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What's in a name? The revealing use of noms de plume in women's correspondence to daily newspapers in Edwardian Scotland

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What's in a name? The revealing use of noms de plume in women's correspondence to daily newspapers in Edwardian Scotland

In August 1912, a female correspondent calling herself 'Fair Play' wrote to the *Aberdeen Free Press* to remonstrate at the militant methods used by the Women's Social and Political Union (the WSPU). She explained that she had chosen to use a pen name rather than reveal her identity for fear of retribution from local suffragettes:

I should prefer to sign my own name to this letter, but having done so some years ago in a letter to a London paper, in which I pointed out the un-reason of their violent conduct, I received such vulgarly abusive postcards from some of the suffragette 'patriots' and 'martyrs' that in these days of hatchet-throwing and petrol-burning I simply dare not do so.¹

Helen Tollie, a local WSPU member from Ballater, wrote immediately in response;

Dear lady – Fear not our hatchets or implements of war. They will not be directed against you. You are not important enough. If you were, they would find their way to you without your help.²

Despite her earlier, unpleasant experience, the correspondent who called herself 'Fair Play' had not given up writing letters to newspapers; instead she elected to hide her identity from the newspapers' readership. However, she did not hide her sex. Indeed, she felt that she spoke for all women when she assured her readers 'We women have felt deeply the disgrace that this violent and prolonged attack of hysteria, largely stimulated by the disease of self-advertisement - a disease very difficult to get cured from - has brought upon our sex.'³

During the 19th century, women authors frequently used pseudonyms in order to achieve publication. Many of the pseudonyms used suggested a male author, such as Charlotte Brontë's Currer Bell, Marian Evans' George Eliot or Elizabeth Gaskell's Cotton Mather Mills. In direct contrast, as Elaine Showalter explains in her book on gender and culture at the fin de siècle, New Woman writers might choose to use a self-consciously feminist pen name, such as Sarah Grand.⁴

This article considers the use of pen names by a group of women who were just beginning to bravely venture into print in local newspapers during the early years of the

20th century. It asks whether their use of noms de plume was purely to conceal their identities or their sex from their readership or whether such pen names were used for other purposes, for example to construct a civic identity. Such an identity, it is argued, was then used to justify the writers' intrusion into the public sphere of newspaper correspondence and debate. It also considers how women's use of pen names changed over time, and the different factors that impacted on a woman's choice of nomenclature in her public correspondence to the newspapers.

The study investigates the choice of pen names made by women letter-writers to two daily newspapers in Scotland between 1900 and 1918. While the use of pen names was frequent in the first part of the period, it died away almost completely during the early years of the First World War, only to recur after 1916. It is thus also suggested that a distinction can be made between reactive and proactive letters to the newspapers – the latter requiring the correspondent's identity to be made public while writers of letters reacting to other letters or editorial might feel more secure behind the cover of a nom de plume.

The two daily newspapers chosen for this research were the *Aberdeen Daily Journal* and the *Aberdeen Free Press*. The *Journal*, established in 1748 by James Chalmers, printer, is one of the oldest newspapers in Europe and until the middle of the 19th century it dominated the newspaper market in Aberdeen and the surrounding north-east of Scotland. Its monopoly, however, was challenged in 1853 by the appearance of the *Aberdeen Free Press*. Matching the *Journal* closely in price, size and content, the *Free Press* enjoyed substantial leaps in circulation in the second half of the 19th century. In 1865 it began to be published twice a week and in 1872 went daily, as increasing civic activity suggested that Aberdeen was now a large enough city to support a daily newspaper. The *Free Press* also reflected an important change in the political loyalties of the North-East of Scotland, which had become a bastion of Liberalism from the mid-1860s, and was much more radical in its editorial than the *Journal*. Worried by the success of a Liberal daily newspaper, a Tory-led consortium - the North of Scotland Newspaper and Printing Company Ltd - bought out the Chalmer brothers, great-grandsons of the *Journal* founder, and the newspaper began daily publication from the summer of 1876. A half-century of

direct rivalry followed, with both newspapers expanding from four to eight pages and launching evening papers, the *Evening Express* and the *Evening Gazette*, in the early 1880s. During the early years of the twentieth century the *Journal* came under the editorship of three men: David Pressly (1894–1903), Robert Anderson (1903–1910) and William Maxwell (1910–1927), all of whom were concerned with establishing the conservative *Journal* as the pre-eminent newspaper in north-east Scotland, in particular in the face of strong competition from the more liberal *Free Press*. The later editor, William Maxwell, was an especially strong Unionist, who aimed at converting the fundamentally liberal North-East to Unionism.⁵ He also desired to make the *Journal* the national Scottish newspaper, and so entered into competition with the *Scotsman* and the *Glasgow Herald*. This desire to develop a provincial newspaper into a national newspaper meant more coverage of national news (both Scottish and British). Throughout this time, the *Free Press* remained a staunch supporter of the Liberal cause, despite the decline of this party's popularity during and after the War. During the First World War the two newspapers were forced to co-operate over issues such as the limitation of paper sizes, mutual reporting aid and advertising charges. After such co-operation, and with the newspapers now covering the same news, selling to the same area, in the same numbers, and both in need of money, a merger was proposed. In 1922 the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* was born, and continues to dominate the local news scene in Aberdeenshire to this day.⁶

One of the reasons these two newspapers were selected for this study was because they show so little evidence of editorial gatekeeping or censorship, even in the later wartime period. It seems that women could expect their letters to be published in the newspaper provided that they at least revealed their name and address to the editor. The editors of the two newspapers, like many other newspapers of the time, operated under a policy of full publication of all letters submitted to them, as long as the letters were accompanied by a name and address, although writers could choose to be published under a pen name.⁷ Women correspondents to the two newspapers therefore faced few editorial barriers to publication, even when they wished to write on topics contrary to the editorial viewpoint of the newspaper. Thus suffragettes campaigning for women's suffrage could explain their militant policies in letters to the anti-suffragist *Journal* without the fear of editorial

editorial comment attached to the end of their letter. For example, on 30 July 1912, Helen Tollie had a letter printed on the subject of 'Suffragettes and Equality'. The editor followed this with a postscript stating: 'That women can never be similar to men is obvious, and when Suffragettes, or women generally, try to compete with men on their own ground they are not only unequal, but, as a rule, they become mere imitations of third-rate men – The Editor' (the Unionist William Maxwell).

The study analysed all letters signed with a female name or nom de plume printed in the letters to the editor column in either newspaper. For the purposes of this research it was decided to identify as female any correspondent giving her full name, using a female nom de plume or identifying herself as a woman in her letter. Many pen names used in the correspondence columns of the newspapers were gender-specific, for example, 'A Working Man'; 'Dorcas' or – very popular – 'A Mother'. Others, such as 'Suffra Jet' or 'Member of the WSPU', also implied a female correspondent (men were not allowed to be members of the Women's Social and Political Union). It has to be accepted that some female correspondents were not counted using these criteria. It was impossible to discern the gender of pen names such as 'A Reader' or 'Annoyed of Crathes'. However, the overall research was focused on analysis of the letters of women who chose to identify themselves as female in their correspondence with the press. Since a correspondent using such a non-gender-specific name obviously did not want to be identified as a woman – and was presumed by subsequent correspondents to be male – this did not affect the overall findings.

Women correspondents to the *Journal* and *Free Press*, therefore, did not have to conceal their sex in order to be published, and hence there was frequent use of sex-specific pen names. Of course, it is impossible to tell how many of the male or non-sex-specific pen names given in the letters belonged to women correspondents. The assumption by other correspondents was usually that the users of pen names which were not specifically female were male. It could cause extreme surprise, if not horror, when a male correspondent found himself in dispute with a woman. In June 1917 'Mearns Farmer' and 'Hopeful' exchanged several letters in the *Aberdeen Free Press* on the subject of the lot

of the farm servant. In her third letter, 'Hopeful' revealed that she was a schoolmistress rather than the 'school teacher' she had previously used. 'Mearns Farmer' immediately stopped the dispute because 'Hopeful's sudden metamorphosis into a lady has somewhat staggered me. In her first letter she led us to understand that she was a 'master' not a 'mistress.'⁸ He did not seem to realise that she might have intentionally hidden her gender in order to avoid precisely this reaction.

Occasionally the subject of the letter might lead some readers to suspect that the author was female. For example, when 'Live and Let Live' wrote to the *Journal* in September 1912 to deplore the violence of the attacks made on women suffragists who tried to disrupt Lloyd George's speech in the Chancellor's home town in Wales, they were assumed to be women by a Welsh reader living in Aberdeenshire. Mr E. Cornwall-Jones declared that, as women, they were illustrating 'their nobler courage by hiding under a pen-name, and heroically using the dirk in the dark to stab at the reputation of a sister nation'⁹. 'Live and Let Live' responded the next day to insist that they were 'mere men', although supporters of the suffrage movement and to explain why they had chosen to use pen names:

Your correspondent indulges in a harmless jibe at our anonymity. It was our modesty, not our cowardice, that restrained us from flaunting our names and addresses in the public press... arguments are important, not our personality.¹⁰

So if female correspondents did not need to pretend to be men in order to be published in the newspapers, why bother to use a pen name at all? Was the cause, as 'Live and Let Live' claimed, an excess of modesty?

An increasing use of pen names

Overall, 1,709 letters from women correspondents were identified and transcribed by this research. The incidence of all noms de plume in the two newspapers in comparison to the incidence of all letters from women correspondents is shown in Figure 1.1 below. In all, 584 women correspondents chose to use nom de plumes on publication in the *Free Press* and 623 in the *Daily Journal*.

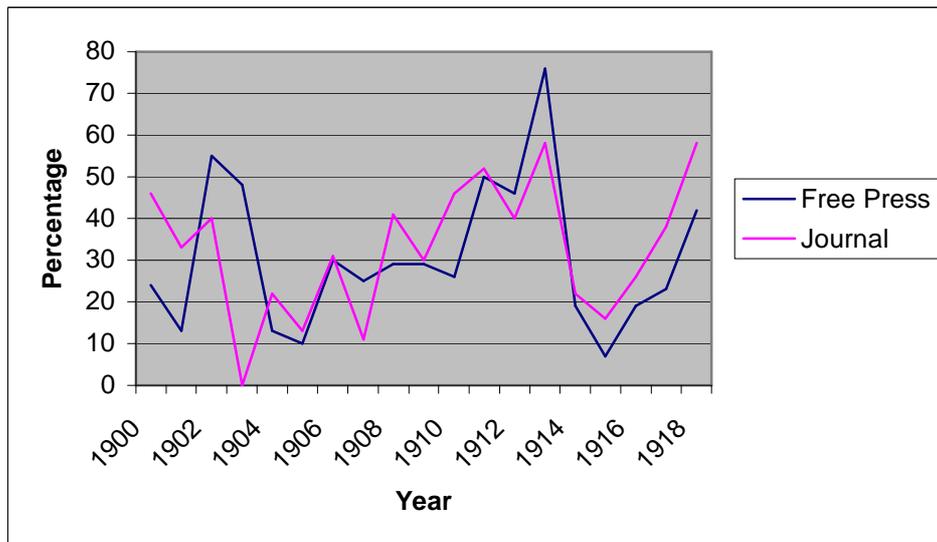


Figure 1.1: Incidence of noms de plume as a proportion of all letters from women correspondents printed in Aberdeen daily newspapers 1900–1918

As can be seen, while the incidence of women’s use of pen names in both newspapers dropped considerably between 1904 and 1906, after this period women’s use of pen names in correspondence with the editor increased steadily until a peak just before the beginning of the First World War. The early war years were characterised by a very limited use of noms de plume, which began to grow again from 1916. The explanations for these phenomena can be found in two different factors that impacted heavily on the correspondence columns of both newspapers during this period: the agitation for women’s suffrage and the outbreak of war, followed by a growing dissatisfaction with the war effort and general war weariness from 1916 onwards. With the arrival of militant suffragism from 1905 onwards, there was an increase in the discussion of women’s suffrage issues in the correspondence columns of both newspapers, and an increasing use of noms de plume to cover the identities of the women involved in such discussions. This was particularly apparent during visits to Aberdeen of the leaders of both the WSPU and the other militant society, the Women’s Freedom League (WFL), for example in 1907 during a hotly contested by-election.¹¹

An analysis of all the letters from women in the two newspapers discussing the issue of woman suffrage between 1900 and 1918 shows a definite unwillingness of women to identify themselves in the press on this subject. Almost half of the 216 letters from

women on the subject in the *Free Press* were signed with a nom de plume, and a quarter of those in the *Journal*. In addition, the highest incidence of female pen names in the *Free Press* occurred during 1912 and 1913, when the militant campaign of the Women's Social and Political Union was at its most violent. Most of the women who *were* happy to identify themselves as suffragists in the press were either members of the committees of the various suffrage societies, or wrote from outside Aberdeen. Aberdonian women who were supporters of the suffrage movement, in particular those from the more militant end, were happier writing in support of the WSPU's actions while concealing their own identity. Thus we have the use of the pen name 'Member WSPU, Aberdeen' 44 times between 1907 and 1918 in the *Free Press*. It is not possible to distinguish whether more than one correspondent used this pen name but the fact that it appeared 44 times during this period demonstrates that even the most fervent local supporter of the militants was happier to preserve her anonymity in the Aberdeen newspapers.

As the letter from 'Fairplay' demonstrates, it was not only the supporters of woman suffrage who were anxious about revealing their identities in correspondence with local newspapers – and a fear of retribution if the identity of the correspondent became known was not necessarily imaginary. Another anti-suffragist explained:

The policeman who passes peaceably along my street wouldn't like to be scratched, and I should not like my window smashed. So ... I sink my personality beneath a safe anonymity, and subscribe myself Madame X.¹²

Correspondents on topics other than the vote might also be nervous about possible repercussions if they allowed their identities to become known. Such nervous correspondents range from 'Two Schoolgirls', who wrote to the *Free Press* in December 1903 to protest at the overworking of schoolgirls with home lessons, to 'Old Servant' who complained about her mistress's habit of buying the cheapest salted butter for her household staff to eat and keeping everything locked up, including the sugar bowl.¹³ A fear of even more violent retribution might be the reason for the choice of anonymity for the two users of the pen name 'Working-man's Wife' who wrote letters to the *Journal* in 1911 in reference to the sentencing of a man who beat his wife to death after a drinking bout. The judge accepted a plea of culpable homicide and sentenced the husband to ten

years. The *Journal's* criticism of this sentence was echoed by two letters from working-men's wives, who were concerned that such leniency might encourage other men, including their own:

After reading the report of the trial of Cumming, I thought how we working men's wives are unprotected in Aberdeenshire compared with other places in Scotland. If we have the misfortune to be married to a passionate, cruel and callous husband, and he wishes to put us out of his way in as brutal a manner as Cumming, he knows a few years is all he will get here. I trust someone with more learning will take up this matter. We get any amount of law, but where does the justice come in?¹⁴

This desire for someone else, better qualified, to take up the writer's case was very common in letters signed with female pen names. 'A Mistress for 45 Years' hoped 'some more able pen will take up the defence of considerate and conscientious mistresses' regarding a discussion of domestic servants' grievances in the *Free Press* in May 1912.¹⁵ 'Shop Girl' hoped 'some others will help in the matter' when she wrote to the *Journal* about tram fares and 'A Worried Mother' trusted 'someone in authority will take this matter in hand' regarding the price of milk during the war.¹⁶ It is as though these women did not consider themselves adequate to do anything about the situation apart from bringing it to the attention of the public through the medium of the newspapers. They believed that, having done so – albeit anonymously – they had done all that they were able to do and trusted that raising the problem in such a public way would suffice to get the matter resolved.

Familial pen names

An analysis of the female pen names used shows that the most popular pseudonyms in both newspapers throughout the period studied were those which identified the writer as either a wife or mother. 31 women identified themselves as someone's wife in the *Journal*, from the popular 'Farmer's Wife' (used 11 times) to wives of soldiers, officers, ministers, scavengers and working men. The *Free Press* only published 11 letters from women describing themselves as a wife, but published 29 letters from mothers, in comparison to the *Journal's* 20. Again, many of the mothers distinguished themselves through the men in their family – 'A Mother of Soldiers', 'A Gordon Prisoner's Mother',

'Lad's Mother'. Women might also describe the type of wife or mother they were, such as 'Indignant Mother' or 'A Homely, Shrewd Mother'. There were also 17 letters to the *Journal* and 4 to the *Free Press* where women used other familial relations as their pen names – 'Farmer's Daughter', 'A Soldier's Sister', 'A Farmer's Niece'. There were no pen names used where the writer identified herself with a female member of her family. Women used their relationships with a male member of their family, usually their husband or son, to justify their letter to the newspapers. They were writing, not on their own behalf, but as a wife or – perhaps more powerfully – a mother. This relationship justified their intervention in public affairs, whether it was to complain about the conduct of the war or local government, or the price of milk or the opening hours of the local school, both frequent subjects for women who identified themselves as mothers. Women correspondents might even use their status as a wife or mother as a justification for their letter when it was not necessary, when they might be justified in writing on their own behalf. A woman describing herself as a ratepayer wrote to the *Free Press* in August 1905 to complain about the condition of the road and pavement in Elmbank Terrace, where she lived. As both a resident and a ratepayer she had justification in her complaints about the state of the road, and her letter did not mention a family at all, yet she signed herself 'Vexed Mother'.¹⁷

Such usage of their maternal identity by women correspondents echoed Edwardian society's concerns with the quality of contemporary mothering. Linked to concerns about the health of the Imperial nation, and the new subjects of eugenics and social Darwinism, women were urged to strive to become better mothers. With rates of infant mortality still causing concern, the finger of blame was pointed directly at mothers, in particular working-class mothers, who, it was claimed, did not have enough education to realise the importance of hygiene and good food for the welfare of their children. While fertility rates amongst middle-class families at least were in decline – with a direct link to better mortality rates in these families and therefore less of a need to have large families in the expectation that some children would die – this did not mean that women's maternal duties were lightened. On the contrary, this period saw an increasing emphasis on the role of the mother, which became an ever more hallowed institution, in particular in middle-class homes. Shani D'Cruze points out that the new study of eugenics meant that

justifications for the separation of the private sphere could be based on scientific and medical arguments and that by the beginning of the 20th century the ideal of motherhood had been reinforced strongly, channelling women's energies into ever higher standards of domestic management, housework and childcare.¹⁸ Hence the use of the pen name of 'mother' by women correspondents chimed in with a national concern about the maternal skills of its women. Such correspondents used a role seen as highly appropriate for a woman - and placed firmly in the private, domestic, sphere - in order to justify their entrance into the public sphere of newspaper debate without provoking a hostile reaction from its usual inhabitants.

In direct comparison to the growing use of pen names during the early part of the century, the early war years were characterised by a very limited use, and the incidence of pen names did not begin to grow again until late 1916. For example, between the outbreak of war in August 1914 and the end of that first year, 44 women gave full details of their name and some indication of an address in the *Daily Journal*, compared to 8 who chose not to. That is, 85% of female correspondents clearly identified themselves in their letters to the more conservative daily newspaper. In comparison, of the 21 women letter-writers to the *Journal* in 1914 before the outbreak of war, only 13 chose to identify themselves, or 62%. Again, before the outbreak of war in August, 62% of women letter-writers to the *Free Press* fully identified themselves (8 out of 13), while after the outbreak of war this figure rose to 84% (49 out of 58).

Of course, there was a purely practical explanation behind the need for identification in the earlier years of the war. Whereas the majority of letters published before the war were *reactive*, commenting on other letters in the newspapers or other parts of the editorial, and therefore it was not necessary for the women writers to reveal their identities if they did not want to, most of the letters published in the newspapers during the first years of the war were *proactive*. Writers asking for donations, whether of money, time or the ubiquitous socks, needed to give their names and addresses so that people would know where to send their contributions. In the last years of the war, however, letters grew less proactive as war work settled into an established routine. Instead, there was a growing number of letters commenting on or complaining about the organisation of some aspect

of the war. Many of these letter-writers chose to hide behind noms de plume. For example, in 1918 the *Free Press* received letters from 'Countrywoman' regarding the arrangement of war-time cookery demonstrations; 'Housewife' on the short opening hours of butchers' shops; 'Country Lass' and 'Munitionette' defending dances in wartime; 'A Mother' complaining about the treatment of prisoners of war in Germany and 'Gamekeeper's Wife' on the low wartime wages paid to estate workers.¹⁹

Again, a rising number of women correspondents chose pen names which emphasised their status as mothers, wives or daughters. Their letters tend to be critical, of the war effort, the government or individual groups in society that were not adequately 'doing their bit', and such pen names gave their users legitimate grounds for entering into the dispute. The women were not criticising war policy as individuals but using their God-given roles of mothers and wives to question and dispute. 'A Mother' was the most popular pen name in use during the war years. Between August 1914 and November 1918, the *Free Press* published letters from five correspondents signing themselves 'A Mother', plus nine variants such as 'A Patriotic Mother', 'A Worried Mother', and 'One Who Has Given Each of Her Sons'. In addition, the *Daily Journal* published letters from 12 mother-derived pen names including 'Widowed Mother of An Only Son Lying Ill in France', 'A Prisoner's Mother', and 'An Indignant Mother'. The 'patriotic mother' was a well-known and admired image in British and American iconography during the war, and women who did not wish to reveal their identity to the newspapers' readers used their motherhood as a useful role. Their motherhood bestowed on them the right to question or complain about some aspect of the army or government's policies which affected themselves or their sons. It legitimised their concerns and gave them a status without which they may not have had the courage to write to the newspapers.

For example, in December 1915 'A Patriotic Mother' attacked the government for allowing soldiers access to alcohol in their camps:

Since the outbreak of the war, mothers have sent their sons from sheltered homes to fight for freedom and righteousness.... But there is another side. The temptation of drink is never absent from the men. What can we do but cry aloud of this iniquity. If the mothers do not, methinks the blood of their slain sons will cry from the ground and witness against their leaders. I trust more skilful

pens than mine will come to the help of those lads who are preparing for the fight.²⁰

Later in the war, mothers attacked the government again for its policy of allowing 'maison tolerees' (officially recognised and patrolled brothels) for the men at the front. The patriotic mother, who was sacrificing her sons for the greater good, was a role which enabled women to question official policy throughout the war without being accused of unpatriotism or mischief-making.

Slightly less popular as a pen name, but still an important role which women were happy to utilise in their letters to the press was that of 'Soldier's Wife'. The image of the soldier's wife was in the main a positive one, and could again legitimise a woman's complaints, for example over army pay or housing.

There seems to be a considerable divergence of opinion among the wives of soldiers over the question of whether a prisoner of war will receive when the war is over, the amount of pay, in bulk, he would have received had he gone through the whole of the campaign on active service. Perhaps your readers will be able to answer this question, as some of the wives of soldiers are building up hopes on this.²¹

Of course, some pen names might be used to add to the impact of the letter. 'A Turning Worm' or 'Widowed Mother of Only Son Lying Ill in France' makes the point more effectively than the publication of the correspondent's true name. In a similar way, women who wished to register their support for the cause of woman suffrage might also choose a nom de plume which repeated their demands: 'Votes for Women', 'Justice for Women', 'Equality' or 'Suffer Yet'.

Occupational pen names

Pen names can also give some indication of the occupations of correspondents, and are particularly useful in helping to identify working-class correspondents. 27 letters to the *Journal* and 28 to the *Free Press* were signed with an occupation-related pen name. These tended to be working class in origin – 'A Servant Girl', 'An Aggrieved Domestic', 'Shop Girl', 'A Servant Lassie' – although pen names such as 'A Nurse' and 'A Teacher' also suggest more middle-class women. In comparison to the letters of mothers and

wives, whose topic might not always be directly related to their families, letters signed with an occupational pen name were usually concerned with some aspect of the writer's occupation. Servant girls wrote in complaint about their mistress; shop girls about the length of their hours; teachers about their school boards; and everyone wrote complaining about their pay. It can not be seen as surprising that the writers of such complaints sought to hide their identity from their employers. Of course, a pen name such as 'Farmer's Wife' or 'Farmer's Daughter' was also an indication of a woman's occupation since wives and daughters were expected to work on the family farm, and the 16 *Journal* and 10 *Free Press* letters signed by a variation on the name 'Housewife' can also be counted as occupation-related, including the pointed 'One in Women's Sphere, the Home'.

Occasionally, other correspondents challenged the writer's choice of an occupational pen name. 'Jubilee Nurse' wrote several times to the *Free Press* during late 1903 to criticise plans in Buchan to raise enough money to support a Jubilee Nurse in the area. The Jubilee nursing scheme had been started in 1887 to commemorate Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. Jubilee nurses, supported by local fundraising, undertook the nursing of those too poor to hire a private nurse; they were the forerunner of the district nurse. 'Jubilee Nurse' was surprised that it had taken so long for the rich parishes of Buchan to decide to raise a fund to support a nurse, and prophesised that one would simply not be enough to cover such a large geographical area with a population of over 11,000.

It appears to me that the first step these would-be philanthropists should take is to promote an Act of Parliament to increase the speed limit of motor cars, for apart from doing any nursing the poor nurse will have to spend the £90 in paying fines for furious driving in running through the district she is expected to 'nurse'. A more ridiculous, idiotic and insane proposal we have seldom seen mooted.²²

Her contempt for these 'do-gooders' and the 'incompetent medical aid which obtains in many of the rural districts' was freely expressed in this first letter, and resulted in a letter published a few days later from Miss Wade, the Superintendent of the Scottish Branch of the Jubilee Institute of Nurses, disassociating the Institute from such views. Miss Wade stated that she

should be sorry to think any Queen's Nurse would write such a letter, and, moreover, the letter displays so much ignorance of our

work and methods that I am bound to believe the signature an assumed one – very wrongly so, as it may lead to much misconception. No well-trained and loyal nurse would criticise the medical men in a letter to a public paper.²³

Despite this rebuke, ‘Jubilee Nurse’ wrote another letter criticising both the scheme and Miss Wade’s understanding of the role of the nurse, claiming that all nurses criticised doctors the minute their backs were turned. In response to this, the Honorary Secretary of the Aberdeen District Nursing Association, Katharine Lumsden, wrote on 7 December: ‘to request that the author of these letters will in future use another pseudonym than the honoured title belonging to the Queen’s Nurses.’²⁴ ‘Jubilee Nurse’ responded that she was not ‘enamoured with the high-sounding title of ‘Jubilee Nurse’, and to please Miss Wade and Miss Lumsden I had serious thoughts of discarding it’, however she signed this, her last letter on the subject, with the same pen name and continued to criticise the proposed scheme.²⁵

Miss Wade and Miss Lumsden had serious doubts that this correspondent was what she claimed to be because of the disrespectful tone of her letters. The credentials of another correspondent to speak for her occupation were questioned a few years later in March 1906. ‘Ex-shop Lassie’ wrote to the *Free Press* to plead for support for the Early Closing Act. Her letter brought forth a response from Mr W. B. Henderson, Secretary of the Anti-Closing Committee, to which she replied the next day:

I know not who W. B. Henderson, Secretary, Anti-Closing Committee is, but I hardly think he can be a gentleman – and even shop-keepers can be that – else he would not have insinuated that the letter showed ‘traces of a firmer hand than shop lassies are wont to write’.²⁶

She reiterated that she was indeed an ex-shop lassie and had ‘thought out, composed and written’ her letter ‘without the aid or suggestion of any other person’.

Conclusions

While women authors in the 19th century might feel it necessary to use male-sounding pseudonyms to achieve initial publication of their novels and poetry, the women correspondents to Aberdeen newspapers did not have to use male pen names in the same

way. With no visible barrier to the publication of the letters in the *Free Press* and *Journal*, they did not have to assume a male identity. However, at least 30% of women correspondents every year chose to utilise a pen name in their correspondence with the editor. While it might be supposed that, as women became more used to entering the public sphere of newspaper debate they would feel less need to hide their identities behind a pen name, in fact women's use of noms de plume increased from 1900 until the outbreak of the First World War. For some, this choice of anonymity was made from fear of retribution, whether from an employer, teacher or husband, if their identity was revealed. Others might not have wished to reveal their support for the suffragists, and in particular the militant WSPU. For a few, there was a real fear that their views would leave them open to verbal or even physical assault.

However, while these women might choose to hide their identity, they did not feel the need to hide their sex, and indeed often chose pen names that proclaimed it, such as wife or mother. One section of women correspondents used familial pen names to justify their discussion of certain issues; extending their domestic sphere to incorporate newspaper debate on household and familial subjects. Their roles as wives and mothers were given as the justification for their rightful concern in these areas and used to create a civic identity for the correspondent.

The use of noms de plume decreased dramatically at the outbreak of war. The vast majority of letters from women in the first two years of the war were appeals for donations of money, comforts or aid for the many charities and voluntary services which were set up during this time. Obviously such correspondents needed their full names and addresses to be published. It was only in the last years of the war that the use of the pen name re-emerged, as women began to criticise publicly the conduct of the war and related organisations. Again, many of the pen names used at this time emphasised the correspondent's familial, domestic connections – 'Soldier's Mother' or 'Soldier's Wife' – which once again justified their criticisms of authority. In particular, the image of the patriotic mother, who willingly sacrificed her sons for the good of the nation, was implicit in many of the noms de plume chosen, for example 'One Who Has Given Each of Her Sons'. Such familial pen names – in particular that of 'A Mother' – were used to

justify women's correspondence on a variety of controversial subjects and to add value to their letter, making the signature part of the message.

¹ 'Fairplay', Letters to the Editor, **Aberdeen Free Press**, 12 August 1912.

² Helen Tollie, Letters to the Editor, **Aberdeen Free Press**, 14 August 1912.

³ 'Fairplay', Letters to the Editor, **Aberdeen Free Press**, 12 August 1912.

⁴ Elaine Showalter, **Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle** (London: Bloomsbury, 1991), 62.

⁵ For more details on the newspaper and its editors at this time, see Fraser, George and Peters, Ken, *The Northern Lights*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1978, pp. 46–71.

⁶ For more on the history of the newspapers, see George Fraser and Ken Peters, **The Northern Lights** (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1978) and Norman Harper, **First Daily: A 250-Year Celebration of the Press and Journal** (Aberdeen: Aberdeen Journals, 1997). For more on the early history of the *Free Press* and William Alexander, see William Donaldson, **Popular Literature in Victorian Scotland** (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1986).

⁷ For more on the lack of editorial gatekeeping in the two newspapers, see Sarah Pedersen, 'Within their sphere? Women correspondents to Aberdeen daily newspapers 1900-1914', **Northern Scotland**, 22 (July 2002), 159-166.

⁸ 'Mearns Farmer', Letters to the Editor, **Aberdeen Free Press**, 15 June 1917.

⁹ E. Cornwall-Jones, Letters to the Editor, **Aberdeen Daily Journal**, 25 September 1912.

¹⁰ 'Live and Let Live', Letters to the Editor, **Aberdeen Daily Journal**, 26 September 1912.

¹¹ For further discussion of newspaper coverage of this by-election, see Sarah Pedersen, 'Women's Politics in the Correspondence Pages of Aberdeen Newspapers 1900-14', **Women's History Review**, 11(4), (2002), 657-674 and Lindy Moore, 'The Woman's Suffrage Campaign in the 1907 Aberdeen by-election'. **Northern Scotland**, 5(2), (1983), 155–178.

¹² 'Madame X', Letters to the Editor, **Aberdeen Daily Journal**, 29 September 1909.

¹³ 'Two Schoolgirls', Letters to the Editor, **Aberdeen Free Press**, 16 December 1900; 'Old Servant', Letters to the Editor, **Aberdeen Daily Journal**, 1 March 1902.

¹⁴ 'Working-Man's Wife', Letters to the Editor, **Aberdeen Daily Journal**, 19 January 1911.

¹⁵ 'A Mistress for 45 Years', Letters to the Editor, **Aberdeen Free Press**, 11 May 1912.

¹⁶ 'Shop Girl', Letters to the Editor, **Aberdeen Daily Journal**, 6 October 1910; 'A Worried Mother', Letters to the Editor, **Aberdeen Free Press**, 10 January 1916.

¹⁷ 'Vexed Mother', Letters to the Editor, **Aberdeen Free Press**, 23 August 1905.

¹⁸ Shani D'Cruze, 'Women and the Family' in June Purvis, ed, **Women's History in Britain, 1850–1945, An Introduction** (London: UCL Press, 1995) 73.

¹⁹ 'Letters to the Editor', *Aberdeen Free Press*, 16 January 1918; 21 February 1918; 1 April 1918; 16 April 1918; 29 April, 1918; 1 June 1918; 20 September 1918.

²⁰ 'A Patriotic Mother', 'Letters to the Editor', **Aberdeen Free Press**, 25 December 1915.

²¹ 'Soldier's Wife', 'Letters to the Editor', **Aberdeen Daily Journal**, 27 January 1915.

²² 'Jubilee Nurse', Letters to the Editor, **Aberdeen Free Press**, 23 November 1903.

²³ Miss J. Wade, Letters to the Editor, **Aberdeen Free Press**, 3 December 1903.

²⁴ Katharine Lumsden, Letters to the Editor, **Aberdeen Free Press**, 7 December 1903.

²⁵ 'Jubilee Nurse', Letters to the Editor, **Aberdeen Free Press**, 10 December 1903.

²⁶ 'Ex-shop Lassie', Letters to the Editor, **Aberdeen Free Press**, 29 March 1906.