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The Curious Problem of Mr Heath; or, An Unfortunate Accretion of Erroneous Assumptions

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An attempt to correct a long-standing error in the records of Brian O'Nolan's correspondence with his agents in London.

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Replying to a correspondence of Thursday 22 September 1938 from his agents, A.M. Heath & Co Ltd,¹ Brian O’Nolan began his letter – dated Sunday 25 September 1938 – with the salutation ‘Dear Mr Heath.’ Both of these letters are reproduced in Maebh Long’s *The Collected Letters of Flann O’Brien* (2018),² where they are headed as being, respectively, ‘From Andy Heath of A.M. Heath’ and ‘To Andy Heath.’ The problem here is that there had never been a Mr Heath, Andy or otherwise, working at the A.M. Heath Literary Agency.

I have been, slowly but slowly,³ working on a series of pieces about the publication of the first edition of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, as well as what came before and after. Sometimes those pieces take me down long and winding rabbit holes, and trying to find Mr Heath was one of those very holes. This one started because I had been trying to find definitive proof that Graham Greene either had or had not been Longmans, Green & Co’s original test reader for *At Swim-Two-Birds*, which is another one of those fascinating rabbit holes.⁴ To these ends, I had been rereading the correspondence directly leading up to the publication of *At Swim-Two-Birds* in 1939, and had also been rereading A.M. Heath’s own history, which appears to have been first posted on their webpage⁵ to mark their centenary in 2019. To further clarify what had been happening during that period, I created a simple timeline for myself, a strategy I often use in a situation like this. And, at some point in early 2022, I posted this entry on that timeline:

22 September 1938: Andy (Audrey?) Heath of AMH repeats Mr Longman’s letter re:
At Swim-Two-Birds.

A.M. Heath had been recommended to O’Nolan by one of his Dublin friends in about 1937.⁶ By 1938, when he first wrote to them, they had been in existence for nineteen years, having been founded in 1919. This had come about because its two principal directors, Alice May Spinks and Audrey Heath, having previously stepped up to keep literary agency Curtis Brown & Massie running smoothly while the menfolk were away fighting in the First World War, were then expected to step back down on the menfolk’s

¹ The company’s initials are given in different places and at different times as AM, A.M., and A. M. Heath. I have chosen mostly to use the middle of these three, for aesthetic reasons as much as anything else.

² Flann O’Brien, *The Collected Letters of Flann O’Brien*, ed. Maebh Long (Victoria, TX: Dalkey Archive Press, 2018), 9–10.

³ To quote John Lennon’s ‘No Flies on Frank,’ published in *In His Own Write* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1964), 17.

⁴ This particular piece will hopefully see print somewhere in 2023 or 2024.

⁵ A.M. Heath, ‘A.M. Heath: The Future’ <https://amheath.com/history/#:~:text=The%20story%20of%20A.M.,recensions%20and%20times%20of%20plenty>

⁶ Possibly John Weldon, aka novelist and actor Brinsley MacNamara, according to Anthony Cronin’s *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O’Brien* (London: Grafton Books, 1989), 85.

return. But, rather than step down, they chose to step away entirely and found their own literary agency.

The company's name, A.M. Heath, was arrived at by combining the A.M. of Alice May's forenames with the Heath of Audrey's surname, with Audrey also serving as Managing Director of the company. This name would be the cause of unforeseen problems further down the line, with ongoing confusion about not only the gender of the directors, but also the identity of the person or persons after whom the company was actually named.

In fact, at the time these letters were written, there were very few clues as to the gender of the correspondents on A.M. Heath's side, except for their actual signatures. When the company was registered at Companies House in June 1921, its original board of directors consisted of Heath, Spinks, and Leslie Tilden-Smith,⁷ although by the time O'Nolan began writing to them in 1938, Tilden-Smith had been replaced on the board of directors by Cyrus H. Brooks. The company's name, A.M. Heath & Company, Limited, was at the top of their headed paper, and the three directors were listed in the top left-hand corner of the company's headed paper as

Directors

A. Heath, A. M. Spinks

C. H. Brooks

At the bottom, after the actual body of the correspondence, there was a space for a signature, above the printed words 'for A. M. Heath & CO. LTD.' The name of the correspondent, however, wasn't printed, so anyone wishing to reply to one of these letters was generally left to act on their own initiative in working out whom exactly they were dealing with.

By the time of the letter of 22 September 1938, O'Nolan had corresponded with a number of different people at A.M. Heath over the course of that year. His introductory letter was to Cyrus Brooks on 31 January 1938. Brooks passed O'Nolan along to the company's literary advisor, Patience Ross,⁸ with whom the vast

⁷ Leslie Tilden-Smith would later become the second of Jean Rhys's three husbands, between Jean Lenglet and Max Hamer. They married in 1934, whilst he was her agent. A few years later, Rhys began a friendship with novelist Eliot Bliss, who was at one stage a lover of Patience Ross, who herself worked for A.M. Heath.

⁸ Patience was born Patience Henrietta Mary Ropes on 12 February 1906. Her father, Arthur Reed Ropes, wrote lyrics for musical comedies to considerable financial success under the pseudonym Adrian Ross, which surname his daughter adopted. He also published a horror novel, *The Hole of the Pit* (1914), amongst other works. In turn, Patience published two volumes of poetry, *Black Bread* (1929) and *The Glass Rose* (1930), the latter of which is dedicated to Audrey Heath, and translated Maurice Leblanc's *L'Image de la femme nue* (1934) into English as *Wanton Venus* (1935). According to Anne Hall [*Angela Thirkell: A Writer's Life* (London: Unicorn, 2021), 100], 'Ross was quoted in a newspaper as saying, "I have no photographs of myself at all". The world needs a biography of Patience Ross.

majority of the subsequent correspondence was conducted. And, whilst the first two letters O’Nolan received from A.M. Heath were more or less form letters which were sent in response to all prospective clients’ enquiries, the third one, dated 11 July that year, was definitely written in Patience Ross’s own distinctive voice, and she always signed her letters with her full forename and surname, in a neat and perfectly legible hand.⁹ But she was the only one of the author’s correspondents at Heath who did.

O’Nolan actually corresponded with four different people at A.M. Heath, after his initial exchange with Cyrus Brooks: the letters available to us show that, besides Patience Ross, who wrote to him fourteen times, there was Audrey Heath, who wrote to him three times, and Alice May Spinks and Phyl Hayter, who wrote to him twice each. Patience’s signature, however, was the only one that clearly and unequivocally identified the signatory as a woman. Alice May Spinks signed her letters M. Spinks, Phyl Hayter¹⁰ signed herself as such, but with a forename like Phyl there was a lot of room for ambiguity as to her gender, and Audrey Heath’s signature, well, that was a different matter. It started with an unambiguous capital A, then just a squiggly line where the *u* should have been, a letter that might be the *d*, then an upward stroke that might be an *r*, but also might be the start of a rather wide-mouthed *y*. So, in effect, A~dy, with the *u* reduced to a squiggle, and the *r* and *e* subsumed into the body of the terminal *y*.

This cursive inscription is how Miss Heath’s letter of 22 September was signed: A~dy, followed by an only slightly more decipherable *Heath*. I’m not necessarily suggesting that O’Nolan interpreted this as Andy Heath, but we can safely assume that he didn’t interpret it as Audrey Heath, as his reply to this letter began ‘Dear Mr Heath.’ And the really curious thing here is that, although you might imagine that she would have corrected him when she replied to him on 7 October, Audrey Heath didn’t disabuse him of his error.

I have given a lot of thought to what might have been at play: what was not immediately evident, or at least not to O’Nolan, and maybe others like him at the time. In 1919, when A.M. Heath was founded, women-led businesses were not as common as they are now. It was only the previous year that the Representation of the People Act 1918 saw British women over 30 gain the vote,¹¹ and it was not until the Representation

⁹ A few letters were signed on her behalf by another member of staff, who usually signed Ross’s name and added PP, standing for Per Pro (from the Latin *per procurationem*), meaning ‘on behalf of.’ The member of staff was identified only by their initials, usually PH, probably standing for Phyl Hayter.

¹⁰ Phyl Hayter was more correctly Phyllis Hayter, but was known as Phyl, and commonly signed her name as Phyl Hayter on A.M. Heath documents.

¹¹ If they met minimum property qualifications, that is.

of the People (Equal Franchise) Act 1928 that full electoral equality was achieved in Britain. In the interwar period, some newspapers were critical of women 'taking up ex-servicemen's jobs.'¹² In 1921, women's football teams, which had been very popular during the war years, were banned from using grounds owned by clubs that were members of the Football Association in England, a position that was not reversed until 1970. So it may have been that Spinks and Heath decided that it would suit them better simply to blur the lines and trade under their surnames as much as possible when they launched their company just after the end of the First World War. But, as we will see below, perhaps there may have been another factor at play, too.

In researching this piece I used many resources: the History page on A.M. Heath's website; the A.M. Heath & Co Ltd company registration papers from 1921, found on the UK's Companies House website; Maebh Long's book of O'Nolan's correspondence, and subsequently scans of all the relevant letters from the SIUC archive, including some not in Long's book; documents from the 1921 UK census; and any number of other books and online resources, all of which helped me build up an image of Audrey, both professionally and personally.

A number of these resources were not available even as recently as five years ago. Long's book, which is where I started on this journey, was published in the middle of 2018, while the history page on A.M. Heath's website dates from their centenary in 2019. The documents from the company's incorporation in 1921 gave me a home address for Audrey Heath, an address I needed in order to find her in the 1921 census, whose data I could not have accessed before 2021. Crucially, because the letters from SIUC, the company formation documents from Companies House, and the 1921 census forms were all scans of the originals, and all contained Audrey Heath's signature, I had finally closed the circle and found the proof that the person with whom O'Nolan had corresponded was Audrey, not Andy. There is no doubt in my mind that the signature of the Audrey Heath who signed the incorporation documents of A.M. Heath & Co Ltd on 1 June 1921 on file at Companies House is the same as the signature of the Audrey Heath who was listed as the head of the household for 90^A South Hill Park in London on the census form filled in on Sunday 24 April 1921, and is the same as the signature on the letter from A.M. Heath's to Brian O'Nolan on 22 September 1938.

We know that O'Nolan's letter was typewritten on 25 September 1938, in the course of his correspondence with A.M. Heath about his first novel, *At Swim-Two-Birds*. He sent the original of the letter to A.M. Heath – where it would have been destroyed by the

¹² Sundari Anitha and Ruth Pearson, 'The Interwar Years: 1918-1939,' *Striking Women* (Lincoln: University of Lincoln, 2013) <https://www.striking-women.org/module/women-and-work/inter-war-years-1918-1939>

Blitz at the end of 1940 – and kept the carbon copy¹³ for his records, where it remained until his death on 1 April 1966. After his death, his widow and sole executrix, Evelyn O’Nolan, sold a collection of his papers to the Morris Library, the main academic library on the campus of Southern Illinois University, in Carbondale, Illinois.¹⁴ And, following this, though perhaps by a few years, SIUC produced a searchable archive, which contains this note:

The most comprehensive study available of this material is found in the dissertation *The Writings of Flann O’Brien* by David Powell, who received his Ph.D. from SIU in June 1970. Dr Powell worked with the collection for several months and aided in organizing it.

If David Powell graduated in June 1970 and had worked with the collection while he was on site, it makes sense that this first searchable archive would date from about that time. I want to point out one particular entry in that first archive, entry #91, which is in the *Correspondence – Letters to BO’N* section. This reads:

91. A. M. Heath & Co. Ltd. (Phyl Hayter, Mark Hamilton, Patience Ross, Hester Green, C.H. Brooks, Joan Brenchly, M. Spinks, Deborah Pye, Karen Sweny, A. M. Heath.)

There are 141 pieces of correspondence under that heading, although only twenty-two of those date from between 1938 and 1940. Of the names listed here, we are only concerned with the ones O’Nolan actually corresponded with in that time period, particularly the two founders of A.M. Heath – Alice May Spinks and Audrey Heath – after whom the company is named. ‘M. Spinks’ is presumably Alice May Spinks, who signed herself as such on the two letters she wrote to O’Nolan.¹⁵ And we already know that Audrey Heath signed her letters as Audrey Heath, not with an initial, and certainly not with a middle name or middle initial. So it is quite a misleading – although wholly understandable – error to have included the fictitious and Bunburyesque ‘A. M. Heath’ as one of the

¹³ Before the development of photocopiers and electronic correspondence, a carbon copy was the under-copy of a typed or written document made using carbon paper, paper coated on one side with a layer of a loosely bound dry ink or pigmented coating, bound with wax. A sheet of carbon paper was placed between two sheets of paper. The pressure applied by the writing implement (a typewriter, in this case) to the top sheet caused pigment from the carbon paper to reproduce the similar mark on the copy sheet. The top sheet is the original and the additional sheet is called a carbon copy. We still use an echo of this when we add a CC address to an email, in these modern paperless times.

¹⁴ ‘SIU acquires Irish author manuscripts,’ *The Southern Illinoisan* (18 August 1967): 8.

¹⁵ The first on 17 February 1939, about setting up a press clippings service for O’Nolan, and the other on 30 January 1940, to acknowledge receipt of the typescript of *The Third Policeman*, as Patience Ross, who would normally have written about this, was out with a cold.

correspondents, rather than somehow intuiting from the letterhead that the A.M. belonged to Spinks, and that the director named A. Heath was the person signing with the surname Heath. While counterintuitive, it would have prevented the – also wholly understandable – error of treating the A.M. Heath of the company name as an actual person and the same individual as the Heath who signed the letters. But, crucially, the correspondents are listed here as M. Spinks and A.M. Heath, rather than as A.M. Spinks and A. Heath, which was a further step on the road to the misidentification of Audrey Heath as ‘Mr Heath,’ after O’Nolan erroneously addressed her as such.

As far as I know, the next stage in this chronology was Maebh Long’s visit to the Morris Library at Southern Illinois University’s Carbondale campus. I had written to her in March 2022, suggesting that the letter in her book dated 22 September 1938, which purported to be from Andy Heath, may instead have been from Audrey Heath. Her reply gave the following explanation:

I’ve checked my files and the very earliest spreadsheet we compiled lists O’Nolan’s correspondent as ‘Andy.’ As I remember, this was the result of a conversation with Carbondale’s archivists about the signature, but as I visited Carbondale in 2015, the conversation would have taken place in person. Given O’Nolan’s use of ‘Mr’ and ‘Esq’ when writing to Heath I had no reason to presume that his correspondent was a woman.

It is worth bearing in mind that *The Collected Letters of Flann O’Brien* runs to over 550 pages of letters, not including either introductory material or indices, and that the correspondence tagged as to or from Andy Heath covers only four of those pages. Long’s message continues:

I remember my only hesitation arising from the fact that ‘Andy’ seemed rather informal. That slight concern was laid to rest, I thought, when I sent all correspondence between A.M. Heath’s and O’Nolan to Heath’s to check – at their request – and they signed off on all the content.

So that’s how a scholar of Long’s standing ends up getting this wrong. *The Collected Letters* was published a year before A.M. Heath added their company’s history page to their website, and there is no Wikipedia page for the company, although perhaps there should be.

O’Nolan misgendered Audrey Heath as Mr Heath in his letters to her, partly because her signature was easily misinterpreted and partly from gendered norms. Crucially,

Audrey Heath didn't correct him on this, nor was there anywhere on the company's stationery that identified the first names of the listed directors or the individual correspondents. Any copies of the correspondence that were in the possession of A.M. Heath were likely destroyed during the German Blitz on London in the dying days of 1940. O'Nolan's carbon copies of the letters were part of the collection of his material that Evelyn O'Nolan sold to the Morris Library in Carbondale in 1967. The collection was inventoried at some point during the following few years, in the course of which Audrey Heath was misidentified, this time as being A.M. Heath, the non-existent namesake of the company. We then jump forward nearly half a century, to 2015, when Long visited the Morris Library at Southern Illinois University's Carbondale campus, where the author of the letters in question was provisionally identified, from Audrey's signatures, as being an Andy Heath – this supposition being helped along by the fact that O'Nolan addressed his letters to 'Mr Heath,' and also used the courtesy title 'Esq,' short for Esquire, in his correspondence to Ms Heath. The final chance for the accumulated errors to be spotted, and actually the point where they should have been immediately put right, being where those letters had emanated from in the first place – if quite a number of years earlier – was at the offices of A.M. Heath & Co Ltd, where all the correspondence related to them was sent by Long to be signed off on, something that the company themselves had asked for. But it seems that, despite the letters being written by the person whose surname the company itself bore, nobody there knew enough about her to correct it.

There was one other interesting fact that emerged from that census form. Although it appears that Audrey Heath filled out the form, and is listed as the head of the household, the only other occupant of the house listed was Mary Grace Ridley, Assistant Treasurer & Manager of Book Department, National Council of Women,¹⁶ who was listed as co-head. This struck me as being so odd, so singular, that I needed to have a closer look at UK census forms, and the sort of descriptions general used on them. Fortunately, I had already downloaded scans of both sides of the census form filled in for 90^A South Hill Park, where both women lived. One side was the actual form that needed to be filled in, whilst the other side were the instructions, which included a dummy form, with the various boxes filled in with examples.

¹⁶ According to an online scan of the *Handbook of the National Council of Women of Great Britain for 1926-27*, Miss M. G. Ridley was still Assistant Treasurer at that time, as well as being Secretary to the Finance Committee, and Secretary *pro tem* to the Insurance Sectional Committee, although the internet seems to completely lose sight of her thereafter.

The first instruction is:

1. The Head, or person acting as Head, of a Private Household is required by law to make a return in the Form, stating the particulars asked for of all persons forming part of the household for Census purposes. See the heading for Column (a) within.

The third instruction says:

- 3: Every such person is required by law to give to the person responsible for making the return such information as may be necessary to enable the return to be made.

Column (a), headed 'NAME and SURNAME,' has only two names listed: 1) Audrey Heath, and 2) Mary Grace Ridley. Column (b) is entitled 'RELATIONSHIP to Head of Household,' with the instructions directing the writer to '[s]tate whether "Head," "Wife," "Son," "Daughter," "Step-son," or other relative, "Visitor," "Boarder," or "Servant."' This column is where Mary Grace Ridley is listed as Co-Head. But Co-Head isn't one of the options given.

The most recent census for England and Wales, the one in 2021, allowed for various forms of relationships between the members of the household, as well as various kinds of blood relatives, *Husband or wife*; *Legally registered civil partner*; or just *Partner*.¹⁷ There was also a section where you could indicate if your Husband/Wife/Partner was of the same sex as or opposite sex to yourself. But one hundred years before that, in 1921, none of these were an option. As there was no suggested way to describe her relationship to Audrey Heath, the stated head of the household, Mary – or, more likely, the pair of them together – changed the limiting terms of the census.

Can we, therefore, posit that Audrey Heath and Mary Grace Ridley were actually two queer women living together? Discussing A.M. Heath's part in representing *The Well of Loneliness* (1928),¹⁸ Radclyffe Hall's ground-breaking novel of lesbian life, the company's website says:

¹⁷ Legislation.gov.uk <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2020/560/schedules/made/data.xht>

¹⁸ A number of the books mentioned in this piece were banned in Ireland: Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* was banned in May 1930, making it one of the very first books banned in the Irish Free State; Maurice Leblanc's *Wanton Venus* in 1935, in the English translation by Patience Ross; and Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock*, banned on 8 February 1939, just over a month before *At Swim-Two-Birds* was published. This brings me neatly back again to where I started. O'Nolan himself had always wanted to have one of his books banned in Ireland, but never really transgressed in the right sorts of way for that to happen. It's possible that there's a moral hidden in there somewhere, if we all look hard enough.

Represented by Audrey Heath, Hall had been living with her lover, Una Troubridge, since 1917, and in writing *The Well of Loneliness* she intended to spark public conversation about homosexuality, and in particular relationships between women. This was a cause A.M. Heath was steadfastly behind, with Audrey championing the novel to publishers and the agency's new typist and literary advisor, Patience Ross – who had joined in 1926 and would herself go on to live with her long-term female lover – supporting the submission.

If we accept the likelihood of her own lesbianism, we can now see Audrey Heath's reasons for championing *The Well of Loneliness*, for being 'steadfastly behind' it, in a more informed light. And there is other evidence that puts her close to Radclyffe Hall and her entourage. Hall had been introduced to Heath by novelist Ida Wylie, who wrote under the name I. A. R. Wylie, and who herself lived with a female partner.

A question worth asking at this point is, if A.M. Heath in 2019 were comfortable mentioning that Patience Ross was living with her 'long-term female lover,' why did they not mention the possibility of Audrey Heath being in the same position? It is possible that they simply weren't aware of it. The evidence available to us suggests that Patience and her partner, Louise Hoyt Porter, a Vassar College graduate from a very wealthy American family, were more open about their relationship. In early August 1939, Angela Thirkell wrote to her publisher, Jamie Hamilton, about Ross and Porter:

I hear from Patience Ross (after a very pleasant night spent with les girls¹⁹ in their new home near Henfield,²⁰ in no room of which can Louise Porter stand upright so antique is it, and I do wish they didn't sleep in a double bed, en tout bien et tout honneur [in all honour] I doubt it not, mais cela me fait frémir [but it makes me shudder]).²¹

There are mentions of Patience and her earlier girlfriends scattered throughout the literary biographies and memoirs of that time, whereas the entry in the 1921 census is the only real evidence I can find of Audrey living with another woman, and I have no idea how long that had been the case, nor how much longer it went on for. However, I find the use of the term 'co-head' to describe her relationship with Mary Grace Ridley so odd that it seemed, certainly at first, that there was only one inference to be drawn from it.

¹⁹ Thirkell regularly referred to Patience and Louise as 'les girls.'

²⁰ This is the same house that Ross moved the Longmans book department to, as mentioned in her letter of 1 November 1940 to O'Nolan, and where both she and Porter spent the rest of their lives together, before being buried in the same grave in the local graveyard, Porter in 1980, and Ross in 1989.

²¹ Hall, *Angela Thirkell*, 99. All the translations in square brackets are as they appear in Anne Hall's book.

Sexual orientation is not gender identity, but the circles in which Audrey moved and her amendments of the census form could be read as indicating a more fluid understanding of identifiers, and she clearly did not think it necessary to correct O'Nolan's misgendering.

It was Leonardo Da Vinci who said that 'truth alone is the daughter of time.' I wasn't even remotely looking to become embroiled in this saga of multiple misnamings, this unfortunate accretion of erroneous assumptions, which grew into a Mylesean comedy of errors, and which returned, by its own commodius vicus of recirculation, back to where it came from, where it was no longer recognised, like Odysseus returned to Ithaca. As an independent scholar, I feel a certain peculiarity in having spotted, and then solved, this tiny mistake, which blossomed into a five-thousand-word piece about post-Second World War British publishing, inevitable but inaccurate presumptions, and the problems that occur when bad information isn't caught in any of the places where it should be. And, if I may say so, there are advantages to being a free-roving scholar with no fear of infinite rabbit holes, and the leisure to stride off in any direction that takes their fancy.

Acknowledgements

Audrey Heath of 35 Brooke Street, London E.C. 1, died on 29 December 1957 in the National Temperance Hospital, London N.W. 1, at the age of 69, leaving effects to the value of £6970 15s. 11d, a not inconsiderate sum at that time. The company she co-founded in 1919, and of which she was Managing Director for its early years, still thrives, even if it does not remember her as well as it should. This article is dedicated to her and to her fellow female trailblazers in publication at that time, in particular Patience Ross. Both of those ladies deserve to be remembered, and further research and publication need to be done about both of them.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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