

Virtual Mobility in the Mid-twentieth Century

*The Role of Pen Pal Correspondence*¹

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Abstract

The ability to learn about other places and cultures through a wide range of media is an important feature of the internet age, but the role of virtual mobility in the past is a largely neglected topic. In this paper I argue that mid-twentieth century pen pal correspondence provided a window on the wider world that would otherwise have been unavailable, and that virtual mobility should be seen as an integral part of the history of migration and mobility. I use a set of pen pal letters written between 1946 and 2012 to assess what each correspondent learned from their letters and how this form of virtual mobility might have expanded their world views.

Introducing virtual mobility

The term virtual mobility is most frequently found in relation to the use of distance learning in education, where students can study a course without attending the institution that is delivering the teaching.² However, it can also be applied more widely where the use of internet-based communications may provide an alternative to physical

1 Many thanks to the families of Jean Bruce and Betty Charnley for giving me access to this material and for permitting me to use and reproduce it for research purposes.

2 Ilse Op de Beeck and Wim Van Petegem, 'Virtual mobility. An alternative or complement to physical mobility?', *ERACON 2011 & 2012 Dual Year Proceedings* (2013) 151-160; Mariet Vriens, Wim Van Petegem, Ilse Op de Beeck and Mart Achten, 'Virtual mobility as an alternative or complement to physical mobility,' *EDULEARN10 Proceedings* (2010) 6695-6702.

mobility,³ with potential implications for social exclusion and a lack of activity outside the home.⁴ Potentially, the impacts of internet-based virtual mobility also have much wider implications as it can provide access to information about distant places that might either encourage or inhibit travel, and in some instances it could instigate residential migration to a location that had only been viewed remotely.⁵ Modern social media also provide access to a wide range of personal contacts which can have both positive and negative impacts,⁶ but which may also provide further access to information about distant places that cause overtourism in locations that are trending.⁷ Although virtual mobility is usually seen as a consequence of the internet age, there were also opportunities for virtual mobility in past societies. In this paper I explore how mid-twentieth-century pen pal correspondence acted as a form of virtual mobility for the different correspondents and consider the implications of such mobility for their global travel. Certainly, the speed of communications was much slower than today, and for most people the opportunities for global travel were more limited, but I argue that pen pal correspondence in the past offered opportunities for virtual mobility that were essentially similar to those experienced today.

The scope of migration history has expanded considerably in recent decades with the incorporation of a diverse suite of studies using a wide variety of different techniques and data sources. Much of this work has been stimulated by innovative research generated in the Netherlands, particularly in Leiden and Amsterdam under the leadership of Marlou

3 Kathrin Konrad and Dirk Wittowsky, 'Virtual mobility and travel behavior of young people. Connections of two dimensions of mobility', *Research in Transportation Economics* 68 (2017) 11-17.

4 Susan Kenyon, Glenn Lyons and Jackie Rafferty, 'Transport and social exclusion. Investigating the possibility of promoting inclusion through virtual mobility', *Journal of Transport Geography* 10 (2002) 207-219; Bertil Vilhelmson and Eva Thulin, 'Virtual mobility, time use and the place of the home', *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 99 (2008) 602-618.

5 Rianne Dekker, Godfried Engbersen and Marije Faber, 'The use of online media in migration networks', *Population, Space and Place* 22 (2016) 539-551; Ar Hidayat Kenichiro Onitsuka, Corinthias Sianipar, Mrittika Basu and Satoshi Hoshino, 'To migrate or not to migrate. Internet use and migration intention among rural youth in developing countries (case of Malang, Indonesia)', *Digital Geography and Society* 4 (2023) 100052; Aiden Tabor and Taciano Milfont, 'We are all in the same boat. How online communities facilitate the process of migration', *New Zealand Journal of Psychology* 42 (2013) 31-35.

6 Elda Tartari, 'Benefits and risks of children and adolescents using social media', *European Scientific Journal* 11 (2015) 321-322; Dana Reid and Paul Weigle, 'Social media use among adolescents. Benefits and risks', *Adolescent Psychiatry* 4 (2014) 73-80.

7 Hochan Jang and Minkyung Park, 'Social media, media and urban transformation in the context of overtourism', *International Journal of Tourism Cities* 6 (2020) 233-260; Ulrike Gretzel, 'The role of social media in creating and addressing overtourism', *Overtourism: Issues, Realities and Solutions* 1 (2019) 62-75.

Schrover and Leo Lucassen.⁸ Although international migration and the experiences of such migrants within different state regimes remains central,⁹ migration history has expanded to include much more research on internal migration,¹⁰ short-distance residential moves, and everyday mobilities.¹¹ In doing so, it has led to much more interaction with related fields, especially in mobility studies, transport studies, and global history.¹² However, virtual mobility in the past has rarely been studied, and this paper aims to explore this theme and provide a starting point for further study.

Pen pal correspondence

Letter writing in some form has obviously taken place ever since written script evolved,¹³ but correspondence between pen friends became more formalized from the mid-twentieth century. The term pen pal

8 See for example: Marlou Schrover, 'Migration histories', in: Peter Scholten (ed.) *Introduction to migration studies* (New York 2022) 25-48; Marlou Schrover and Deirdre Molony, *Gender, migration and categorization. Making distinctions between migrants in western countries, 1945-2010* (Amsterdam 2013); Marlou Schrover, 'Dutch migration history. Looking back and moving forward', *TSEG – The Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* 11:2 (2014) 199-218; Jan Lucassen and Leo Lucassen, 'The mobility transition revisited, 1500-1900. What the case of Europe can offer to global history', *Journal of Global History* 4 (2009) 347-377; Leo Lucassen, *The immigrant threat. The integration of old and new migrants in western Europe since 1850* (Champaign (IL) 2005); Jan Lucassen, Leo Lucassen and Patrick Manning, 'Migration history. Multidisciplinary approaches', in: Jan Lucassen, Leo Lucassen and Patrick Manning (eds), *Migration history in world history* (Leiden 2010) 1-35.

9 Saskia Bonjour and Marlou Schrover, 'Public debate and policy-making on family migration in the Netherlands, 1960-1995', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 41 (2015) 1475-1494; Marlou Schrover and Willem Schinkel (eds), *The language of inclusion and exclusion in immigration and integration* (New York 2014).

10 Jan Kok, Kees Mandemakers and Bastian Mönkediek, 'Flight from the land? Migration flows of the rural population of the Netherlands, 1850-1940', *Espace Populations Sociétés* 2014:1 (2014); Jan Kok, 'Choices and constraints in the migration of families. The central Netherlands, 1850-1940', *The History of the Family* 9 (2004) 137-158; Colin Pooley and Jean Turnbull, *Migration and mobility in Britain since the eighteenth century* (London 1998).

11 Colin Pooley, Jean Turnbull and Mags Adams, *A mobile century? Changes in everyday mobility in Britain in the twentieth century* (London 2005); Colin Pooley and Marilyn Pooley, *Everyday mobilities in nineteenth- and twentieth-century British diaries* (New York 2022).

12 Colin Divall, 'Transport history, the usable past and the future of mobility 1', in: Margaret Grieco and John Urry (eds), *Mobilities. New perspectives on transport and society* (London 2016) 305-319. Colin Divall, 'Mobilities and transport history', in: Peter Adey et al. (eds), *The Routledge handbook of mobilities* (London 2014) 36-44; Colin Pooley, *Mobility, migration and transport. Historical perspectives* (London 2017); Adam McKeown, 'Global migration, 1846-1940', *Journal of World History* 15 (2004) 155-189; Lucassen, Lucassen and Manning, *Migration history*.

13 Stephen Houston (ed.), *The first writing. Script invention as history and process* (Cambridge 2004).

first appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1931, and in 1936 a teacher in the USA founded the Student Letter Exchange with the purpose of connecting school students in different countries with the aim of extending their knowledge of the cultures and customs of other nations. The organization provided a framework for putting budding letter writers in contact with others in the network, with the web of communications rapidly growing as writers passed on details of other participants. International Pen Pal Day is celebrated by participants on June 1, and today the Student Letter Exchange (based in Wantagh, New York) claims to be linking over 500,000 students in 100 countries around the world.¹⁴ Despite the growth of social media and rapid internet-based communications, letter writing to pen friends is still promoted quite widely, with several contemporary additions to the organizations that link potential pen pals.¹⁵

There is very little historical literature on pen pal correspondence and its social and cultural significance. There is a substantial contemporary literature on the value of pen pal letter writing for school children,¹⁶ but such work rarely engages directly with the history of the genre. Where it does, the emphasis is usually either on the ways in which written pen pal correspondence could be seen either as a precursor of global internet-based communications,¹⁷ or as a project to connect two specific groups of young people.¹⁸ Such correspondence rarely continued into adulthood. Some research on personal advertisements

14 Student Letter Exchange (2010), <https://www.pen-pal.com/> (accessed 27 August 2024). For further information on the history of pen pal correspondence see: Pen Pal Community (2022), <https://blog.penpal.me/what-is-a-pen-pal-from-then-to-now/> (accessed 27 August 2024); West Des Moines Historical Society (2001) How the pen pal came to be – the underrated June 1st holiday, Pen Pal Day (wdmhs.org) (accessed 27 August 2024).

15 See for instance: Pen Pals Now (2024), <https://www.penpalsnow.com/index.html> (accessed 27 August 2024); Pen Pal (ND), PenPal – Find Pen Pals Worldwide (accessed 27 August 2024).

16 For instance: Hibajene Shandomo, 'Getting to know you. Cross-cultural pen pals expand children's world view', *Childhood Education* 85 (2009) 154-159; Woon Lie and Melor Yunus, 'Pen pals are now in your fingertips – A global collaboration online project to develop writing skills', *Creative Education* 9 (2018) 2491-2504.

17 Katie Good, 'From pen pals to ePals. Mediated intercultural exchange in a historical perspective', in: Margaret D'Silva and Ahmet Atay (eds), *Intercultural communication, identity, and social movements in the digital age* (New York 2019) 9-28.

18 Emily Katz, 'Pen pals, pilgrims, and pioneers. Reform youth and Israel, 1948-1967', *American Jewish History* 95 (2009) 249-276; Joan Rankin, 'Connecting literacy learners. A pen pal project', *The Reading Teacher* 46 (1992) 204-214; Katherine Harmston, Carol Strong and Deborah Evans, 'Writing to South Africa. International pen-pal correspondence for students with language-learning disabilities', *Teaching Exceptional Children* 33 (2001) 46-51.

and dating practices also refers to pen pal correspondents.¹⁹ Pen pal contacts and other forms of letter writing have also been used by scholars to examine the nature of the dialogue and the use of creativity in such writing.²⁰ Most letter sets consist of a one-way correspondence, but a rare example of a series of two-way correspondence charting courtship over a long distance between Italy and Canada has been analyzed by Sonia Cancian in the context of migration between Europe and North America.²¹ There is also a large body of literature on migrant letters, designed to tell relatives of the migrant's experience in a new country and, in some cases, encouraging others to follow.²² The reasons why a young person sought a pen friend are both individual and related to broader cultural trends. Most often the initial stimulus came in school, with a teacher encouraging pen pal correspondence to improve writing skills and extend knowledge of the world. However, this practice may also be located within a broader concept of mid-twentieth century internationalism which was especially significant after the devastation of the First World War.²³ It has also been suggested that letter writing could be used as an antidote for loneliness.²⁴

This paper is based on an unusually long set of correspondence which began in 1946 when both writers were aged 18, and which continued until one died in 2013. The letters I have were written by Jean Bruce (born 1928) who lived all her life in Toronto. Her pen friend was Betty Charnley (also born in 1928) who lived all her life in north Lancashire, England. I do not have the letters that Betty wrote to Jean,

19 Ilari Taskinen, 'Personal advertising and dating culture in World War II Finland', *The History of the Family* 29 (2023) 482-505; Michael Lynn and Rosemary Bolig, 'Personal advertisements. Sources of data about relationships', *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 2 (1985) 377-383.

20 Janet Maybin, 'Intimate strangers. Dialogue and creativity in penfriend correspondence', in: Joan Swann, Rob Pope and Ronald Carter (eds), *Creativity in language and literature. The state of the art* (Basingstoke 2011) 129-140; Barbara Caine, 'Taking up the pen. Women and the writing of friendship', in: Barbara Caine (ed.), *Friendship* (London 2014) 231-238; Nigel Hall and David Barton (eds), *Letter writing as a social practice* (Amsterdam 2000).

21 Sonia Cancian (ed.), *With your words in my hands. The letters of Antonietta Petris and Loris Palma* (Montreal 2021).

22 Bruce Elliott, David Gerber and Susan Sinke (eds), *Letters across borders. The epistolary practices of international migrants* (New York 2006); Marcel Borges and Sonia Cancian, 'Reconsidering the migrant letter. From the experience of migrants to the language of migrants', *The History of the Family* 21 (2016) 281-290; Marcel Borges and Sonia Cancian (eds), *Migrant letters. Emotional language, mobile identities, and writing practices in historical perspective* (Abingdon and New York 2018).

23 Mark Mazower, 'An international civilization? Empire, internationalism and the crisis of the mid-twentieth century', *International Affairs* 82 (2006) 553-566.

24 Georgina Binnie, 'Loneliness and the letter. Co-developing cross-generational letter writing with higher education students and older people', *Research for All* 3 (2019) 59-73.



*Illustration 1 Jean Bruce, Toronto, February 1947
(Personal archive – reproduced with permission of Jean Bruce's family).*



*Illustration 2 Betty Charnley, North Lancashire, 1948
(Personal archive – reproduced with permission of Betty Charnley's family).*

but I do have a very detailed set of diaries which Betty Charnley kept throughout her life, and which provide a record of her daily activities. I do not know if the two young ladies made contact through the student letter exchange, but they may well have done so as it was advertised in Toronto newspapers of the time. Neither women had siblings, and neither married nor had children themselves, but their educations and the contexts in which they lived their lives were very different. Jean Bruce remained in education until she was eighteen and had a good job as a secretary/personal assistant in the newsroom at the Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC). Betty Charnley left school before her fourteenth birthday, worked initially on the family farm, and then had a series of relatively low-skilled jobs. Whereas Jean Bruce had access to all the facilities of a large city in Toronto and travelled widely for holidays, Betty Charnley lived first on a remote upland farm, then in a village in north Lancashire, and she rarely travelled more than about 30 miles (48km) from her home. Both young women initially lived with their parents, and then lived alone after their parents had died. Betty Charnley was not the only pen friend whom Jean Bruce wrote to, and

in this paper I use the letters to examine the extent of Jean Bruce's pen pal contacts, as well as to speculate on how this correspondence contributed to the virtual mobility of both Jean and Betty.

It is hard to know exactly how many people Jean Bruce was writing to at any one time because correspondents seemed to come and go. Between 1946 and 1952 she mentioned 43 different pen pals spread across some 30 countries (table 1), but she rarely seemed to have more than 30 active pen friends at any one time. These contacts created a complex network of correspondence to both male and female friends from all over the world, which I suggest can be seen as an early version of the internet-based social media networks that exist today, and which could provide access to information about distant countries and cultures without leaving home. This network could also grow organically as the names of contacts were passed from person to person as Jean Bruce explained in one letter to Betty Charnley: "Well, I'm not satisfied with meeting my own pen pals; – now I'm starting on my pen pals' pen pals."²⁵ Betty had a smaller number of pen friends, but at the end of her diary for 1948 she listed 13 different people to whom she was writing regularly.²⁶ However, by 1947 Jean was clearly beginning to feel that the number of friends she wrote to was getting out of hand, and by 1952 she was only writing regularly to 6 or 7 friends. This number then seemed to remain stable for a considerable period. The process of acquiring and then reducing pen pal contacts can be illustrated by a selection of quotes from the letters:

I have been gathering letters from new pen pals almost every day. On Saturday one came from Kenya, Africa from someone named xxx. He or she wants to correspond with me. Then today I received one from a girl in the U.S.A., and another girl in Australia. I don't know where this is going to end. How many pen pals have you?²⁷

I have about 13 or 14 pen pals, Betty, but only about 6 or 7 ever write regularly. One girl I only hear from once a year.²⁸

Just to keep the record straight, besides you and xxx I also write to a man in Germany; a girl in Australia; a girl in Kenya, Africa; and a girl in the Cayman Islands, West Indies, whom I think I have mentioned.²⁹

25 Letter from Jean Bruce to Betty Charnley, 13 August 1949. (Private collection).

26 Diary of Betty Charnley, 1948 (Private collection).

27 Letter, 15 October 1947.

28 *Ibid.*, 10 September 1952.

29 *Ibid.*, 26 February 1963.

Table 1 Jean Bruce's existing and new pen pals, 1946-1952

| |
|---|
| 1946: England; Scotland; Italy; Hawaii; USA; Canada; New Zealand; France; Newfoundland; South Africa; Southern Rhodesia; Palestine; Trinidad; Malta; Ghana; South Africa. |
| 1947: Holland; Transvaal; Nigeria; Brazil; Kenya; USA; Australia; India; Barbados; Ireland; Malaysia; Hawaii; USA; Australia. |
| 1949: England; USA; Japan; Germany; Egypt; Japan; Germany; Venezuela. |
| 1950: England; Japan. |
| 1951: Belgium; Cayman Islands. |
| 1952: Dominica. |

Source: Letters from Jean Bruce to Betty Charnley.

The table lists the locations of all the pen pals listed in Jean's first letter to Betty in 1946, and then all those new pen pals whom she mentioned in her letters. Jean was not necessarily writing to all these pen pals at the same time. Locations are given exactly as Jean recorded them.

What was said and what was learned

One reason for travel is to meet new people and to discover different places and cultures. To what extent did the virtual mobility provided through mid-twentieth-century pen pal correspondence allow this to happen? In this section I examine what was said in the letters, and how this may have enlarged and enriched the lives of the correspondents. I argue that although both women gained from their pen pal correspondence, Betty Charnley probably gained more because – rarely traveling beyond her local rural area– she had limited education and lived a much more restricted life than did Jean Bruce, but both Jean and Betty gained knowledge well beyond anything they would have encountered in their home environments. The contents of the letters seem to have been quite comprehensive and unfiltered, and although their very different backgrounds and experiences might have implied a degree of social inequality, with Jean Bruce clearly much more privileged than Betty Charnley, there is little evidence of any uneasiness

between them. Jean travelled to Britain on several occasions, and when they met they clearly got on well and became firm friends.

Much of the correspondence was mundane, focusing on the weather, work, and everyday activities. However, even these exchanges could have extended Betty's view of the world, given that she had almost no experience of big city living. For instance, Jean's comments on the size of the city, the volume of traffic, the abundance of theaters and cinemas, some of the modern transport technology in Toronto, and Canadian wildlife would all have greatly extended Betty's view of the world and, in some cases, puzzled or surprised her. The following extracts from Jean's letters illustrate these points.

At the time we moved to Scarboro 18 years ago, it was very sparsely populated. Then just after we came, a great surge of people came from the city out of the suburbs in the post-war boom. Now all the farms for miles around have been bought up and turned into housing sub-divisions and you can imagine the influx of cars. The latest trend is for apartment living and both in the city and the suburbs massive apartment towers are rising everywhere. Everyone who lives in an apartment has at least one car, often two, and each building that rises can add 100 or 150 cars to the flow of traffic heading into and out of the city each day.³⁰

It's a lot easier to go to shows when you live in the city, where there's one around every corner (slight exaggeration). There are about 100 shows in Toronto.³¹

When I mentioned in my last letter about our new subway, I did not mean a motorway. This is the sort of thing they have in London, which I believe they call a 'tube' – an underground railway line which carries people to the heart of the city. We have had a north-south route for five or six years, but the east-west one opened in February and has made travelling downtown much faster.³²

You asked me about racoons, so I've managed to find a picture to send you. It didn't occur to me that you wouldn't have the same animals there that we have, but I'll try to tell you a little about them.³³

30 Ibid., 6 January 1966.

31 Ibid., 31 October 1946.

32 Ibid., 6 May 1966.

33 Ibid., 12 September 1961.

Most letters from Jean Bruce to Betty Charnley also included updates on the lives of other pen friends that Jean wrote to so that Betty would gain insights into the worlds of people about whom she knew little and would never meet. For many pen pals she revealed little detail, just noting that she had received a letter, but for some others – possibly with more interesting lives – she passed on considerably more information. For instance, Jean had a female pen friend whom Betty also wrote to briefly. From the context she must have lived in East Germany (she does not give the precise location), and Jean comments on the travel restrictions that she faced in 1951, some 10 years before the erection of the Berlin wall:

Do you still write to xxx in Germany? You haven't mentioned anything about it recently. I suppose you will know, though, that she was married on April 28, and that her name is now Mrs. xxx. She said her husband wanted to spend their honeymoon in Paris, but couldn't get permission to leave the country even for that short period of time. It seems a shame, but people in an occupied country certainly aren't allowed to go where they please or do as they please.³⁴

Jean Bruce frequently listed the different letters she received and, in doing so, would have passed on to Betty snippets of information about world geography that might also have been new to Betty:

A few weeks ago I received a letter from a girl in Dominica. I didn't even have any idea where Dominica was, but after looking it up I found it was an island in the British West Indies. She received my name from a boy in Trinidad that I used to write to. I also received a card from a girl I used to correspond with in British Honduras. She had stopped writing suddenly and I thought she no longer wanted to write. However, it seems she had lost my address and that is why I hadn't heard from her. She is now living in Miami, Florida.³⁵

One of Jean Bruce's most long-standing pen friends was a young lady of about the same age who lived in the Cayman Islands. Her lifestyle and environment could hardly have been more different than that of Jean in Toronto and would have seemed equally strange to Betty in north Lancashire. The island Jean's pen pal lived on had almost

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 29 May 1951.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 27 December 1952.

no medical facilities, with residents having to go to Jamaica for any significant treatment. Also, there was little work for men with most males (including the husband of Jean's correspondent) having to work as a merchant seaman, which necessitated being away from home for long periods and only docking in Jamaica when there was shore leave. Despite these differences the two young women appeared to form a strong friendship, exchanging personal details of their lives, which were duly passed on to Betty (and possibly to other pen friends). Jean met her Caymanian friend once when she visited Jamaica, and this encounter obviously helped to cement the friendship. The following extracts are typical of the information that was exchanged and passed on to Betty Charnley.

Also, the girl I write to who lives in the Cayman Islands is expecting her third child in Feb. She's been quite sick each time and it also worries her that there is no doctor where she lives. The nearest doctor is on another island and it is quite a journey to get to him. When she had her last baby she went to Jamaica for several months so she could be under a doctor's care, and stayed there till after the baby was born. I had a letter from her the other day and a friend of her family had just died in childbirth, so no doubt this is preying on xxx's mind too. I am hoping everything will be all right for her.³⁶

In her last letter she said they were all excited about getting electricity throughout their island, and also that a Canadian doctor was planning to build a small hospital for them. Since they have no doctor, this would be wonderful for them.³⁷

I had a letter last week which said they were all feeling better, but she expected to be in Jamaica till July. Apparently the Jamaicans, who are very black, hate them because they are a lighter brown and call them 'red'. (All this makes no sense to me, but then none of this racial trouble ever does).³⁸

In addition to passing on information about the lives of her pen friends, Jean Bruce also told Betty Charnley about her holidays. Whereas when Betty had time off work she mostly had days out locally visiting friends and relations, Jean and a friend from Toronto travelled quite widely in the Americas, the Caribbean, and Europe. In this way Betty would have gained insights into countries which she never visited and about which

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 27 December 1955.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 2 July 1956.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 15 March 1970.

she probably knew little. One of Jean's favorite holiday destinations was Bermuda, an island she visited many times. Below, she provides Betty with an account of her first visit in 1955.

You see, I was away for 2 weeks, from March 13-27, and everything got behind at the time. xxx and I had a marvellous vacation in Bermuda, a place we have always wanted to visit. I don't know how much you know about this British colony, but it is a collection of over a hundred islands whose combined area is only about 20 square miles. So you can see what a small place it is. Also, it is 700 miles from any land. After our cold winter weather here, you can imagine how wonderful it was to be able to roam around in Summer clothes and go in bathing almost every day. We are very tanned now – you should see us. Bermuda is certainly a pretty place, with its graceful palms, its lovely flowers and pink sandy beaches. All the houses are colourful too – they're made of limestone and painted pastel colours, pink, coral, blue, green, yellow. We were enchanted by the place. The guest house where we stayed had about 35-40 people there, all of whom were friendly. All in all, Betty, it was a relaxing, restful holiday.³⁹

In 1962 Jean and her friend spent their vacation in Mexico, and travelled quite widely with a guide, usually in a car with a small group of other tourists. Jean's account of parts of the holiday painted a rather different picture compared with Bermuda, and she was clearly surprised by the poverty compared to her own lifestyle in Toronto. On one occasion, while travelling on a winding mountain road, the car they were travelling in broke down, and the passengers were required to get a passing local bus to their next destination while the driver waited for assistance to come. Jean was initially shocked by the appearance of her fellow bus passengers, but quickly appreciated that they were friendly, helpful, and courteous. The two extracts below illustrate these points.

As you might expect, much of the country we passed through was barren-looking, and the people were working like slaves with almost no farming equipment, to grow food. The land was very dry because there had been no rain for months and it was almost time for the rainy season to begin. In some areas, the soil was completely covered with rocks, and the people had built their houses and fences of rock, but still hadn't made any impression on the number of them.⁴⁰

39 Ibid., 4 April 1955.

40 Ibid., 4 May 1962.

It was 45 minutes before a bus came, and it was crowded with Mexican farmers – very rough-looking men who looked like bandits I'd seen in movies. Somehow the six of us and our luggage (a lot of it) were put aboard, and immediately the Mexicans began jumping up and giving us seats – even the men.* [added at bottom of page (CP): *I don't mean "even the men" kept jumping up, I mean they gave seats even to the men in our group]. They wouldn't hear of us standing. xxx had told the driver where we wanted to go, since none of us could speak Spanish. Well, it was an old, decrepit bus, and we had a very rattly, bumpy ride, but by this time we'd entered into the spirit of the thing and were enjoying the whole situation.⁴¹

Conclusions

Pen pal correspondence has been rarely studied but, as the series of letters examined here demonstrate, they can reveal much about the social connections and information exchanges that took place in the mid-twentieth century. First, the letters that Jean Bruce wrote to Betty Charnley reveal a wide network of connections that spanned the globe. Within this network, information was freely exchanged and details of pen friends passed between correspondents. There are echoes here of at least some of the ways in which modern social media operates. Second, the information gained and exchanged could expose the correspondents to worlds very different from their own. Jean and Betty had very different life situations, yet exchanged their news and personal lives freely, while other pen friends that Jean had could provide insights into lives even more different from those of Jean and Betty. I argue that through these contacts and exchanges both Jean and Betty engaged in a form of virtual mobility. They could learn about distant lands without leaving their homes.

While both young women gained information from these exchanges, I argue that Betty probably learned rather more than did her Canadian pen friend. Jean Bruce was well educated, worked in an environment where she was exposed to news and current affairs, and knew people who travelled widely. In contrast, Betty Charnley lived in a much more restricted social and spatial world. She had a close network of friends and relatives living nearby in rural north Lancashire, and in the mid-twentieth century she rarely travelled far from home. It was only after

⁴¹ Ibid.

she retired from work and cheap European package holidays became widely available, that she first experienced air travel on a couriered holiday to the Mediterranean. Betty not only learned much from Jean's metropolitan life and her holiday travels, but she was also relayed information about the lives of at least some of Jean's other pen friends. In contrast, Jean Bruce seemed to have a good knowledge of British life and culture, to the extent that on one occasion when Jean was in the UK for a holiday and they agreed to meet in London, Jean knew far more about London than did Betty, who was nervously visiting for the first time.

There is little evidence that the pen pal exchanges, in addition to the news of other places that both women were exposed to via their virtual mobility, had any significant impact on their own physical travel. Betty remained rooted in her home territory and according to evidence in her diary never considered visiting Canada to meet Jean. While Jean did travel to meet some pen friends, including Betty, it was always done as part of a planned vacation rather than a special trip, and Jean's holidays seemed to be determined by information she had gained from brochures and from 'travelogue' talks that she often attended in Toronto. Their virtual mobility appeared to have very little influence on their physical mobility which, in both cases, remained quite constant throughout their lives. It is hard to assess the extent to which pen pal correspondence affected other aspects of the writer's lives. The lack of immediacy in letter writing, in contrast to modern internet communications, meant that there could be long gaps between letters, during which they may have given each other little thought. There is little evidence that the correspondence influenced the friend's lives in any significant way, both continued with their usual routines of work, home, and leisure activities with local friends. Even so, the process of writing and the friendship that developed clearly did enrich their lives and provided an added dimension to their everyday activities.

About the author

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