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Writing of the Body: Penella Lenigan and Other 19th Century Female Diarists

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This paper will focus on the use of personal diaries by 19th century women to create a private space in which to discuss those feelings and opinions relating to gender, sexuality and the body normally prohibited to them in the public sphere. It will use the diary (1843-1862) of Penella Lenigan as a case study. Lenigan was the daughter of a Catholic landowner and Protestant mother, both members of their religion's social elite; she is 12-32 during the diary's span. The paper focuses on four principal areas: Attitudes to servants, tenants, and the "native"/Catholic Irish, in particular women, and how this is (unconsciously) expressed in terms relating to sexuality (e.g. disgust); The construction (or erasure) of the female diarist's own sexual identity; and, by extension, how the physical act of diary writing relates to female sexuality; Descriptions of typical Victorian entertainments, many of which feature displays of strange/"other" bodies, such as Tom Thumb, or the micro cephalic children exhibited as "living Aztec children"; Lenigan's detailed account of her mother's slow recovery from a burns accident (an extraordinary and rare case history), where attitudes to the body are foregrounded and revised. Also in this section will be discussed the Victorian fashion for spa towns, and how health was one area where "body" discourse was in some way permitted to women.

Darragh O'Donoghue is a project archivist cataloguing the Adelaide Hospital archives for the Trinity College Dublin Manuscripts & Archives Research Library. Before this he worked as an archivist for the Allen Library & Raidio Teilifis Eireann. He has delivered conference or seminar papers on cinema, archives and/or feminism in TCD, University College Cork & University of Wales, Aberystwyth; has written on sound archives for ?ARC?, the magazine of the Society of Archivists; and writes regularly on cinema for the online journal 'Senses of cinema'. He is completing a Masters dissertation on the diary of Penella Lenigan.