

# *Constructing the Global Irish Woman Traveller: Cynthia Longfield's Scientific Researches in South America, 1921-27*

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**Abstract:** *Irish-born Cynthia Longfield (1896-1991) became a leading entomologist after participating in three expeditions to South America in the 1920s. Working unpaid in the British Museum for 30 years, she catalogued Odonata (dragonflies and damselflies) from all over the world, published scientific papers, and collaborated with British, Irish and international scientists. While she made several other collecting expeditions to Africa and South-East Asia in the 1920s and 1930s, her early experiences of South American natural history are a crucial aspect of her formation as an internationally renowned scientist, and are an interesting chapter in the long history of Irish connections with the region. She was a migrant, a traveller, and a scientist, and was a person at once privileged by her class and denied basic equalities due to her gender. This article firstly considers her scientific career in the context of Irish women's migration in the first half of the twentieth century, before focusing on her three voyages to South America in 1921-7 and, finally, examining the ways in which her participation in the St George expedition— as one of just three women aboard ship — was reported in the Anglophone press.*

**Keywords:** *Science; Travel; Women; Migration.*

**Resumo:** *Cynthia Longfield, nascida na Irlanda (1896-1991), tornou-se uma das principais entomologistas após ter participado de três expedições à América do Sul na década de 1920. Trabalhando de forma não remunerada no Museu Britânico por 30 anos, Longfield catalogou Odonata (libélulas e libelinhas) de todo o mundo, publicou artigos científicos e colaborou com cientistas britânicos, irlandeses e estrangeiros. Ainda que tenha participado de expedições posteriores de coleta na África e no sudeste asiático nas décadas de 1920 e 1930, sua experiência inicial com a história natural da América do Sul é um aspecto crucial de sua formação como cientista de renome internacional, e um interessante capítulo da longa história de conexões irlandesas com a região. Longfield foi uma imigrante, uma viajante e uma cientista, e ao mesmo tempo em que era privilegiada por sua classe, a igualdade lhe era negada em vista de seu gênero. Este artigo contempla, em primeiro lugar, sua carreira científica considerando o contexto das mulheres irlandesas imigrantes da primeira metade do século XX, logo após, apresenta suas três viagens à América do Sul de 1921 a 1927 e, finalmente, discute a maneira pela qual sua participação na expedição de St George, como uma das três mulheres a bordo do navio, foi relatada na imprensa anglófona.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Ciência; Viagens; Mulheres; Migração.*

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In 1932, Irish woman Cynthia Longfield (1896-1991) became the first female president of the London Natural History Society (LNHS). Established in 1858, the LNHS first admitted women members in 1893, and Longfield assumed the role of president when her status as an entomologist was reaching new heights. Just five years earlier, she had returned from her second scientific expedition to begin an unpaid role as cataloguer of Odonata (dragonfly and damselfly) collections in the Natural History branch of the British Museum, a position she retained for thirty years. While barred on gender grounds from drawing a salary for this work, the financial advantages conferred upon her at birth contributed in no small way to allowing her to remain active in institutional entomology and to conduct fieldwork in the South Pacific, South America, Africa and south-east Asia in the 1920s and 1930s. Her South American expeditions in particular formed the basis for a lifetime of scientific enquiry into global insect life and quickly shaped her as an internationally renowned entomologist; they are also an interesting chapter in the long history of Irish connections with the region. Longfield was a migrant, a traveller, and a scientist, a person at once privileged by her class and denied basic equalities due to her gender, and one of just three women participants in the high-profile *St George* expedition of 1924-5. This article considers her scientific career in the context of Irish women's migration in the first half of the twentieth century, before focusing on her three voyages to South America in 1921-7, and the ways in which her participation in the *St George* expedition was reported in the Anglophone press.

The youngest daughter of a wealthy, landowning family, Cynthia's childhood was divided evenly between London and the Longfield ancestral home of Castle Mary, Co. Cork. She was educated at home, and her scientific interests were formed in childhood, when her mother and grandmother encouraged her to spend time outdoors. She thereby developed a love of insects and reptiles, and family lore tells of her bringing lizards that she found outside into her bedroom (Hayter-Hames 8). Her maternal grandfather, James Mason, was a professional scientist, educated at the Sorbonne. A wider appreciation for the sciences percolated down through the generations, with Cynthia inspired at an early age by reading about Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and the *Beagle voyage* of 1831-6. She later recalled, 'I went on the St George expedition to follow Darwin's footsteps – and I got there!' (Hayter-Hames 12, 76). While she spent most of her working life in London, she had a very strong connection to Ireland and returned to live there in retirement (1956-91). Indeed, her Irishness led her colleagues aboard the *St George* gave her the nickname 'Paddy' (Longfield, RIA, LRC/16:3-4). While this was almost certainly devoid of any malice or ill-feeling (her relationships with the other crewmembers appear to have been very good), it is difficult to extract this nickname from the recent backdrop of the Irish revolutionary period, and the destruction of the Longfield ancestral home in an arson attack during the War of Independence.

## Longfield as migrant

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century there was, more or less, gender parity among Irish migrants – in other words, Irish women were as likely to migrate as Irish men – a pattern not repeated among any other ethnic diaspora group. Like Irish officialdom, academics were slow to study Irish women's migration in a sustained and meaningful way, but the field has enjoyed a flowering of interest in recent years. In the 1980s, a smattering of pioneering studies emphasised economic factors and established migration as emancipation, particularly in the

context of post-Famine Ireland, when opportunities for women were understood to have been even more restricted than they had been previously (Diner; Nolan). Women's migration in this analysis holds up a mirror to Ireland, reflecting the position of women in Irish society and economy, particularly in the post-Famine period. Advances in the field demonstrated how, while the 1940s and 1950s saw an 'epidemic' of Irish women's migration, this had been a feature of Irish life since the Famine, and was a response to the poor prospects offered by marriage, resulting in delay to, or avoidance of, marriage (Clear). Since the late 1990s, studies of the Irish women's diaspora have interrogated identity and belonging through sociological, historical and ethnographic theory.

Alongside this complicating of the received motives for or causes of Irish women's mass migration, the field has also developed a thematic richness. Scholars have looked at Irish domestic servants in Britain and North America (Lynch-Brennan); criminal and deviant Irish women abroad (Farrell); women's assisted migration (McClaughlin); the role of singlehood and poverty in the reception of female migrants (Breathnach 2011); women in religious orders within the diaspora and the roles of Irish women in education systems worldwide (Collins; Hill; Hoy; Raftery); and the interplay between ethnicity, class and confession (Chilton). These developments have given new energy and direction to the field, enhancing understanding not only of women's decisions to migrate, but also how those decisions were portrayed and understood at official levels in the decades following Irish independence. Those analyses continue to influence historiographical understanding into the early twenty-first century (Redmond).

Longfield was just one of a completely understudied group – women born or raised in Ireland who found scientific careers abroad in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> From 1890, third-level education in Ireland began to open to women, so that they slowly began to develop careers in the sciences, medicine and engineering – areas that had been closed to them for generations (O'Connell 2009). However, structural inequalities persisted across the Irish educational system into the mid-twentieth century. In national schools, girls generally continued to be taught only basic arithmetic and domestic skills; secondary education was limited to a minority, generally middle-class boys; and women experienced difficulties in accessing postgraduate training in Ireland (Ó hÓgartaigh 2009). From 1923, the Irish Free State placed additional pressure on working women with the introduction of the so-called marriage bar, which initially forced women teachers to retire on marriage, but was extended over time to confine all married female civil servants to the domestic sphere.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, many women scientists benefited from periods of work, study or residence overseas. Aleen Cust (1868-1937), Britain and Ireland's first female veterinary surgeon, studied at Edinburgh's New Veterinary College – like Longfield, she had the advantage of a degree of financial independence (O'Connell 2009ig; Ó hÓgartaigh 2006; *The Times*, 2 Feb. 1937). X-ray crystallographer Dame Professor Kathleen Lonsdale (1903-81) was born in Ireland but was brought to London as a child, where she benefited from access to educational opportunities that may not have been available in her native Kildare, and in 1949 became the first woman professor at University College London (Childs and Mac Lellan; Hodgkin). Similarly, Kay McNulty (1921-2006) was brought from Donegal to Philadelphia when she was three years old, attained a college scholarship in mathematics, and went on to form part of the team of six women who programmed the ENIAC, the world's first electronic general-purpose computer ([McNulty]). Donegal-born Pearl Dunlevy (1909-2002) gained crucial public health experience in UK hospitals before leading an important children's TB vaccination programme in Dublin (Breathnach 2016). The Royal Observatory at Greenwich attracted a cluster of Irish women

astronomers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including Margaret Lindsay Huggins, Alice Everett and Annie Maunder (Bailey Ogilvie; Jones). Similarly, overseas work was central to the activities of medical missionary organisations, whose members comprised a good proportion of female medical graduates in mid-twentieth century Ireland. Few of these women have studied seriously, and as professionals working outside Ireland, their careers and experiences have not yet been woven into Irish migration studies more widely.

It is questionable whether all of these women could have realised their ambitions in the economic depression and repressive socio-cultural contexts of post-independence Ireland. While Longfield's removal to London on a semi-permanent basis was hardly motivated by the same financial imperatives that pressed countless other Irish women to seek better opportunities overseas, nevertheless, her motivations, concerns, successes and challenges merit attention as a neglected aspect of Irish women's professional experiences outside Ireland. Tendencies to treat Irish women migrants as either a faceless mass, or to highlight a small number of seemingly exceptional cases has clear implications for our understanding of migrant women's life-paths and choices, which were determined in no small part by the local circumstances they left behind in Ireland. Furthermore, attention was for long diverted from women who pioneered in various fields of work, but whose contributions were not memorialised after their death or retirement, whose legacies did not fit easily within the dominant narratives of twentieth-century Irish historiography, or were not easily packaged for general readership and public consumption.

Indeed, despite her long and successful career as an entomologist, Longfield has never been the subject of serious study. Like many other Irish women in the history of science, she has most often been considered in isolation, rather than part of a scientific community. While her contributions to science were recognised during her lifetime and shortly afterwards (as evident in her obituaries), she was then rather quickly forgotten.<sup>4</sup> Where she has been remembered in print, it is most often as a quaint oddity, a relic of Victorian expeditionary science, or an eccentric amateur who chose her passion for dragonflies over a marriage proposal from her scientific mentor.<sup>5</sup> This is partly a result of the fact that the only personal record of her life and career available to researchers is a set of three diaries recording the *St George* expedition of 1924 (Longfield, RIA, LRC/16-18.) The remainder of her life and career, therefore, has usually been pieced together from brief or largely impressionistic sources, with the exception of a detailed biography by a relative, based on interviews with Longfield herself, as well as private family papers (Hayter-Hames). The pattern of Longfield's life and career call to mind Margaret Ward's words, first published four decades ago: "[i]n many instances, what was significant for men has not necessarily proved to be so for women, while on other occasions, the same historical event often has an additional significance for women." (Ward 1).

Longfield's life was shaped by historical events of wider significance, but that had unique resonance for a woman aspiring to a scientific career. Firstly, World War I provided her with a first taste of freedom and allowed her to shed her 'society girl' destiny. As an aristocratic family, the Longfield daughters would have expected to have been introduced to London society at formal "coming-out" parties, shortly after which they would be expected to marry, but Cynthia's life did not follow this pattern due to the outbreak of World War I. She and her sister Norah spent the war volunteering – Norah as a nurse with the Voluntary Aid Detachment, and Cynthia with the Royal Army Service Corps and in an aeroplane factory. Most of the young women in the Corps were upper-middle-class, seizing the opportunity to work outside the home (Hayter-Hames 18-19). Secondly, in 1924, the *St George* expedition gave the British press ample fodder for sensational headlines, but from Longfield's perspective, it

provided crucial training in fieldwork and formed the basis of her scientific career. Thirdly, migration and travel offered her a wealth of experiences, but also set in sharp relief her complicated position as a woman barred from drawing a professional salary for her contributions to science, but whose book on dragonflies would remain the standard text in the field for fifty years.

## **The making of an entomologist: Longfield's South American expeditions, 1921-7**

Longfield's first visit to South America was the unexpectedly fortuitous result of missing her formal "coming-out" into society due to World War I. When, in late 1921, family friends invited her to join them on a voyage to South America, her parents agreed to fund the trip in lieu of her apparently diminished marriage prospects (Hayter-Hames 24). The party managed an astonishing itinerary in a four-month period, travelling through Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, Peru, Panama, Jamaica and Cuba. While the tour was a whirlwind, and was not a scientific expedition, it sparked Longfield's passion for entomology. She returned to Britain and Ireland with an appreciation for the scientific importance of fieldwork and travel, and began to collect Irish dragonflies, butterflies and moths, and to raise caterpillars (Hayter-Hames 35).

In 1924, the Scientific Expeditionary Research Association advertised for an assistant scientist to accompany an 18-month-long re-enactment of Darwin's *Beagle* voyage, taking in Trinidad and Tobago, Panama, Galapagos, Tahiti, and Easter Island. Once more, Longfield's father agreed to fund her passage, and she was brought aboard the *St George* as assistant to the entomologist, Cyril Collenette, under whose mentorship she collected Lepidoptera, beetles, snails and reptiles for the natural history branch of the British Museum. During the voyage, Longfield learned about astronomy, photography, and marine biology, and how to draw specimens from the microscope, dissect them, and mount them on microscope slides (Longfield, RIA MS LRC/16, 13, 16, 32). When the expedition's botanist fell ill early in the expedition, Longfield, Collenette and fellow entomologist Lucy Evelyn Cheesman assumed the additional responsibility of collecting and preserving plant specimens (Longfield 1972). Her diary records how she constantly observed flora and fauna, kept lists of what she saw on shore and at sea, noted in detail how she caught and collected specimens, and recorded sightings of specimens that she was unable to capture. (Indeed, her 'insect killing bottle' is preserved as part of the Longfield Collection at the Royal Irish Academy today.) As well as preserving specimens, Longfield and the other scientists kept live specimens on board ship. These insects, birds and animals entertained her greatly, and she grew fond of some of them. She made a tree frog her pet and named it Gambo, and regretted the death of Judy, an owl (Longfield, RIA MSS LRC/17:50; LRC/16:63). She also described close interactions with wild animals, such as a lizard eating flies from her skirt as she lay on an island beach (Longfield, RIA MS LRC/16:182-3). Her dedication to the job of collecting is evident in her diary, which records the number of moths she gathered each night and how she spent each morning pinning the specimens. She went nothing ashore at night with Collenette, even when very tired, 'for the sake of the collection' (Longfield, RIA MS LRC/16:179). In an account of the voyage published shortly after its completion, she rightly did not shy from describing herself as 'an entomologist' occupied in 'writing up data, diary and notes; and pinning, sorting and classifying the insects' (Longfield 1927:5).

Returning to London, Longfield began work as a cataloguer at the British Museum.

Working under Douglas E. Kimmins, head of Natural History at the museum, she sorted, studied and described the St George collection, identifying a number of new species. Demonstrating her skill as a cataloguer, she was given custody of the Museum's Odonata collection, a field that had not previously been well researched. She quickly established herself as an entomologist, gaining recognition with membership of the Royal Entomological Society and Fellowship of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS). However, despite all of these signals of her scientific standing, the British Museum never paid her for her thirty years' work as a cataloguer; she was enabled to continue in this unsalaried position thanks to a small private income and access to a family home in London (Hayter-Hames 83).

She returned to South America in 1927, again in the company of Cyril Collenette and the watercolour artist Gwen Dorrien-Smith. Travelling over 4,000 miles overland in five-and-a-half-months, the team made its way from São Paulo to Campo Grande, into the Mato Grosso plateau – the north-west of which Longfield described as 'practically unexplored territory' (Longfield 1929:126) – and on to Iguazu Falls (Hayter-Hames 87-94). Longfield collected 38 Odonata in the Mato Grosso, of which one genus and three species were new to western science, and 25 of which had not previously been recorded in the region. She returned from the expedition "a fully-trained field entomologist", her scientific reputation established (Corbet 29). The expedition resulted in her first scientific publication – a paper read to the Entomological Society in May 1929, in which she collated all of the Odonata recorded to date in the Mato Grosso, including those that had appeared in scientific literature from the 1880s, all of those found in the British Museum collection, and the specimens she herself she had collected in April–June 1927 (Longfield 1929). She thereby positioned herself within a tradition of entomological research in Brazil, and to the forefront of developments in the field.

By 1930, Longfield had secured her place as a leading entomologist, publishing new discoveries in scientific journals, including *Transactions of the Royal Entomological Society*. She became first woman president of the London Natural History Society in 1932, serving as its vice-president and honorary vice-president from 1934 until her death, and was a Fellow of the Royal Entomological Society and Royal Zoological Society (Keeper of Entomology; Longfield 1932). Her book, *The Dragonflies of the British Isles*, first published in 1937 and with a second edition issued in 1948, was accepted for many years as the standard handbook for species identification (Longfield 1948:5). While she is best remembered for her contributions to entomology, she also maintained a keen interest in ornithology and in conservation until her death, as a member of the Committee on Bird Sanctuaries in Royal Parks and a life member of the Botanical Society.

## **Print media and women participants in the St George expedition**

The St George expedition was a formative moment in Longfield's scientific career, and was the first and only venture by the Scientific Expeditionary Research Association, which folded shortly afterwards (Longfield 1927:1). The expedition received a great deal of attention in the English-language press, particularly in Britain and the USA. Led by marine biologist and ethnographer James Hornell, the expedition was intended as a serious scientific endeavour and was reported as such in *Science*, and the crew included an international team of scientists (Hornell *et al.*). Despite this, the popular press sensationalised the presence of three women crewmembers: Longfield, a 'stewardess' named Miss Cropp, and Evelyn Cheesman, curator of insects and the first woman to hold a curatorial position at London Zoo. Over 30 years had

passed since Isabella Bird had become the first woman Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society (1892), and the accounts of global travelling women such as Mary Kingsley, Gertrude Bell, Beatrice Grimshaw, Violet Cressy-Marcks and Annie Peck were read widely. Still, Longfield and Cheesman were portrayed in terms that diminished their roles in the expedition. Cheesman – already an established scientist – was profiled in an *Evening News* article headlined, ‘WOMAN’S QUEST FOR MOSQUITOES [...] THERMOS FLASKS TO KEEP INSECTS’ EGGS IN’, reducing her scientific work to an oddity and peculiarity. A blunt correlation is made between the ‘woman’s quest’ for tiny insects and routine domestic labour, carried by the image of the Thermos flask. The same article described Longfield not as an entomological assistant, but as Cheesman’s ‘friend’.

Cheesman and Longfield’s scientific roles were further diminished by *The Evening News*’s publication of a photograph of Longfield playing with the “ship’s mascot” cat before departure, clearly chosen to emphasise ‘feminine’ qualities of playfulness, innocence and frivolity. The *Daily Sketch* chose to differentiate Cheesman from the other professional scientists on board with the byline, ‘Women join scientists’ romantic trip to the South Sea Isles’. Speaking at a farewell luncheon prior to the departure of the *St George*, the deputy mayor of Dartmouth gave a toast commenting on the inclusion of women in the scientific team. The *Brixham Western Guardian* reported that the deputy mayor ‘saw no reason why, in these enlightened times, the addition of members of the gentler sex should not prove a very helpful experiment’ (9 Apr. 1924). The politician’s wordplay – his intentional employment of the word ‘experiment’, with its scientific and moral inflections – reflects prevailing dismissive attitudes towards women scientists, and the prevailing disregard for the women participants themselves (Bell and McEwan; Higgitt and Withers).

More generally, the English-language press published all sorts of wild theories about the purpose of the high-profile expedition. Diminishing Cheesman’s status from professional scientist to object of curiosity, the *New York Tribune* proclaimed, ‘Hardy Women Ready to Scour Spanish Main for Treasure’ (20 Jan. 1924). The accompanying article stated that the expedition intended to search for Peruvian treasure buried by the crew of a brig during the Spanish–Peruvian war of 1821. Facts surrounding these events remain hazy – even the name of the brig is unclear, reported alternately as the *Mary Read* or the *Mary Dear* – but what is significant here is the tracing of a genealogy of British women on the waves, tentatively connecting Cheesman and Longfield with eighteenth-century convicted pirate Mary Read. The unspoken implication is that the three women occupied morally questionable positions on board a ship full of men. The *Sheffield Telegraph* screamed, ‘PIRATE GOLD’ with the somewhat deflating sub-heading, ‘Not the object of British Scientific Expedition’ (7 Feb. 1924). A Daily Graphic headline ran, ‘TREASURE CRUISE IN THE PACIFIC’ but the following article clarified that ‘It is purely a scientific expedition, and although a call will be made at Cocos Island, no search will take place for the hidden Peruvian treasure’ (9 Apr. 1924). Indeed, the force of the rumours was such that the expedition’s organisers had to issue a statement to the effect that ‘there has never been any intention of calling at the Cocos Islands for the purpose of treasure hunting’ (RIA, LRC/28).

There are compelling parallels between Longfield’s position as a woman in science, and public perceptions of the *St George* expedition. While the team included professional scientists, the press did not take its scientific aims seriously and chose instead to sensationalise – and even fabricate – other elements of the voyage. Similarly, while Longfield herself had some prior (albeit limited) fieldwork experience, her position on board was largely relegated to that of footloose heiress, rather than the assistant research role that she fulfilled so diligently. Certainly,

the public symbolism of the *St George* expedition as propagated by the popular press was very different to the importance of the journey in Longfield's life – it made her a scientist and set her on the path to a lifetime dedicated to entomology.

## Conclusions

Longfield retired from the British Museum in 1956, aged 60, and returned to Cloyne, Co. Cork. Even in retirement, she remained as active as ever, continuing to travel, collect specimens, participate in scientific conferences and give public talks, including one on the topic of 'Entomology as a Career for Women', given in *Cork Examiner* in 1961. She considered entomology a very suitable career for young women, not least because of its links to the medical science and agricultural industries (*Cork Examiner*, 10 Feb. 1961). Certainly, she managed to forge a stable and satisfying career in the field, even if this was thanks in large part to inherited wealth that gave her the means to pursue her passion without the obligation of earning a wage. Following her father's death in 1929, she was in receipt of a private income and was free to travel and pursue scientific research as fully as her health would permit (Hayter-Hames 98). Globally, Longfield was one of a tiny minority of women in such a position, but even with her privileges, there were barriers to be overcome. In an institutional landscape that was unwelcoming to female scientists, Longfield had no choice but to operate as an unpaid museum volunteer – there was no other context within which her research could possibly be accepted within the formal scientific community. A private collection amassed outside of an institutional context would not have been taken seriously, particularly when the collector was a woman (Gates 86-8).

In terms of migration, Longfield and other twentieth-century Irish women in science worldwide merit study not as individual outliers, but as a body of professionals who were often displaced from Ireland due to a relative lack of higher educational and professional opportunities. When these women are exceptionalized and studied in isolation – if they are studied at all – we lose an opportunity to deepen our understanding of the means women employed to navigate barriers to participation, and to draw lessons from their shared experiences with male 'amateurs' who were often excluded from institutional science for similar reasons, as largely self-taught practitioners. We also lose an opportunity to celebrate the perseverance, ingenuity and prescience of women like Longfield, whose 1961 public lecture on 'Entomology as a Career for Women' demonstrated an acute awareness of her own position as a role-model decades before international initiatives to encourage more girls and women to study and work in the sciences.

## Notes

- 1 An earlier version of this paper was delivered as a keynote at XIV Symposium of Irish Studies in South America, Universidade de São Paulo, 2019.
- 2 In 2018, in conjunction with EPIC The Irish Emigration Museum, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the Herstory project, I curated the exhibition, 'Blazing a Trail: Lives and Legacies of Irish Diaspora Women' that acknowledged the contributions of Irish-born women in six fields of work: the arts, humanitarian work, politics, science, sports, and women's suffrage. In this exhibition, Longfield's career is contextualised alongside three other women in the sciences.



- 3 Lambkin and Fitzgerald (59) point out that in Northern Ireland, where no such ‘marriage bar’ existed, women’s emigration was at similarly high levels.
- 4 See obituaries in *The Independent*, 5 July 1991; *The Guardian*, 7 July 1991; *The Times*, 9 July 1991; *The Daily Telegraph*, 12 July 1991; *Journal of the British Dragonfly Society*, vol. 72, no. 2, 1991, pp. 29-32.
- 5 Longfield’s rejection of Cyril Collenette’s marriage proposal is emphasised in Hayter-Hames, 98–117, and in O’Connell 2006.

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