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WOMEN'S BOOK OWNERSHIP IN WALES (c.1770-1830): THE LADIES OF
LLANGOLLEN, HESTER THRALE PIOZZI AND ELIZABETH GREENLY

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Abstract

In *A Nation and its Books* (1998), numerous chapters emphasise the cultural impact of book collecting in Wales; however, apart from one entry, a history of women's book ownership is largely absent. This article seeks to redress this imbalance by providing an account of three women's libraries in Wales from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The records for these libraries provide statistical evidence about book-buying trends, as well as information about the materiality of the books, and the spaces they were housed in. Importantly, revisiting such collections helps differentiate and document women's cultural legacies through books in Wales.

In their seminal work on Welsh book history, *A Nation and its Books*, Philip Henry Jones and Eiluned Rees allotted seven (out of thirty-four) chapters to detailing the cultural impact of book collecting and libraries in Wales.¹ As their contributors showed, the various collecting

The findings in this article are part of a larger research project on women's book ownership and libraries, 1660-1820, kindly funded by a research fellowship from the Leverhulme Trust.

¹ Philip Henry Jones and Eiluned Rees (eds), *A Nation and Its Books: A History of the Book in Wales* (Aberystwyth, 1998).

practices that developed and the libraries that were created have helped to shape the past and present ‘booksapes’ of Wales.² However, apart from Thomas Lloyd’s contribution on country house libraries, a history of women’s book ownership is largely absent from the volume.³ Lloyd’s inclusion of eleven names of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women who owned significant quantities of books manifestly shows that there are libraries to discover, and also offers an important acknowledgement of women’s enduring intellectual and cultural legacies in Wales. Unfortunately, many of the records and books belonging to the women Lloyd lists are either lost or very incomplete, meaning that a detailed picture of their library contents, let alone the how and why of their assembly, is impossible. Thus, over twenty years later, it is still the case that very little has been documented beyond individual names in relation to women’s book ownership in Wales.

Despite this lack of attention, a number of recent projects have revealed that there are plenty of sources and resources available to redress women’s longstanding absence from library history.⁴ Recovery of women’s libraries relies on a variety of sources. Those discussed below have been made possible through surviving manuscript library catalogues, ownership inscriptions, bookplates, subscriber lists, contemporary journals and letters, account books, and both historical and recent auction catalogues. Therefore, while it is true that evidence for women’s libraries has become dispersed or obscured over time, and that

² This useful term was coined by Leah Knight, Micheline White and Elizabeth Sauer (eds), *Women’s Booksapes in Early Modern Britain: Reading, Ownership, Circulation* (Ann Arbor, 2018).

³ Thomas Lloyd, ‘Country house libraries of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’, in Jones and Rees (eds), *A Nation and its Books*, pp. 135-46.

⁴ See: Knight, White and Sauer (eds), *Women’s Booksapes*, and the special issue on ‘Women in Book History, 1660-1830’, edited by Betty A. Schellenberg and Michelle Levy, *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, 84, 1 (Spring 2021).

historical as well as modern cataloguing processes continue to make it difficult to identify female owners of books, there are undoubtedly many more women's libraries in Wales that could be reconstructed by similar means.

In order to address this gap in the book history of Wales, this article explores three women's libraries assembled in Wales in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Two are associated with well-known women with copious paper trails, while the third came to light through new efforts at provenance research. All of them contribute vital information about the types of books women accumulated, and provide concrete examples of trends as well as differences in individual collections. In addition, letters and diaries communicate their individual readings or receptions of various genres and titles, as well as preferences in terms of the material qualities of their books. Records also uncover the various methods of obtaining books and their inevitable recirculation, meaning that these women's books are part of a layered cultural heritage that has long-term impact.

The first well-known library is that at 'Plas Newydd' in Llangollen, Denbighshire, which belonged to the Irish 'Ladies of Llangollen', Lady Eleanor Butler (c.1739-1829) and Sarah Ponsonby (1755-1831). The records for their library in 1792 show that they had 894 titles. A little farther north in the same county is the collection of 752 books that Hester Thrale Piozzi (1741-1821) assembled at 'Brynbella', near to her family's original Welsh estate of Bachegraig. In contrast to these high-profile women and their extensive libraries, is a relatively unknown Welsh gentry woman whose library has recently come to light: Lady Elizabeth Greenly (1771-1839) of Titley Court, Herefordshire.⁵ The size of Greenly's library

⁵ See, also, Charlotte Priddle's work on another gentry woman, Elizabeth 'Eliza' Giffard (1766-1842) of Nerquis Hall, Flintshire: 'Eliza Giffard and her books, 1797-2015: the legacies of a Regency library', *Libraries: Culture, History, and Society* 2 (2017), 153–70, and her website: https://wp.nyu.edu/eliza_giffard_library/?page_id=771.

is smaller – 209 titles – but the records are incomplete. Nevertheless, taken together the libraries provide useful statistical information.

These collections reveal that eighteenth-century women were considerable consumers of books. As such, their collecting and reading patterns constitute a significant aspect of our collective book history. The books they acquired, bound and housed helped to drive publishing trends and to shape the contents of the country house library. Individual books helped to furnish content for letters and inspired and supported the writings of those who were published authors. Reconstructing the histories behind these women's libraries is critical not only to understanding the material legacies and cultural scope of our inherited print history, but also to the inflections of this inheritance in Wales. Unfortunately for Welsh-language print history, this inheritance is largely Anglophone, but as such it arguably had greater impact beyond Wales. Nevertheless, Greenly, a patron of the antiquarian and bard Iolo Morganwg (Edward Williams, 1747-1826), actively supported figures who championed a revival of interest in Welsh-language literature.

As Lloyd's work established, the majority of evidence for such libraries in Wales falls in the latter half of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and my three examples are no exception. This is pointedly different from the evidence in England, where Marie-Louise Coolahan and Mark Empey have identified smaller collections as early as the sixteenth century and significant holdings in the early seventeenth.⁶ The earliest single provenance dates that Lloyd found were for the late seventeenth century, and my records are similar. A Catherine Roberts inscribed her name, 'Cathrine [sic] Roberts' in the front and 'Cate Roberts Cefn y Coed' in the back of the interesting 1680 title, *The Conforming Non-conformist and the Non-conforming Conformist Pleading the Cause of Either Side against Violent Opposers*.

⁶ Marie-Louise Coolahan and Mark Empey, 'Women's book ownership and the reception of early modern women's texts, 1545-1700', in Knight, White and Sauer (eds), *Women's Bookscapes*, pp. 231–52.

She did not date her signature, however, so there is no guarantee that she bought it in the seventeenth century. Likewise, there is an ink annotation and laid in note at the outset of *The Young Clerk's Tutor Enlarged* (1685) that records: 'Bwlch Chwyrn', then 'Mrs Joseph, Bwlch Chwyrn'. Again, there is no date with the signature, although elsewhere in the book Richard Williams notes that he bought the book in Hereford in 1687. Mrs Joseph may have been the first owner, or a later one. There are a number of other potential Welsh names in seventeenth-century texts in Cardiff University's Special Collections, but no conclusive identifying marks to place them in Wales.⁷

Another common trend, first identified by Lloyd, is the prevalence of gentry women. Gentry women not only had the time and resources to educate and entertain themselves through reading, but often inherited their bookish interests. Lloyd notes that many came from 'literary or library-owning families' or were 'notably of independent spirit'.⁸ These quotations foreground some important factors that have had impact on women's book ownership across the period, and which limit the range of case studies available, namely: class, the cost of books, and the legal status of women. As Robert D. Hume notes, new books were expensive entities and '[m]ost book buying has to have been done by the top 1 percent of families, and extensive book buying by the top 0.5 percent'.⁹ Hume observes, for example, that novels cost three shillings per volume; a middle-class family with an income of £200 'would have to spend nearly a full day's income to buy a four-volume novel, but only 12

⁷ The provenance of the Cardiff University collections is the old Cardiff Public Library Rare Books collection. These books were collected during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and many were donated by Welsh patrons.

⁸ Lloyd, 'Country house libraries of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries', p. 139.

⁹ Robert D. Hume, 'The value of money in eighteenth-century England: incomes, prices, buying power--and some problems in cultural economics', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 77, 4 (Winter 2014), 373–416 (375).

percent for a play'.¹⁰ Such figures highlight not only why some genres were more prevalent on the market than others, but also reveal how prohibitively expensive it could be to create a library. When space and building requirements are added to this, it becomes clear why it was often only wealthy gentry and aristocratic women who could afford to develop and maintain their own libraries.

Nevertheless, in an economy that largely relied on credit, lack of immediate funds did not always constrain purchasing power.¹¹ Book ownership existed across class demographics, and there is evidence in English sources that a wide range of readers accumulated more than the odd chapbook or Bible. The English kitchen-maid and poet Mary Leapor (1722-46) is documented as owning 'sixteen or seventeen single Volumes' of her own, while Jan Fergus's research on two provincial English booksellers found a broad customer base that included at least fifty provincial servants.¹² We also know from wealthy women's papers that they frequently distributed Bibles or devotional texts to their own staff, as well as to local residents. Elizabeth Seymour, the first duchess of Northumberland (1716-76), took this one step further and supplied a large library of 131 books for her staff.¹³ Thus, wealthy women were not only consumers but could also be the distributors of books in their communities.

Despite their contemporary purchasing power, the issue of ownership continues to obscure many women's libraries. Numerous female-owned books were – and still are –

¹⁰ Hume, 'The value of money in eighteenth-century England', 373.

¹¹ Jan Fergus, *Provincial Readers in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 2006), p. 1.

¹² Bridget Freemantle, 21 February 1749, quoted in Richard Greene and Ann Messenger (eds), *The Works of Mary Leapor* (Oxford, 2003), pp. xx and xl; Fergus, *Provincial Readers* and Jan Fergus, 'Provincial servants' reading in the late eighteenth century', in James Raven, Helen Small and Naomi Tadmor (eds), *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 202-25.

¹³ Melanie Bigold, 'Sex education, songs, and spiritual guidance: an eighteenth-century servants' library' (forthcoming, *The Library*).

hidden or absorbed in family or country house libraries, whether in Wales, England, Scotland or Ireland. Under English property laws, women were not legally independent unless they were unmarried or widows. This determined what was defined as their property. As a result, the bookish interests of many upper-class women have often only come to light when the libraries of their husbands or families have been sold off. Lloyd recounts an example, passed on to him by a bookseller long after the sale, of Catherine Davies, whose 'early eighteenth-century collection of several thousand books places her amongst the first of all Welsh women collectors'.¹⁴ No records of that tantalising collection now remain. Elizabeth Greenly's library recently came to light through the same means, but this time there is a partial record.

One of the principal problems in identifying female provenance is historical as well as modern cataloguing processes. Before the concerted turn to book history in the 1980s, librarians were unlikely to record evidence of a book's previous ownership (provenance) or use (marginalia). When provenance was recorded, it was often because the historical cataloguer readily identified the person as a significant figure; unsurprisingly, this excluded most women. When bibliographical information from paper card catalogues was transferred to digital records, very few institutions had the time or resources to enhance the original entries. For example, neither the National Library of Wales nor the main Bodleian collection have updated their provenance records. Even where detailed records of provenance have been updated, it is still the case that they can be searched only by known names, not gender. Trawling for unknown Anns and Elizas is far from ideal. Trying to then locate those women in Wales is often impossible. Very few inscriptions also record a place of residence, and the only crumbs for a researcher are common Welsh surnames. Bookplates or labels sometimes contain more location information, but they are more numerous for later periods, and, of

¹⁴ Lloyd, 'Country house libraries of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries', p. 139.

course, dating inscriptions is fraught with difficulties. Therefore, while it is true that there is considerable material evidence for women's books 'hiding in plain sight', there are still a number of specific problems that make gendered, lower-class, and geographical identification a thorny exercise.¹⁵ All of this makes it incredibly rewarding when records are identified, and a library can be reconstructed.

THREE CASE STUDIES

Possibly the three most well-known women in Wales at the latter end of the eighteenth century were Lady Eleanor Butler (c.1739-1829) and Sarah Ponsonby (1755-1831), the so-called 'Ladies of Llangollen', and Hester Thrale Piozzi (1741-1821), the writer as well as friend and biographer of Samuel Johnson. Butler and Ponsonby originally came to public notice because of their dramatic elopement from Ireland and subsequent performance of retired 'romantic friendship' in their adopted home in Llangollen.¹⁶ They became known for the cultured lifestyle they maintained at their gothic fantasy cottage Plas Newydd, and they attracted a steady stream of notable visitors to their corner of Denbighshire. Their library and the large number of books they accumulated were central to their self-fashioning as well as to their daily activities.

Unlike the Irish escapees, Piozzi was Welsh; both her parents were descended from Catrin of Berain, the 'Mother of Wales', connecting her 'with many of the leading families of

¹⁵ Sarah Lindenbaum, 'Hiding in plain sight: how electronic records can lead us to early modern women readers', in Knight, White and Sauer (eds), *Women's Bookscapes*, pp. 193–213.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Mavor, *The Ladies of Llangollen: A Study in Romantic Friendship* (Harmondsworth, 1971; 1985), p. xvii.

north Wales'.¹⁷ Like the 'Ladies of Llangollen', Piozzi was also known for her famous visitors, though in her case these stemmed from her time in Streatham where, along with Johnson, the literati of London enjoyed her hospitality as Mrs Thrale, the wife of the wealthy brewer, Henry Thrale. After Mr Thrale's death, Piozzi scandalised friends and enemies alike by marrying the Italian musician, Gabriel Piozzi, but this late marriage and the death of Johnson creatively released her, resulting in a string of innovative publications. In 1794, she and Gabriel returned to Wales and built a neo-classical villa, 'Brynbella', near her ancestral home. Piozzi had multiple libraries, but the one at Brynbella was specifically assembled and then augmented to support Piozzi's intellectual endeavours.

Lady Elizabeth Greenly (1771-1839) is largely unknown, and despite being a published author she has no Virtual International Authority File (VIAF). Like Butler, Ponsonby, and Piozzi, she hailed from the landed gentry; however, unlike them she inherited the family estate and had the wherewithal to follow her own interests. Even during her father's lifetime, though, she took an active role in the estate and local community. She helped to build local schools, patronised Welsh bards, and, along with her god-daughter Lady Llanover, supported the eisteddfod. Proud of her Welsh identity, interested in the arts and sciences, and a talented painter and writer, her books reflect her cultured lifestyle.¹⁸

¹⁷ Michael J. Franklin, 'Piozzi [née Salusbury; other married name Thrale], Hester Lynch (1741–1821), writer', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (23 September 2004), <https://www-oxforddnb-com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-22309> (accessed 21 October 2021).

¹⁸ Hereford, Hereford Archives and Record Office, D6/ 1-3, Elizabeth Brown Coffin Greenly, 'The Greenly diaries', edited by A.E.W. Salt and M. Wight, n.d. An introductory history is provided by Miss M. Wight.

These three libraries evidence the individuality and purposefulness of the ladies who created them. They also help us to delineate broader patterns of consumption and use, as well as to identify some differences that are unique to Wales.

(i) The Library at Plas Newydd

In 1778, Lady Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby fled to Wales and a life of Rousseau-inspired retirement as a result of their families' refusal to recognise their friendship and their desire to live together. Since that time they have, as Fiona Brideoake contends, played 'a central role in the conceptualisation of female same-sex desire', though the 'inscrutability of their intimacy' has also helped them to escape restrictive and 'stable signification'.¹⁹ Resident in Llangollen from 1780 to their deaths, Butler and Ponsonby transformed their small abode into a gothic cottage *ornée*, and, despite their often impecunious state, found it difficult to economize where house improvements, gardening, books, or servants were concerned.²⁰

One of their earliest and clearly most personal transformations to the cottage was to turn the main sitting room into a library. Subsequent improvements involved enlarging the room, adding a dramatic bay window, and decorating it with stained glass. As one of the 1832 auction advertisements for the house described it, the interiors were 'conspicuous' for their '[c]onsiderable tact', or taste: 'none more unequivocally displayed than in the lightsome little dining room contrasted with the gloomy yet superior grace of the library into which it opens. This room is fitted up in the Gothic style, the windows are of ancient painted glass

¹⁹ Fiona Brideoake, *The Ladies of Llangollen: Desire, Indeterminacy and the Legacies of Criticism* (Lewisburg, 2017), p. xxvi.

²⁰ For biographical details, I have relied on Mavor's scholarship in *The Ladies of Llangollen*.

“shedding their dim religious light.”²¹ This account constructs the ladies as wise and cultured tastemakers. In other words, their material belongings deserved a place in other houses and collections.

A contemporary visitor – Sophia Hoare, the daughter of Piozzi – also confirmed the aesthetic impact of the library when she recorded that

the Cottage is full of Elegance and Convenience, and excellent Library in a small Gothick Room fitted up for the purpose, beautiful painted Glass, and quantities of Miniatures and Drawings by & of their Friends – They had every new publication Marmion most elegantly bound, sent them by the Princess of Wales, and numberless other Prints in Books Drawing Materials, China, &c. &c.²²

Here again, the ladies are associated with a culture of books, art and *objets*, and particularly with what is new, beautifully presented and socially memorable. As someone who grew up around books, writers and artists, it is clearly the aesthetic impact of their collections that impressed Hoare.

The focus on their lived environment is doubly significant because the room is one of the few examples of a female-designed library from the eighteenth century that has survived. According to these contemporaries, the effect was atmospheric and elegant, and one they considered appropriate to female learning. An early nineteenth-century print even depicts them in their library, surrounded by the cultural productions documented in the catalogues

²¹ ‘Auction Catalogues, 1832’, in *Early Tourists in Wales*. Available at:

<https://sublimewales.wordpress.com/attractions/mansions-and-grounds/ladies-of-llangollen/ownership/auction-catalogues-1832/> (accessed 13 October 2021).

²² ‘Journal of a Tour into N. Wales by Sophia Hoare, 1808’, *Curious Travellers Digital Editions*, edited with an introduction by Elizabeth Edwards. Available at: editions.curioustravellers.ac.uk/doc/0018, f. 20v (accessed 13 October 2021).

and accounts.²³ Although the contents of the cottage, including their books and bookcases, were auctioned off in 1832, we have not one but two surviving records of the library contents.

The first and most interesting manuscript is the handsome library catalogue that Sarah Ponsonby created in 1792, twelve years into their life at Plas Newydd.²⁴ Detailed with calligraphic skill and multiple-coloured inks, this document tells the story not only of their collecting propensities, but also of how they chose to present the library and its contents to visitors. It lists 894 titles, amounting to approximately 2,202 volumes. The second document is the 1832 printed sale catalogue for the contents of Plas Newydd. The sale catalogue tallies 2,550 volumes from the library; however, it only lists a fraction of the titles, as many books were sold off in bulk lots. It also lists the many other artefacts that the ladies owned, revealing that they were considerable collectors of more than just books.²⁵

Compared with other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women's libraries across England and Wales, their collection is on the large size for 1792; however, given their often straitened circumstances it is nothing short of extraordinary that they managed to acquire nearly 900 titles and the bulk of their collection in the space of just twelve years. The Welsh gentry woman discussed below had a significantly smaller library, almost a quarter of the size. Piozzi's Brynbella library (she had others as well) is closer in size, but she did not experience the same financial constraints. Numerous English women from a slightly earlier generation had considerable libraries. For example, Katherine Bridgeman, whose library was sold off fifty years earlier, in 1743, had at least 752 titles.²⁶ Some of Bridgeman's surviving

²³ Mavor, *The Ladies of Llangollen*, p. 204.

²⁴ Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales (NLW), NLW MS 22980C, Plas Newydd Library Catalogue, 1792.

²⁵ NLW MS 9132D, Plas Newydd Sale Catalogue, 1832 (facsimile), 59-61.

²⁶ *A Catalogue of the Entire Library of Mrs. Katherine Bridgeman* (London, 1743).

books have armorial bindings, which suggests aristocratic connections and wealth, but otherwise she remains unknown. Another mid-eighteenth-century library of considerable size belonged to Elizabeth Seymour, the duchess of Northumberland (1716-76); she had a personal library of 1,746 titles in the 1770s.²⁷ As these examples show, wealth often equated to large libraries, but in the case of Butler and Ponsonby their lack of wealth was not a hindrance where books were concerned. With only £289 per annum, the women were nevertheless spending £35 a year on books.²⁸ Hume's study makes clear that they were spending well beyond their modest income, and, unsurprisingly, relied on a range of handouts from friends.²⁹ Exceptionally, the ladies' reliance on such generosity was made a feature of their library accounting.

The 1792 library catalogue is a quarto-size volume with gilt fillets and edging. The manuscript is in remarkably good condition, in particular the gilt on the bottom edge, meaning it cannot have been subjected to the kind of rubbing that many books suffer as they are taken off and replaced on shelves. Either this means it was almost never consulted, or, more likely, it sat on a library table for ease of reference and for show. The presentational aspect is reinforced by Ponsonby's calligraphic attentions which speak not only to the textual fashioning that Brideoake identifies as an important element of their queer performativity, but also as a way of recalibrating themselves in local gentry social circles.³⁰ In terms that pointedly queer their library, Ponsonby titled the manuscript a 'Catalogue Of Our Books |

²⁷ Melanie Bigold, 'Women's book collecting in the eighteenth century: the libraries of the countess of Hertford and the duchess of Northumberland', *Huntington Library Quarterly* 84, 1 (Spring 2021), 139-50.

²⁸ Mavor, *The Ladies of Llangollen*, p. 64.

²⁹ Hume, 'The value of money in eighteenth-century England', 373.

³⁰ Brideoake, *The Ladies of Llangollen*, p. 72.

MDCCXCII', the 'our' in the title reinforcing their relationship and joint ownership.³¹

However, the catalogue looks beyond their relationship, for Ponsonby switched between coloured inks to designate books that were gifts from friends and books that were gifts from authors. In Ponsonby's words, those '*written in Blue Ink & Roman Print, denote their having been the valued Gift of Friends. Those written in Italick Print with Red Ink were given by the Authors.*'³² Her phrasing is both complimentary and performative: books from friends are 'valued', and their own connections and worth mean that writers made gifts of books to them too. The value projected here is undoubtedly sentimental, but these gifts must also have been appreciated for financial reasons. One hundred and forty-eight titles, or seventeen per cent of their collection, was gifted, and Ponsonby's catalogue fashioned these gifts into a virtuous circle of friendly and cultured reciprocity. Across all of the women's library catalogues I have viewed, this method of consistently recording and differentiating the source of their books is unique, and it speaks to the determined textual self-fashioning of the ladies.

In other respects, though, the catalogue is typical. Most catalogues vary the way they present titles. Sometimes they list items by format: from folios down to duodecimos; at other times by genre, and sometimes simply as an alphabetical list. Ponsonby divided the catalogue in two: the first half categorises titles alphabetically by genre and the second half by the 'Disposition of the Books in the Library'.³³ The 'Disposition' section lists their bookcases (eight in the main library and a further two in the 'Boudoir') and the books housed in each, but otherwise there is no organisational logic. As a method for locating specific books, therefore, it is singularly ineffective. Indeed, despite the large quantity of books, they appear not to have created any system of shelf marks; of the four surviving books now owned by the

³¹ NLW MS 22980C, 1.

³² NLW MS 22980C, 2.

³³ NLW MS 22980C, 93.

National Library of Wales none have shelf marks. However, they did inscribe their books in a similar joint fashion as the catalogue, ensuring that their books embodied and projected their lifestyle choices.

At the front of the catalogue, the generic section starts with ‘Antiquities’, but is not alphabetical within the genre, suggesting that books were added in order of acquisition. It includes format and volume numbers, but no dates of publication. Unusually, it is a bilingual catalogue, giving separate English and French sections for many genres. For example, there are generic headings for ‘Divinity’ followed by ‘Theologie’, ‘Gardening’ and ‘Jardinage’. In total, 36 per cent are in French, with further headings for all Spanish and Italian titles. The large quantity of continental languages mirrors earlier eighteenth-century women’s libraries, when, as Emma Jay has shown, Queen Caroline (1683-1737) inspired literary cosmopolitanism among her courtiers.³⁴ In Butler’s case, her education at a convent in Cambrai undoubtedly helped her develop an appreciation for, and facility with, European languages. Surprisingly, perhaps, there is no equivalent interest in religion: there are only twenty-nine titles across both English and French, sixteen of which were gifts. In the context of such a large collection, this is on the low side and is unusual given the ladies’ concerted efforts to project a lifestyle of virtuous seclusion.

What the women did enjoy was literature, which comprises 30 per cent of titles across both French and English, and there are yet more literary titles under the headings for Miscellanies, Italian, and Spanish. Within literature, poetry (26 per cent) is the dominant form, but prose fiction (23 per cent) is not far behind. A preference for poetry over novels is typical of earlier collections, while prose gained the ascendancy in the last quarter of the

³⁴ Emma Jay, ‘Caroline, queen consort of George II, and British literary culture’ (unpublished DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2004), i, 7, 39.

century. Overall, the titles confirm Mavor's description of the ladies' sensibilities, which tended to the sentimental and gothic.³⁵

Unlike many earlier collections, women authors are better represented. Of the titles identified, fifty-three (6 per cent) are by female authors, and a number of others are about women, including biographies of queens and royal mistresses, female correspondences and collected biographies like George Ballard's history of learned British women, *Memoirs of Several Ladies* (1752). Many female-authored works were gifts; for example, from Hannah More and Anna Seward, among others. Piozzi's work, *British Synonymy* (1794) is entered in blue, signifying it as a gift from a 'friend', while her earlier travel tome, *Observations and Reflections* (1789) was purchased. Likewise, Charlotte Smith gifted the ladies a copy of her *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784), but they bought five of her novels. In addition, they bought the novels of Charlotte Lennox and Ann Radcliffe, and the French romances of Scudéry, D'Aulnoy, and Lafayette. The later auction catalogue adds yet more titles from bluestockings like Elizabeth Carter and Elizabeth Montagu. The range of titles show that the ladies were interested in women's lives and learned contributions, but primarily they enjoyed their romantic literary productions.

Country house stalwarts are evident throughout the collection. History, lives and travel were popular across libraries of the period, but tomes that mattered to their class, such as heraldry, got their own generic entry. They also owned large runs of old and new periodicals (nineteen titles, 110 volumes). Often periodicals are missing from gentry women's personal lists because there was no need to replicate holdings in the main estate libraries; Butler and Ponsonby had no such recourse. On the other hand, they did not have

³⁵ Mavor, *The Ladies of Llangollen*, p. 124.

many texts related to the upkeep of country estates. Accounting, legal works and husbandry are absent, though there are multiple works on gardening, one of their favourite pastimes.

In keeping with their love of collecting, the women evinced a keen interest in the material quality and presentation of their books, and Ponsonby's record-keeping confirms David McKitterick's arguments regarding the development of rare books knowledge throughout the century.³⁶ Ponsonby recorded when works remained 'unbound', as numerous plays did, as well as when they were finely bound. An edition of Milton's *Paradise Lost* is described as a 'Superb Edition'.³⁷ This title appears in blue ink, meaning it was a gift from friends. There are two further octavo editions of Milton that were gifted to them, and a fourth Milton in duodecimo bought by themselves. Even if we did not have the ladies' journals and letters to tell us they were avid readers, the different format sizes indicate that the women were serious collectors as well as readers. It is likely that the small duodecimo Milton was their reading copy, whilst the special editions show their appreciation for design. The 1832 auction catalogue confirmed their taste, with a section devoted to works 'splendidly bound'. Item 536, 'Hayley's Milton, red morocco, gilt edges, folio, 3 vols., London 1794', may be the Milton referred to above, but there is a second large Milton in morocco with gilt edges listed under Folios and Quartos.³⁸ The ladies were discerning collectors and the auction ensured that their fine books helped to furnish the collections of others.

Indeed, the truly significant legacy of their library is that books with a Plas Newydd provenance became collectable. Surviving Plas Newydd books in the National Library of Wales have marginalia which record their purchase at the sale, confirming the importance of

³⁶ David McKitterick, *The Invention of Rare Books: Private Interest and Public Memory, 1600-1840* (Cambridge, 2018).

³⁷ NLW MS 22980C, 72.

³⁸ NLW MS 9132D, 'Plas Newydd Sale Catalogue, 1832. Facsimile', 38 and 33.

such provenance.³⁹ But even in their own time, the women's books had influence. As noted above, the library contained copious continental languages, some of which were bought to facilitate self-improvement. In 1793, Ponsonby wrote to a friend that she and Butler were actively learning Spanish, and they purchased Spanish literature to further their progress.⁴⁰ One of their Spanish prayer books was later gifted to the future duke of Wellington, Sir Arthur Wellesley, who, with the prayer book and a grammar, 'learn[ed] enough Spanish to stand him in good stead during the Peninsular campaign'.⁴¹ The ladies' choice of subjects and books had an impact well beyond Wales.

Surprisingly, given their local celebrity, there are only nine titles related to Wales itself. Most of these are travel or descriptive works (e.g. Pennant tours) and none of them were gifts. Nevertheless, their library has other Welsh inflections. Their enjoyment of the natural wonders of their Welsh environs is reflected in the many descriptive accounts of other sublime landscapes in their collection. Likewise, the dominance of poetry in such a late library seems to speak to the bardic heritage of Wales. However, their interest in older literary forms, particularly ballads, is centred on Scottish Gaelic (perhaps fuelled by the Ossian poems, of which they owned a copy). Overall, their real passion was continental languages, literature and history.

In its broad outlines, therefore, the library is similar to those of earlier generations of female book owners, but with some important differences. The dominance of literature, lives, history and continental languages echoes earlier libraries, but finally we start to see more

³⁹ See: Thomas Lewis O'Beirne, *A Vindication of the Doctrine of Baptismal Regeneration* (1822), NLW 2014 MB 1346 a; William Combe, *The First of April: or, the Triumphs of Folly. A Poem* (1777), NLW OXA 1209; *The Holy Bible* (1767), NLW OC46.

⁴⁰ Mavor, *The Ladies of Llangollen*, pp. 111-12.

⁴¹ Mavor, *The Ladies of Llangollen*, p. 137.

women writers. Likewise, the ladies' keen interest in the material quality of their books and in different editions marks them out as serious collectors. The most distinctive element, however, is the performative catalogue. As a result, the library neatly reflects its two owners. Butler was known for her erudition, wit and facility with languages; her interests undoubtedly informed most of the book purchases. However, Ponsonby was responsible for the unique catalogue and, therefore, the textual self-fashioning of their shared bookscape.

(ii) The Library at Brynbella

A copious reader, annotator, and accumulator of books, Hester Thrale Piozzi's engagement with eighteenth-century print culture and the textual content of thousands of volumes is everywhere evident in her letters, journals, published writings and the books themselves. However, her bibliographical legacy has often been overshadowed by Samuel Johnson. Nevertheless, the effort to revision and foreground Piozzi's innovative writing interventions and her significance to book history has been underway for some time.⁴² Most pertinent to the present study, she is one of only three women in A. N. L. Munby's series, *Sale Catalogues of Libraries of Eminent Persons*, where the catalogues for the sale of her Streatham Park library (1816) and her posthumous collections (1823) are both featured. Undoubtedly included because of Johnson's role in helping curate the Streatham library, the editor nevertheless acknowledges 'the variety and extent of Mrs Piozzi's own intellectual

⁴² In particular, Heather Jackson's important work on marginalia gave prominence to Piozzi's active and material presence as a reader, while William McCarthy's biography frequently highlights Piozzi's lifelong interaction with book culture, including the Brynbella library. Heather Jackson, *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books* (New Haven and London, 2001); William McCarthy, *Hester Thrale Piozzi: Portrait of a Literary Woman* (Chapel Hill and London, 1985).

interests' and how the 'outstanding feature' of her marginalia added value to her books.⁴³

There is, however, a third library record for Piozzi in the form of her own hand-written catalogue for the books at Brynbella. This contemporary catalogue, compiled between 1806 and 1813, reveals the constant flow of books that helped sustain Piozzi's life of the mind in Wales.⁴⁴

Piozzi returned to the land of her birth in 1794 and built a new home near to her old family estate. The design was largely overseen by her Italian husband and there is no record of whether a library was planned. However, shortly after moving in Hester needed a new project and this necessitated books. The work in question was her ambitious history marking the turn of the century, *Retrospection: or a Review of the Most Striking and Important Events, Characters, Situations, and their Consequences which the Last Eighteenth Hundred Years Have Presented to the View of Mankind* (1801), an undertaking that required copious scholarly resources. Despite the immediate needs of this project, however, the Brynbella catalogue reveals that Piozzi's books were acquired and appreciated for a multitude of reasons.

The manuscript is titled, 'Catalogue of Books at Brynbella' and features a crude sketch of the house's front façade and the date, 18 October 1806. It lists 752 titles, amounting to 1,605 volumes.⁴⁵ Books are listed by descending format size, and Piozzi added volume

⁴³ Stephen Parks (ed.), *Sale Catalogues of Libraries of Eminent Persons: Vol. 5, Poets and Men of Letters* (London, 1972), p. 388.

⁴⁴ Manchester, John Rylands Collection, the University of Manchester Library, English MS 612, 'Catalogue of the Books at Brynbella, 1806-1813'. A digital facsimile is available at:
<https://luna.manchester.ac.uk/luna/servlet/detail/Manchester~91~1~422775~190275?qvq=q:english%20ms%20612&mi=0&trs=2>

⁴⁵ McCarthy describes it as 'a respectable collection of some 1,300 volumes': *Hester Thrale Piozzi*, p. 10.

numbers and whether books were loaned, returned or missing. She also indicated the binding on some, whether ‘naked’, in ‘vellum’, or full or half bound, and she documented the state of others; for example, there are a number of ‘broken’ volumes, as well as a few that are ‘fine’, ‘elegant’, or ‘curious’.⁴⁶ On the final pages, ‘additions’ appear by year (up to 1813), including cargo ‘brought from Streatham’ in 1807. On the front and final pages are numerous attempts to tally the volume numbers.

The manuscript gives no indication of where the books were housed. A contemporary account suggests that books may have been piled about. Lord Henry Petty-Fitzmaurice remembered Piozzi ‘taking me into her bed-room to show me the floor covered with folios, quartos, and octavos, for consultation, and indicating the labour she had gone through in compiling an immense volume she was then publishing, called “Retrospection”’.⁴⁷ This slightly chaotic image of female intellectual endeavour is a familiar and negative trope, and therefore not entirely reliable.⁴⁸ Given the overall numbers of books, and the sums expended on decorating the villa – they spent £2,000 on new furniture – it seems likely that bookcases and library furniture were installed.⁴⁹ At Llangollen, the ladies had ten bookcases for a similar size library.

Unlike Butler and Ponsonby, Piozzi is not known as a connoisseur of the arts and crafts of the book, and yet her catalogue frequently refers to the material qualities of certain items. According to her letters, the textual content was the only aspect that mattered. She wrote to her daughter Queeney that ‘I hate a fine Book and a famous Edition a little more ev’ry Year than other: You would laugh to see my Anguish about Mrs. Heaton’s *beautiful*

⁴⁶ English MS 612, *passim*.

⁴⁷ Quoted in James L. Clifford, *Hester Lynch Piozzi (Mrs Thrale)* (2nd edn, Oxford, 1968), p. 399.

⁴⁸ Similar descriptions were applied to Butler and Ponsonby (Mavor, *The Ladies of Llangollen*, p. 186).

⁴⁹ Clifford, *Hester Lynch Piozzi*, p. 382.

Infidel Gibbon—lest a Spot of Ink should penetrate the Papers I have wrapped him in, and make him black on the *Outside*.⁵⁰ Despite such protestations, she described a ‘curious Sedan Virgil locked up’, a ‘Pia Desiderata scarce’, and ‘a Legacy of Shakespear in 22 Vols. very fine’. Clearly aware of the significance of certain material attributes, she was also shrewd about book values. Requesting help from Queeney, she wrote: ‘Do look over some Bookseller’s Catalogues for Knollys’s *History of the Turks*: second hand *Rums* of that Sort are very cheap’.⁵¹ Queeney obviously succeeded, for a folio edition of Richard Knolles’ *The Generall Historie of the Turkes* (1603) is listed.

As a working library for *Retrospection*, it makes sense that history titles are prominent at Brynbella (14 per cent); indeed, they are more than double that of Plas Newydd (6 per cent). However, we know that Piozzi consulted many more books through the help of friends and also made use of Bull’s lending library in Bath.⁵² Thus the books at Brynbella provide only a partial picture of the scholarship that informed her attempt at popular history. What is much more evident in the catalogue is Piozzi’s expansive interest in all sorts of subjects, her enduring collecting interests and her lifelong attachment to certain books and authors.

Throughout her time in Wales, Piozzi’s husband suffered from painful bouts of gout, and they were often unable to leave the house. If it had not been for her love of reading, she wrote to her adopted son, ‘what would become of me?’.⁵³ We know from her journals and letters that she read widely, and William McCarthy’s biography of Piozzi enumerates the catalogue’s multiple editions of Latin classics, the expansive range of seventeenth-century

⁵⁰ Quoted in Clifford, *Hester Lynch Piozzi*, p. 393.

⁵¹ Quoted in Clifford, *Hester Lynch Piozzi*, p. 393.

⁵² Clifford, *Hester Lynch Piozzi*, pp. 398-9.

⁵³ Rylands 585, 4; 28 January 1808, quoted in Clifford, *Hester Lynch Piozzi*, p. 421.

literature, her ‘antiquarian’ interest in Spenser, old ballads, and Chaucer, her three sets of Shakespeare, and her ‘extensive and surprising’ range of modern material.⁵⁴ Apart from the classics, a similar description could be made of the Plas Newydd library. Across most of their corresponding genres the two libraries are remarkably similar, and one of the benefits of comparison is knowing that ‘antiquarian’ interests, for instance, were not unique to Piozzi. Plas Newydd had two sets of Spenser, four Chaucers (including a black letter edition), three works of old ballads and three sets of Shakespeare too.

Where they differ is that Brynbella had much more poetry than fiction (36 per cent versus 11 per cent), whereas Plas Newydd had roughly the same (26 per cent and 23 per cent). McCarthy claims that Piozzi had ‘contempt’ for the novels so beloved at Plas Newydd, and she certainly did not have many sentimental titles, but there were at least twenty-five works of prose fiction in various languages, nineteen of which are novels.⁵⁵ Piozzi’s poetry selection is, however, more typical of earlier libraries, and her multiple sets of classical works, like Ovid, Homer, Horace, and Virgil, increase the poetry numbers. Unlike most women’s libraries across the period, though, a number of those volumes are in Latin. Piozzi also started learning Hebrew in 1805, and, in addition to Latin and Greek titles, acquired five Hebrew texts.⁵⁶ Piozzi also significantly differs from the ladies in having more religious texts – 14 per cent compared to the ladies’ 3 per cent. As noted above, the ladies are the odd ones out in this respect.

Like the ladies, Piozzi was a collector, but in her case it was focused on one genre. She collected French and hybrid texts containing anecdotal snippets of all manner of information, and which inspired her own capacious journal, ‘Thraliana’, and her best-selling

⁵⁴ McCarthy, *Hester Thrale Piozzi*, p. 10.

⁵⁵ McCarthy cites seven novels: *Hester Thrale Piozzi*, p. 65.

⁵⁶ Clifford, *Hester Lynch Piozzi*, p. 417.

Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson (1786). In 1780, she noted: 'I have made a Collection of Anas with Seward's help, -- I can now count 20 of them in good Editions; 'tis a silly desire, but all desires are silly'.⁵⁷ She brought twenty-five French ana to Wales, as well as English examples like John Selden's *Table-Talk* (1689) and William Camden's *Remaines* (1605). She had more ana at Brynbella than fiction.

Despite her pride in her Welsh heritage, Piozzi had only five Wales-related works in her catalogue: Pennant on Snowdonia, a pocket-sized guidebook, a work on 'Celtic Derivations', the same eighteenth-century reprint of Thomas Churchyard's sixteenth-century *The Worthiness of Wales* that Butler and Ponsonby acquired, and, as Piozzi recorded it 'Genlis's Llangollen Ladies ____ calld Souvenirs de Felicie'. Through this last item, the unconventional pair across the valley became part of Piozzi's Welsh bibliography.

Perhaps the most telling feature of Piozzi's library catalogue is that certain books and authors stayed with her. Her own works, of course, and a number of Johnson's too, but also Joseph Warton's *Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope* (1756), which she read back in 1760 and claimed it 'made a Writer & a Critic of H:L:P'.⁵⁸ There is also a 'Pocket Chronology' with Dr Arthur Collier's name next to it. Collier was her childhood tutor and the man she claimed as more of an influence on her thinking than Johnson.⁵⁹ Most poignantly, a copy of Richard Allstree's *The Ladies Calling*, identified as 'old' and 'Lucy's', was there to remind Piozzi of her daughter Lucy, who died at the age of four in 1773. We know Piozzi left most of her library at Streatham intact, so these books were clearly part of a core collection of objects with cherished connections.

⁵⁷ Quoted in *The Piozzi Letters: Correspondence of Hester Lynch Piozzi, 1784-1821* (formerly Mrs. Thrale), vol. 6 (Newark, 1989-2002), p. 150.

⁵⁸ Quoted in McCarthy, *Hester Thrale Piozzi*, p. 9.

⁵⁹ McCarthy, *Hester Thrale Piozzi*, pp. 7-8.

In its broad outlines, Piozzi's book selection at Brynbella mirrors that at Plas Newydd. Butler and Piozzi were born two years apart and, although very differently educated, developed similar reading interests. However, Piozzi's quantity of history and religious texts is closer to the norm for educated female readers, whilst her Latin tomes set her apart in the late eighteenth century. Piozzi was, as Munby put it, an eminent figure and the details of her library deserve closer study, not least because her marginal additions to those books and her redistribution of them as gifts has added literary and historical value to them over the years.⁶⁰

(iii) The Library at Titley Court

Lady Elizabeth Coffin Greenly spent most of her life (including a late, but disastrous marriage) living in her father's household. An only child, she was destined to inherit her father's considerable property portfolio; however, her father (William Greenly (1741-1834)) was long-lived and she only survived him by five years. Her father's main residence was Titley Court, Herefordshire, but he also had a house in Abergavenny, in Monmouthshire, and properties between Talgarth and Crickhowell, in Breconshire. This land ownership qualified him as the High Sheriff of Breconshire and the family was always very involved in both their Welsh and English estates.

Lady Greenly's library came to light as a result of provenance research on some Greenly-inscribed books. A serendipitous exchange with a bookseller provided details of the auction house responsible for the sale of Titley Court's library in 2016, and their catalogue revealed 'A Regency Library' of 1,230 items, not including one manuscript letter, one mixed media miscellany and three paintings by Greenly (who was a talented artist and had a

⁶⁰ Jackson, p. 104.

painting exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1795).⁶¹ Unfortunately, many entries in the catalogue are bulk lots; of the 1,230 items, therefore, only 147 titles can be extracted. A bookseller who purchased one lot helped add another sixty-two titles, for a total of 209 titles. This equates to sixty-eight percent of the items, so the library was a good deal larger.

Another piece of evidence that helps flesh out Greenly's reading and collecting is her diaries. At the age of sixty-four, Greenly decided to edit her own papers and created an autograph manuscript diary/letter hybrid of six volumes. A twentieth-century edited transcript of her original is now in the Hereford Archives and Records Office, whilst family retain the original volumes.⁶² These diaries evidence Greenly's considerable knowledge and engagement in contemporary arts and culture. She regularly travelled to London and Bath to attend theatre, scientific and philosophical lectures, and exhibitions (and often bought the related books). She was also a writer and published three works with Hatchards: a translation from the French of Abbé Gérard – a pedagogical novel entitled: *The Count de Valmont; or, The Errors of Reason* (1805) – which was well-reviewed for its correctives to the skepticism in the original; three volumes of *Practical Sermons for Every Sunday in the Year*, which went to three editions, as well as a course of lectures on the New Testament, which remain unidentified. To this day, she is not credited as the author of any of these works and none of them were in the library when it was sold.

Greenly's diaries reveal in great detail where, when and why she purchased or was gifted many of her books, starting with the guidance of an early male mentor and continuing through to friendships with specific authors and editors (many of whom were women), and an ever-evolving sense of purpose and interest in Wales, the Welsh language and Welsh culture.

⁶¹ *Printed Books & Maps, 2 March 2016* (South Cerney, Gloucestershire: Dominic Winter Auctioneers, 2016).

⁶² Hereford, Hereford Archives and Record Office, D6/ 1-3, Elizabeth Brown Coffin Greenly, 'The Greenly diaries', edited by A.E.W. Salt and M. Wight, n.d.

The diaries also list many works not present in the 2016 sale. These books may have been loans (from subscription libraries, friends, or booksellers), or given away by Greenly or subsequent owners of Titley Court. However, Greenly did retain many books, including a number of inherited volumes.

Lloyd has pointed out that many gentry women inherited their bookish propensities, and this is evident in Greenly's library.⁶³ In many female collections, inherited works came from the maternal side, and Greenly's is no exception, but there are also texts with her father's inscription. Of course, the library space was legally his, but the daughter was undoubtedly the driving force, given how closely the books align with her interests. In addition, one of the distinguishing characteristics of Greenly's books is her neat ink inscription, often with a date, inserted in her books. These dates show that many books predate her father's death, which, at the very least, indicates that Greenly was creating her own collection in the family home. However, the most dominant record of ownership throughout the books is the man who inherited Titley at the end of the nineteenth century: Edward Howorth Greenly (1837-1926). He pasted his bookplate on everything, with the result that the auctioneer's catalogue sometimes conflates him with Elizabeth, so ubiquitous is his presence. If family tradition had not characterised this as Elizabeth's library, it is questionable whether it would have been recognised as such.⁶⁴

Titley Court's library also has added significance because we know that Greenly took an active role in the design. In 1799, she rescued an early seventeenth-century fireplace from a former Greenly home and installed it in her library, and in 1832 records that 'I put up a new

⁶³ Lloyd, p. 139.

⁶⁴ Like the father, Edward's daughters asserted their ownership on some of the inherited books. Amelia signed her name to three, and his youngest daughter, Lucy Margaret Byng, used a bookplate with the traditional phrase, 'Her book'.

Oak book case in the Library with a cornice of my own carving'.⁶⁵ Elizabeth reclaimed, updated, decorated and crafted her own library space. Given how few examples there are of female-designed libraries, it is noteworthy that two of them are in Wales.

Though much younger than the women in the previous case studies, Greenly's bookscape closely mirrors theirs, Piozzi's in particular. Literature is the dominant genre at 33 per cent, followed by history (14 per cent) and religion (12 per cent). Poetry was Greenly's favourite literary form, and she has the highest percentage at 43 per cent. Evidence from Greenly's letters and a manuscript verse miscellany suggest that she wrote occasional verse her whole life. Like Piozzi, poetry seems to have been her entertainment and her solace, whilst she published in other forms. Given the example of these three case studies, poetry appears to be the most popular literary genre in Welsh gentry libraries in the latter half of the century. Greenly also had the highest percentage (11 per cent) of female-authored works. Compared to Piozzi (5 per cent) and the ladies (6 per cent), her collection doubled the representation of women.

Many of the remaining books represent Elizabeth's other interests and hobbies: painting, religious pedagogy, travel, and Welsh history and language. Although she was proficient in French and Italian, the percentage of foreign language books is low compared to that at Plas Newydd and Brynbellla. French makes up just 9 per cent of the collection and there is one Italian poetry work and one Italian/English dictionary. The French influence can be traced back to Greenly's earliest mentor, an elderly man named Daniel Crespín who befriended Greenly at the age of nine. They corresponded, often in French, for ten years (until his death), and he sent her many books. At one point he wrote that 'I am pleased with the thought that I am laying a foundation for your future little French library.'⁶⁶ It seems

⁶⁵ Greenly, 'The Greenly diaries', pp. ii and 340.

⁶⁶ Greenly, 'The Greenly diaries', p. 41.

fitting that one of her published works is a French translation.⁶⁷ There are no Welsh-language texts, but Greenly did have a number of grammars and dictionaries, some heavily annotated. The interest in Welsh started at seventeen, when she acquired William Evans's *A New English-Welsh Dictionary* (1771). A further thirteen titles cover Welsh-interest material and align with her love of riding through, and painting, the Welsh countryside. She was also a subscriber to the *Cambrian Magazine* (1829-33), which published a miscellaneous selection of writings about Wales and by Welsh writers. Of all the women, Greenly invested the most in books about Wales and Welsh culture.

Although Greenly did not show interest in the material qualities of books, she placed a lot of importance on their provenance. Like many locals, she took an active interest in the sale of the Plas Newydd house contents in 1832 and exchanged a number of letters discussing who had bought what. While some of her correspondents were interested in the finer books, Greenly was after drawings associated with friends and managed to get one album, but was outbid on another by 'a Scotch bookseller who had orders to get it at any price'.⁶⁸ More tellingly, she recorded in 1819 that

April 19th I sent Miss Harley a Bible which was given in 1692 by Edward Harley, of Brampton Bryan, to his sister, Abigail, on his leaving for (I think) Oxford. I saw it one day in our kitchen and found that it had been given by Lady Charlotte Harley to a nursery girl who had come to us as housemaid. I easily prevailed on her to exchange it with me for a new Bible. I considered it as a Relic which Miss Harley would value.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Greenly translated abbé Philippe-Louis Gérard's novel *Le Comte de Valmont: ou les égarements de la raison* (1774).

⁶⁸ Greenly, 'The Greenly diaries', p. 343.

⁶⁹ Greenly, 'The Greenly diaries', p. 268.

In this account, the provenance of the book gives it sentimental value. What is important, though, is the story of who received the book. Here we have that rare piece of evidence that books – special books with family associations – were being given to servants. Greenly ‘prevails’ with the housemaid to swap it for a new one. Nevertheless, the housemaid clearly valued it – it lived with her in the kitchen – and the exchange was not for money, or some other item, but a replacement Bible.

Researching women’s libraries has the potential to illuminate libraries and book use other than their own. Most importantly, though, it means that we finally have some facts and figures about women’s book ownership. The women discussed in these case studies were not all collectors, but they were certainly all readers. Delineating the contours of their libraries helps us to understand the influence that women’s tastes may have had on the publishing market, as well as their impact on other readers. The redistribution and exchange of books belonging to men and women throughout the period means that books were constantly making their way into more varied hands. Butler, Ponsonby, Piozzi and Greenly inherited, collected, bought, or were gifted books that sometimes hailed from the libraries of others, and their selection, preservation and rehousing of these books invested them with new material identities and import. These women’s books became, and continue to be, the cultural products that furnish our national and international bookscapes.