RESEARCHING IN CIRCLES: MATERIAL CULTURE, HISTORY AND METHODOLOGY

Leonie Hannan

In this essay, I want to tell a story backwards. First, I will share some examples of my recent work on the eighteenth-century home as a site of knowledge-making and then I will turn to a decade-old project concerned with methodologies for material culture research. I conducted the recent research alone and using primarily textual forms of evidence to uncover material practices and ways of knowing. The earlier project was collaborative and aimed at disrupting traditional, efficient and – often – teleological modes of historical enquiry by prioritising objects (as opposed to texts) and testing non-linear research practices.

The threads of the collaborative project are recognisable in the findings of the solo endeavour. For example, my book exhibits the qualities of material culture research in that it is a compilation of examples that don't really fit clean narratives and which jostle messily together, disrupting ingrained assumptions about where the main action takes place and the identity of its protagonists.[1] Like my own research and writing over these last ten years, this essay will loop back on itself. This is an attempt to show the value of returning to themes and questions and also to show how a material culture lens promotes a generative, non-linear mode.

As a social historian, I am interested in what non-elite people are doing and experiencing in their lives several centuries ago. Traditionally, historians have paid a lot of attention to rich people, important people, royalty and nobility. Historians have also typically looked to the written record to understand the past. We are trained to think through words, through text. Class, race and gender all play their parts in deciding which textual records are saved and carefully archived for the future. Countless documents, written in pen and ink, were cast into the fireplace shortly after they were written. Others were destroyed later to keep the secrets they told or simply because they were considered unimportant, not worth saving. Many people did not leave any kind of written record at all. A couple of centuries ago, many people could not read or write or lived busy working lives that left them little time for such activities. As a cultural historian I work on the way these 'ordinary' people engaged with ideas – whether they were ideas about literature, art or nature. I look inside the walls of the home to investigate the way they engaged with and contributed to popular and intellectual culture. As might be expected, historians primarily categorise themselves temporally and my

1 Leonie Hannan, *A Culture of Curiosity: Science in the eighteenth-century home* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023).

period of study is the 'early modern', more specifically any time between 1660 and 1830. In this sense, my interpretations come from another, rather alien place: a long time ago.

Now, there is something to be said here about the terms we use to describe popular engagement with ideas. I use the word 'intellectual' when discussing the cultural activities of unknown individuals precisely because it is a word usually reserved for the privileged. I do not think that the cultural work of non-elite people should be categorised differently, as something lesser. In many ways my work strives to be an intellectual history from below. In the 1970s, historians started to work on 'history from below' in the sense that they took the perspective of the working man or woman, the so-called 'ordinary' person.[2] They often turned their attention to those who were marginalised by society. However, those historians concerned with questions of culture and knowledge, have stuck longer to the idea that important culture and important knowledge was produced by the top of society, it came from scholarly institutions, great men of letters, *literati* or *savants*. Now, none of this is news to scholars of media and popular culture, or to anthropologists or scholars of cultural studies and many other disciplines besides. In these fields, a focus on the everyday, the ephemeral and the intangible is central. Nonetheless, in speaking across such disciplinary boundaries there is potential for insight and, what follows, is an attempt to use historical examples to unpack questions of mutual interest, including material culture, gender, power and the domestic.

The Significance of Domestic Space

First, why the home? The early modern home was a complex space, through which people, things, materials and knowledge circulated. Mistresses, masters and servants exercised a wide range of technical competencies and material literacies in activities that were necessary, sociable and exploratory in nature. In many ways, when we compare this environment to a modern home – it seems strange. Gone are the technologies that can help reduce the labour of laundry, of cooking or cleaning. Largely absent are the shops that provide ready-made consumable goods. Instead, people made from raw ingredients most of the products of everyday life – from bread to ink. As such, the pre-modern home offers us a space populated with people and things that is driven by material practices and embodied experience, which generates multiple, diverse ways of knowing and understanding the world. The home has changed a great deal in the intervening centuries, but it remains an incredibly important space for the production of culture and social relations.

Thinking of the household as a networked and dynamic space casts a different light on the work of home. Far from being a discrete space set apart from the main action of

2 History from below in an anglophone context was exemplified by the work of historians such as E. P. Thompson and Natalie Zemon Davis. See also Claire Langhamer, '"Who the hell are ordinary people?" Ordinariness as a category of historical analysis', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 28 (2018), pp. 175-95.

cultural life, the home framed people's engagements with other spheres and was a centre of activity in itself. Moreover, the household produced varied kinds of interrelated labour. Much as I am interested in blurring lines between concepts such as intellectual culture and popular culture; blurring the line between work and other kinds of activity also seems fruitful. Domestic work in particular has a bad reputation, it is highly gendered – considered to be women's work (today as well as historically) and it is often thought of as mindless or unskilled. None of these things are entirely true. Of course, the home produces much drudgery, of a narrow and difficult kind. But it also produces other kinds of work, knowledge and creativity too. So, part of what I want to do here is re-imagine domestic labour as something encompassing, porous and generative.

Bread-making, Star-gazing and Silkworm-breeding

One vital domestic commodity that demanded especially careful treatment was the starter or 'barm' used in the leavening of bread. This substance consisted of flour, water, bacteria and yeast. This example reveals the technical expertise of domestic knowledge and I became aware of it through the letters of Church of Ireland Bishop, Edward Synge (1691-1762). On 16 July 1751, he began a letter to his daughter, Alicia, with a detailed re-telling of his servant, Jane's method of creating, maintaining and using barm. He was interested in Jane's technique because, in his own words: 'her Bread is Excellent, and almost constantly so'.[3]

However, Synge struggled to describe in words, rather than showing in person, the instructions he had received. Only a few lines in and Synge broke off: 'For fear of writing wrong or imperfectly I stopp'd here, and sent for Jane. My caution was not amiss'.[4] Synge had the steps in the wrong order.[5] Putting tacit knowledge, learned by doing, onto the page was proving a challenge.

Synge also commented that the 'Best Barm is that which works out of the Vessels of Ale when drink is tunn'd [stored]'. Thus, bread-making made use of another aspect of home production – brewing, revealing the transfer of materials and knowledge from one to another. This note also points to the temporal connection between brewing and baking, the rhythm of brewing providing material for baking and indicates the complex overlapping timeframes for domestic tasks. Preparing and maintaining the barm was an iterative process, 'What she uses one day, she prepares constantly the day before' and it was responsive to the changing needs of the household: 'Her quantity is in proportion to the Bread intended'.[6]

3 Marie-Louise Legg (ed.), *The Synge Letters: Bishop Edward Synge to his daughter Alicia, Roscommon to Dublin 1746-1752* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1996), p. 326. Synge to Daughter, Elphin, 16 Jul. 1751. Winters were spent in the city and away from the Roscommon estate where Jane baked her bread.

4 Legg, *Synge Letters*, pp. 325-6. Synge to Daughter, Elphin, 16 Jul. 1751.

5 Legg, *Synge Letters*, p. 326. Synge to Daughter, Elphin, 16 Jul. 1751.

6 Ibid.

Jane's decision-making was necessarily responsive to a wide range of factors – the demand for her bread, other tasks she had to do, the weather and conditions for fermentation, having the right equipment to hand. The barm harvested from the brewing process was not a uniform product, having 'had another conference with her on the Subject', Synge reported Jane's response: 'Indeed, My Lord, says she, I get Barm sometimes as red as a Fox, sometimes black, full of Hop-leaves, Bog-bane, Wormwood, Artichoak leaves, and a long &c. of other like ingredients.'[7] This list of ingredients offers a glimpse into the diverse material world of home production.

Now, clearly, Jane is making bread, not a cultural artefact. However, I find her example instructive as to our concerns with domestic space as generative, and creative. According to Synge, Jane described her use of barm as a 'doctrine and practice', highlighting both her belief in her own methods and their refinement through repetition. Throughout Synge's re-telling of her method, the challenge of putting the practice into words is ever-present. Moreover, the profoundly asymmetrical power relationship between Synge and his servant emerges, as Synge finds himself both reliant on her expertise and sceptical of her intellectual capacity to really 'know' of what she speaks.

So, through Bishop Synge and servant Jane's engagement with bread-making, we can see the unequal power relations that determine who can be credited with knowing things. We also see experience and authority derived from knowing through doing. Non-human actors make themselves felt in this story too, the yeast, the weather, the utensils.

My next example involves two young men, working as apprentices in Dublin in the mid-eighteenth century who were also keen astronomers: Robert Jackson (1748-93) and Thomas Chandlee (dates unknown). Apprentices were young people in a status of indentured labour while training in a particular trade. Only Jackson's letters survive, and he acted as an informal tutor to his friend Chandlee in matters of star-gazing. Jackson was apprentice to his father, the printer and publisher Isaac Jackson of Meath Street in Dublin and Thomas Chandlee was apprentice to a linen-draper a few streets away.[8] This pair were working hard to establish themselves and they lived in busy households with their master, his family, other apprentices and servants.

The letters reveal their detailed knowledge of astronomy and their ability to make calculations concerning the position of celestial bodies. They also cast light on networks of exchange facilitated by almanacs, magazines and newspapers in this period. Given his trade, Jackson had a particularly detailed grasp of the print market and good access to a wide range of these publications.

At home, Jackson was able to make himself a small study that he referred to as the 'Hygrometer closet' on account of its containing such an instrument.[9] He made resourceful

7 Legg, *Synge Letters*, p. 331. Synge to daughter, Elphin, 23 Jul. 1751.

8 On Isaac and Robert Jackson's careers in printing, see Mary Pollard, *A dictionary of members of the Dublin book trade, 1550–1800* (London: Bibliographical Society, 2000), pp. 311-13; 314-15.

9 See, for example, Friends Historical Library Dublin (FHLD), Fennell, MSS Box 27, folder 1, letters 56 and 75; folder 3, letters 97, 99 and 110; a hygrometer is an instrument used for measuring the amount of humidity and water vapour in the atmosphere, in soil, or in confined spaces, see Mateus, 'Searching', p. 163.

use of domestic space, describing a method for making a meridian line using the shadow cast by a casement window on the floor of a room.[10] Another letter speaks to the chance sightings possible at home, as Jackson sighted Saturn as he was going upstairs on 3 December 1769.[11] On occasion, to gain an improved view of the 'Western side', Jackson leaned out of a 'back Garrett [attic] window', which he described as 'my best Uraniburg' in reference to the sixteenth-century Danish observatory of the same name.[12] One evening, Jackson enquired: 'Hast thou seen lucida lyra peeping late over the houses (not yet to be seen from the street but from a window) towards the N. East?'[13] This example shows that eighteenth-century investigators pushed the spatial and material affordances of their homes to accommodate enquiry.

Two intense years of apprenticeship and astronomy came to a close in 1769, when Jackson's indenture expired and he became a journeyman. This period of regular corresponding casts light on their incredible curiosity and determination. Despite instruments that lacked precision and a heavy daily workload, the depth of engagement was significant – their knowledge was considerable.

The final example builds on these themes of gender, material culture and cultures of knowledge. In the second half of the eighteenth century, an English postmistress embarked on breeding silkworms in her home and reported her findings to a learned society in the hope of a prize. She was not alone in this endeavour, as many women across Britain and Ireland attempted the same. At this time, centres of silk production were predominantly in the far East and also in Italy and France. In a European context, silkworm breeding was often done by women and as an adjunct to other domestic tasks. In London and Dublin there were neighbourhoods renowned for their silk-weaving, but the raw product had to be imported at considerable expense.

As Reverend Samuel Pullein commented to the Dublin Society in 1750, it was thought that: 'many thousand Spinsters of a more curious Nature, without the Expence of Wages' could become the workforce for this new silk manufacture and by doing so 'be of publick Good to their Country'.[14] Williams' letters reported in great detail how she managed her community of silkworms, tested different techniques for breeding and feeding them and observed the effects of her strategies on their production of silk. Here she describes the re-purposing of her domestic possessions to accommodate the silkworms:

> I keep them in a woman's large hat box, feed them every day at Ten o'clock; at Four in the afternoon, and Eleven at night; keeping them very clean. When I clean them I remove them as follows: In a Morning they are always upon the leaves, I take them out gently upon them,

10 FFHLD, Fennell, MSS Box 27, folder 2, letter 52; although in folder 3, letter 99: n.d., Jackson noted: 'But it's likely thou are not possessed of a room convenient to do it in. So I may spare my labour.'

11 FHLD, Fennell, MSS Box 27, folder 1, letter 31: Jackson to Chandlee, 3 Dec 1769.

12 FHLD, Fennell, MSS Box 27, folder 3, letter 85: Jackson to Chandlee, 3 May.

13 Ibid.; 'lucida lyra' most likely refers to 'Vega' – the brightest star in the northern constellation of Lyra.

14 Samuel Pullein, *Some hints intended to promote the culture of silkworms in Ireland* (Dublin, 1750), pp. 12, 15.

> and when the box is cleaned, I lay them in, on the same leaves, with fresh ones over them, (with the dew on, if I can get them) and the fibre side of the leaves up: when they are all on the upper leaves, I remove the old ones; by this method a quantity of silk is saved, for, from the moment they are hatched, they move themselves by a silken web; the silk continually issuing from their mouths.[15]

When the weather turned cold, Williams took special measures to preserve her colony:

> I put the papers with the Eggs, into a pidgeon-hole in a Cabinet, nearly opposite the fire. As soon as the frost set in, I covered the hole with paper several times double, to keep out the night air; the event answered my most sanguine wishes, they came according to expectation.[16]

She was proud of her achievements and boasted:

> They are extremely strong, keep hatching every day, and are uncommonly large. I joke and tell all whom curiosity induces to see my little family, they shall be as big as bulls and cows.[17]

More than once, Williams referred to her colony as 'my little family', she inferred from their behaviours that her silkworms were 'innocent', 'satisfied', that they were in 'pain', she noted when she thought they seemed to 'play' and when they reacted with 'horror'. However, for every anthropomorphic suggestion there were many paragraphs of detailed observation and Williams made clear that she 'observed every minute circumstance', drawing on contemporary ideals of scientific practice to demonstrate rigour.[18] She was no doubt aware of her diminished credibility on the grounds of gender and social status as a working woman and was, therefore, at pains to demonstrate the validity of her observations by emphasising a meticulous approach. Ultimately, her success was rewarded and the society's officials bestowed a prize upon her.

Approaches to understanding a material world

Having explored some specific historical examples, I will reflect on the way interdisciplinary work on material culture has helped me to think differently about material practice in the historical past but also the practices we employ as scholars in the present. I'll do this by

15 *Transactions of the Society, instituted at London, for the encouragement of arts, manufactures, and commerce*:, vol. 2 (1784), pp. 158-9.

16 *Transactions of the Society*, vol. 2 (1784), p. 156.

17 Ibid., p. 170.

18 Lorraine Daston and Elizabeth Lunbeck (eds), *Histories of Scientific Observation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 115.

introducing a project I led with Kate Smith ten years ago. Its insights stay with me, despite the fact that it did not lead to many traditional academic outcomes.

We decided to create a project which incorporated the analytical power of 'close looking' with a ritual of repetition and sustained attention to 'think through things' and we called it '100 Hours'.[19] This title referred to the 10 researchers who spent 10 hours each with a chosen museum object, accumulating collectively 100 hours of looking. The team of ten early career researchers came from many disciplines, including cultural geography, history of science and of art, literature and we also attracted a practising artist and a curator. The chosen objects were a ten-legged stool, dodo bones, a drawing in red chalk, Edison wax-cylinder tubes, a photograph album, a section of a meteorite, plaster models of Floraminifera, an oracular bust, lantern slides and weather map printing plates.

At intervals we came together as a group to discuss how our individual, repeated engagements with an object were going and to learn from senior specialists, again from a range of disciplines. One such session, ran by performance artists, initiated our group of researchers into a ritual – where we paid a given object our attention in an intense way.[20] This process moved people into a strange, playful and even uncomfortable space – but it served an important purpose. We became a bonded group who were incapable of *just looking* at an object and were, instead, bound to a more ritualised approach to object study. In this way, ten individuals collectively clocked up 100 hours of looking, considering and discussing their chosen objects. We aimed to document the researchers' thoughts and findings in real time and provide ourselves with a record of emerging ideas and also a method of tracing connections between individual reflections.

There were many lively outworkings from this first 100 Hours. Each of the researchers took this experience on to new ventures. The outcomes were difficult to capture and encapsulate in a traditional academic form. For years after we finished the project, Kate and I troubled over writing it up, we wrote and re-wrote, it was a slippery subject and we felt inconclusive, unsure even though we knew we had gained a great deal from this work. In the end, what we came to was a reflection on the importance of repetition and return in our engagement with the material world.[21] We wrote from our own positions as historians, but we hoped the ideas would land with other researchers and creative practitioners within the arts, humanities and social sciences. We drew on the work of literary scholars (Michael Riffaterre; Patricia Spacks); art historians (T. J. Clark and Jules Prown) and theorists (Bruno Latour, Graham Harman, Jane Bennett).

We argued that it is necessary for practitioners to do more than simply return to the objects of their study. Through repeated encounters we argued for cultivating a 'critical intimacy' with objects through developing a broad repertoire of methods to enrich and enliven

19 https://ucl100hours.wordpress.com/ [accessed 29.02.24].

20 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6IV5rE-RIgk [accessed 14.03.24] and D. Graham Burnett, Catherine L. Hansen and Justin E. H. Smith (eds), *In Search of the Third Bird: Exemplary essays from the proceedings of ESTAR (SER), 2001-2021* (London: Strange Attractor Press, 2021).

21 Kate Smith and Leonie Hannan, 'Return and Repetition: Methods for material culture studies, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 48:1 (2017), pp. 43-59.

research practice over time. Rather than trying to 'read' objects, we thought that a closeness of observation and understanding could benefit our research. Nevertheless, opening a form of awareness and attention that allows for such encounters to occur remains problematic. Jane Bennett has written eloquently about the importance and challenges of developing 'a perceptual style open to the appearance of thing-power'.[22] In this light, we hoped to promote the benefits of developing knowledge of objects through *repeated* interactions, each of which allowing for a new lens to be actively applied and reflected upon in order that we might attend to the fullness of what is before us. By returning, the researcher has the opportunity to follow directions that, at first, seem obscure or tangential. Or, at least, to proceed with their investigation with enhanced critical insight around the assumptions they had held on first seeing the material in question. As I moved to work on the eighteenth-century home as a site of enquiry, I took these ideas with me. Whilst my research on the home remained very archival, I became attentive to a different repertoire of connection and meaning within that space and to ways of knowing that sit uneasily on the written page.

In the intervening years, methods of Reconstruction, Replication and Re-enactment (known for short as 'RRR') have become much more mainstream within my discipline.[23] Taking features of practice that had been on the margins of historical work (weekend battle re-enactments; makers and collectors) and placing them front and centre, some fields of study have really run with this material-focused approach. The history of science is a good example of this, with the Making and Knowing Project as a key example.[24]

It is possible that in our age of increasingly transformative digital technologies, virtual reality and AI that some part of us hankers for a return to the tactile and embodied. In a period of built-in obsolescence in many of our everyday consumable goods – we perhaps crave the ability to mend things once more. Post-pandemic, many remain affected by the prescriptions and prohibitions of that time. The Material Turn is now many years old, and yet it seems to be still with us and maybe there is something instructive in that. So, in summary, this essay aims to persuade its reader of the value of attending to the material in the very many different ways it is possible to do so and to use these methods collectively to test out new ideas and ways of working together. All of this is much easier to say than it is to do. Many of us work in hectic environments that prioritise expediency over exploration. In straining against those currents and some of the dogmas of our different research cultures, perhaps we can realise multiple modes of resistance and attention.

22 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A political ecology of things* (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 5.

23 Sven Dupré, Anna Harris, Julia Kursell, Patricia Lulof, Maartje Stols-Wilcox (eds), *Reconstruction, Replication and Re-enactment in the Humanities and Social Sciences* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020).

24 https://www.makingandknowing.org/ [accessed 29.02.24].