

Complete Letter-Writers, Migration and the Macmurdo Papers

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This paper will use the unpublished and unexamined letters of George Macmurdo and his family, deposited in the National Library of Scotland, to shed light on the choice and structure of model letters in Complete Letter Writers, and to situate these epistolary manuals in relation to a transatlantic usership and transatlantic migration patterns. Secondly, the paper will use Complete Letter Writers to "read" Macmurdo's family correspondence. The claim is not that Macmurdo and his male and female relations in Virginia imitated the letters in Complete Letter Writers (though they would have been taught letter-writing in ways consonant with such manuals), but that reading the family's transatlantic correspondence together with Complete Letter Writers, which were in vogue on both sides of the Atlantic during the same period, helps us better understand such issues as:

- i) what Complete Letter Writers meant by "the familiar letter" and why this differs from what 20th century critics assumed the "familiar letter" to be, based on their reading of epistolary novels and of correspondence between literati.
- ii) why the fictional correspondents in Complete Letter Writers included members of all ranks from the highest to the lowest, and what this suggests about how rank worked transatlantically, in contradiction to the stratified marxist model.
- iii) how the "exceptionalist" view of American history (even in Bailyn) obscures migration patterns by equating migration with emigration.
- iv) how even private correspondence was "coded" and cannot simply be read as an historical "document."