</sup> Laura Kelly, *Contraception and Modern Ireland: A Social history, c.1922-92* (Cambridge, 2022), 15.

<sup>49</sup> The guidelines devised by the Oral History Network Ireland, for example, note: 'it is good practice to return a copy of the interview to the interviewee for their own use ... it might also be required if an interviewee has requested an opportunity to review the content'. See Oral History Network Ireland Practical Guidelines, <https://oralhistorynetworkireland.ie/practical-guidelines> (accessed 23 Oct. 2023). See also James Rowlands, 'Interviewee Transcript Review as a Tool to Improve Data Quality and Participant Confidence in Sensitive Research', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20 (2021), 1-11.

<sup>50</sup> Meyer and Moncrieff, 'Family not to be Informed?', 69.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 80-1.

Julia Laité has reflected on the issue of visibility with regard to deceased individuals:

Perhaps we can assume that a person who has published their own writing, especially writing about their life, wants to be remembered, but can we make the same assumption for the legions of the unpublished dead: those who, because they were legally compelled to do so, had their marriage registered or their sea voyage surveilled; those whose criminal records were, as far as they knew, to be kept tucked away in a police station drawer; those whose names were briefly mentioned in newspapers that – they thought – became the next day’s kindling? Can we assume that these people, ripped from the dark ever-working chaos of the past and entered onto genealogical and historical databases, want to be there?<sup>52</sup>

None of the girls and women in our study have agreed to be named or included in our research and yet we have done so anyway. We also base our research on sources to which they may not have had access, or sources that were created about them rather than by them.<sup>53</sup> This could be potentially problematic because it obviously shapes our perception of the girls and women in our research, who have not had any say in how they have been presented. For instance, staff at the Massachusetts Reformatory for Women described Irish-born Mary O’Malley, imprisoned in 1914 for nightwalking, as: ‘Courteous, [a] splendid helper; has given no trouble in any way.’<sup>54</sup> The official who interviewed her fellow countrywoman Mary Sweeney in Massachusetts in May 1917 was far more critical of the Irish woman in front of her, writing:

Several times during [the] interview she became excited, raised her voice, and apparently considered the advisability of making a general rumpus but each time decided against it and quieted down. Is a powerful woman. It was evident she wished to make a good impression and to appear very quiet, mild, and much wronged by a charge against her chastity. Several times tried to squeeze out a few tears in speaking of disgrace brought upon family by her alcoholic habit, but insincere and without desire to be temperate.<sup>55</sup>

The records on which our research is based were largely generated when an Irish-born woman encountered a legal authority, implying (erroneously or not) illegal or deviant behaviour. In his study of focused queer histories, Tom

<sup>52</sup> Laité, ‘The Emmet’s Inch’, 979.

<sup>53</sup> For discussion of subjects’ concerns about what was written about them, see Mark Peel, *Miss Culter and the Case of the Resurrected Horse: Social Work and the Story of Poverty in America, Australia, and Britain* (Chicago & London, 2012), 15–16.

<sup>54</sup> Case file of Mary O’Malley (Massachusetts Archives, Massachusetts Reformatory for Women, Inmate case files, HS9.06/series 515, #10267).

<sup>55</sup> Case file of Mary Sweeney (Massachusetts Archives, Massachusetts Reformatory for Women, Inmate case files, HS9.06/series 515, #10948).

Hulme has likewise reflected on the difficulty of using legal records whereby we ‘risk defining queer men solely by their sexual behaviour, not unlike the pathologizing psychiatrists of the past, even if we can claim more compassionate objectives’.<sup>56</sup> He argues that ‘the dead cannot decide whether they want to be reborn as a queer hero today’.<sup>57</sup> In the same way, the dead cannot agree to inclusion in a research project entitled *Bad Bridget*, and all that that name might imply.

Although modern concepts of data protection and consent were not a feature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the question remains whether the Irish-born girls and women would have wanted their stories and experiences told. Some of the individuals identified in the course of our research sought to conceal their criminal histories from their relatives and friends. ‘My poor mother’s heart would be broke if she knew’, Mary Good said of her sister’s work in Boston’s sex industry.<sup>58</sup> Their mother was at home in Ireland, evidently unaware of how her daughter was earning a living. According to a prison clerk who documented Catherine Lynch’s admission to prison for larceny in Massachusetts in 1900, she ‘will not give her peoples names. Does not want to disgrace them.’<sup>59</sup> Lynch and her husband had left Ireland for New York around twenty years earlier.<sup>60</sup> It is not lost on us that we expose such secrets as part of our research.

And this is, of course, a one-way gaze, a one-way exposure of secrets. Laite notes of Lydia Harvey, about whom she has written: ‘I can scrutinize her, know very intimate details about her life, and she can never do the same for me, no matter how much of myself I pour into investigating her.’<sup>61</sup> In a way, it can thus feel exploitative to use these cases. In writing or talking about these girls and women, are we also exploiting them, a twenty-first-century echo of the way in which some were exploited in their own lives? We edit their life stories to fit our word count or our arguments, using one individual life history as if it tells all of them. We employ individual stories for entertainment, sometimes utilising our *Bad Bridget* social media account to showcase some, often humorous, examples. We look for light-hearted cases or stories of defiant women when the heart-breaking cases get too heavy.

As professional historians, we also benefit from this exploitation. Laite also recognises this, observing that historians ‘commodify individual lives. We use them to “tell some other kind of tale” in books and articles that feed into our academic appointments, our promotions, and, if we are lucky, our publishing revenue.’<sup>62</sup> But while these issues might be most frequently discussed in relation to modern crime history, in reality they are not unique to the study of criminality nor the modern period. The individuals named in the *Bad*

<sup>56</sup> See Hulme, ‘Queering Family History’, 63.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>58</sup> Farrell and McCormick, *Bad Bridget*, 8.

<sup>59</sup> Entry for Catherine Lynch, 11 May 1900 (Massachusetts Archives, Massachusetts Reformatory Prison for Women, Inmate registers, HS9.06/series 824).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Laite, ‘The Emmet’s Inch’, 978.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

Bridget project are deceased and thus cannot consent to inclusion, but this is not unusual in history practice. Bengry explains: 'As historians we're already using all kinds of records that the people named in them certainly would have wanted nothing more than to see them destroyed.'<sup>63</sup> Political, social, cultural and other historians regularly use sources such as private diaries and journals, family papers, letters and photographs that were never intended for public consumption or dissemination. Likewise, the way historians benefit personally or professionally by writing about the hardship of people in the past is common to many areas of historical research.

The large number of historic individuals in our Bad Bridget project means that it encompasses diverse personalities. While some of the women mentioned earlier expressed shame at their predicaments, others seem to have relished the public platform that they were given in court and enjoyed light-hearted exchanges with those present. 'You here again?' the presiding judge asked Maggie Smith when she appeared before him at Washington Place Police Court in New York in 1876, evidently recognising the Irish woman. She claimed that her drinking was medicinal, insisting, when the judge asked her to sign the abstinence pledge: 'I can't, your Honor, I've got the asthma, and must drink.' When he observed that she was 'a dissolute woman', Smith retorted: 'No, your Honor ... I'm an Irish woman.' 'Well, you're a woman, anyway', the judge surmised, probably in an attempt to conclude the exchange. 'No, I aint ... I'm a girl, twenty-seven years old', Maggie Smith replied, seemingly wanting to have the last word.<sup>64</sup>

Laura Nys has argued that 'anonymising individuals confined in disciplinary institutions perpetuates the idea that contact with such institutions was – and still is – shameful'.<sup>65</sup> It is clear that for reasons of poverty, homelessness, ill-health or otherwise, some Irish women who came before the courts viewed a prison sentence as their desired outcome. When sentenced to twenty-nine days for drunkenness in New York in July 1885, for example, Ann Kelly thanked the judge. She was evidently happy to return to the prison that she had left only a few weeks earlier, and thus 'with a smile on her face she marched back to the pen'.<sup>66</sup> Another Irish-born suspect, Ann Jane Fox, blessed the magistrate who sent her to prison for the same offence in Toronto in 1890.<sup>67</sup> As these courtroom examples indicate, assigning shame to women who were charged or convicted of criminal behaviour through blanket anonymisation would obviously be problematic when they seem to have experienced or expressed no such shame themselves. Given the subject matter of the Bad Bridget project, assigning false names would also reproduce nineteenth- and early twentieth-century notions that shame should be associated with experiences such as pregnancies or births outside marriage,

<sup>63</sup> Bengry, 'Difficult Stories and Ethical Dilemmas'.

<sup>64</sup> *New York Times*, 5 June 1876.

<sup>65</sup> Nys, 'I am F. B.', 432.

<sup>66</sup> *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 21 July 1885.

<sup>67</sup> *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 7 Jan. 1890.

poverty, or sexual or physical assaults.<sup>68</sup> Not to use real names, therefore, would seem to make us complicit in this shaming.

Some of the women and men in positions of power whom we encountered in our research behaved in ways that might seem inappropriate today, even though their behaviour was not illegal then or now. Charity or child protection workers, for instance, made decisions to fragment families or deliberately to sever parental and sibling bonds. Judges, policemen and other legal authorities likewise made choices to arrest or convict, informed by factors that can seem incomprehensible today. Our evidence also reveals that families too disowned or ignored daughters or sisters in need, which might seem unsympathetic given their circumstances.<sup>69</sup> Concealing the names of some individuals in the past due to concerns about shame or posthumous memory but not the identities of others could thus be seen as inconsistent. It would require us to make judgements about the type of behaviour that might be classified as problematic today, adding to the historian's role an uncomfortable, moralising element.

Anonymisation is also sometimes presented as a means to maintain a dead person's 'dignity'. But the notion that dignity is assigned when we remove individuals' names is not straightforward. Is it not disrespectful to analyse the life of an individual, to take ideas from them, to quote what they said or what someone else said about them, and then not even to credit or acknowledge their input enough to identify them by name?<sup>70</sup> Likewise, assigning a fictitious name could be perceived as disrespectful in a historic Irish context where forenames were often passed down through generations. In her discussion of historians' discomfort at using the records of deceased historical subjects, Sarah Fox observes: 'Empathetic approaches to history ... go some way to allay historians' concerns about the ethics of using personal documents.'<sup>71</sup> Maintaining real names for deceased subjects, where the archival records and guidance allow, could thus be interpreted as a facet of an empathetic approach to history practice.

## The audience response

The nineteenth-century annual reports of the Association for the Protection of Roman Catholic Children in Boston deliberately excluded the surnames of individuals aided, 'lest the children, when grown up, might be brought to unmerited shame by the revelation of the misconduct of their parents'.<sup>72</sup> It could be

<sup>68</sup> Similar concerns have been expressed in relation to queer history. Tom Hulme, for instance, has chosen to use real names in his analysis of men brought to court on charges of so-called 'gross indecency', coupled sometimes with dates of birth and death, address, name of school and names of family members (Tom Hulme, 'Queer Belfast during the First World War: Masculinity and Same-Sex Desire in the Irish City', *Irish Historical Studies*, 45 (2021), 239–61).

<sup>69</sup> See for example, Farrell and McCormick, *Bad Bridget*, 221–3.

<sup>70</sup> Erica Weiss 'Pseudonyms as Anti-Citation', <https://americanethnologist.org/online-content/collections/rethinking-pseudonyms-in-ethnography/pseudonyms-as-anti-citation/> (accessed 23 Oct. 2023).

<sup>71</sup> Fox, 'Archival Intimacies', 261.

<sup>72</sup> *Annual report of the Association for the Protection of Roman Catholic Children, in Boston, from Jan. 1, 1865, to Jan. 1, 1866* (Boston, 1866), 5.



argued that ‘although the dead feel no shame, their still living descendants can’.<sup>73</sup> These living descendants can constitute in part the audience of historical research. Barry Godfrey, Tim Hitchcock and Robert Shoemaker have explained that they did not anonymise in the Digital Panopticon because the project methodology is record linkage, which by its very nature requires names and biographical details to be available to users. In reference to descendants discovering information about the criminal pasts of relatives, they argue that ‘if you engage in historical research, you must be prepared for whatever information you encounter’.<sup>74</sup> The democratisation of historical knowledge through the digitisation of records facilitates such discoveries.<sup>75</sup>

The relatively small pool of forenames used in Ireland at this time, and the commonality of certain surnames, probably prevents some of our audience recognising their own ancestors in our Bad Bridget outputs. For example, of the 6,482 names of Irish girls and women that we extracted from Boston House of Correction registers dating from 1882 to 1915, 1,660 (25.61 per cent) are Marys, 680 are Margarets or Maggies (10.49 per cent) and 633 (9.77 per cent) are Catherines/Katherines (or derivatives such as Kate, Cassie, Kitty, or Katie).<sup>76</sup> This means that at least 45.87 per cent of the forenames extracted from the institution’s registers are one of three names. The names Ann/Anne, Annie and Anna were similarly common among the Irish girls and women admitted to the Boston House of Correction between 1882 and 1915, with 702 (10.83 per cent) listed, but some of these might derive from Hannah (of which there are 121), Johanna (of which there are 42) or Rosanna (of which 23 have been taken from the registers).<sup>77</sup> We also see repetition in surnames among Irish-born girls and women in this institution. The surname Murphy occurs 151 times and Kelly/Kelley/O’Kelly 121 times. In many (if not most) cases, a descendant would thus probably need to know some details of their ancestor’s migratory history in order to connect them with any degree of confidence to the stories told in Bad Bridget outputs.

The commonality of Irish names at this time hindered our efforts to trace some individuals, but other girls and women proved more visible. As we followed some Irish-born girls and women through civil records or census returns, it was not unusual for us to come across the names of their descendants. We generally shied away from including in our monograph identifiable data on the generations that followed, where they were not involved in the

<sup>73</sup> Meyer and Moncrieff, ‘Family not to be Informed?’, 69.

<sup>74</sup> Barry Godfrey, Tim Hitchcock, and Robert Shoemaker, ‘The Ethics of Digital Data on Convict Lives’, [https://www.digitalpanopticon.org/Ethics\\_and\\_Digital\\_History](https://www.digitalpanopticon.org/Ethics_and_Digital_History) (accessed 23 Sept. 2023).

<sup>75</sup> Evans, ‘Secrets and Lies’, 49–73.

<sup>76</sup> These figures include the same women more than once if they were readmitted to the institution. Other names extracted from these Boston House of Correction records, such as Maria, Minnie, Mazie, Madge, Mae and Maud, may derive from Mary or Margaret but are not included in these figures.

<sup>77</sup> Other common names include Ellen (which appeared 318 times, with an additional 23 entries for Helen) and Bridget (316).

crime. We also sometimes excluded information relating to Irish women in the years after their encounters with the law, such as precise details on marriages (including name of spouse in some instances), or place or date of death. Such details, although discoverable through genealogical and other records, were not directly relevant to our research because, in our outputs to date, it has not been our intention to produce full biographies of historic individuals.

It is also problematic to assume that living descendants would be entirely aghast at uncovering information relating to an ancestor who was accused or convicted of a crime. The example that opens this article is a case in point. Genealogical, self-discovery programmes such as the celebrity-focused *Who Do You Think You Are?*, which first aired on BBC in 2004, have popularised having ancestors with unusual pasts.<sup>78</sup> Claire Lynch describes it as ‘quite remarkable’ that historical documents on *Who Do You Think You Are?*, like ‘bigamous marriage certificates, or birth certificates proving illegitimacy, which would once have been destroyed in shame, are now brandished as a treasure, breaking the seal of privacy that would have once prevented the present from intruding on the intimate secrets of the past’.<sup>79</sup> Australia too has seen a growing fascination with convict ancestors, a sharp remove from the ‘collective amnesia’ of the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>80</sup> In her study of family history in Canada, Britain and Australia, Tanya Evans highlights generational differences, with younger generations wanting to ‘share secrets openly to discourage shame’ in response to discoveries such as criminality, homosexuality and sexual relationships outside marriage.<sup>81</sup> Our intention is not to expose crimes about which descendants did not already know, but rather to provide a history of Irish girls’ and women’s lived experiences abroad, through the use of contextualised illustrative individual histories. It is likely, however, that some Bad Bridget ancestors are more palatable than others.

It could be argued that real names would matter less in publications generated specifically for an academic audience than for a non-academic audience. Academics would presumably be reading for the context, analysis and argument rather than the specific histories of individuals. Outputs from the Bad Bridget project to date, however, have been largely public facing and the exhibition, podcast and book have a non-academic audience in mind. Referring to individuals in these outputs by their initials would be confusing (especially due to recurring initials) and their stories could prove difficult to follow, particularly in some of the more complicated cases involving several individuals. Fictional names could also prove problematic. In 2021, anthropologist Carole McGranahan queried the expected use of pseudonyms in anthropological outputs:

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<sup>78</sup> Claire Lynch, ‘Who Do You Think You Are? Intimate Past Made Public’. *Biography*, 34 (2011), 108–18.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>80</sup> Ashley Barnwell, ‘Convict Shame to Convict Chic: Intergenerational Memory and Family Histories’, *Memory Studies*, 12 (2019), 405.

<sup>81</sup> Tanya Evans, *Family History, Historical Consciousness and Citizenship: A New Social History* (London, 2023), 70.

scholars often presume the reader is another academic trained in similar conventions of method, theory, and ethics. But this is not always the case. Readers of our scholarship are not only other ethnographers. They are also scholars from other disciplines, community members, professionals, journalists, and interested people anywhere in the world. Ethnographers often take for granted the use of pseudonyms; our readers do not. Instead, for some, the use of real names is critical to the ethical production of knowledge. For such readers, pseudonyms disrupt expectations for truth and trust.<sup>82</sup>

It was important for us not to generate such distrust in outputs for our (predominantly non-academic) audience.<sup>83</sup>

Pseudonymisation would also sever the audience connection to a name. Some surnames are particular to or well known in a locality. Forenames too can be specific to certain areas; the name Delia, for example, is markedly evident among immigrants from the western seaboard counties of Clare, Galway and Mayo. The Census of Ireland, 1901, digitised and freely available on the National Archives of Ireland website, indicates that 69.64 per cent of the renumerated Delias were born in counties Clare (1,103), Galway (2,118) and Mayo (1,159).<sup>84</sup> In comparison, the census lists only 73 Delias born in County Dublin (including Dublin city) and 4 born in County Antrim (including Belfast), despite the fact that these two counties boasted the largest populations.<sup>85</sup> In an Irish context, some names also point to parents' religious or political backgrounds. The use of real names allows local or informed audiences to recognise these and other nuances. Assigning new names, which carry their own meanings and histories, could on the other hand cause confusion or erroneous assumptions about an individual's background.

Enabling readers, listeners and museum visitors to connect to historical stories on a personal level facilitates interest and engagement, increasing the relatability of the research and ensuring that the stories are not viewed as fiction. Visitor feedback on the Bad Bridget exhibition at the Ulster American Folk Park in Omagh, County Tyrone, evidences this. One reads:

Catherine O'Donnell's story broke my heart. As a mother of two & as someone who had a miscarriage, I feel so sad for her trying to make a

<sup>82</sup> Carole McGranahan, 'The Truths of Anonymity: Ethnographic Credibility and the Problem with Pseudonyms', <https://americanethnologist.org/online-content/collections/rethinking-pseudonyms-in-ethnography/the-truths-of-anonymity-ethnographic-credibility-and-the-problem-with-pseudonyms/> (accessed 1 Oct. 2023).

<sup>83</sup> In the National Museums NI Bad Bridget exhibition, writer Jan Carson wrote imagined monologues based on historical sources relating to six girls and women, which were voiced by actresses. Notices were added to each character totem to make clear that these were fictionalised accounts based on historical evidence.

<sup>84</sup> This includes eleven girls and women named Dellia (seven from Mayo and two from Galway), and one (Delia McCarthy) whose forename was written in the surname column of the census form. See [www.census.nationalarchives.ie](http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie) (accessed 20 Dec. 2023).

<sup>85</sup> *Irish Historical Statistics: Population, 1821-1971*, ed. W. E. Vaughan and A. J. Fitzpatrick (Dublin, 1978), 5-15.

life for herself and her baby only for it to die and then she gets charged with murdering it. It's heartbreaking. It really made me so sad for her.

Another described the exhibition as 'insightful of the experiences of my granny, great-granny & all the other women that endured it'. In the context of Irish women's migration to North America, this engagement has also resulted in audience members or readers making connections to the present, including on topics such as racism in the US, women's experiences or rights at home and abroad, and migration to the island of Ireland.

## Conclusion

It would be difficult to produce social history outputs without including individual narratives. It would also be challenging for an academic historian to write history on a sensitive topic or one that involves the hardship or suffering of historic individuals without personally or professionally benefitting from it in some way through workplace promotion or otherwise. Yet avoiding this type of research would leave significant gaps in our understandings of the past, and with the sea of open access archives, avoidance seems redundant. We could lose the context that is vital to understanding these stories and their wider significance.

Nys argues against the use of real names in her research on juvenile reformatories in Belgium between 1890 and 1960 and instead opts for pseudonyms rather than initials to 'convey more humanness'. She asks: 'Would I violate the post-mortem privacy of my research subjects by naming them? I do not believe so. But there is no actual reason to use their real names, either.'<sup>86</sup> We see many reasons to use real names for our research on an earlier time period, for us as historians as well as for the individuals themselves. It enables us to adhere to archival requirements and disciplinary conventions by referencing our sources. It allows us to reclaim the histories of these forgotten Irish women, to complicate the popular narrative of Irish immigration to North America as one of rising up the social ranks from humble beginnings. Avoiding anonymisation and pseudonymisation means that we also avoid reproducing nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century notions of shame, or that we do not read shame into experiences where there was none. In this manner, we regard our use of real names as part of our empathetic and ethical approach to historical practice. The use of real names also enables those in the twenty-first century to connect more easily to the research and to the realities of life in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ireland and North America. And perhaps this is particularly important on an island where unwed motherhood was stigmatised until recent decades, sexuality was in some instances repressed, and where, in December 2023, four years after the decriminalisation of abortion in Northern Ireland, Amnesty International UK published a report outlining significant access issues.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>86</sup> Nys, 'I am F. B.', 437.

<sup>87</sup> Amnesty International UK, *Legal but not Local: Barriers to Accessing Abortion Services in Northern Ireland* (2023). Grainne Teggart, Northern Ireland Deputy Director of Amnesty International UK

In her study of ‘small history’, Laite observes:

If we still want real people to cross the stages of our historical narratives, we must accept that this brings with it all sorts of tricks and problems. I certainly have not overcome these ethical, methodological, and theoretical issues in the history that I am trying to tell. I remain a trafficker in other people’s stories.<sup>88</sup>

We have no one-size-fits-all solution to offer either. The choices each historian makes will depend on the nature of the project, the sources and archival requirements, the real or perceived sensitivities of the topic, their personal or professional views of ethical historical practice, and their audiences. For the Bad Bridget project our choices reflected our decisions around these issues.

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described the situation: ‘Four years on from decriminalisation of abortion in Northern Ireland, access is a right but not a reality for all who need it.’ See [amnestyinternational.org.uk/press-releases](https://amnestyinternational.org.uk/press-releases) (accessed 20 Dec. 2023).

<sup>88</sup> Laite, ‘The Emmet’s Inch’, 978.

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