

## EDITING FAMILY CORRESPONDENCE: ACCIDENTALS IN THE ROWE LETTERS

DR J.P. ROWE EMIGRATED FROM ENGLAND to Van Diemen's Land in 1832, married the daughter of two emancipists, and set up in practice in Hobart. In 1846 he moved to the Port Phillip district, where he began his life as a squatter. In 1874, wishing to visit his family in England, he took his wife, a son and three daughters to Europe. He placed the younger children, Francis and Helen, at schools in London, and proceeded to tour Europe and Great Britain with his wife Mary and two daughters, Cecily and Jane. The latter were to improve themselves: to learn French and Italian, perfect their singing, and acquire a broad knowledge of art and architecture. During their absence they wrote frequently to another sister, Frances, in Australia. Almost all the letters written in the two-year period of their absence are extant.

The Rowe letters (which are in private hands) form an interesting and unique collection amongst Australian manuscripts. They are written by different members of the family, but principally by Cecily and Jane, who were aged eighteen and twenty at the time the correspondence begins. Unfortunately none of Frances's replies survive. There are approximately two hundred letters, and they fall into three groups. First there are those written to Frances shortly after she has married, while all the family are still in Victoria. The second and largest part of the collection is comprised of the letters written by Dr and Mrs Rowe, Cecily and Jane, and two younger children, Francis and Helen, while they are overseas and Frances remains at home (1874-5). Finally there are the 1876 letters written when the family have returned to Victoria and Frances and her husband visit Ireland.

It is the sisters' frank and forthright style which gives the letters a special value. They convey a fresh and vivid picture of colonial society. The collection is an unusually complete one in that it gives us an almost continuous account of three years in the family's lives, these years being crucial years and covering the contrasts of colonial bush life, parochial Melbourne, and the European world. Finally, Dr Rowe's fortunes are destroyed by an embezzling son-in-law, who, unable to face his victim, commits suicide shortly before the Rowes return home. The letters are important in that they are one of the few collections which give us a picture of Europe through the eyes of Australians. The letters are of interest to social historians, as the sisters, with a Dickensian eye for caricature, give detailed, lively and sometimes scathing accounts of Melbourne's fashionable world. They reveal much about class attitudes and Victorian and colonial family life. The sisters were educated partly by governesses and partly by their father, who was well-equipped to teach them, having had a classical education at the English Jesuit college, Stonyhurst, in Lancashire.

Questions associated with the editing of the letters arose while preparing a text as part of an M.A. thesis.<sup>1</sup>

It might be thought that in editing the letters of professional writers or authors one would employ very different principles from those suitable for unknown people whose mistakes or orthographical irregularities one might expect to be many, their intentions being vague. For various reasons it might be supposed that in editing the work of professional writers an 'old-spelling' edition is preferable but that for unknown writers a modernized text which regularizes distracting errors and makes the text more readable would be preferable. Such a supposition rests on the belief that the content and style of the professional author are, as it were, untouchable — that the subtleties there contained are of the utmost importance. All shades of thought must be represented and principles devised to meet this end. Thus, for example, the writer's deleted words are presented in pointed brackets or footnotes. This practice would be inappropriate in the Rowe letters, for example, since deleted words are rarely anything more than the correction of errors and always inconsequential. Similarly, editors of letters of professional writers usually choose to represent the shades of emphasis suggested by multiple underscoring by footnoting the number of times a word has been underlined or by stating it within brackets immediately after the underscored word.<sup>2</sup>

While one need not treat the content of an unknown writer's work with such reverence, features which affect style are extremely important. For it becomes apparent that there is a traditional concept of the ideal familiar letter. While in letter-writing manuals professional writers and authors were held up as examples, the familiar letter was thought to have been one in which women generally excelled.<sup>3</sup> Most prized was a style which was easy, spontaneous and casual. Erasmus held that 'a good letter ought to be *extempore*' and Johnson echoed these sentiments when he wrote in the *Rambler* that 'the best letters are those . . . where the flow of thought is artless and free from studied arrangement'.<sup>4</sup>

The Victorians considered that the art of letter-writing had reached its zenith in the eighteenth century, as seen in the letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Gray and Cowper, all of whom were notable for their natural and spontaneous style. If we look at the letters of various authors of the period — Thackeray, Dickens and Keats, for example — we can see this same characteristic artless style which was still being recommended in the early twentieth century. An extract from a letter of Keats to Benjamin Bailey provides us with a good example:

I am glad to hear you are in a fair way for Easter — you will soon get through your unpleasant reading and then! — but the world is full of troubles and I have not much reason to think myself pesterd with many — I think Jane or Marianne has a better opinion of me than I deserve — for really and truly I do not think my Brothers illness connected with mine — you know more of the real Cause than they do nor have I any chance of being rack'd as you have been — You perhaps at one time thought there was such a thing as Worldly Happiness to be arrived at, at certain periods of time marked out — you have of necessity from your disposition been thus led away — I scarcely remember counting upon any Happiness — I look not for it if it be not in

the present hour — nothing startles me beyond the Moment.<sup>5</sup>

In this letter Keats unfolds his subject by a series of asides, and the many asides are an inseparable part of the artless, unplanned letter. As Bingley says in *Pride and Prejudice*, 'My ideas flow so rapidly I have not time to express them'.<sup>6</sup> This spontaneity, with the writer digressing or going off at tangents, is one aspect of casualness to be observed in the Rowe sisters' letters. Cecily despises the stiff or formal letter, or that which in its descriptions is merely a guide-book.<sup>7</sup>

An inseparable part of this style is the apparently irregular punctuation. But while the punctuation appears irregular to the modern reader it did not to those in the nineteenth century. For then, particularly in letters, punctuation was used with rhetorical rather than syntactical principles in mind. 'Put a comma wherever you would make a trifling pause, were you speaking' is the advice given in the *The Wide World Letter Writer*.<sup>8</sup> John Wilson's counter-advice in his *Treatise on English Punctuation* indicates just how widespread the rhetorical method of punctuation was:

Many persons seem to consider points as being the representatives *only* of rhetorical pauses. . . . Hence not a few writers and authors point their manuscript exactly as they would recite it, in accordance with their power of enunciation, with the quickness or slowness of their perceptions, or with their particular views as to the influence of pauses on the minds of their hearers.<sup>9</sup>

In fact Dickens may be numbered among these 'many persons', as House and Storey found in editing his letters. One of his letters to Thomas Mitton illustrates this well:

Dear Tom. I hardly know what to do — I really have not sufficient decision about me to make up my mind how to act — and (except Barrow who is violently prejudiced) I can speak to no one but you. *My* impression is, — at all risks, and running every hazard, — to back out — I have no objection to tell you.<sup>10</sup>

Theodore Besterman, in editing Voltaire's correspondence, indicated the importance of punctuation as a guide to rhythm as well as to tone. Thackeray, who was described by the editor of his letters, G.N. Ray, as 'the most informal of letter-writers', used his eccentric punctuation to represent his thoughts; in the description of Wallack, the absence of commas heightens the satirical tone of the passage:

The English company begins here on Wednesday; yesterday I was dining at Vefours in company with H. Wallack the beauteous Delhi! — he blazed in pins rings chains all covered with diamonds a white stock a lilac satin waistcoat a blue coat with buttons of brass & velvet collar — a costume worthy of him & Theodore Hooke —<sup>11</sup>

We might say then that punctuation was an important element of style in the nineteenth century. This characteristic of rhetorical usage is present, in my opinion, in the Rowe letters. A quotation from one of Cecily's letters will illustrate the point:

Papa did not like Rome at all — I am sorry, as we do, — so much, but it may be, because he has been ill, ever since he came here — he has quite lost all his gaiety, and lightness of heart, since we left the sea — there is another reason; that he cannot talk much, or understand conversations, and you know he could never be happy, under those circumstances —<sup>12</sup>

Jane's pauses too are those of an animated speaker; she pauses in unusual places to lend emphasis to a word:

we will be satisfied to remain in blissful ignorance of these things, certainly, if burrowing, in the catacombs, has the effect of reducing one to the, abject, personating man which Mr Palmer presents<sup>13</sup>

The commas both before and after 'abject' achieve the effect of heightening her scorn. We become aware that the letters are written not merely to recount but to entertain. Their anecdotes become 'ripping yarns' in a world half way between fiction and fact. It can be seen from both the content of their letters and their punctuation that they are writing stories to be read aloud to the family and visitors according to the nineteenth-century custom. They think of their letters as literary creations, and they write in the style of Dickens, caricaturing the people they meet and drawing on the tradition of comic-satiric travel literature.<sup>14</sup>

The editorial problem then arises: how should the accidentals and orthographical irregularities — in particular, irregular punctuation — be treated in such manuscripts? Modernizing the punctuation alters the style, but reproducing what lies on the page may create real difficulties for the modern reader without necessarily fulfilling authorial intentions. It could be objected that not all pen strokes are intended necessarily to convey meaning. External causes, moreover, such as the nature of the ink and paper, can play a part in determining punctuation.<sup>15</sup> Irregular punctuation can naturally be the result of ignorance. However, if punctuation is also used with rhetorical intent it is unwise to change it. In that casualness is an integral part of the spontaneous and artless style of the familiar letter; to alter it is to misrepresent the spirit of the text. The editors of Thackeray's and Dickens's letters retained original punctuation on these grounds. Ray thought that a modernization of Thackeray's punctuation would falsify the tone and blur the meaning of his letters. House and Storey considered that Dickens had used commas to mark pauses he intended in the reading.<sup>16</sup> Gaskell's argument that to introduce the regularity of modern punctuation is unhistorical is even more pertinent when applied specifically to letters where the tradition of the familiar letter demands casualness.<sup>17</sup> Beyond this there is the argument that by modernizing the punctuation one removes features of the original that are generally expressive of the personality and time of the writer. The letters are important documents for social historians in that they reveal much about the dynamics of Victorian family life. It is important that features which are expressive of personality be preserved.

The rambling style of Jane's prolific prose, her long sentences of clauses

strung loosely together, seem an important part of her youthful impulsiveness, as can be seen in the following example:

But to return to Stoneyhurst, we stayed in a dear little place at Hurst Green it was so homely and pretty, quite like a private house, it was situated in a little garden, there was a young Philosopher staying there they are obliged to leave the College in the vacation now, not a boy is allowed to remain, he was a Spaniard most absurd he used to sit playing a flute all day long rather [?an innocent] way of enjoying ones holidays his name is "Maragola" his sister is at Roehampton with Nell.<sup>18</sup>

In the example below, the prolonged sentence, with its absence of semi-colons and dashes, conveys to us Jane's breathless excitement and characteristic enthusiasm:

Since I posted my last letter to you we have been to a delightful concert, at the Royal Albert Hall, Christine Nilsson's, it was magnificent, I never, enjoyed anything so much in my life, I could have stayed there for days listening to the singing, Nilsson excelled everything I have ever heard, also Titiens & Trebelli Bettini, they sang, "Giorno d'orrore" splendidly, — do you remember we had a photo of Campanini, well he sings splendidly, he sang "La mia Letizia" grandly, he and Nilsson sang a duet from "Il Talismano" and were encored twice, then Nilsson sang "Ah! fors'e lui" and "Sempre Libera", and in that enormous hall which holds eight thousand people her voice sounded as loud as if she were in a small room, it seems to ring, you cannot believe that it comes from a human being, it is so true and strong  
—<sup>19</sup>

Cecily's punctuation stands in contrast to Jane's, though it is equally unusual. She has attempted to create some form of order by the abundant use of dashes to separate her thoughts. She uses them not only for asides but also in place of commas, full stops and paragraphs.<sup>20</sup> We could say that by her over-use of dashes she is affecting the competence she lacks. This is characteristic of her: it is part of her pose as the confident woman.

In editing the Rowe letters, therefore, it was decided that punctuation within sentences would be left except where it was positively misleading. In such situations it was emended and footnoted. However, the choice of an 'old-spelling' text did raise problems, particularly with the treatment of terminal punctuation in Jane's letters.

It seemed that Jane did not know how to use full stops, and coped with her uncertainty in different ways. The first was by forming the initial letter of a sentence or clause ambiguously, so that it could be read as either upper or lower case.<sup>21</sup> Her formation of the letter 'w' is an example of this. The 'w' at Fig.1(a), line 1, 'We go today' and that at lines 5-6 further down, in 'We enjoyed our' are not significantly larger than the initial letters of the words around them: the 'g' of

Feb 26<sup>th</sup>  
Realized. — We go today today  
Elephanta, Kromma is not  
to accompany us. So she  
will not go.

think it would cause great  
commotion. — We enjoyed<sup>5</sup>  
our visit to Elephanta very  
much, we are all carried on.

Figure 1(a) Upper case W or lower case w?

'go', the 'r' of 'realized' (line 1) and the 'e' of 'enjoyed' (line 5). On the other hand, they do appear to be slightly larger than the 'w' of 'water' and 'we' ('we are asked' — Fig.1(b), line 12) and so upper case letters have been used in transcribing. At the same time it should be noted that the 'w' of 'we' in 'while we' (line 11) is larger than that of 'while' (immediately preceding it) and that of 'water' and 'we are asked' (line 12). But since there is no reason at all for using an upper case letter for the 'w' of 'we' in the clause 'while we are dressing' lower case has been used in transcribing. At the same time it should be noted that the 'w' of 'we' in 'while we' (line 11) is larger than that of 'while' (immediately preceding it) and that of 'water' and 'we are asked' (line 12). But since there is no reason at all for using an upper case letter for the 'w' of 'we' in the clause 'while we are dressing' lower case has been used in transcribing. This instance should illustrate the difficulty involved in distinguishing her upper and lower case letters. Her formation of the letter 's' can also be used to illustrate these difficulties. At Fig.2(a), line 11, the 's' in 'she' ('she went into the parlour'), taken in isolation, might appear to be an upper case letter. Yet if one compares it with the 's' in 'shown' and 'she arrived' (lines 6-7), one could only regard it as lower case. Nor is the matter quite as straightforward as that, for a comparison with the two 's' in 'strange to say' (line 8), on the other hand, could confirm our initial impression. The ultimate test here is provided by the size and shape of the 's' in the surname 'Sams' at line 1, an occasion when Jane is certain that the use of upper case is indicated: here the 'S' becomes half as large again as the upper case 'M' of 'Miss' preceding it. Further down, the two 'S' of 'She has written' (Fig.2(b), line 6), and 'She has become' (line 1) have a more distinctive form than the 's' of 'she' (in 'she is charmed', lines 2-3) and are thus suggestive of upper case letters.

The varying sizes of initial letters can be ascribed to uncertainty in some cases, to casualness in others. On one page (Fig.2(a)), we have, allowing for the foot noted error, four different sizes of 's'. However, as we have seen, for the names of people and, in fact, all proper nouns — situations where she was evidently certain that an upper case letter was required — she used an upper case letter that was quite unambiguous.

Since ambiguous lower case letters could be seen to be the result of ignorance an editor might be tempted to emend them to upper case letters. However, the situation is more complicated, for it is difficult to judge where her sentences end. To denote what we might think of as the end of a sentence, Jane employed any one of the following: the full stop (.); the full stop followed by a dash (. —); the dash (—). However, she used these marks also in situations that did not indicate what we would think of as the end of a sentence. For example, the dash might indicate an aside or a pause. The so-called 'full stop' can appear at any stage of a sentence and may signify no more than that she was testing the flow of the ink, or perhaps resting the tip of her pen on the page while she paused to think. Thus, given a dot on the page followed by a lower case letter, one is reluctant to assume that this is the end of a sentence.

now is consequence. Of the tremendous into  
that have taken place between the Mahomedans<sup>3</sup>  
and the Parsees, they are such a tradition<sup>4</sup>  
people, there seems to be millions of them.  
The streets are thronged all day with them.<sup>5</sup>  
The servants at this hotel are all natives  
Pecil and I carriage on open bars with our  
attendant upstairs who is most unwell.  
Like in his conversation, he makes Cecil  
laugh every much by coming in ever so  
many times, while his ~~own~~ dressing and  
putting fresh water in our kadies. We are  
asked every morning if we want a barber  
it is all so foreign to us. I wish sincerely you  
were both with us, it is so funny. Thinking  
that you are doing so still while you are  
constantly knowing. Don't think I shall ever  
become tired of travelling, we like it more  
every day, our anticipations of the pleasure  
we should have are already more than

Figure 1(b) Upper case W or lower case w?



The celebrated Miss Law is  
now staying with Mrs. Pat-  
son. I do not think we told  
you what ~~the~~ <sup>she</sup> she caused  
here one morning after Fred  
died, she arrived, and was  
shown into the drawingroom  
very strange to say Mary came  
in a few minutes afterwards  
but luckily for them both,  
she went into the parlour first

Figure 2(a) Upper case S or lower case s?

~~pleasant~~ She has become, very  
lively and great fun, she is  
charmed to have us, and is  
now looking out for apart-  
ments for us at the Seely  
Hotel. She has written telling  
us to bring some trunks down  
with us ~~from~~ she has gone

Figure 2(b) Upper case S or lower case s?

In the circumstances, there being so many difficulties in determining the writer's intention, it seemed advisable to supply editorial capitals silently in situations which might otherwise lead to confusion on the part of the reader. Other vagaries of orthography, however, were left as in the original since, as we have seen, many of the irregularities were genuinely expressive of her personality. The following rules for transcription were devised for uncertain situations:

(i) The full stop/dash (. —) was retained where there was no doubt that this was what Jane wrote. In cases where there was any doubt, for example other dots about the mark or where the full stop could be a comma, this mark was regularized to a dash.

(ii) In the cases where Jane used a dash and then wrote a word almost on top of it, the dash was omitted. In such situations it was clear that she had changed her mind and, on reconsideration, decided that the dash was unwarranted. Where a full stop or dot preceded such a dash, it too was omitted, except in cases where it seemed advisable to use the full stop and provide editorial capitals to make the text more easily comprehensible. Such capitals were foot noted.

(iii) In cases where the dash was only partially written on and a larger part left protruding, the dash was retained.

(iv) When an apparent dot, dash or comma was judged decorative or involuntary, rather than as an intended punctuation mark, it was not reproduced.

(v) Just as commas before new sentences were altered to full stops, so too a comma followed by a dash before a new sentence was emended to a full stop and foot noted. A comma before a dash was left in cases where it could not be determined whether or not the writer intended to start a new sentence. Examples were where the sentence had an ambiguous upper or lower case letter, or where it started with a proper noun and thus already required an upper case letter. Sometimes common nouns, used with capitals according to nineteenth-century custom, also fell into this category, for example 'Gentlemen'.<sup>22</sup> A comma plus a dash before a lower case letter was retained.

(vi) In cases where it was uncertain whether Jane used an upper or lower case letter after a question mark, an upper case letter was supplied.

In conclusion it might be said that in establishing principles for editing nineteenth-century letters due consideration should be given to the possible causes or reasons for punctuation, which we would judge as 'irregular'. It should be remembered that if there is evidence that punctuation has been used rhetorically this is of overriding importance. The editor should therefore be prepared to tolerate a significant amount of arbitrary, aesthetically displeasing, or even inept punctuation rather than run the risk of eliminating genuinely expressive usages. On the other hand, the needs of the modern reader must be considered at least to the extent that punctuation reproduced is never positively misleading.

Teresa Pagliaro,  
Melbourne.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Teresa Pagliaro, 'An Australian Family Abroad, the Rowe Family Letters, 1873-4, Monash University, 1981.

<sup>2</sup> See Charles Richard Sanders, 'Editing the Carlyle Letters', in John M. Robson (ed.), *Editing Nineteenth Century Texts* (Toronto, 1967), p.89. It should be noted that there is a wider range of meanings in the holograph than can be conveniently reproduced in the typescript. There are various degrees of emphasis which cannot be conveyed: a writer may have generally untidy writing but write a particular word or part of a phrase legibly or unusually neatly as if to indicate its importance; one word may be underlined lightly, another heavily. Writers occasionally choose to emphasise an idea by starting a new line but not a new paragraph or by a subtle spacing of words. In the former instance sometimes the impact is gained by the empty or half-empty space of the preceding line. However, there is no practical way in which these features can be indicated in a modern edition.

<sup>3</sup> For further information on the history of letter-writing, see Walter Raleigh, *On Writing and Writers* (London, 1926). The large number of guides to the art of letter-writing which were published in the 1860s and 1870s might be seen as evidence of the importance with which this art was regarded. See George Seton, *Gossip about Letters and Letter-Writers* (Edinburgh, 1870), p.166. For Raleigh's comments about female letter-writers, see p.62: 'Perhaps it is because they are generally unprofessional and write to please themselves that women are so often the best letter-writers.' George Seton writes: 'If the epistles of the "Lords of Creation" are more precise and succinct than those of the gentler sex, there can be no doubt that they are quite eclipsed by the ladies in respect to graphic description and liveliness of touch . . . the really good letter, which is usually the production of the woman's pen, is a positive sweetener of existence. A man, on the other hand . . . generally makes a very sorry appearance . . . he produces a cold, bald, formal outline, without a vestige of either shade or colour; or if he should be disposed to attempt a more lengthened treatment, the result will probably bear an unpleasant resemblance to an essay, a sermon, or a review!' (pp.5-6).

<sup>4</sup> See R.D. Blackman (ed.), *The Letter-Writer's Vade-Mecum and Dictionary Supplement. A Complete Handbook to the Epistolary Art* (Edinburgh, 1912), p.18.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Harter Fogle (ed.), *John Keats Selected Poetry and Letters* (New York, 1969), p.306.

<sup>6</sup> *Pride and Prejudice* (Harmondsworth, 1972), p.93.

<sup>7</sup> 'An Australian Family Abroad', pp.74, 78, 92 and 145.

<sup>8</sup> *The Wide World Letter Writer* (London, c.1879), p.xvi.

<sup>9</sup> John Wilson, *A Treatise on English Punctuation* (New York, 1871), p.15.

<sup>10</sup> Madeline House and Graham Storey (eds.), *The Letters of Charles Dickens* (Oxford, 1965), vol.1, p.35.

<sup>11</sup> Gordon N. Ray (ed.), *The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray* (Cambridge, Mass., 1946), vol.1, pp.lxxiii and 254; Theodore Besterman, 'Twenty Thousand Voltaire Letters', in D.I.B. Smith (ed.), *Editing Eighteenth-Century Texts* (Toronto, 1968), pp.17-18.

<sup>12</sup> 'An Australian Family Abroad', p.75.

<sup>13</sup> 'An Australian Family Abroad', p.105.

<sup>14</sup> 'An Australian Family Abroad', pp.liv and lxiv-lxxiii.

<sup>15</sup> The quality and type of the ink and paper were not insignificant in their effects on punctuation. Cecily complained about the writing paper, finding that the ink ran too easily on it. The Italian ink she described as 'execrable': it caused blots and untidiness ('An Australian Family Abroad', p.75). Cecily also wrote that she could not find a nib to suit her. Difficulty in controlling the flow of the ink may have been a contributory factor in influencing decisions about punctuation. This can be seen by examining the formation of loops of letters which, from time to time, are filled with a drop of ink, which presumably ran, when the nib was stopped or turned to form the upstroke of the loop. Jane rarely uses a full stop in isolation, and it is possible that her more usual method of punctuation, the full stop followed by a dash, was a nib-clearing device or that the dash was written immediately after the 'dot' to test the flow of the ink. The full stop/dash (. —) was also, of course, a not-uncommon punctuation sign in the nineteenth century, though it was not used generally to the extent that Jane employs it.

<sup>16</sup> Ray, p.lxxiii; House and Storey, p.xxvii.

<sup>17</sup> Philip Gaskell, *From Writer to Reader* (Oxford, 1978), pp.7-8. Gaskell notes that Dickens was inconsistent in his spelling and punctuation, and observes that such irregularity was a normal feature of either Dickens's or the printer's style and bothered no one. Gaskell continues that to regularize is therefore unhistorical.

<sup>18</sup> 'An Australian Family Abroad', p.237.

<sup>19</sup> 'An Australian Family Abroad', p.208.

<sup>20</sup> A typical example of Cecily's use of dashes in place of commas is to be found in 'An Australian Family Abroad', p.4: . . . I suppose it is owing to a combination of evils — packing up — hot weather — flies — and teetotalism —.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Halsband, in 'Editing the Letters of Letter-Writers', *Studies in Bibliography* 11(1958), p.31 quotes Lewis, who wrote on the difficulties of determining when writers intended to use upper case letters. Grigg, in editing Coleridge's letters, found the same problem.

<sup>22</sup> 'An Australian Family Abroad', p.130.

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