

**EVIDENCE THAT SWIFT'S *DRAPIER'S LETTERS* WERE PRODUCED
BY SARAH HARDING, NOT JOHN HARDING**

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Swift's *Drapier's Letters* all state on their title pages that they were 'Printed by John Harding of Molesworth's Court' but new evidence shows that the actual printing work was performed by Harding's wife, Sarah.

The fact that Sarah Harding was herself skilled as a printer has always been known. This is principally due to a few tracts she printed for Swift under her own name during the years of her widowhood, including *A Short View of the State of Ireland*, 1728, the periodical *The Intelligencer*, also 1728, and *A Modest Proposal* of late 1729. She had, however, acquired skills in the stationery industry from a young age. Christened 'Sara Sadler' on 24 October 1700, she was the daughter of Ralph and Elizabeth Sadlier (née Fookes).<sup>1</sup> Ralph Sadlier, from Bedfordshire, England, had been apprenticed to a type-founder in London and had moved to Dublin in about 1690 where he married Elizabeth Fookes and established Ireland's first type-founding business. Sarah Sadlier grew up in this environment.<sup>2</sup>

In about 1718, in her late teens, she married John Harding, who was three years older than her<sup>3</sup> and had recently completed his indentures as a stationer. From that time the newspapers, pamphlets and broadsides they produced all carried the name 'John Harding', but evidence suggests that Sarah Harding had a hands-on role in the business. This is seen during the periods of John Harding's absences from the shop. During these absences, which were sometimes for prison terms on account of the provocations he offered up to the Whig establishment in his newspaper copy, Sarah Harding, as a mother of one and possibly with the help of her mother, who remained active in the industry until at least 1727,<sup>4</sup> did what she could to keep the press active. For instance, throughout John Harding's seven-month imprisonment beginning in July 1723, there are four known publications from the Harding shop.<sup>5</sup> On a separate occasion she even defied convention by

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<sup>1</sup> For her baptismal record: Representative Church Body Library P/273.01.1, *St. Paul's, Dublin, Baptisms*. 'Sadler' was one of several variant spellings of 'Sadlier'.

<sup>2</sup> For references to selected records of her family members in the type-founding industry, see Mary Pollard, *Dictionary of Members of the Dublin Book Trade: 1550–1800, based on the records of the Guild of St. Luke the Evangelist, Dublin* (London, 2000), 506-7.

<sup>3</sup> He was baptised in the Protestant Parish of St. Bride's, Dublin, on 6 August 1697: Trinity College MSS 1478, in *St. Bride's Register. Births from 1633–1800*.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Sadlier remained active in the industry until at least 1727: refer Pollard, *Dictionary of Members of the Dublin Book Trade: 1550–1800*, 506.

<sup>5</sup> Three were Numbers of their *Weekly Impartial News-Letter*, for 16 November, 28 December and 31 December respectively. The fourth was a tract published on 16 November: *A Letter sent to a Member of Parliament setting forth the oppression the subjects of this kingdom lye under, by the*

putting her own name in the imprint. This was with the anonymously written tract, *The Present Miserable State of Ireland in a letter from a gentleman in Dublin to his Friend in London*, ‘London Printed: And Re-printed in Dublin by Sarah Harding in Molesworth’s Court in Fishamble Street, 1721’.

The *Drapier’s Letters* were printed under the name of John Harding throughout 1724. Written by Swift under the pseudonym ‘M.B. Drapier’, these *Letters* united the people of Ireland in a resolve to boycott the new farthings and halfpence that were being coined for them, in their view corruptly, pursuant to a patent granted to the Englishman, William Wood. For the fourth of these *Letters*, a King’s Bench prosecution was issued against the printer whose name appeared on the title page. John Harding was subsequently arrested and imprisoned for three weeks in Dublin’s Newgate and whilst incarcerated was struck down in some way. The cause of his demise has never been ascertained but he died soon after, on 19 April 1725.

The evidence which shows that the printing work for the *Letters* was performed by Sarah Harding is seen in a direct statement, one which has eluded scholarly attention, made in the course of the periodical, *The Intelligencer*, which was printed by Sarah Harding throughout 1728. This periodical was devised by Swift’s friend, Thomas Sheridan, for the purpose of providing work to Sarah Harding. The writing duties were shared between Sheridan and Swift, but Swift’s commitment soon waned, leading an exasperated Sheridan to eventually drop it altogether.<sup>6</sup> The last Number Sheridan contributed to the periodical was Number Eighteen and he ended it with this postscript:

#### POSTSCRIPT

I do make it my Request, that the Widdow, the PRINTER of these *Papers*, who did likewise *Print* the DRAPIER’s *Letters*, may be enabled by Charitable Encouragements to keep a *merry Christmass*; for She, and her Family, were ruined by Iniquitous *Imprisonments*, and *hardships*, for *Printing* those *Papers*, which were to the Advantage of this Kingdom in General.<sup>7</sup>

Sheridan’s comment that Sarah Harding ‘did likewise *Print* the DRAPIER’s *Letters*’ is clear. Sheridan is not saying that she was the printer of these *Letters* only in the sense that she was the wife of the proprietor and part of the business that was responsible for them. He is disclosing that, just as she had printed the Numbers of *The Intelligencer*, she had also printed the *Letters* written by M.B. Drapier. This is the plain meaning of his comment and may even be the reason for the verb ‘*Print*’

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*exorbitant fees taken by attornies for entring judgments, and the charges attending the same* (Dublin: John Harding, 1723).

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed discussion of events concerning *The Intelligencer*: Craig Francis Pett, *I am no inconsiderable Shop-Keeper in this Town, Swift and his Dublin Printers of the 1720’s: Edward Waters, John Harding and Sarah Harding* (Melbourne: Monash University thesis, 2015), Chapter 8: <https://doi.org/10.4225/03/58b75c04d8433>

<sup>7</sup> *The Intelligencer*, Numb XVIII (Dublin: Sarah Harding, 1728), p.8.

being italicised. This interpretation of the comment is also supported by the evidence concerning Sarah Harding's previous experience and activity in the industry. It shows us that, whilst John Harding can be considered to have been the 'publisher' of the *Letters* in the contemporary Dublin sense of being the person responsible for bringing them to press, it was his wife who did the manual work.

The fact that this work was undertaken by Sarah Harding is significant in itself. However, it also helps explain two matters. As seen in the postscript from Sheridan in *The Intelligencer* Number Eighteen, John and Sarah Harding both suffered imprisonments as a consequence of the fourth *Letter* of the Drapier in late 1724. John Harding had gone into hiding<sup>8</sup> and Sarah Harding was consequently imprisoned, effectively as ransom, until John Harding was taken eleven days later.<sup>9</sup> This was the first known occasion in Ireland in which the wife of a printer had been imprisoned in her husband's place, and was a harsh measure, even in a prosecution as heavy-handed as this one was. It can now be at least partly explained, however, by the fact that her role in the business was widely known. That is, if it was known around Dublin that the printing work in the Harding shop was performed by Sarah Harding and that she had had a leading role in the production of the *Drapier's Letters*, as evidenced by her imprint in *The Present Miserable State of Ireland* and Sheridan's comment of 1728 respectively, the government prosecutors may have been inclined to treat her more as an equal in the business with her proprietor husband.

Sheridan's comment also explains how the fifth *Letter* of the Drapier came to be printed. This fifth *Letter* was published on 31 December 1724, 'Printed by John Harding of Molesworth's Court'.<sup>10</sup> Whether through illness or injury, however, John Harding was dying at this time. Given that it bears precisely the same font and printing idiosyncracies as the previous *Letters*, this fifth *Letter*, like the preceding four, would appear to have been the work of Sarah Harding.

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<sup>8</sup> Refer Thomas Tickell to Charles Delafaye, 1 November 1724, Public Records Office of Northern Ireland, 580/1, 230–2.

<sup>9</sup> Refer John Carteret to Thomas Pelham-Holles, Duke of Newcastle, 8 November 1724, PRONI SP 63/382; MIC 223/162, 177–80.

<sup>10</sup> *A Letter to the Right Honourable the Lord Viscount Molesworth. By M.B. Drapier* (Dublin: John Harding, 1724).