Keynote:

Professor Liz Stanley (Department of Sociology, and Director of the Centre for Narrative and Auto/Biographical Studies, University of Edinburgh).

“The epistolary economy: exchange and anti/ reciprocity in letters, correspondences & postcards”.

The context of my paper is a book-in-progress, which takes off from past work, both theoretical and substantive, on letters and correspondences (to be called something like To the Letter: Epistolarity From Wax Tablets & Parchment To Email, Blogs & Text). Its contents will hinge on but not be restricted to my long-standing work on the c7,000 letters of the feminist writer and social theorist Olive Schreiner (1855-1920), and will include substantial discussion of letters and correspondences by, variously, Roman wives on Hadrian’s wall, Heloise and Abelard, Thomas More, David Hume, Mary Wollstonecraft, in ‘Lady Susan’, by Thomas Carlyle, migrants to the US, and Virginia Woolf, among others.

Sketching out some ideas about how to theorise and use the heuristic of ‘the epistolarium’, I shall explore how, in what ways, and also with what limitations, thinking about the epistolarity in terms of economy and exchange and Mauss’s conceptualisation of ‘the system of the gift’ can throw useful light on different aspects of the epistolary form and its changes across time and also its sub-forms. The substantive examples I shall refer to are ones which hopefully will echo the concerns of other paper-givers at the symposium, and will feature as separate chapters within the book. They will include the ‘writing I’ in some correspondences of Olive Schreiner, the postcard album, and contemporary forms of epistolarity among Polish migrants to the UK.