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Elizabeth Jane Errington

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Résumé de l'article

Cette étude explore les réseaux d'affection, de frustration et d'obligation qui ont continué de lier les familles et amis séparés par l'océan Atlantique dans la première moitié du XIXe siècle, comme le révèle la correspondance de deux hommes — John Gemmill qui, avec sa femme et ses sept enfants, a immigré au Haut-Canada dans les années 1820, et John Turner, qui est resté en Angleterre après l'installation de son jeune frère à St. Andrews (N.-B.) dans les années 1830. Une lecture attentive de cette correspondance illustre comment amis et parents de part et d'autre de l'océan ont continué à affirmer leur place à la table familiale malgré l'éloignement physique et temporel. Dans leurs échanges, les correspondants des deux côtés de l'Atlantique ont aussi négocié des relations changeantes et souvent très contestées au fil des années. Par la même occasion, ces échanges procuraient aux émigrants une certaine assurance au sujet de leur identité et de leur place dans le monde à mesure qu'ils se forgeaient une nouvelle identité sociale.

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Webs of Affection and Obligation: Glimpse into Families and Nineteenth Century Transatlantic Communities

E. JANE ERRINGTON

Abstract

This paper explores the networks of affection, of frustration, and of obligation that continued to tie families and friends divided by the Atlantic in the first half of the nineteenth century as seen through the correspondence of two men — John Gemmill, who with his wife and 7 children emigrated to Upper Canada in the 1820s, and John Turner, who stayed home in England after his younger brother resettled in St. Andrews, New Brunswick in the 1830s. A close reading of this correspondence illustrates how kith and kin divided by the Atlantic continued to assert their place around family firesides, despite the difficulties presented by the gulf of time and space. Through their letters, correspondents on both sides of the Atlantic also negotiated often highly contested relationships that changed over time. At the same time, this link offered emigrants some reassurance of who they were and their place in the world as they negotiated new identities.

Résumé

Cette étude explore les réseaux d'affection, de frustration et d'obligation qui ont continué de lier les familles et amis séparés par l'océan Atlantique dans la première moitié du XIXe siècle, comme le révèle la correspondance de deux hommes — John Gemmill qui, avec sa femme et ses sept enfants, a immigré au Haut-Canada dans les années 1820, et John Turner, qui est resté en Angleterre après l'installation de son jeune frère à St. Andrews (N.-B.) dans les années 1830. Une lecture attentive de cette correspondance illustre comment amis et parents de part et d'autre de l'océan ont continué à affirmer leur place à la table familiale malgré l'éloignement physique et temporel. Dans leurs échanges, les correspondants des deux côtés de l'Atlantique ont aussi négocié des relations changeantes et souvent très contestées au fil des années. Par la même

I would like to express my appreciation to SSHRC, RMC, and Queen's University for financial support that materially assisted in the researching and writing of this paper.

occasion, ces échanges procuraient aux émigrants une certaine assurance au sujet de leur identité et de leur place dans le monde à mesure qu'ils se forgeaient une nouvelle identité sociale.

In early March 1822, John Gemmill, a Scottish stone mason and aspiring farmer living in New Lanark, Upper Canada (near present day Ottawa, Ontario), wrote to his "Dear Wife and Family": "I take this opportunity of writing you these few lines to let you know that I am still in good health thank god hoping that this will find you all in the same." It was the third letter John had written to his family since he had left Glasgow the previous year, but having "got no answer," he was beginning to be a little concerned. The Gemmills had obviously arranged that Anne and the children would join John once he was settled in the colonies and, in part, the purpose of writing was to reassure them that all was proceeding as it should. Among other things, he reported that having received his plot of land "and other articles promised by the Government ... I am now at work on my land and intends having about six acres cleared and under crop this spring." The winter had been severe, he told Anne, but reassured her that "it is not nigh as bad as was represented at home." Most of the letter, however, was devoted to John's instructions about how to arrange the family's passage and what they should bring.[1]

Ten years later John Turner, a baker in the small village of Milton Ernest, Bedfordshire (in the Midlands), England, began his letter to "My Dear Brother," Thomas, a shop keeper in St. Andrews, New Brunswick, "We hear you have had another loss!" Some of Thomas Turner's goods had been destroyed on their way to St. Andrews and John wrote both to commiserate over his brother's latest misfortune and to encourage him to return home. As John pointed out, this was but the latest of "repeated losses and disappointments," and John was convinced that "there can be little doubt but if you stay in that abominable Climate you will soon be lost too." The family was very concerned and "unhappy about you, no words can tell unhappy." John entreated (one suspects not for the first time) that "if you do not see a prospect of being comfortable where you are lay aside every other consideration and come home without delay." Only this would assuage "the Pain your absence occasions."[2]

On the face of it, these two letters and the collections of which they are a part are not particularly remarkable. An untold number of personal letters

1 Scottish Record Office (SRO), Gemmill Papers, TD 293/1, John Gemmill to Mrs Gemmill, 2 March 1822. All further references to Gemmill letters are from this collection. Unless absolutely necessary, passages from the letters have been quoted as originally written, without corrections to spelling or punctuation.

2 Bedfordshire and Luton Archives and Records Service (BLARS), Turner Papers, Z629/2, John Turner to Mr. Thomas Turner, 21 March 1832. All further references to Turner letters are from this collection. Unless absolutely necessary, passages from the letters have been quoted as originally written, without corrections.

crossed the Atlantic in the first half of the nineteenth century. Although what newspapers at the time called "the tide" of migration had divided families, friends, and communities, many on both sides of the Atlantic were determined to maintain contact and relationships with those who now lived "away." Most of the transatlantic correspondence dealt with the everyday stuff of life — births, deaths, marriages, work and play, success and disappointment, and their writers' faith, hopes and dreams. These long distance conversations in many ways served as a replacement for the face to face encounters of the past. But John Gemmill, John Turner, and many others also wrote to inform, instruct, and entreat. They anticipated (often erroneously) that their readers would heed their words and take their advice. For their authors, letters were a way both to sustain familial webs of affection and to invoke obligation; and by asserting their continuing place in the family circle, letters writers also sought to confirm their own identity and place in the world.

A growing number of social and cultural historians have rediscovered the personal letter (those never intended for publication) as an invaluable historical source. Letters provide us with a unique window into the lives and experiences of individuals who often lived in the shadows of the official record. Historians of migration have found emigrant letters particularly intriguing because, as David Fitzpatrick has persuasively argued, not only can letters be mined for information about local circumstances, they, more significantly, highlight the diversity of the migrant experience and offer a necessary corrective to the "identikit" figure of the "typical" emigrant that so often populates studies of migration. Letters home also provide invaluable insights into the continuing role that kin and community had in shaping emigrant lives and sensibilities.[3] As David Gerber's recent study illustrates, collections of letters also offer us glimpses of how migrants "simultaneously look[ed] backward and forward" and "fashioned in and through their letters a transnational field of actions that confronted changing circumstances or daily life and sustained their links with the past." Emigrant letters, Gerber argues, were essentially "identity narratives" that "fed the immigrant's existential hunger for continu-

3 David Fitzpatrick, *Oceans of Consolation: Personal Accounts of Irish Migration to Australia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 3. On the importance of emigrant letters and how to read them, see also Charlotte Erickson, *Invisible Immigrants: The Adaption of English and Scottish Immigrants in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca & New York: Cornell University Press, 1772), 5; Charlotte Erickson, *Leaving England: Essays on British Emigration in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1994); David Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives: The Personal Accounts of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2006). I used emigrant letters extensively in my latest monograph and discussed the various debates about the strengths and weakness of this source in its "A Note on Sources." Elizabeth Jane Errington, *Emigrant Worlds and Transatlantic Communities* (Montréal & Kingston: McGill Queen's University Press, 2007).

ity" and a familiar sense of place while they tried to remake themselves in a foreign world.[4]

The Gemmill and Turner correspondences certainly reflect many of Fitzpatrick's and Gerber's observations. Yet these two collections also highlight issues that are often overlooked in studies of nineteenth century migration. We tend to forget that not all Britons were captivated by the promise of the colonies.[5] Certainly, John Gemmill seemed to be an eager participant in the emigrant world. In the 15 extant letters (14 of which were sent to son Andrew between 1822 and 1832), John never expressed any regrets about leaving home, and was frankly bewildered by his son's reluctance to join the rest of the family. John Turner's letters offer a fascinating counterpoint to this view of emigration. John was one of that majority of Englishmen who had decided to stay home; moreover, most of the 15 surviving letters to his brother written between 1832 and 1847 expressed John's belief that his brother's decision to emigrate had been fool hearty and irresponsible. The radically different emotional as well as geographic perspectives and circumstances of these two men not surprisingly shaped the tone and content of their letters. And yet, the two men faced similar dilemmas. Emigration had fundamentally disrupted both their lives and challenged their assumptions about the accepted order of their respective family circles. Their letters to family members who were now "away" reflected their determination to affirm older and very fundamental familial identities. One of the central aspects of these identities was that both men often asserted what Nancy Christie has called "the familial economy of obligation"[6] — bonds that these two writers assumed persisted despite family separation. Certainly, the rudimentary mechanics of the transatlantic networks of communication (letters could take months to reach their destination, if they arrived at all) made maintaining these relationships difficult. But the letters often reflected an immediacy of face to face conversations that ignored these problems. Through their letters, John Gemmill and John Turner tried to collapse time and space; as they wrote, they created an imaginary world of home. Father talked to and directed his son, and brother called on brother for help and solace — and in the process, they tried to maintain the essential fabric of their family's lives.

Although the Gemmills and the Turners cannot be considered "representative" of all British migrant families, the situation that they found themselves in

4 Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives*, 161, 3, 5.

5 To some degree, the differences in the tone and content of these two sets of letters mirror the contested understandings of emigration (and Empire) that prevailed in Great Britain at the time. See discussion in Errington, *Emigrant Worlds*, 13–28.

6 Nancy Christie, "A 'Painful Dependence': Female Begging Letters and the Familial Economy of Obligation," in *Mapping the Margins: The Family and Social Discipline in Canada, 1700–1975*, eds. Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau (Montreal & Kingston: McGill Queen's University Press, 2004), 69–102.

was not particularly unique. Between 1815 and 1845, tens of thousands of British and Irish households were assessing their futures in light of the rapidly changing economic climate. What was often called the "rage" for emigration was "the product of an extremely complex web of influences, which both created a restless, rootless population and also provided an outlet for it in an expanding world within and beyond the British Empire."[7] The agricultural revolution, growing industrialization and urbanization, and an unprecedented growth in the population were straining the national and local economies. Mobility had always been a regular part of British life and by the early 1820s, a growing number of able bodied labourers, farmers, mechanics, and artisans were being encouraged to consider leaving home for "America" or one of the colonies.[8]

As Bruce Elliott has perceptively reminded us, "factors such as trade cycles, the impact of war, industrialization, and the agrarian revolution affected different localities and regions of the old world in different ways ... and impacted upon social classes differently."[9] Who actually left home, why and when, depended on any number of factors. For John Gemmill, the decision to emigrate came in 1820–1821 when Glasgow was in the midst of unprecedented economic difficulties. For 40 year old John, head of a household with nine children still living at home and ranging in age from two to 17, the prospects for the future looked grim. The offer from the Glasgow Committee of Emigration of subsidized passage to Upper Canada, with the promise of free land and further government assistance, was apparently too good to miss, particularly as he would be able to travel with and to settle in the company of Scottish friends and neighbours. When John left in May 1821, he and Anne planned that the entire family would soon follow.[10]

The Turner brothers were in quite a different situation. Certainly, unemployment and poverty in the Midlands was high in the early 1830s (and often fuelled violent protest).[11] But John Turner's letters to his brother indicate that the family's prospects had seemed good. John, the eldest of four surviving children, had his own business in the village; Mr. Turner senior managed a

7 Marjorie Harper, "British Migration and the Peopling of the Empire," in *The Oxford History of the British Empire: The Nineteenth Century*, ed. Andrew Porter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 76.

8 For a discussion of the difficulties of determining any kind of socio-economic profile of migrants, see Errington, *Emigrant Worlds*, "Introduction."

9 Bruce Elliott, "Regional Patterns of English Immigration and Settlement," in *Canadian Migration Patterns: From Britain and North America*, ed. Barbara Messamore (Ottawa: Ottawa University Press, 2004), 51–90, 52–3.

10 I have discussed the situation of the Gemmill family at some length in *Emigrant Worlds*.

11 For a discussion of the general situation in the region, see Wendy Cameron, et al., *Assisting Emigration to Upper Canada* (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), chap. 2.

relatively prosperous farm that Thomas (the only other son) could expect to take over. It appears from comments in John's letters, however, that Thomas and his father were constantly at odds; moreover, the family did not approve of his recent marriage to Susan Paine, the daughter of a local milliner. It is not surprising that Thomas and his new wife preferred to set up their own household rather than stay on the farm.[12] Sometime in 1830, the young couple decided to move to New Brunswick. One of Susan's brothers was already settled in the colony and her family were willing to help the young couple (state aid was no longer available) to set up their own small shop. John Turner and the rest of the family (including sister Ann, who by 1832, was also married; and sister Elizabeth who still lived at home) were incredulous. Thomas and Susan apparently returned home for a visit in 1831, but despite continuing pressure from the Turners, the pair was committed to their new lives in the colony.

Despite the differences in their particular situations, the decisions of John and Ann Gemmill and Thomas and Susan Turner to leave home were intimately tied to their varying expectations of and relationships within their families.[13] So, too, were the decisions of Andrew Gemmill and John Turner to stay in Great Britain. As I have argued elsewhere, emigration was, at its most basic level, always a family affair; the decision to go or to stay continued to resonate within familial relationships for years. A few (and perhaps a sizable minority) emigrated to escape their families; absconding husbands, recalcitrant children, and the classic "wastrel" consciously tried to sever all ties with home and lose themselves in the New World. Most emigrants did not, however, want to reinvent themselves. Some, perhaps a majority, decided, like the Gemmills, that the entire household would leave home; even those including Thomas and Susan Turner, who in part left to escape a difficult family situation, continued to depend on familial networks that now spanned the Atlantic.

Maintaining the connection was no easy task. For the vast majority of migrants, the transatlantic crossing was a one way journey. Few had the resources of Thomas and Susan Turner to return to Great Britain, even for a visit. Families were dependent on the mails for what limited contact they had with those away. But, in the first decades of the nineteenth century, postal service in Great Britain and British America was virtually non-existent, and as David Gerber and others have pointed out, writers on both sides of the Atlantic had to learn how to negotiate the often tenuous connections that did link the metropole and periphery.[14] The Gemmill family variously relied on "the mail"

12 See discussion in Catherine Wilson, *A New Lease on Life* (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990).

13 The role of family in emigration is the central theme of my *Emigrant Worlds*.

14 Gerber, *Authors of Their Own Lives*, chap. 4. See also Wendy Cameron, et al., *English Immigrant Voices* (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000) and Errington, *Emigrant Worlds*, 138–40.

(if possible routed through New York) or neighbours returning home for a visit to deliver their letters. John Turner entrusted most of his letters and parcels to Thomas' business agent in London, who would forward them on with the next shipment of goods to New Brunswick. No arrangements were completely reliable and families were continually frustrated by the state of the mails. For example, in September 1823, John Gemmill acknowledged receipt of three letters from Andrew in one lot, one of them dating back to the previous December. But at least they had arrived. Just as frequently, letters were lost completely. "We are sorry to here that you have only received one letter in the cours of two years," John told his son. It was not because the family had "been neglectfull of writting to you ... but it is the post offices that must be neglectfull,"[15] and, in one case, a neighbours' son, returning to Scotland had obviously forgotten to pass on John's letter.[16] (John Gemmill's punctuation and spelling was, at best, erratic.) In August 1830, John Gemmill advised his son to write "by way of the ships from the Clyde either in the spring or the fall as the letters come much sooner to hand and the postage is more than half less."[17] For his part, John Turner was always conscious that ships could go down, or opportunistic thieves would take his carefully made up parcels. He frequently observed that he wanted to "make the mail." In August 1832, for example, though "I have now not much to say," John told his brother that he had "scrolled down a few particulars as they occurred" to him. John apologized that "they were wrote in such haste that I doubt wether you will be able to make them out." He was anxious to get "the letter in the bag," however, and "You must take it," therefore, "as men do their wives 'for better or for worse'."[18]

Receiving mail, no matter how long it had taken in the passage was cause for celebration and writers always acknowledged the receipt of letters (and the pleasure they gave) when penning their own.[19] It did not mean, however, that

15 John Gemmill to Andrew Gemmill, 17 September 1823.

16 Ibid., 21 June 1823. When a letter was personally delivered, it was a double benefit to the recipient, who also received first hand accounts about family members' welfare. For example, in one letter, Isaac Wilson, a settler living near York, Upper Canada, noted that he was "pleased" to inform his brother in the summer of 1821 that "John Barnes and his wife [had] arrived at York" and brought with them letters from home. "I am much obliged to you for your kindness," he told Jonathon, and the Barneses "will afford me much information and entertainment. Dear Brother." Archives of Ontario (AO), Wilson Diaries, Isaac Wilson to his brother, 24 June 1821. See also Wilson's comments of 2 August 1828 and 26 April 1832. For further discussion, see Errington, *Emigrant Worlds*, chap. 5.

17 John Gemmill to Andrew Gemmill, 26 August 1830.

18 John Turner to Thomas Turner, 27 August 1834.

19 Not only is this apparent in these two collections, but in the dozens of others I have looked at, which are referenced in *Emigrant Worlds*. One stunning example is a notation in Mary O'Brien's diary. In the summer of 1836, just after the birth of her third child, Mary commented, "A letter from Lucy arrived a few hours after my baby & I am not sure which was the most welcome." AO, Mary O'Brien Journal, 25 July 1836.

the recipient replied immediately. The actual process of writing took time and some effort. And one had to have something to say. John Gemmill usually replied to his son's "latest" but it could be months before he did so. In December 1826, for example, he acknowledged two letters, dated 31 August and 30 March. "My neglect in answering them deserves some apology," he continued, "but I must only make the same claim as you do *want of time*."[20] John Turner sometimes apologized to Thomas when he had not written in awhile and knew that "you are anxious to hear from us."[21] Problems with his housekeeper, ill health, or too much work to do in the bakery or, later on, the family farm kept John busy. He nonetheless wrote relatively frequently, and often without the prompting of a letter from New Brunswick. Indeed, John periodically complained about his brother's tardiness in replying: "Lose no time in writing directly you receive this sit down & write," he admonished in September 1833.[22]

Despite all these difficulties, the very act of writing and thereby of reaching out to a brother or son was obviously important. For John Gemmill and John Turner, it was a means of reaffirming who they were and their place in the world. The fabric of this ongoing relationship did not seem to depend on the frequency of the mails, or the length of time it took to reply. Rather, it rested on an assumption of a shared relationship that continued even without the usual face to face contact and everyday conversations and experiences. Correspondents did have to appreciate and be able to negotiate the mechanisms of the British Atlantic networks of communication. As David Gerber has illustrated, the writer also had to be able and willing to engage with his audience and to choose topics for discussion that he thought would be of interest to both.[23]

The Gemmill letters, like many others from this period, followed a basic pattern of composition — one very similar to that of Irish migrants in Australia that David Fitzpatrick explored in *Oceans of Consolation*.[24] After the date and salutation, they almost all began "we received your letter," and then a conscious response to its contents. For example, John and Anne's letter of 21 June 1823, opened with an almost formulaic greeting: "Dear son, We received your letter datted the 26th of March on the 26 of May and the other Dated the 29 of March which Gave us Great Pleasure to hear of your Well fare as they find us all in good health at Preasent thank God for it." Such ritualized openings were not empty rote; they were a crucial affirmation of the intimacy that the writer assumed existed with the recipient and set the tone for a larger conversation that

20 John Gemmill to Andrew Gemmill, 6 December 1826. See also letter of 8 June 1829.

21 John Turner to Thomas Turner, 18 September 1832.

22 Ibid., 18 September 1833.

23 Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives*, chap. 3.

24 David Fitzpatrick, *Oceans of Consolation*, 19-28.

despite substantial pauses had an immediacy that belied the distance between them. John's June 1823 reply reads almost as though Andrew was sitting at the family table in Lanark. "Dear son I am very Glad to hear that My Brother is not Bodily hurt and again took possesion of his house likewise I am very Sory to hear that Mr. Nelson that worthy member of Society is Departed this Life but I hope that we Shall all meet again in that Kingdom that can not be moved."

Like many emigrants, John wrote about his new life in the colony. Periodically, he reported on the family's progress of the farm or local market conditions. Details were usually sparse, however. In part, it may have been because he was writing from what to Andrew would have been a foreign land. To explain life in Upper Canada to someone living in Glasgow would have been difficult, to say the least. As another settler writing to his brother in England once commented, "An account of all the changes that take place among my old neighbours is very pleasing for me to read along with various other incidents that may occur. A relation of such items from here would be quite uninteresting to you."[25] Certainly, John never discussed any of the difficulties of settlement or of those disappointments that frequently attended life in the Upper Canadian bush. As noted historian Charlotte Erickson and others discovered, John, as was the case with many other emigrants, presented Andrew and the rest of the family at home with an image of Upper Canada as a land of unbounded opportunity that was ready for the taking.[26]

John Gemmill was much more interested in passing on news about the people in his life. In addition to the family, John's letters were populated by many individuals whom Andrew would have known. To some degree, the Gemmills had taken "home" with them when they left Glasgow and John regularly reported on what Andrew's former neighbours and friends now living in Upper Canada were doing; he also responded to news Andrew sent about the "doings" at home. In May 1823, for example, John and Anne "were very Glad to here of your welfare but very sory to hear of that Melancholy account of the Capt and crew of that Ship that we came out in." A month later, John commiserated with former farm neighbours on the loss they must have suffered as a result of a great storm the previous December.[27] The following year, he was "happy to hear of a fine crop at home and that markets are reasonable and that employment in general is plentiful and rather better paid at home."[28] He also sent detailed greetings to former neighbours and friends. John finished his first surviving letter home, "I conclude at present by giving my best respects to all enquiring

25 AO, Wilson Diaries, Isaac Wilson to Jonathon Wilson, 24 June 1817.

26 Erickson, *Leaving Home*. See also Marjory Harper, *Willing Exiles* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988) and Errington, *Emigrant Worlds*, "A Note on Sources".

27 John Gemmill to Andrew Gemmill, 21 June and 21 July 1823. See also letter of 24 November 1829, when John commented on news in the British papers.

28 Ibid., 8 November 1824.

friends and well wishers."[29] In subsequent letters, he asked his son to "Be so good as to acquaint all Enquiring friends" that the family was well and usually included a specific list of individuals to whom Andrew was to pass on their respects.[30] Although John and the family never expected to return to Glasgow, they did not want to be forgotten; and they continued to see themselves as part of the community of friends "at home" that they knew so intimately.

It is not surprising that John Turner's letters to his brother had a different tone than that of the Gemmill letters. John was, at best, a reluctant participant in the world of emigration. By choice he would never have been in the situation of writing to a brother on the other side of the world. Moreover, while John Gemmill could "see" his son as he walked about the streets of Glasgow, John Turner was almost writing into a vacuum. He could not imagine his brother at work or in his new home and his dilemma seems to have been exacerbated because Thomas was, at best, an intermittent correspondent, and did not seem to afford John the opportunity to engage in conversation. Most of John's letters began abruptly. After the salutation, "My Dear brother" or just "Dear Brother," John plunged into an explanation of why he was writing — to explain the contents of a package or to pass on particular news about the family or events in the village. Sometimes, as he ruefully commented in March 1836, "I have no very particular communication to make nor have anything worth sending to you."[31] He then proceeded to fill four closely written pages with his small, neat handwriting.

John regularly reported on his father's and sisters' health and gave Thomas highlights of what the family had been doing since he had last written. Through John's eyes, their father continued to be difficult and seemed to enjoy his periodic tempers; sister Anne had made an unfortunate match; and although Elizabeth was a good housekeeper and companion for their father, she was already showing signs of irrational behaviour. John Turner, unlike John Gemmill, did periodically write about local and national affairs — the persistent problems local authorities had coping with the poor (and the increasing poor rates), and his views on "Mother Church" (which, as a Methodist, offended him). Most space in each letter was devoted, however, to information about the progress of the farm and life in the village. There was always something to say about the "doings" in the village and many of John's descriptions are incredibly detailed. Of particular importance seems to have been reports of births, deaths, and marriages of Thomas' former neighbours and friends. John also included local gossip — about, among other things, the neighbour who had, everyone thought, gone bankrupt and fled to the colonies; plans to build of a kennel for the new

29 John Gemmill to family, 2 March 1822.

30 John Gemmill to Andrew Gemmill, 23 July 1823. See also 30 April 1824 and 2 October 1824.

31 Ibid., 6 March 1836. See also 27 August 1832.

hunt club next to the church yard (and local fears that the odour of the dogs would disturb neighbours); and the sale of the manor to a man from London. In many ways, John seemed determined to remind Thomas of what he was missing at home, or at the very least, keep him engaged in local activities. The very act of writing also seemed to provide him with an emotional outlet for his frustration and to assuage his growing loneliness.

Recounting local news was, in the end, only a small part of why John Gemmill and John Turner continued to write to their families for more than a decade. Both sets of letters reflect an intimacy between writer and recipient that rested on a shared past and on the writers' assumptions about the dynamics of their particular families. At the heart of the correspondence was the desire to sustain a relationship that they could draw on for emotional and, if need be, physical support and in the process to define who they were and their place in the world. Although everyone recognized that living in distant and quite different parts of the world complicated matters, neither John Gemmill or John Turner believed, at least at the beginning of their correspondence, that the Atlantic had severed the familial bonds of affection and obligation or fundamentally altered personal dynamics. Distance and time did make a difference, however, and the letters chronicle how the relationships between the writer and those who were away changed, and with it, John Gemmill's and John Turner's own sense of self — as fathers, brothers, and men.

From the beginning, John Gemmill wrote as a fully adult male who, as head of a household had the responsibility and power to direct his dependents. In the first surviving letter, John concentrated most of his attention on the mechanics of reuniting the family. If they had not already done so, he told his wife and children to "get yourselves entered into some Society ... immediately as I wish you were all here!" Eldest son, Andrew, should register as head of the family, as this "will entitle him to land and implements." John then provided a detailed list of what the family should bring — in the way of farm implements, food, and household goods. John was worried about the voyage and he instructed them "before sailing provide yourself with a littler mercurial ointment and be sure and keep it at hand as you will want it before you are long in the ship." John clearly assumed that his instructions would be followed. Yet he also seemed to realize that everyone might not have been happy about the prospect of leaving home. Perhaps in an attempt to entice his eldest daughters (who were apparently already in service), he reassured them that they would easily find work in the colony, and "if they should choose to take service they will get from 4 to 5 dollars per month."[32]

John's reassurances and carefully penned instructions went unheeded, however. Ironically, but not surprisingly, given the state of the mails at the time,

32 John Gemmill to "My Dear Wife," 2 March 1822.

Anne was already in New Lanark when the letter arrived in Glasgow.[33] More disturbing was that his two eldest daughters and his eldest son Andrew were not part of the party. John assumed that this separation would be permanent. The next surviving letter of May 1823 made it clear that they expected Andrew (and if they were so inclined, other family members) to join them in short order. When this did not happen, John and his wife Anne (it is often unclear who actually wrote the letters — it was probably a joint affair, a practice that Wendy Cameron concluded was quite frequent among Petworth families[34]) continued to write "home" and bring Andrew into the family circle.

For the next three or so years, John continued to write home as a father speaking to a dependent son. A persistent topic of these early conversations was the timing of Andrew's arrival. As John explained, "It is not very pleasant for us to have the family scattered when we can all live very comfortable here." Throughout 1823 and 1824, John and Anne assured Andrew that the family had "plenty to maintain you all there is plenty of good situations for you Andrew and likewise for them [his sisters] if they do not chuse to stope at home," and encouraged their son to make arrangements for his passage immediately.[35] "I would be very happy if you would come out in the Spring," John wrote in September 1823.[36] At times, he was quite direct and seemed surprised when Andrew did not accede to his wishes. In April 1824, John explained that "we would have writan you soonner had we thought you were not coming on the testimony of the last letter you received."[37]

It appears that for a time, Andrew seriously considered joining the family in Upper Canada. In 1824, he requested "a more explicit statement" about conditions in Lanark. "We shall proceed to answer your numerous budget of queries just as they stand and leave you to judge in some measure for yourself," his father replied and then detailed acreage cleared, the success of the last harvest, latest prices at the market, and the increasing opportunities for educated and talented men.[38] Andrew was, in the end, not convinced. The issue soon became more complicated when Andrew and his sisters married and each of them then had to take into account the desires and needs of their respective spouses and new in-laws.

It must have been difficult for John to realize that he no longer had the ability to compel Andrew to accede to his wishes. For years, John had successfully

33 All the Gemmill letters are dated; what is unusual and intriguing is that they also included, on the "envelope," the date the letter was received.

34 Cameron, et al., *English Immigrant Voices*, xxx.

35 Anne and John Gemmill to Andrew Gemmill, 21 May 1823. See also 21 June and 17 September 1823.

36 John Gemmill to Andrew Gemmill, 17 September 1823.

37 Ibid., 30 April 1824.

38 Ibid.

supported his family; he had taken the responsibility of finding them a new home, and securing their future. By refusing to join the rest of the family, Andrew was implicitly challenging John's judgment. There was little John could do, however, to change the situation and as John began to accept this, the tone of his letters began to change. By 1826, John no longer wrote as though he was addressing a dependent son, but rather was writing to an independent householder. "I hope as soon as you receive this letter you will be ready to embark for this country if you can raise the means to enable you to do so," he wrote in May 1826. But, he continued, "I hope I need not say any thing to influence you to leave Scotland."[39] Three years later, John was almost resigned to the fact that Andrew had no intention of emigrating. "I almost despair of your wishes of our meeting again with the rest of my family around my fireside," a letter in 1829 concluded.[40] John and the family in Lanark and Andrew in Scotland would have to be content with a long distance relationship.

Being separated from Andrew did not mean that John (and Anne) relinquished their role as parents. They always wrote to their "Dear Son" and signed letters either "Your Affectionate Father" or "Your Loving Affectionate Father and Mother." Such language encapsulated a relationship that rested on the continued acceptance of familial identities and responsibilities. As the eldest and only son at home, John and Anne expected that Andrew would keep an eye on his sisters still in Scotland, pass on news and information as the need arose, and generally would be the Gemmill's voice in Glasgow. They were quite willing to take Andrew to task when they were not satisfied with his response. In May 1823, and again a month later, for example, John and Anne were "surprised that you never Mention nothing about your two Sisters Margeret and Jane."[41] In June, they asked Andrew to "be so good as to lett them know of our Welfare";[42] and toward the end of a letter the following September, John asked, "We have our Complaments all to you and your two Sisters let them here from us that we would be happy to have them come to America."[43] Periodically, John also asked Andrew to pass on information to old neighbours and friends. At one point, John told Andrew that "James Colquhoun [one of the original company of settlers from Glasgow] wishes us to mention to you if you could hear anything of his brother Robert to let him know that he is well & surprised that he had not heard from him for more than two years." Andrew obviously tracked down Robert, and reported to his father that James' brother was fine. Unfortunately, in the intervening time, the situation in Upper Canada had

39 Ibid., 2 May 1828.
40 Ibid., 24 November 1829.
41 Ibid., 21 May 1823. See also 21 June 1823.
42 Ibid., 21 June 1823.
43 Ibid., 17 September 1823.

changed, and John now had to ask Andrew to break the news to Robert that James was "no more," having been killed while at work.[44]

Andrew was also expected to carry on with the family's unfinished business in Glasgow. In 1824, John gave Andrew authority to deal with what appears to have been a dispute over Anne's inheritance. Apparently, one of Anne's brothers was claiming that she had signed away her share: "Your Mother signed no receipt or discharge accepting the £40 her father left her." John Gemmill thought that Andrew would have no problem sorting out the situation, but a dispute with another of Anne's brothers was another matter: "We think Uncal's ... conduct very unproper and the sooner you set about getting the business put to rights the better."[45] Tensions between John and his in-laws persisted. One of Anne's brothers claimed that John still owed him money. "I can swear in court that I do not owe it," John informed his son. If anything, he was still entitled to payment for work he had done, but he had decided, just before he had left home, "I would not trouble myself any more about it but let him have the whole for the amount of the Bill."[46] Although John periodically offered Andrew advice on how he might proceed to settle these various disputes, it is clear that he had confidence in his son. And in 1829, he and Anne were "very happy to hear that you have at last got the better of your Uncle."[47]

Andrew was, however, much more than Anne and John's agent at home. They were determined that he would also continue to take an active, if vicarious part in the family's life in Upper Canada. Andrew regularly learned about his brothers' and sister's health and welfare. Through his father's letters, Andrew was encouraged to follow as sisters Mary and Ann went into service and subsequently married, and to watch as the little ones, including David, who had been an infant when he had left home, went to school.[48] In 1827, when Andrew told the family about his own marriage, John congratulated his son and from then on extended the family circle; his subsequent letters always included greetings to "all your [Andrews's] relations in Scotland." Two years later, John rejoiced with his son over the birth of his first child; "but we think you forgot to mention her name and hope you will have a better memory when you write next."[49]

Particularly in the early years, when the younger children were living in the parental household in Upper Canada, John tried to draw Andrew further into

44 Ibid., 6 December 1826 and 6 August 1827.

45 Ibid., 4 October 1824. On 8 November 1824, John again discussed the matter. Apparently, the signed copy of the "Mandatory" had not arrived in Scotland and John was sending another "without delay."

46 Ibid., 6 August 1827.

47 Ibid., 8 June 1829.

48 Ibid., 28 May 1824.

49 Ibid., 6 December 1826 and 8 June 1829.

life in Lanark. John's letters regularly included specific greetings from his siblings. Sometimes, it was a brief: "Jennet sends her best respects to you;"[50] or, somewhat later, "Your Brothers & Sisters all join in love to you & your Family, David [the youngest son] has some recollection of you ... but says he would know you better if you would send him the suit of cloaths."[51] Through her father's letters, Jennett, who was only two years younger than Andrew, teased him about being a bachelor. Still hopeful that Andrew would join them, in September 1823 John related that "She thinks that if you do not bring a wife with you that you will remain an Old Batchelor that you would not get a Negor or Indian Squaw in the Country they will think so little of you."[52]

It was the occasion of Jennett's engagement, about six months later, which illustrates best the texture of this imagined familial fireside. At the end of April 1824, a postscript in one of John's letters cryptically noted "Janet will be married before you come here so you put on spurs."[53] There seems to have been some hope (although it may have just been wishful thinking) that Andrew would arrive in time to be the best man. But, as John reported the following November, "Since you did not come forward to be the best man, they made as merry as they could without you." And later in the same letter, he passed on a message from Jennett: "As soon as you send intimation of your comming they [Jennett and her new husband] will Joyfully saddle the Tea Kettle and have everything ready to make you comfortable but they dare not put it on yet lest the bottom boil out of it before you come."[54] A year later, as John continued to hope that Andrew and his sisters would arrive, he bemoaned, "if you don't come soon, the Bottom *will* be out of the kettle."[55] One of Andrew's brothers, John, reintroduced the teapot to the transatlantic conversation nine years later: "But my Mother says that if you don't come soon she is afraid that you have to take your tea out of the pot for the botem is out of the old tea ketel and she has got A new one and she is afraid that it will go the same way before you reach this place."[56]

The references to the familiar and domestic tea kettle — which in many Scottish homes was the symbol of welcome — helped to create the illusion of

50 Ibid., 17 September 1823.

51 Ibid., 6 December 1826.

52 In this quite remarkable passage, John passed on additional remarks from Jennett, "she has not got the imitation of that Black Man you sent her yet." Ibid., 17 September 1823. In one of the few letters from Andrew in the collection, he replied, "Tell Janet to belief herself besides those black Ghosts of Indians." Andrew Gemmill to his parents, 2 October 1824.

53 John Gemmill to Andrew Gemmill, 30 April 1824.

54 Ibid. 8 November 1824.

55 Ibid., 21 November 1825. This image of the kettle was also invoked by John and Caroline Dearling to Brothers and Sisters, 15 July 1838. Citied in Cameron, et al., *Immigrant Voices*, 276–7.

56 John Gemmill (jr) to Andrew Gemmill, 25 September 1832.

a continuing, immediate and face to face relationship within a family divided by the Atlantic. Certainly, relationships changed — in part because of separation but also because children grew up, married and had children of their own. By 1832, it must have been clear to all that Andrew and his new young family would never leave Scotland. The webs of affection continued to be sustained by letters and an unshakeable belief that "Kind Providence ... provided all things liberally."[57] All trials and tribulations that "we suffer," including family separations, are "from the Supreme Disposer of Events" and "are generally for our good,"[58] John wrote. John's faith never wavered and was an important ingredient in cementing familial bonds across time and space. And he took solace that "though that [the family's reunion] may not take place upon earth, let us with the Divine assistance conduct ourselves in such a manner that we look forward to our meeting together in another and better world."[59]

In the meantime, John Gemmill created his own world — one with a tea kettle on the hob — and one in which, through his letters, everyone shared their concerns, their triumphs and their sorrows. It was a world in which time and space were collapsed. Events that happened months ago retained their immediacy when passed on to interested parties on the other side of the Atlantic. The whole Gemmill family took part in a conversation that lasted for more than ten years. After the birth of the first of Jennett's children in 1826, John reported that she "is living in great hopes of her son being heir to your inheritance ... you made this promise & she will make you keep it."[60] John told Andrew a year later that young David (now eight) was proud of the gold piece Andrew had sent him.[61] And when Andrew's brother, John, wrote his first letter (and apologized for his spelling), it was sent to his brother with the hope "that you are intending to pay us a visit sure that would be a hapy meting."[62] This was a world that offered all its participants emotional support — and for John, at least, a continuing sense of security, as father of all his children and as a responsible man who, with his initial decision to leave home, had successfully fulfilled his responsibilities as head of a large household.

Not all correspondents were so successful in sustaining what was essentially an imaginary world. Moreover, there were often times when families

57 Ibid., 8 November 1824.

58 Ibid., 24 November 1829. Five years earlier, John had replied to what appears to have been a thoughtful letter from Andrew: "I take you kind advice ... and I hope you will daily and hourly take to yourself the uncertainty of time and the precarious nature of all its enjoyments ought never to be forgot and our preparation for our eternal state ought to be our daily or hourly our constant study and employ as the basis of our Eternal felicity," 4 October 1824.

59 Ibid., 24 November 1829.

60 Ibid., 6 December 1826.

61 Ibid., 6 August 1827.

62 Ibid., 25 September 1832.

were suddenly jarred into the realization that the world they had created in their letters was a hollow illusion. This reality became starkly evident to John Turner in 1834.

For the first two years of his correspondence, John Turner, like the Gemmills, seemed able to ignore the distance between Milton Ernest and St. Andrews, New Brunswick. He wrote as an older brother passing on news and advice. John seems to have taken pleasure in writing and sometimes it was as though he was imagining the two brothers sitting together over tea at the end of the day. The four surviving letters written in 1832 and 1833 also reflected John's frustration and bewilderment with his younger brother's decision to emigrate, and he frequently urged Thomas to return home. "The pain your absence occasions — indeed, it mars all our comforts," he wrote in 1832. Their sisters "never speak about you at all without shedding tears. — As to myself ... trust we all feel and lament your absence." John was clearly lonely and he believed that, in the end, Thomas was probably unhappy with his decision: "If we knew you were happy & comfortable it would be some consolation." But all that the Turners knew was that the climate was terrible and Thomas was having continual problems receiving goods from England; John (and apparently his sisters) despaired of their brother's situation.[63]

For a time, John did consider joining Thomas in New Brunswick. In August 1832, he was dissatisfied with his bake shop and his father and thought that it might be time for a change. "If I had enough to keep me alive in the world I think I dare go hither to you or any other Country if I could get employ in raising Garden & other plants where new varieties such as England's produce where required," he wrote. John continued, "if you get settled & do yourselves good where you are & if I could get a little something of my own *I dare come* to live in your country for such a purpose."[64] In the end, John did not dare. He had responsibilities to his family in Milton Ernest; more to the point, he seems to have been someone who never strayed far from home. In September 1833, he told Thomas, "I have never been 10 miles from home since you left but purpose going to Northampton soon — if I dare."[65] Instead, John journeyed vicariously by sending letters and parcels; and as he wrote, he entered an imaginary world in which he and his brother were once again together.

Then, in February 1834, the tone of John's letters changed dramatically. "I have lately been in daily expectation of hearing from you & was about preparing a Little Box containing Garden Seeds etc to forward for your Spring Sowing; but this morning my intentions have been frustrated and our hopes for your present happiness have been destroyed," his hastily written letter began.

63 John Turner to Thomas Turner, 21 March 1832.

64 Ibid., 27 August 1832.

65 Ibid., 18 September 1833.

John had just read a report in the newspaper forwarded by Thomas' agent that a Mrs. Turner from St. Andrews had died in a ship wreck in early January while on her way to England. "We fear — We cannot but fear, — indeed we have scarce a gleam of hope left for we cannot but believe that the Lady mentioned in the report was your wife."[66] John's disbelief, was in part, because, no one in the village had known that Susan had intended to visit England. The family wondered aloud "how she dare attempt the voyage at such a season, in such weather, comparitively alone & in such a crazy old vessel." Obviously, "her anxiety to see her friends & to attend to Business [had] ... support[ed] her Noble Spirit to brave every danger." John and the family were "consoled to think that Poor Susans sufferings were not prolonged on the Wreck"[67] and that she was now with God. But this gave little comfort.

Over the next three months, John penned four lengthy letters offering his brother sympathy and what support he could from the other side of the Atlantic. "We are all anxiety on your account as well as deeply grieved for your loss," he wrote, but "I know not what to say nor how to write — I can say nothing to help — you & I fear little to comfort you." He pleaded with Thomas that if there was anything "that we are able to give you only say and all shall be done that we are able to do."[68] John knew that "you will be wishful for us to pay every tribute of respect to departed worth in this instance," and he told his brother that he and their sister Elizabeth had given mourning to sister Ann and to John's man and maid to wear. John also visited Susan's family, to offer his condolences and support, and he informed Thomas that they had begun to make plans "to erect a Marble Tablet" at the local church in Susan's memory and were discussing an appropriate engraving. John reassured Thomas that nothing would be done, however, until after he returned home.[69]

In his attempt to lift his brother's spirits, in March, John began the first of a two part "walk round the village." "Perhaps it will cheer you up a bit to call your old neighbours to mind," he explained.[70] John's imaginary tour began at the end of his garden and the two brothers then proceeded through the village, greeting old friends, pointing out new buildings and gossiping about the neighbours. The tour continued in May, because John explained, "we had not had time to go to little London, but as old Tommy Pick will perhaps be angry if we do not call we will now go to see both him & his neighbours."[71] By evoking the sights and sounds of home, John was reminding Thomas that he had not been forgotten. The tour was also a graphic illustration of the intensely personal

66 Ibid., 1 February 1834.
67 Ibid., 19 February 1834.
68 Ibid., 19 February 1834.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid., 28 March 1834.
71 Ibid., 2 May 1834.

imaginary world that could exist within and, indeed, was created by the larger Atlantic world. In the face of tragedy, John continued to reach out to Thomas and offer consolation and support based on their shared experiences, landscapes, and identities.

John knew, however, that even thoughts of home could not alleviate his brother's grief. Only Thomas's faith in God would, in the end, bring consolation and renewed hope for the future. "May God support you under the Awful bereavment," John wrote as soon as he heard the news.[72] Time and again, he reminded his brother that Susan's death had to be part of God's plan. We must "trace the hand of God" in these events, he wrote, "& let us have patience a little & we shall be enabled (tho' we cannot fathom him immensity) to look thro' the dark cloud and behold our God doing all things well." John urged, "My Brother, Cheer up, your Beloved Susan has met with the dear little girl it grieved you so much to part with, it is not for us to say in what way (when her work on earth was finished) our God should conduct her to join the Little Harper before the Throne — is it not enough for us to hope — yea to know that she with both her babes are there safe housed from every gathering storm."[73] John, and he assumed Thomas, had a "firm belief that that divine being is continually superintending and directing *all* the concerns of *all* his creatures." This "should, and I hope does dispel your and our fears, relieve our sorrows, and afford us no small consolation amidst all our griefs and trials."[74]

As he sat in his bake shop in Milton Ernest, John was initially confident that the same hand of God that had taken Susan away would also bring Thomas home: "In the event of your being thus awfully circumstanced you will (we trust) make the necessary arrangements to your speedy return home."[75] As soon as he heard the news in early February, John declared that this was no time for Thomas to be among strangers. Moreover, this tragedy was but the last "dreadful event" of a number of "repeated Losses & anxieties" and surely all that had happened since he had left home were "loud providential calls for your return." "It is my opinion," John wrote, and one that he stated was shared by all Thomas' friends and family, "that if you attempt to remain in a foreign country you may will still be hedged up with Thorns."[76] Only at home, in Milton Ernest in the bosom of his family could Thomas really be comforted in his grief. In March, John wrote primarily "to say that we more & more anxiously wish you to return home."[77] John repeated this refrain throughout his correspondence of 1834. He did not want to "harrass" his brother, he said; rather he hoped to

72 Ibid., 1 February 1834.
73 Ibid., 19 February 1834.
74 Ibid., 28 March 1834.
75 Ibid., 1 February 1834.
76 Ibid., 19 February 1834
77 Ibid., 28 March 1834.

"lighten" his burden and to assure him that he was not only missed at home; but Thomas needed to return for his own welfare.

It is in this series of letters, spanning five months, that we see something of the relationship between John and Thomas Turner, at least as understood by John. He had never really been reconciled to his brother leaving home. This situation was particularly difficult for him as he obviously felt that the brothers were especially close. They were not only siblings who had grown up together and shared bonds of brotherhood that, from the letters at least, had set them apart from the rest of the family; he and Thomas also shared a faith in God that gave them each solace and strengthened their relationship.

In 1834, John was also conscious that as the older brother, he had some responsibility for looking out for Thomas. And he found his inability to do so, because of the great distance between them, frustrating. He did what he could to offer advice and support. "I am your brother," he wrote in February, urging Thomas to return home quickly, "& I feel it to be my duty to weigh circumstances as well as I can & I pray you to so the same."[78] John knew that Thomas could not just leave St. Andrews — he owned a shop and had financial responsibilities both in New Brunswick and in England. Thomas had to "make every arrangement with Caution,"[79] John advised in March 1834. Another factor that Thomas had to consider was how Susan's death changed his relationship with his in-laws. Thomas was now "as a Branch lopped off from Mrs. Paines family," John wrote. They "will always respect you" and were unlikely to "use you ill," John continued; but Thomas should know that one of Susan's brother was already claiming that Thomas should return "a great deal of Property" that Susan had originally taken "out of the family."[80] Although this situation was resolved (and indeed, John reported later that Susan's brother had left the village under a cloud), John continued to offer his brother advice. By July 1834 he began to suspect that Thomas might not heed it, and this added to his frustration and sense of dislocation. "We have no wish to hurry you home until you have disposed of your business & stock to the best possible advantage," he wrote. Indeed, "if you can *better your condition* where you are ... remain there a little longer ... but," John continued, rather emphatically, "by no means stay away longer than you can at all help."[81]

Among other things, this tragic event highlights the startling disjunction that could occur when the illusions of immediacy created and sustained by letters were shattered by the exigencies of the Atlantic crossing. The ship wreck that took Susan's life had occurred off the coast of New Brunswick, but news of it arrived in London first. An American ship bound for Southampton had

78 Ibid., 19 February 1834.
79 Ibid., 28 March 1834.
80 Ibid., 19 February 1834.
81 Ibid., 31 July 1834.

picked up the surviving crew and passengers and continued on its way to Great Britain. It was only after the Captain had attended at the Admiralty to request assistance for the 11 surviving Irish seamen, "who had been reduced to a truly pitiable state," that the local press, always attentive to shipping news, picked up the report.[82] John was grateful that "the awful news of your loss reached" Milton Ernest before St. Andrews. "It will relieve you from the anxiety you could not but have felt on account of your friends here," he explained to Thomas.[83] John knew that while he sat in his bakery shop in Milton Ernest, mourning and worried about his brother's emotional state, Thomas remained blissfully ignorant of his wife's death. He also knew that it would be weeks before his letters reached St. Andrews and months before he could expect to receive a reply. But John could not hide his shock at the news and his first two letters of 1834 reflected an almost frantic concern for his brother's welfare that seemed to demand an immediate response. For John, his imagined world of kin and community had, for a time at least, truly come asunder.

By the beginning of March, John was becoming impatient. Even though he realized that "we cannot expect [a letter] just at the present" and, as he wrote, perhaps "we shall hear from you in about a fortnight,"[84] waiting for news was hard. By May, John was becoming increasingly anxious. As he explained to Thomas, he had recently received one letter and "I opened it with much anxiety" because "I expected before writing you had heard of your melancholy loss at sea." To his horror, Thomas still had not heard of the death of his wife nor had he received any of John's letters of commiseration. "Mr Brother, altho' we had been wearing mourning about a month on account of your loss & which dreadful event had occurred exactly 2 months before your Letter was written [6 March 1834] you had not then heard one word about it." To make matters worse, two letters the family had sent to St. Andrews the previous fall had been returned to Milton Ernest. Although John and the family were pleased "to hear from you … in other respects your Letter increases our anxiety on your account." John continued to "pray that the hand of God may support you," and urged Thomas to return home as soon as possible, although "do not expose yourself to a Voyage in the Winter if it can be at all avoided." At the same time, he pleaded with his brother to put his affairs in New Brunswick in order for "it is our earnest and anxious desire for you to return home" quickly — and to take his place in the family circle. It was not until John was ready to seal this latest missive (four days after he had begun to write) that he finally received Thomas' "kind letter [that] informed us that the awful tidings of the loss of your wife had reached you."[85]

82 John copied out an extract of the news item into his first letter to Thomas, 1 February 1834.
83 Ibid., 19 February 1834.
84 Ibid., 28 March 1834.
85 Ibid., 2 May 1834.

For John, his sister-in-law's untimely death confirmed the tragic consequences of emigration. But it also offered him a ray of hope that Thomas might now abandon his foolish enterprise. From the beginning of the surviving correspondence, it is clear that, at times, John felt abandoned by his brother and trapped in a situation not of his making. He was often desperately lonely. Since Thomas had left, John had been forced to assume more and more of the responsibility for the family. By early 1834, the situation in Milton Ernest was rapidly deteriorating. Their father's farming business had begun "to go very badly," and the sheep were mismanaged, John explained to his brother in March 1834. "We need you at home," John declared, or the family would have to make "some fresh arrangements."[86] John appreciated the impulse that had propelled Thomas to New Brunswick in the first place, but their father was not now so difficult, and John reassured Thomas that if he returned, Mr. Turner had agreed to "give up the entire management of the farm"; if this did not meet with Thomas' wishes, John offered to give him his bakery business.[87] John recognized Thomas' reluctance but he needed to know Thomas' "future intentions and wishes — if you do not give me much ground to hope, I shall not expect you at all, for I think that if you do not now soon return you will never return at all & I shall proceed accordingly." John pleaded with Thomas to return; it was "absolutely necessary ... for in almost every respect you are much wanted & needed here."[88]

John Turner was caught in a dilemma that was shared by many British men and women at the time. When one or more members of a family emigrated, there was almost always someone left behind who needed care and attention. The Gemmills expected that Andrew would look after his sisters, and perhaps aunts and uncles. He did not, however, have the responsibilities that John Turner had to shoulder — an aging and irascible parent, one sister who was being abused by her husband, and another maiden sister who remained home and was subject to bouts of "fits." As a bachelor, John had few other family members to turn to for help. He was now in his late forties and apparently subject to bouts of gout and other illnesses. It was not surprising that John wanted Thomas to return home both to help assuage his loneliness and to relieve him of some of the responsibility of looking after the family.

In July 1834, John announced that he was thinking about moving back to the farm, even though his father did not want him to. John reminded his brother "our Father now grows old" and he was "surrounded by dishonest men."[89] With still no word on Thomas' intentions, John forwarded a letter from their father that urged Thomas to come home.[90] But by September 1834, John had begun

86 Ibid., 28 March 1834.
87 Ibid., 2 May 1834.
88 Ibid., 2 May 1834.
89 Ibid., 31 July 1834.
90 Noted in letter, Ibid., 24 February 1835.

to be resigned to the fact that Thomas was not likely to return. His hurt and his frustration were palpable. Although "we want to see you safe and sound at home & shall now be mortified if you do not come," he wrote, "I also believe you will weigh things all together in your mind & act as you are led to believe will be best."[91] By March 1836, John had given up all hope that his brother would return home to stay; instead he began to look forward to a visit Thomas proposed to make in the summer.[92]

For the next few years, John's letters settled back into their earlier thematic pattern. They included details of the weather and its impact on planting and harvesting, the state of the livestock, and events in the village, including marriages of local girls, the births and deaths of neighbours and relations and the state of the Bedfordshire economy.[93] By the summer of 1841, John was living with his father and at times, finding it difficult. Although his father did not seem "dissatisfied" with what John was doing, "you know his disposition which you are aware must in many ways grow worse and more unpleasant." There were times, John reported, when their father was "like a spoiled child." But John felt compelled to stay: "I must try & bear it for really, I do not know what would become of things if I was not here."[94]

In 1843, John was once again in crisis and he again turned to Thomas for help. "Our Father ... is very unwell," John reported and he himself had contracted influenza and after a month was still very weak and depressed. Their sister Ann, had been forced to flee her home, because of her "beastly husband" and, at one point, the couple had come to blows; Elizabeth, who still lived on the farm, had had another fit; and a spate of "incendiaries" were terrifying the village and John feared that their farm might be next. "Such being our case, I hope you will take our circumstances into your most *serious consideration* & if you think of coming home at all come home without delay." The situation was desperate enough, John continued, that "if you must make a great sacrifice never mind for this must be made come whenever you like." Thomas could take possession of the farm immediately "& I think that if my life is spared arrangements may very well be made to put me & Elizabeth somewhere out of your way." John reiterated his plea for help at the end of the letter. "I can add no more now only now consider what I have said & try & come home for as regards the life of our father & myself we are in a precarious state Yrs Dr Brother truly, John Turner."[95] John must have harboured some resentment first at finding himself in a position of having to plead with his brother and then at having Thomas refuse his request. By refusing to meet his obligations to his

91 Ibid., 29 September 1834.
92 Ibid., 16 March 1836.
93 Ibid., 16 March 1836; Journal 1844.
94 Ibid., 24 June 1841.
95 Ibid., 28 November 1843.

family, it must have seemed that he was also rejecting that fundamental sibling relationship that was so important to John. John's disappointment only increased when his father died a year later.

John sent Thomas parts of his journal for October and November 1844 that described their father's steady decline. "This is an awful stroke & the Lord knows, we feel it," John recorded. "I feel that a heavy burthen had fallen upon me — May God support me under it." A month later, as John was preparing to send the latest journal, he announced, "I will try & keep on the Farm except you demand now your share of the Property. — if you do I will give it up & sell off."[96] John's next and last letters in the collection also included a journal of "our doings thro the last month [February 1845]." He still had not heard from Thomas about whether he wanted his inheritance immediately: "Say if I shall pay you your share of the money & where or state you particular wishes freely & frankly & give me any advice for the best you can," the letter accompanying the journal stated.[97] In the meantime, John would carry on. By now, Ann and her children had joined him and sister Elizabeth in the family home. In addition to managing the farm and winding up his father's affairs, in the evenings John was teaching ten local boys to read and write.

It seems that despite his disappointments with his brother, John needed to maintain the seemingly tenuous connection between his world in Milton Ernest and his brother's in St. Andrews. But in 1845, the 56 year old John was plagued by rheumatism and "in a poor state of health." His nephews were beginning to help on the farm and as he told Thomas, their eldest nephew, also named John, "shall write next time."[98] In the course of ten years, the relationship between the brothers had changed. Despite frequent attempts to assert his authority as older brother and de facto head of household, John was increasingly conscious that he was now dependent on both his nephews physically and on his brother emotionally. The family still had to settle their father's estate, a process that, as a number of other British families including the Gemmills knew, could take years to complete. But John Turner's last surviving letter in the collection indicates that he would no longer take an active part in the relationship.

Both the Gemmill and Turner correspondence seem to end quite abruptly. There is, however, no indication that the two families had stopped writing. It is more likely that at least some letters were lost in the mail, and others did not survive for other reasons. Certainly, the last letters in each of the collections continued to reflect the issues that had preoccupied their writers for some time. In August 1830, John Gemmill continued to hope that his daughter Jean and her family would yet join them. He could offer them some assistance, he told

96 Journal 1844.
97 Ibid., 1 March 1845.
98 Ibid.

Andrew, and he expected "to see [her] here as soon as her pecuniary circumstances will permit."[99] Two years later the family was still waiting, but still hopeful. A young John Gemmill, writing to his eldest brother Andrew, suggested that perhaps he could help financially.[100] Ironically, John Turner's personal connections to the emigrant world were strengthened after his father's death. Although Thomas did not return home, in 1845 or 1846, John's nephew Thomas (Ann's son) left for New Brunswick to join his uncle. Their sister Ann wrote the last letter in the Turner collection. "I take this opportnity of putting a few lines in my Dear Boys Box he is very anxious of coming to you as the seas but very little prospects of doing any good here," her letter began.[101] She told Thomas that their brother John, who was very fond of the boy, was (not surprisingly) unhappy about the arrangement. Indeed, John may have bitterly resented that his views on emigration had, once again, been ignored. Ann Turner, however, seemed to be resigned to her son's departure. "Take care of him," she pleaded with her brother in New Brunswick and "send us as soon as you can if Thomas is spared to get safe over as we shall be very anxious about Him."

Maintaining the family circle when a great distance divided members was not easy. The difficulties of communications and the vagaries of the nineteenth century mails made it all the more difficult. Many emigrants, either by choice or by chance, lost touch with family at home. Many more, however, were determined not to. As David Gerber has argued, letters were an essential part of the fabric of "the transatlantic culture of emigration."[102] They were also an essential part of maintaining family connections and holding on to one's identity and place in the world. It was perhaps easier for emigrants to maintain the substance of a relationship with those they had left behind than for those who had, for a variety of reasons, stayed in Great Britain. John Gemmill could, in his mind's eye "see" his son and daughters and knew the contours of the landscape in which they worked and played. Even though these images were increasingly out of date — static snapshots of a world that no longer existed — it was better than the situation John Turner found himself in. Unlike John Gemmill writing to Andrew, John Turner did not know Thomas' neighbours, and he had not sense of the rhythm of his brother's life. He wrote to a brother who now lived in a land that was unimaginable and, John assumed, hostile.

Nonetheless, John Turner and John Gemmill, as was the case for so many other family members divided by the Atlantic, were determined to maintain the connection. Through their letters, they created an imaginary world of kin and

99 John Gemmill to Andrew Gemmill, 26 August 1830.

100 John Gemmill (jr) to Andrew Gemmill, 25 September 1832.

101 Ann Turner (Odell) to Thomas Turner, 20 April. Although no year was included in the date, internal evidence indicates that this was definitely written shortly after her father's death.

102 Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives*, 92.

community. The strength of this world lay in the writer's assumptions that their readers accepted and embraced a common understanding of the family's needs and interests. Familial relationships were not static; they changed with time, and required constant negotiation to accommodate changing circumstances and strains. John Gemmill and John Turner were both forced to accept that their roles as father or brother, when asserted at such distance, could be implicitly and sometimes were explicitly challenged, but that did not mean that relationships so central to their personal identities were abandoned. Letters provided them with the means to maintain the family circle, with all its webs of affection and obligation, over a great distance and considerable lengths of time. Writing to those away also offered a sense of personal security and identity — one rooted in one's place in what had become a transatlantic family.

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ELIZABETH JANE ERRINGTON is Dean of Arts at the Royal Military College of Canada, and a member of the Departments of History at RMC and Queen's University. She is beginning two new projects — one that explores imperial masculinity and the making of RMC and a second that examines voluntary societies, benevolence and identity in nineteenth century British America.

ELIZABETH JANE ERRINGTON est doyenne de la Faculté des arts au Collège militaire royal du Canada (CMR) et membre des départements d'histoire du CMR et de l'Université Queen. Elle entame à présent deux nouvelles recherches — l'une sur la masculinité à l'époque impériale et la constitution du CMR, et l'autre sur les sociétés de bienfaisance, les œuvres bénévoles et l'identité dans l'Amérique britannique du XIXe siècle.