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Aubrey Williams Research Travel Award – Research Report

As a recipient of the Aubrey Williams Research Travel Award for 2012, I recently completed a research trip to London and Oxford, United Kingdom. The goal of my trip was to examine a wide variety of manuscript and printed letters in support of my ongoing dissertation project, “The Known World: The Epistolary Origins of Print,” which argues that the genre of the letter was fundamental to the eighteenth-century expansion of news and novel writing. I was hoping to look at as many letters as possible in order to draw conclusions about conventions for letter writing and formatting in the period. At the same time, there were several individual authors whose archives I was interested in viewing.

I began at the British Library, where I spent two weeks studying a range of material. I first consulted a collection of manuscript newsletters written by Henry Muddiman, the first editor of the world’s first newspaper, the *London Gazette*. These letters helped me draw stronger conclusions about the connections between manuscript and printed news in the period. I then studied the library’s collection of Daniel Defoe’s letters, which included some of those he wrote while working as a government agent and political propagandist. These letters have proved extremely useful for the second chapter of my dissertation, which includes discussion of the print periodicals Defoe was writing while he worked for Harley. Third, I examined a collection of letters sent to Richard Steele when he was writing and editing the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*, periodicals that I also discuss in my second chapter. These letters demonstrate the extent to which members of the public did in fact participate in “writing” these papers. Finally, I looked at a series of miscellaneous letters collected by Thomas Birch, an eighteenth-century scholar. These letters covered a variety of topics and historical periods, allowing me to follow genre conventions in a number of contexts.

I then spent two weeks studying at the Bodleian Library in Oxford. At the Bodleian I examined another collection of manuscript newsletters, as well as several collections of diplomatic and scholarly correspondence, which helped to demonstrate some of the central communications networks in eighteenth-century Europe. I also studied the archives of Jane Johnson, a mid-eighteenth century woman, which was very useful in exposing gendered letter-writing conventions. Finally, I had access to the papers of John Dunton, a seventeenth- and eighteenth-century printer who was influential in the early periodical press. Looking at such a wide variety of letters helped me to better understand the material conditions of letter writing, such as the types of paper used, the standards for handwriting, and the ways that writers tended to fold and address their letters. All of these factors would be impossible to fully appreciate without access to archival material, and this research trip will provide invaluable evidence for many sections of my dissertation.

