

## THEMATIC INTRODUCTION

### FROM HAT HONOUR TO THE HANDSHAKE: CHANGING STYLES OF COMMUNICATION IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY<sup>1</sup>

as published in  
**P.J. Corfield and L. Hannan (eds),**  
*Hats Off, Gentlemen!*  
*Changing Arts of Communication in the Eighteenth Century/*  
*Arts de communiquer au dix-huitième siècle*  
 (Honoré Champion: Paris, 2017), pp. 11-30

Collectively, the essays in this volume explore the interlocking patterns of continuities *and* change in styles of communication, including medium-term fluctuations, diversions, and reversals – since it is rare that long-term trends are simply linear and straightforward. The focus is upon the long eighteenth century, defined generously to stretch back into earlier eras and forward into later times as the core themes demand. Communications include all forms of inter-personal contact, whether face-to-face or at a distance.

Together the constituent essays offer evidence and analysis relating chiefly to western Europe. Yet the global outreach of the expansive powers in this era means that the argument also extends to countries like India which encountered the European diaspora culturally as well as militarily. In pursuit of the overarching theme, individual essays discuss specifically: interpersonal greetings, advice manuals, letters, novels (whether earnest or comic), drama, journals (both private and public), non-fiction, private libraries, and satirical art. A final chapter asks not just: *were there changes alongside continuities?* but also, in parallel: *how should historians best define and name those trends?*

---

<sup>1</sup> Warm thanks for stimulating discussions go to all Manchester Conference participants; with particular thanks to Adrian Seville for advice on sources, and to Tony Belton and Leonie Hannan for their constructive criticisms of draft texts.

This opening essay starts the analysis with a thematic overview, to set some context. Two main sections consider: changes in interpersonal greetings, with firstly the decline of Hat Honour and secondly the rise of the egalitarian handshake. A third explores parallel changes in written salutations. And a final overview section reassesses the methodological challenges encountered when researching the dynamics of social variety alongside the rituals of social conformity. It is notably hard to find evidence about fleeting day-to-day routines, on which people rarely comment. Yet historians are now rising to the challenge.

### **THE DECLINE OF HAT HONOUR AND THE DEEP CURTSEY**

*Hats Off, Gentlemen!* This clarion call for courtesy expresses a standard requirement of polite manners across western Europe in the long eighteenth century. Gentlemen were expected to send social signals by means of their highly visible headgear. Hats were to be removed with something of a flourish, when greeting men who were their equals and, especially, when encountering their social « betters ». « Hat honour », as it was termed, was also a means for men to demonstrate respect for « ladies » who were not necessarily ranked above them but who were deemed deserving of their chivalrous acknowledgement<sup>2</sup>.

In these encounters, the hat stands as proxy for the head, which, at the apex of the body, signals each individual's social standing. As a result, the relative positioning of people's heads has long been a key component of cultural traditions of greetings, across many different cultures across space and time.

---

<sup>2</sup> See P.J. Corfield, « Dress for Deference & Dissent: Hats and the Decline of Hat Honour », *Costume: Journal of the Costume Society*, 23 (1989), p. 64-79; also transl. in K. Gerteis (ed.), *Zum Wandel von Zeremoniell und Gesellschaftsritualen in der Zeit des Aufklärung, Aufklärung*, 6 (1991), p. 5-18; and on-line in [www.penelopejcorfield.co.uk/british-history-essays/Pdf8](http://www.penelopejcorfield.co.uk/british-history-essays/Pdf8).

Lowering one's head before another individual indicates a modest submission from the « lower » to the « higher ». The greater the disparity in rank, the closer to the ground the head of the « inferior » individual should go. Indeed, in some cultures, as in Imperial China, it was customary for subjects to prostrate themselves entirely before the individual wielding supreme authority<sup>3</sup>.

Moreover, many languages still express this traditional notion of people being ranged on a vertical ladder, with the traditional rulers and great families being « above » and the mass of the population « below »<sup>4</sup>. For example, in Britain today it is customary (although not actually required by law) to refer to the reigning monarch as his or her royal « Highness ». That nomenclature is so automatically used that its literal meaning is hardly ever recalled. Yet in a democracy, all individuals are constitutionally equal, as are, within the European Union, the seven sovereign monarchs whose territories lie within the Union. Hence, while British passports used to announce all Britons as « subjects » of the crown, the terminology was updated in 1949 to define them as United Kingdom « citizens »<sup>5</sup>; and, since the 1992 Maastricht Treaty came into force in 1993, they are concurrently « citizens » of the European Union too.

As will be seen, this legal shift reflected a significant change in the way that people viewed their relationships with each other and the state. But the process of adaptation, across Europe, has been slow and patchy. The notion of citizenship arrived promptly enough in European republics, borrowing the terminology of classical Rome. However, within constitutional monarchies, its advent has proved more intricate. Nonetheless, the march of « citizenship » can be seen as an integral long-term trend within democracies. It is true that, so far,

---

<sup>3</sup> Bodily prostration also features in rituals within many different world religions, when worshippers are paying tribute to divine rather than to human authority.

<sup>4</sup> For essays in P.J. Corfield (ed.), *Language, History and Class* (Oxford, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> Under the British Nationality Act (1948), which came into force in 1949. However, British usage remained hybrid, with references to Britons as subjects still found in legal discourse and, not infrequently, in casual parlance.

no-one has seriously proposed to rename the British monarch as Britain's First Citizen. Nonetheless, within the context of the European Union that case could be argued constitutionally and, *who knows?* that terminology may one day come into use<sup>6</sup>.

Returning to hats in the long eighteenth century, the etiquette of hat honour called for a continuous exercise of social judgment on the part of men in polite society, who wished to be taken for « compleat » English gentlemen. An advice manual like *The Rudiments of Genteel Behaviour* (1737) gave precise instructions as to how, theoretically at least, the deed should be done<sup>7</sup>.

The right Arm must rise to the Hat with moderate Motion sideways ...; and whilst taking it off, let the Look and Action be complaisantly address'd to the Person to whom the compliment is intended; the left Arm should fall neither backward nor forward ... but gently by the Side, ... and holding the Glove in an easy, careless Manner.

Thus too much ostentation would appear obsequious. But too abrupt a gesture might seem rude. Getting it right was a potential source of anxiety, as Samuel Pepys discovered in 1660. When walking in London's fashionable Pall Mall, he passed the Duke of York, the king's brother, who was also Lord High Admiral. Pepys, as a naval civil servant, duly saluted his social and administrative « superior ». But the Duke sent a footman running after Pepys to check his identity. « What his meaning is, I know not », confided Pepys to his diary, « but was fearful that I might not go far enough *with my hat off* »<sup>8</sup>. Had he inadvertently snubbed a royal duke? If so, it was not a great career move.

---

<sup>6</sup> *Princeps Civitatis* or First Citizen was an official title of the Emperors at the start of the Roman Empire. The title was later echoed by Napoleon Bonaparte as First Consul in the French Consulate, 1799-1804.

<sup>7</sup> F. Nivelon, *The Rudiments of Genteel Behaviour* (London, 1737; repr. 2003), p. 29-30. One standard verb for removing one's hat was to « doff » [take off] or, more rarely, to « vail » [lower], as in « to vail one's bonnet ».

<sup>8</sup> H.B. Wheatley (ed.), *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* (London, 1893), Vol. 1, p. 243.

Such considerations were trickier in casual encounters, whereas upon formal occasions the etiquette was usually clear. Even so, giving and receiving salutations always had elements of performance art. Styles in wearing and removing headgear were in practice richly variegated, according to context. In principle, a king always remained hatted, while others uncovered in his presence. (Ambassadors from foreign monarchs were exempt from this rule, as they represented fellow royalty). But, upon occasion, even a king might doff his hat. When visiting one celebrated schoolmaster Dr Richard Busby, Charles II was said to have removed his hat to show the students that the schoolmaster was king in his own schoolroom<sup>9</sup>. Similarly, Oxford and Cambridge dons wore their academic mortar boards when conducting College business, while young men being interviewed for admission (and their anxious fathers, in attendance) stood hatless before them (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Detail from Henry William Bunbury's gentle satire *The Hopes of the Family – An Admission at the University* (1774), in which the male participants indicate their relative roles by their hats, while the candidate's mother retains her conventional female bonnet.

© The Wellcome Library, London.

<sup>9</sup> Corfield, « Dress for Deference and Dissent », p. 71.

Flouting these intricate conventions was sometimes done by mistake. Or it could be done as a social statement. A number of religious radicals refused to take their hats off to « superiors » as a point of principle. They believed in the spiritual equality of all true believers: « we are all one in the eyes of the Lord ». In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain, it was the Protestant denomination of Quakers, known as the Society of Friends, who were the most consistent in refusing hat honour<sup>10</sup>. It was on the basis of that social egalitarianism that they were also among the earliest to oppose slavery<sup>11</sup>. Furthermore, those Quakers who followed the « plain » rule most thoroughly used the intimate Biblical « thee » and « thou » when talking to fellow humans of whatever social rank, instead of the more impersonal « you ». It took some personal courage and/or social obduracy to stand outside the accepted conventions of polite manners. Yet, after all, there was (and is) no law that tells people how they should greet others.

Over time, therefore, customs can adjust to changing circumstances. Such adaptations often take place gradually and almost unnoticeably. Certainly in eighteenth-century Britain there was a slow shift towards greater simplicity and less ceremoniousness in everyday greetings. It was not the case that all the Quaker practices triumphed: the pronoun « you » eventually prevailed over the traditional « thee » and « thou », even amongst the « plain » Quakers<sup>12</sup>.

But the radical religious stress upon simplicity was part of a wider trend which was extending across British society. As the country was becoming increasingly commercialised, urbanised, and then industrialised, with a growing

---

<sup>10</sup> See A.M. Gummere, *The Quaker: A Study in Costume* (Philadelphia, 1901), p. 57-90; A. Lloyd, *Quaker Social History, 1669-1738* (London 1950), p. 9, 20, 22, 30, 67, 80, 94; and P. Furtado, *Quakers* (Oxford, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> B. Carey, *From Peace to Freedom: Quaker Rhetoric and the Birth of American Antislavery, 1657-1761* (New Haven, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> But references to «thee/thou» survive in poetic and religious usages, as well as in some English dialects: see [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thou](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thou).

number of fleeting contacts, people began to favour quicker, less elaborate styles of greeting. Moreover, in a changing and mobile society (where servants frequently wore second-hand clothes given by their employers), it was not always easy to calculate at a glance who outranked whom. It made sense, therefore, to streamline manners.

Contemporary comments about such changes, which can be found throughout the eighteenth century, multiplied further from the 1780s onwards. On a visit in 1810-1811, for example, the American Louis Simond commented that, while people in London were civil in responding to his enquiries, they did not remove their hats, as was done in Paris: instead « a slight inclination of the head, or a motion of the hand, is thought sufficient »<sup>13</sup>.

Deep bowing for men, bending the body over an outstretched leg (a movement known as « making a leg »), was being replaced by a slighter inclination of the upper body or perhaps a nod. The phrase « bowing and scraping » (in French idiom: *faire des courbettes*) accordingly came to be used, not in praise, but to condemn undue servility. Gestures with headgear simultaneously became less extravagant. Gentlemen began to tip their hats lightly, rather than remove them entirely with a huge flourish. And lower-class men giving a mark of respect to their social « superiors » would give a slight pull to their caps – or, if hatless, tug their forelocks – or, if hatless and hairless (or simply careless), simply raise a hand to the head.

A brisk motion of this sort gave symbolic recognition to authority. In military terms, pointing to the head was eventually codified into the stiff-armed salute. Again, there were many stylistic variations. Some regiments saluted with the right-hand, others with the left. Over time, however, military forces gradually standardised their codes, to reduce confusion. In particular, warfare

---

<sup>13</sup> L. Simond, *An American in Regency England: The Journal of a Tour in 1810/11*, ed. C. Hibbert (London, 1968), p. 28.

encouraged systematisation to override regimental traditions. Thus in 1917 the British army decreed that salutes should thenceforth be made with the right hand<sup>14</sup>. The result was that acknowledgments could be made quickly and automatically, without requiring time for social cogitation.

For women, there was a parallel change from the traditional deep curtsy to a quicker, simpler bob, often accompanied by a nod of the head. The old custom required a woman to sink her upright body downwards, whilst holding her skirts out wide in a show of deference and slowly bending her head. It was a manoeuvre that took some skill to do graciously. It long survived at court and at formal events in smart society. But, like all gestures, it was capable of conveying multiple messages. In his novel *Framley Parsonage* (1861), Anthony Trollope imagined a surprise encounter between the old-fashioned Lady Lufton and her pet abomination, the dissolutely grand Duke of Omnium. Neither was pleased. But Lady Lufton used her feminine armoury cleverly. With her entire body-language expressive of deep disapproval, she gave the Duke a studied curtsy, « with a haughty arrangement of her drapery that was all her own ». In reply, the Duke bowed politely and departed, with a subdued smile of derision. Yet the bystanders acknowledged that Lady Lufton had won the silent duel<sup>15</sup>.

It is rare to find individual accounts of changes in their personal styles of greeting, since these things often seemed too trivial to recall. The posthumously published autobiography of Elizabeth Ham does, however, provide an explicit reference. She was the daughter of a Dorset yeoman farmer, of middling status. Of her youth in the 1780s, she recollected that: « I used to curtsy to all the fine-dressed ladies that I met, till told not to do so by the nurse-maid, with whom I generally walked out ». Such behaviour marked her, in her later memory, as « a

---

<sup>14</sup> See [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salute](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salute).

<sup>15</sup> A. Trollope, *Framley Parsonage* (London, 1861; in 1976 edn), p. 280-281.



little rustic, uncouth child »<sup>16</sup>. Of course, that account was retrospective and can't be directly checked. It is interesting, however, on two grounds: firstly, for the nursemaid advising the child about « proper » behaviour, which indicates that live-in servants were often sensitive about their employing family's self-presentation. Secondly, Ham clearly implied that the changing style of salutations was being led by Britain's growing towns and copied more slowly in the countryside. That point fits with other contemporary evidence teasing or chiding « country bumpkins » about their slowness to follow urban fashions, thus tending to authenticate her account which was much preoccupied with questions of status.

### THE ADVENT OF THE EGALITARIAN HANDSHAKE

Alongside the slow attenuation of hat honour, the deep bow and the deep curtsy, there was also an incoming innovation: the advent of the egalitarian handshake. Again, the change was gradual and patchy. In commercial dealings, a handshake was long known as a mode of confirming a deal. The giving of one's hand was a personal pledge, as customary when giving one's hand in marriage. It sealed a personal bond of trust between equals, whilst still retaining a certain physical distance between them. It is comparatively rare to find eighteenth-century graphic illustrations of the handshake. Yet the emblem of linked hands was well known as signifying mutuality, and was often used by benefit societies, early trade unions, and insurance societies (as in Fig. 2)<sup>17</sup>.

---

<sup>16</sup> E. Gillett (ed.), *Elizabeth Ham, by Herself, 1783-1820* (London, 1945), p. 27.

<sup>17</sup> The insurance mark, issued 1758, belonged to sugar refiner, John Bezeley of Rose Lane (later Lime Street), St Anne's parish, Middlesex.



Fig. 2. Lead wall-mark no. 77903,  
issued by the Hand-in-Hand Fire Insurance Company (1758),  
showing the powerful symbol of clasped hands as a pledge of mutual support.  
© Museum of London.

During the eighteenth century, its usage in commercialising Britain began to spread gradually as a standard form of greeting, particularly at first between men, while in republican America by the nineteenth century it was commonplace. Not everyone approved. Frances Trollope, who shared her son Anthony Trollope's close interest in social mores, declared in 1832 that the American habit of universal handshaking between men and women of all classes was far too « forward »<sup>18</sup>. There were also complaints that the intimate touch of palms was unhygienic, especially if adopted by the masses, who were unkindly known as the « great unwashed ». Thus there was often uncertainty as to whether to offer one's hand in greeting to someone of markedly different class background.

Nonetheless, the habit was spreading, not only among men but also between men and women. A literary example from Jane Austen's *Sense and*

<sup>18</sup> F. Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832), ed. R. Mullen (Oxford, 1984), p. 83.

*Sensibility* (1811) confirmed that. The impulsive Marianne Dashwood is shown as an advanced young lady, who does not believe in concealing her romantic sensibilities, even when in the thick of a crowded London party<sup>19</sup>.

She [Marianne] started up, and pronouncing his name in a tone of affection, held out her hand to him. ... [Her erstwhile admirer, John Willoughby, approaches and mutters something inconsequential]. Her face was crimsoned over, and she exclaimed in a voice of the greatest emotion: “*Good God! Willoughby, what is the meaning of this? Have you not received my letters? Will you not shake hands with me?*” He could not then avoid it, but her touch seemed painful to him, and he held her hand only for a moment.

Here Willoughby did just brush Marianne Dashwood’s fingers. But his abrupt behaviour signalled his callous change of heart – and indeed a refusal to accept someone’s outstretched hand is always interpreted as a public snub.

Another literary case occurs in *North and South*. Elizabeth Gaskell’s well-bred heroine Margaret Hale, internally exiled from Hampshire to Manchester, is initially taken aback when the Mancunian businessman John Thornton offers, in « the frank familiar custom of the place », to shake her hand. She was unprepared for the gesture and responded with a cool bow, making him think her « proud » and « disagreeable »<sup>20</sup>. It was a small incident, which indicated the uncertainties in their early relationship. In fact, it was hardly surprising that a degree of erotic tension was attached to the first handshake, since it provided a rare moment (as in a ballroom) for an unrelated young man and young woman of middle- or upper-class background to touch, in a culture which did not countenance hugging, back-slapping, or kissing outside the family environment<sup>21</sup>.

Prohibitions such as these applied especially in polite society. Thus, when in the nineteenth century, some super-chivalrous gentlemen kissed the hands of

---

<sup>19</sup> J. Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), ed. R. Ballaster (London, 1995), p. 167.

<sup>20</sup> E. Gaskell, *North and South* (1854/5), ed. D. Collin (Harmondsworth, 1970), p. 127.

<sup>21</sup> See essays in K. Harvey (ed.), *The Kiss in History* (Manchester, 2005).

powerful ladies in greeting, bowing over the hand as they did so, this approach provoked mixed reactions. On the one hand, the gesture signified courtesy, homage, and even a playful affection. Yet it was also derided as overly effete, theatrical, and « slobbering ». Either way, for most traditionally minded Britons, hand-kissing, like clicking heels when bowing, was definitely and suspiciously « foreign »<sup>22</sup>.

Indeed, it was the custom at some, although not all, European courts during the long eighteenth century. In the Hapsburg-influenced Spanish, Austrian and Neapolitan court ceremonial, people knelt in homage and, on ritual occasions, kissed the monarch's proffered hand. Here an interesting case is reported below by Barbara Tetti<sup>23</sup>: in 1751 when the architect Luigi Vanvitelli was on one knee, bowing to Charles III of Naples, the monarch seized his architect's hand and shook it twice. It was great signal of royal favour (though not equality) and it was appreciated as such. Episodes like this provide a reminder that, in highly formal systems of etiquette, it was open to the highest-ranked person to relax the conventions from time to time: either to show favour to one individual or to provide light relief from oppressive ceremonial. Sustaining high rank in the eyes of the world thus also required judgment, mixing some spontaneity amidst the grandeur. In his prime, King George III of England was known for his cheery greetings (« Hey! Hey! Hey! ») on informal occasions – sometimes to the discomfiture of his startled subjects, as satirist James Gillray slyly suggested in his print *Affability* (Fig. 3). All ranks thus had expectations of « proper » behaviour, though it was open to a « superior » to introduce a touch of casualness.

---

<sup>22</sup> Closely related to hand-kissing is the gesture of kissing a ring on the hand of a high-status individual, whether secular or religious, as an acknowledgement of his (or, more rarely, her) authority. Again, however, that was a custom traditionally regarded as « foreign » by Protestant Britons.

<sup>23</sup> Below, p. xx.



Fig. 3. Detail from James Gillray's *Affability* (1795), showing a bonhomous King George III, dressed informally in country-farmer style, invading the personal « space » of a socially-unnerved agricultural labourer.  
© National Portrait Gallerv.

Social customs and individual preferences were thus sometimes congruent – but sometimes opposed, challenged, or quietly subverted. As a result, there was endless scope for personal adjustments and adaptations. Overall, the advent of the handshake was part-cause and part-response to the attenuation of the traditional etiquette of bowing and curtsying. It was particularly successful as a mode of greetings between fellow men, confident of their equal status. Young radicals among the English intelligentsia in the 1790s, like William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and John Thelwall, would shake hands on meeting, to confirm their fraternal allegiance. It was a conscious choice. Thus when by 1801 Coleridge and Thelwall had fallen out over politics and philosophy, Coleridge declared that the « chasm » between them was too great for them to shake hands, or even to hear each other's words<sup>24</sup>.

Incidentally, as a more relaxed and familiar style came gradually into use, those who insisted rigidly on traditional punctilio came to seem particularly old-

<sup>24</sup> See letter dated 23 April 1801 in E.L. Griggs (ed.), *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Oxford, 1956), Vol. 2, p. 723.

fashioned. Prince William Frederick, Duke of Gloucester – nick-named unflatteringly as « Silly Billy » – was a man of impeccably royal background. He was a great-grandson of George II as well as the nephew and son-in-law of George III. But, perhaps conscious of being close to kingship but not actually wearing a crown, William Frederick demanded exceptional reverence from those around him: gentlemen were not permitted to sit in his presence (even though George III did permit that upon occasion) and fine ladies at social gatherings were required themselves to pour coffee for the Prince, standing attentively whilst he drank<sup>25</sup>.

Overlapping styles were thus part of the picture at any given point in time. Different social circles had their own variants upon convention. It would be wrong to generalise about universal behaviour either from the relaxed mores of the young Coleridge or the grandeur of Prince William Frederick. Hence the story was more complex than a tidy « decline » of one usage neatly matching the « rise » of another. Handshaking between strangers, especially those of unknown or different social status, came only slowly into usage. It is still comparatively rare today between people of widely variant social standing – and is being challenged in the early twenty-first century by new alternatives. Thus high fives, fist bumps, and shoulder hugs can be found today for informal greetings (but may not keep their popularity). And, if in doubt, many people still greet strangers not with a handshake or slap on the back but with a slight nod of the head, which is a shadow of the old deep bow.

Most dramatic evidence that trends can also be overtaken by even newer trends is the relatively recent advent in Britain of the « continental » kiss, also called the « air kiss ». The salutation, which is most common in Eastern and Mediterranean Europe, is directed at the cheek (sometimes both cheeks) or the air close to the cheek. This form of greeting between family and friends is much

---

<sup>25</sup> See *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*: on-line.

more intimate, in terms of intruding into another person's body space, than British custom has traditionally allowed. It too can be executed with greater or lesser heartiness<sup>26</sup>. For example, the continental kiss can follow an initial handshake, or be accompanied by warm bear-hugs. All this variety indicates that adherence to old social hierarchies no longer controls habitual modes of greeting. On a global scale, there is an even greater range of cultural variation. So there is still no consensus as to what may become a universal democratic « best practice », particularly when greeting strangers from very different class and cultural backgrounds. My own prediction is for the successful march of the egalitarian handshake, especially between men, but other non-touching variants, including bowing and signalling with the palms together, are unlikely to disappear.

### **THE SPREAD OF INFORMALITY IN WRITTEN SALUTATIONS**

Given these complex mutations in modes of interpersonal greetings, it was not surprising that there was a parallel slow shift in written salutations. Letters were, of course, written in greater privacy and thus allowed greater leeway for personal idiosyncrasies. In the course of the eighteenth century, many thousands of letters were penned by men and women; young and old; fluent writers and semi-literate beginners; the rich and, increasingly, the poor too<sup>27</sup>. It was the development of efficient postal services which laid the organisational basis for this widespread access to epistolary communication,

---

<sup>26</sup> See the many etiquette websites today, advising on recommended styles of kiss-greetings, to avoid being overly intimate, smudging makeup, and spreading contagion.

<sup>27</sup> See many examples in S. Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers, 1660-1800* (Oxford, 2009); C. Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture* (Basingstoke, 2006); and K. Dierks, *In My Power: Letter Writing and Communications in Early America* (Philadelphia, 2009).

often at a great distance (as in trans-Atlantic correspondence)<sup>28</sup>. And it was the long-term spread of literacy<sup>29</sup> which brought more and more people – women<sup>30</sup> as well as men – into the world of books and writing.

Shared epistolary conventions, long in existence, were thereby diffused socially and enabled to evolve further. These conventions had a pervasive influence (rather as the early twenty-first century is seeing the global emergence of communicable styles for writing emails). Among other things, some broad sense of how to start and end a letter made the task of writing quicker and easier for both authors and readers.

One good reason for relying upon shared cultural conventions was that in the eighteenth century many letters, even if written in relative privacy, were treated as semi-public documents. They were passed around between friends and family, or read aloud for collective commentary. Listening to such missives provided entertainment and interest at domestic gatherings, rather as newspapers were read aloud in pubs and alehouses. For the quick-witted, it could be annoying to hear the contents being drawled at a funereal pace, with pauses between each word and fumbling over tricky handwriting. But for many listeners, in the days before telegrams, telephones and emails, these personal communications were invaluable documents, to be savoured both individually and collectively. They enabled people to network not only face-to-face with

---

<sup>28</sup> S.M.S. Pearsall, *Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Later Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 2008).

<sup>29</sup> Classic studies include: L. Stone, « Literacy and Education in England, 1640-1900 », *Past & Present*, 42 (1969), p. 69-139; R.S. Schofield, « Dimensions of Illiteracy in England, 1750-1850 », in H.J. Graff (ed.), *Literacy and Social Development in the West* (Cambridge, 1971), p. 201-213; and R.A. Houston, *Scottish Literacy and the Scottish Identity: Illiteracy and Society in Scotland and Northern England, 1600-1800* (Cambridge, 1985). See too I.G. Toth, *Literacy and Written Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Budapest, 2000); and D. Vincent, *The Rise of Mass Literacy: Reading and Writing in Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2000).

<sup>30</sup> For the vanguard literary of clergy wives, see J. Eales, « Female Literacy and the Social Identity of the Clergy Family in the Seventeenth Century », *Archaeologia Cantiana* 133 (2013), p. 67-81.



those physically near to them (in the traditional way) but also to contact others at a distance<sup>31</sup>.

The major exceptions in terms of their semi-public status were love letters, especially in the context of clandestine affairs<sup>32</sup>. Yet, even when the correspondents enjoined complete secrecy, there was no guarantee of permanent privacy. Letters could be lost, or stolen, or betrayed. So there was often a degree of caution and social conformity even in writing secret epistles « for your eyes only ».

Tensions between individual preferences and social conformity are thus very evident within letters from this period. It was clear that actual practices were far more variegated and spontaneous than might be expected from the recommendations in contemporary advice manuals<sup>33</sup>. These publications were often very repetitive and conservative. They did not seek to keep track of changing fashions, but frequently copied specimen letters wholesale from one another instead<sup>34</sup>. Hence, while advice manuals and all other instruction documents are important for demonstrating what conventions their compilers sought to uphold<sup>35</sup>, they are not reliable as direct guides to what was actually being written or said.

Greetings in letters from children to parents were relatively simple. Salutations to « Dear Mamma/Mother » and « Dear Papa/Father » were widely found and children in return were addressed by their first names. Things, however, became more complicated when adults addressed fellow adults. It was

---

<sup>31</sup> L. O'Neill, *The Opened Letter: Networking in the Early Modern British World* (Philadelphia, 2015).

<sup>32</sup> S. Holloway, « “You know I am All on Fire”: Writing the Adulterous Affair in England, c.1740-1830 », *Historical Research* (forthcoming, 2015).

<sup>33</sup> See C. Poster and L.C. Mitchell (eds), *Letter-Writing Manuals and Instruction from Antiquity to the Present* (Columbia, SC, 2007).

<sup>34</sup> For more, see below: pp. xx-xx

<sup>35</sup> See essay by Sutapa Dutta, for comparable point: below pp. xx-xx.

an era when surnames were routinely used in speech (especially for men), even among close friends and family. Think of Marianne Dashwood calling her perfidious suitor « Willoughby », not « John ». Think of Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride & Prejudice* (1813) exclaiming « Mr Darcy », not « Fitzwilliam ». And think of her parents who, even after years of marriage, name one another as « Mr Bennet » and « Mrs Bennet ». Indeed, their first names are never revealed throughout the novel<sup>36</sup>.

Epistolary greetings in such a context tended, unsurprisingly, to be formal. Sometimes an individual's full name and title, if relevant, was used. Or, at other moments, the impersonal « Sir » and « Madam ». But over time an element of greater informality began to break through, especially from the later eighteenth century onwards. It is rare to find someone reflecting directly upon these questions. But one remarkable real-life example comes from the young Jacob Patisson (aged 20) in September 1781. Writing to his tradesman father in Essex from his lodgings in Edinburgh, where he was training as a medical student, Jacob Patisson made a direct proposal for a shift in nomenclature<sup>37</sup>:

If you think the word “Sir” at present necessary from yourself to me, I cannot object to it – but it appears cold, & seems to place one at an uncomfortable distance – perhaps time may take off this effect, or it may be an unjust Idea that I form of it, & will soon rectify itself ...

His mixture of deference to patriarchal authority with personal affection was apparently persuasive. The parental reply has not survived, and this son died young, of typhus caught on the Edinburgh hospital wards. But later letters to the father from his younger son, William Patisson, showed that a degree of informality had been accepted. People's chosen styles, however, still varied according to mood and circumstances. Thus in March 1797 William Patisson

---

<sup>36</sup> J. Austen, *Pride & Prejudice* (London, 1813).

<sup>37</sup> P.J. Corfield and C. Evans, *Youth and Revolution in the 1790s: Letters of William Patisson, Thomas Amyot and Henry Crabb Robinson* (Stroud, 1996), p. 19.

wrote twice to his father as « My Dear Sir » but a fortnight later to « My Dear Father ». In response, Jacob Pattisson wrote affectionately to « My dear son » and, in 1793, daringly in view of Britain's hostilities with France, to « *Mon cher garcon* »<sup>38</sup>.

Generally, there was a contrast between social distance, which dictated a more formal epistolary style, and personal and emotional closeness, which encouraged greater informality. Women writing to close female friends were also more likely to use first names, while male friends in this period stuck to surnames. The radical orator John Thelwall thus seemed rather curt in August 1796, when writing to his close friend and political ally Thomas Hardy as « Dear Hardy » and signing his letter « J. Thelwall ». On the other hand, the same letter ended with a rhetorical flourish which was far from the routine conventions: « Civic remembrances to all good Democrats – to [William] Frennd in particular and that walking Benevolence George Dyer [fellow reformers] – Health and Fraternity »<sup>39</sup>.

Thelwall's sending of « civic » greetings to his close allies offers a reminder that many radical reformers in Britain in the 1790s termed themselves not only as « Democrats » but also as fellow « Citizens »<sup>40</sup>. It was a mutual badge of commitment and trust – rather as, in twentieth-century Communist circles, dedicated members addressed one another as « comrades ». Nonetheless, this terminology was distinctly provocative in British ears, as it came from France's 1789 *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*, at a time when the two countries were engaged in prolonged ideological and

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 19-20.

<sup>39</sup> Rare Books and Special Collections, University of Notre Dame, IND., John Thelwall Letters, MSE/MD 3811-1 in [http://rsbc.library.nd.edu/finding\\_aids/und.ks65h990w1h](http://rsbc.library.nd.edu/finding_aids/und.ks65h990w1h): letter from John Thelwall, in Great Yarmouth, to Thomas Hardy, London, dated 24 August 1796.

<sup>40</sup> The term could also be used satirically, as in a young lawyer's strictures on upon « Citizen Thelwall »: see Corfield and Evans, *Youth and Revolution*, p. 138.

physical combat. No wonder that William Pitt's conservative government became alarmed when the radical societies organised their own quasi-parliament or Convention at Edinburgh in December 1793. The delegates, sent by the radical societies, addressed one another as « Citizens »<sup>41</sup>. In fact, these campaigners for the adult male franchise were eventually defeated by Pitt's repression, as well as weakened by divisions and uncertainties amongst their own ranks.

Thereafter, the custom of addressing individuals directly as « Citizens » faded fast in Britain (although the noun still remains the collective term for the inhabitants of cities). That fact highlights the point that innovations in styles of greeting do not necessarily all survive to have a long history. Even today, when constitutionally Britons are citizens, it is still very unusual to find the terminology in use when speaking or writing directly to individuals.

So rather than thinking of changes in terms of one-way streets, with old usages replaced by newer ones, it is more realistic to identify of competing and parallel trends, with circuitous pathways and diversions, some of which terminate as dead-ends. But simultaneously, it is also possible to detect preponderant changes over the long term. From the seventeenth century onwards, Britain saw a gradual shift away from highly formal styles of salutation in written correspondence towards simpler ones. It also saw an even slower and later-starting shift towards the use of first names (outside close family and friends) rather than surnames. A range of conventional formalities survived, as they always do – for example, when today people sign letters « Yours sincerely » whether feeling sincere or not. But, at the same time, there is always scope for variation and innovation, whether long-lasting or not.

---

41 A. Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty: The English Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution* (London, 1979), p. 302.

## CONTINUITIES AND CHANGES IN MODES OF COMMUNICATION

Difficulties abound when studying gestures generally and salutations specifically. Since very much inter-personal behaviour has been historically unrecorded, historians are always working with scanty and imperfect sources. As already noted above, it is particularly hard to find reliable information (as opposed to generalised remarks) about the routine behaviour of ordinary people, whose lives were much less closely scrutinised than those of the great and powerful. The fleeting nature of gestures make them particularly elusive, as acknowledged both by the eighteenth-century founders of gesture-history<sup>42</sup> and by later successors<sup>43</sup>. It is often tricky to date gradual changes. And it can be challenging to differentiate long-term trends from gradual oscillations and individual variants.

All surviving sources, moreover, have their problems and inbuilt biases. Letters and diaries, while vivid, may be self-censored and unreliable. Novels of daily life may be idealised and partial rather than realistic and comprehensive. Autobiographies may be forgetful or exaggerated. Paintings and drawings of people in relationship to others in group portraits may be stylised and were often artificially posed. Travellers' tales might prove untrue.

Above all, prescriptive etiquette manuals and conduct books were socially conservative and, being frequently reprinted without amendment, quickly out-of-date. Indeed, it has been said that tracing the history of manners from

---

<sup>42</sup> See the pioneering study by the Italian antiquary A. de Jorio, *La mimica degli antichi investigata nel gestire napoletano* (1832), transl. in idem, *Gesture in Naples and Gesture in Classical Antiquity*, ed. A. Kendon (Bloomington, IND, 1999; 2002).

<sup>43</sup> See variously W. Tegg, *Meetings and Greetings: The Salutations, Obeisances and Courtesies of Nations* (London, 1877); M. Critchley, *The Language of Gesture* (London, 1939); E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Edinburgh, 1959); and J. Bremmer and H. Roodenburg (eds), *A Cultural History of Gestures: From Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge, 1991).

conduct books is like analysing the realities of driving by reading the *Highway Code*<sup>44</sup> – and the *Highway Code* does at least have official status.

Incidentally, one result of researchers' excess reliance upon official manuals of manners is that filmic and TV representations of eighteenth-century social gatherings too often make the characters bow and curtsy with the gravity of courtiers at the court of St James. Real life was just « not like that ». And even British court etiquette, which was known for its dullness and stuffiness, could be relaxed upon occasion.

Nevertheless, despite the source difficulties and the persistence of antiquated stereotypes, these fascinating themes are not beyond the wit of scholars to study. The eighteenth century is a magnificent period of European history, in that it was a period when change and continuities coexisted and competed – and simultaneously a time when literacy was spreading, generating a range of conscious commentaries upon these processes. Not only complex changes but also continuities are traced in the following essays, which focus in turn upon: the literary cultures of pen and ink; the world of print; and the public forum of theatre, instruction, art, satire, and encounters between global cultures. Ladies and gentlemen, fellow-citizens of the world, please read on ...

**PENELOPE J. CORFIELD**  
**(Royal Holloway, University of London)**

---

<sup>44</sup> P.J. Corfield, « History and the Challenge of Gender History », *Rethinking History*, 1 (1997), p. 250. Also available in S. Morgan (ed.), *The Feminist History Reader* (London, 2006), p. 116-129; and on-line in [www.penelopejcorfield.co.uk/what-is-history?/Pdf6](http://www.penelopejcorfield.co.uk/what-is-history?/Pdf6).