

Cambridge University Press

0521856183 - Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic  
Correspondence, 1688-1820

Eve Tavor Bannet

Excerpt

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PART I

*Letter manuals and  
eighteenth-century letteracy*

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## Introduction

In the introduction to his best-selling letter manual, *The Young Secretary's Guide, or Speedy Help to Learning* (1687), John Hill still thought it necessary to explain the purposes and uses of letter-writing. He stressed the importance of letters to "Empires, Kingdoms, Estates and Provinces." The art of letter-writing "immediately shewed its Serviceableness in the negotiating and managing important Affairs throughout the habitable World, especially in all civiliz'd Nations, where Traffick, Trade, or Commerce, relating to the Profit, Pleasure, or Well-being of humane Societies, take place, or where the Necessity of conversing with one another, though at the greatest Distance imaginable, is requisite and commendable." For families and friends, especially in the English or American provinces, letters were "the maintainer of Love, Amity and Correspondency" and the preserver of human societies across space and time, because they enabled those who were separated to converse in writing and "created the same Effects and right Understanding, as if the Sender or Writer were present."<sup>1</sup>

More remarkable than the need to explain why anyone would want to write a letter, was the function that Hill conceived for letter manuals. Hill suggested that *Secretaries* such as his could enable everyone, and especially provincials, to "save themselves the Charge, if not (as in Country Towns and Villages often happens) the tedious fruitless Search of a Secretary or Scrivener," and allow them to keep their affairs more secret.<sup>2</sup> In other words, Hill made the revolutionary suggestion that printed *Secretaries* could supply the place earlier occupied by human secretaries and scribes and (in the words of another manual a century later) make *Every Man his own Letter-Writer* – and every woman too.<sup>3</sup> Printed manuals would offer

1 John Hill, *The Young Secretary's Guide*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (London, 1796), 2.

2 *Ibid.* and Preface, n.p.

3 James Wallace, *Every Man his own Letter-Writer* (London, 1782).

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the public an abacus or techne that they could use to generate new letters without any intermediary but themselves. Epistolary compendia like Hill's would meet the working needs of "Empires, Kingdoms, Estates and Provinces," and the personal, social and professional needs of those within them, by modeling "Forms and Precedents" for all the letters and legal documents that anyone might need to write, by offering instruction in grammar, spelling, and reading, and by demonstrating the proper language, codes, sentiments and forms of address to be used on different occasions to correspondents of different ranks in letters of different kinds. Printed *Secretaries* would thereby become the means of empowering people of all ages and all ranks. In conjunction with the new academies and "English" venture schools, epistolary compendia throughout the century would disseminate "the sundry measures taken in Inditing Letters" to "the Younger Sort of either Sex." But they also would also serve the needs of those "of Elder Years" who had "Business and important Affairs" to transact but were not yet "fully qualified in this kind," and "prove in some kind serviceable even to the Learned" by offering them the means of epistolary, moral and stylistic "Improvement."<sup>4</sup>

The extension of letter-writing to all manner and ranks of people in late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain and British-America by means of manuals such as Hill's coincided with the expansion of empire, and was its *sine qua non*. The first ten editions of *The Young Secretary's Guide*, which appeared between 1687 and 1699, were contemporaneous with the turn of English merchants from Europe to the Atlantic trade, with the financial revolution of the 1690s, with the Glorious Revolution and beginning of a century of almost constant foreign war, and with a huge expansion of government departments and bureaucracies.<sup>5</sup> They accompanied the reorganization of the Board of Trade and Plantations under the Secretaries of State which made colonization and commerce affairs of state; the institution of new academies and "English" schools, which made letter-writing in the vernacular a fundamental part of the curriculum for the first time, and the establishment of a single national and transatlantic government-run post. Indeed, John Hill, Gent, may himself have been a provincial lawyer seeking a government job in the post office at York.<sup>6</sup>

4 Hill, *Young Secretary's Guide*, Preface.

5 Sacks, *Widening Gate*; O'Brien, "Inseparable Connections"; Dickson, *Financial Revolution*; Brewer, *Sinews of Power*; Stone, *Imperial State*.

6 Robinson, *British Post Office*, 45.

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## Introduction

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These developments, which increased the demand for competent letter-writers in government and administration as much as in commerce and trade, preceded the Union with Scotland of 1707 and what Linda Colley has called “forging the nation” from disparate and culturally distinct counties and kingdoms.<sup>7</sup> Without precluding nation-building in Britain, these administrative, commercial and military developments also subsumed and enveloped it. Empire, in the sense of extension of English government and dominion, proceeded in the opposite direction from that assumed by later, ideologically charged, oppositions between nation (at the center close to home) and “empire” (distantly out there on the periphery).<sup>8</sup> It began in the seventeenth century with colonization and with political and military struggles for dominion far from home, and turned back in the eighteenth century, during intervals between foreign wars, to ensure that England was not vulnerable to her enemies and colonial rivals through other kingdoms in the British Isles. The Scots agreed to Union largely to gain commercial access to England’s colonies, and went on to play important roles both as migrants to America and as actors in the colonial administrative and war machines. Empire, in the narrower sense of overseas dominions, was one of the interests that united the three kingdoms.<sup>9</sup>

The needs of this expanding mercantile empire both at home and abroad appear to have set the terms that enabled *English* manuals to conceive their functions more broadly than merely in relation to the interests of a single rising middle or “middling” trading or commercial class. As we will see, at the upper end of the social hierarchy, English manuals addressed and portrayed the epistolary needs of the lesser gentry, professionals (including military officers) and well-to-do merchants, while at the lower end they served apprentices, clerks, sailors, servants and maidservants. Unlike American adaptations we will examine in Part II, English manuals did not limit their target audiences or the letters they modeled to the needs, concerns and families of tradesmen and merchants;

7 Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837*. England’s colonization of America and the Sugar Islands began a century before Union with Scotland. The “Union of Crowns” at the accession of James VI of Scotland and James I of England did not integrate Scotland and England economically or politically. The Act of Union with Ireland only took place in 1800, almost a century after Hill. For a different view, see Armitage, *Greater Britain*.

8 “Empire, community and realm were treated, to all intents and purposes, as identical.” Miller, *Defining the Common Good*, 66.

9 For changing models of empire, Pagden, *Lords of All the World*; Wilson, *Sense of the People*; Marshall, “Empire and Authority.” For views from the provinces, Calder, *Revolutionary Empire*; Fry, *Scottish Empire*; Green, *Periphery and Center*.

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and well before the Revolution, this “middle class” of successful tradesmen, merchants and professionals was part of America’s political and social elite.

As instruments of public instruction, letter manuals were outgrowths, and translations into the vernacular for popular use, of a longstanding, European-wide, pedagogical system based on the commonplace book, and on what Mary Thomas Crane has described as “the collection and redeployment of textual fragments.”<sup>10</sup> Far from declining at the end of the seventeenth century as early modernists have supposed, the humanist method of pedagogy associated with it was, if anything, given a new lease of life in the eighteenth century by Locke and by Rollin, who were widely influential both in Britain and in America. Rollin’s *Method of Teaching and Studying the Belles Lettres* (1734) taught composition and writing from pre-selected commonplace book excerpts using a method that he rightly claimed was only “an exact account of what has for a long time been constantly performed.”<sup>11</sup> Printed commonplace books inspired by Locke’s directions for their use and organization were still being published and used in England at the turn of the nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup>

Commonplace books were compiled by what Crane calls “gathering” and “framing.” Gathering, which was represented for centuries in the figure of a bee collecting honey from chosen flowers, involved the selection and collection of exemplary extracts from authoritative texts. Framing consisted of the reordering and rearrangement of those fragments under commonplace headings or *tituli* to make the extracts easier to locate and to use. Writing in this system was a matter of reusing and recycling the matter and style of extracts by imitating, rewording, varying, inverting or combining them both on the level of sentiment or argument, and on the level of language and imagery. Compilation by gathering and framing was also still viewed as a form of writing and “as an authorial activity.”<sup>13</sup> The writer-compilers of London’s seventeenth- and eighteenth-century letter manuals, who often signaled that they were themselves products of this kind of learned education, composed the “original letters” of which their manuals consisted by using these methods of imitation, variation, inversion, and correction to produce new letters

<sup>10</sup> Crane, *Framing Authority*, 6. Also Parkes, “Influence of the Concepts”; Moss, *Printed Commonplace Books*.

<sup>11</sup> Rollin, *Belles Lettres*, 64, 67.

<sup>12</sup> Beal, “Nations in Garrison.”

<sup>13</sup> Crane, *Framing Authority*, 138.

from old, to alter matter, change applications, and modernize style. They also expected their most educated readers to treat their manuals as they would the extracts in a printed commonplace book. John Hill, for instance, informed “the Learned” that they might “without any prejudice to their Knowledge and Understanding of higher Matters, gather from the sundry choice Flowers scattered in this Garden of profitable Recreation, some Honey of Improvement to add to their larger Store.”<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, like some important London compilers at mid-century, provincial American printers worked exclusively from pre-printed materials and did not significantly alter individual letters. Instead they used traditional methods of gathering and framing to adapt manuals and to generate “new” letter manuals from old. They used selection, exclusion, rearrangement, recontextualization and other such devices to produce abridged or adapted manuals that were remarkably different in ideological content, in target audience, and sometimes even in style from the London manual or manuals from which they worked. They made compilation a convincingly “authorial activity.”

Late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century letter manuals preserved other traces of their filiation to commonplace books too. All letter manuals created titles for letters, and later for the larger sections that contained them, just as commonplace books did. And from the 1750s on, when manuals had begun to construct themselves as a “copious well-stocked portable library”<sup>15</sup> in addition to their other functions, they frequently used abstract commonplace headings on their title-pages to advertise the range and variety of the subjects addressed by the letters they contained. Henry Hogg’s *New and Complete Universal Letter-Writer, or Whole Art of Polite Correspondence* (c. 1790) and Hogan’s Philadelphia manual, *The New Universal Letter-Writer, or Complete Art of Polite Correspondence* (1804), both listed the “important, instructive and entertaining subjects” that they “particularly” addressed in alphabetical order on their title-pages as: “Advice, Affection, Affluence, Benevolence, Business, Children to Parents, Compliments, Condolence, Courtship, Diligence, Education, Fidelity, Folly, Friendship, Generosity, Happiness, Humanity, Humour, Industry, Justice, Love, Marriage, Masters to Servants, Modesty, Morality, Oeconomics, Parents to Children, Paternal Affection, Piety, Pleasure, Prodigality, Prudence, Religion, Retirement, Servants to Masters, Trade, Truth, Virtue, Wit etc. etc.” Like conventional commonplace book categories,

<sup>14</sup> “Epistle to the Reader.” This epistle was later omitted.

<sup>15</sup> Moss, *Printed Commonplace Books*, 159.

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this mixed catalogue of moral virtues (benevolence, diligence, fidelity, justice, generosity, modesty, prudence, etc.), of topics (business, courtship, love, friendship, marriage, piety, religion, oeconomics, retirement, trade), and of relations (children to parents, masters to servants, servants to masters), was a way of dividing up the world that had implicit ideological content. This mixed catalogue also invited readers to study the letters within as extracts collected and rearranged in commonplace books were studied, namely both for their matter and their manner: as treasuries of information and guides to moral conduct, as well as models of style and expression and loci for arguments or proper sentiments.

Chapter 1 begins by looking at some of the obvious questions that arise as soon as one considers letter-writing and the market for epistolary manuals in these contexts: the state of literacy, education and national and imperial posts, and the relation of letter manuals to them; why printers and compilers thought there was a market for their manuals among members of certain occupations and ranks; why letter manuals used the language of the family and household as well as that of occupation and rank to represent their potential readers; and how they used the old Ciceronian definition of correspondence as “written conversation” to put letter-writing within the reach of a broad readership and to relate letter-writing to everyday conversation and social life.

The focus in Chapter 2 is on the elements of letter manuals. This chapter explores the composition and complex taxonomies common to a large variety of London manuals throughout the eighteenth century. It shows what these taught about letter-writing and social conduct, how they taught it, and the different ways in which they might be read, imitated and used by a public with different levels of education and competence.

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## CHAPTER I

*Empire of letters*

## EDUCATION FOR THE POST

The post office became a single, integrated, government-run service in England only in 1685. The service was extended to the American provinces in 1693, and to post-Union Scotland in 1711.<sup>1</sup> The late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century postal service was still comparatively slow, seasonal, uneven, and where shipping was involved, subject to disruption by war. In the early years, posts only ran a limited number of routes: from London to the outports on the west coast of England and on to Ireland; from London to Edinburgh; and between the major towns on America's eastern seaboard. The mail generally crossed the Atlantic to Britain's American mainland and island colonies on whatever merchant ships were heading that way. Before the postal reforms in America under Benjamin Franklin during the 1750s, it could take as long for mail to travel from New York to Philadelphia as from London to New York – forty-nine days on average, *if* the winds were fair, *if* the season was right, and *if* the vessel happened to be going directly to New York. For much of the eighteenth century, therefore, “remoter areas of Scotland and Ireland were as far from London news as Barbados or Massachusetts,” and news of Boston often reached Britain before it reached Philadelphia.<sup>2</sup> But there had never before been a postal service as comprehensive, and service was expanded and improved throughout the eighteenth century.

Despite obvious shortcomings, the post office created “a communications revolution” that was, in the words of one scholar, “as profound in

<sup>1</sup> Post Office Acts, each of which have also been called the beginning of the Post, were passed by the Cromwellian Parliament in 1653 and by the Restoration Parliament in 1660; but the post office was not a direct source of government revenue and a single system under government control until the dates I indicate. The first Parliamentary Act for the whole system was Queen Anne's 1711 Post Office Act.

<sup>2</sup> Steele, *English Atlantic*, 6. Also Robinson, *Carrying British Mail*; Pred, *Urban Growth*.



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its consequences. . . as the subsequent revolutions that came to be associated with the telegraph, the telephone and the computer.”<sup>3</sup> Historians have identified three major areas that were impacted by this communications revolution. These can also give us some notion of the scope and importance of letter-writing in the empire if we bear in mind that historians of the post tend to attribute to the institution and to its administrative and vehicular infrastructure, functions performed by the written and printed letters it carried. The first area revolutionized by the post was political and administrative. The post “enhanced England’s ability to govern her colonies”; it helped to weld the kingdoms of England, Ireland and Scotland into “an artificial nation”; and it ushered in the fatal era of English administrative centralization.<sup>4</sup> Many of the decisions about where to run English post roads or government mail-carrying packets at sea were made for strategic, political and military reasons by a succession of governments which sought to achieve for Britain absolute dominion over the seas, primacy in commerce, and triumph over its European rivals for wealth and power in the new world. The political and strategic importance of the eighteenth-century post was also recognized by American patriots when they created their own “Constitutional Post” in 1774 as war with Britain approached, and made “the best means of establishing posts for conveying letters and intelligence through this Continent” one of the first priorities of the Continental Congress of 1775. The second area impacted by the post was commerce. Institution of an integrated, government-run postal system preceded and accompanied the great commercial and financial revolutions of the 1690s, and was instrumental in improving the pace and efficiency both of inland and of foreign trade throughout the period. The post facilitated coordination between merchants, wholesalers, manufacturers, retailers and factors in this essentially mercantile empire where new wealth on both sides of the Atlantic grew from overseas trade.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, some said that government supported the American colonial post (which ran at a loss for about fifty years) primarily “for the increase and preservation of trade and commerce.”<sup>6</sup> The third area affected by the communications revolution, and the one that has been of most interest to recent scholars, has to do with the transmission of news and information. Despite time-lags, the post did

3 John, *Spreading the News*, vii.

4 Fuller, *American Mail*, 30; Colley, *Britons*, 56.

5 Gauci, *Politics of Trade*, Holderness, *Preindustrial England*.

6 Quoted in Konwiser, *Colonial and Revolutionary Posts*, 16.

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quite efficiently distribute throughout the British Isles and the British Atlantic, heavily subsidized commercial newsletters and newspapers, as well as royal proclamations and the official government infomercial, *The London Gazette* (all of which either included letters or took epistolary form). The rise and proliferation of the newspaper and with it, of the provincial press, would have been unthinkable without this postal delivery system.<sup>7</sup> The post circulated and disseminated printed information, joining isolated settlements in the British Isles and American provinces into one information network with feedback loops more or less regularly for the first time. Historians have therefore emphasized the role of the post in creating an informed citizenry, in forging “bonds of union” between different regions of Britain and her empire, and in “reinforcing colonists’ identity as British subjects.”<sup>8</sup>

As a carrier of written letters, however, the post office also represented a communications revolution in a more grassroots sense. One of the most remarkable and new things about the late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century postal system was that it was open to the public at large, and more or less within most peoples’ means. The postal rates set by Parliament were altered several times, but one can say that during the first half of this period, carriage of a “single” letter (a letter consisting of a single sheet) generally cost 3 pence, or in America 4 pence, for a letter traveling within sixty miles, double within a hundred-mile radius, and treble within 200 miles. Under George III, the base fee (carriage of a single within sixty miles) went up to 6 pence on both sides of the Atlantic, but was subsequently brought back down. Carriage of a letter between New York and London cost 9 pence at the end of the seventeenth century and 1 shilling in the middle of the eighteenth century. In Britain, the number of letters and packets carried by the post increased exponentially every few years from the last decade of the seventeenth century for, high as they seem, these charges made postage at least for an occasional letter affordable to an unexpectedly wide swathe of the paying population.<sup>9</sup>

7 In America, many postmasters were also printers of newspapers, even when running the post involved financial losses. For the press in the Atlantic world, see Clark, *Public Prints*; Warner, *Letters of the Republic*; Sommerville, *News Revolution in England*.

8 Kiebowicz, *News in the Mail*, 9; Fuller, *American Mail*, 29.

9 Robinson calculates on the basis of post office revenue that the numbers of letters carried rose from around 800,000 in 1697–8 to almost 100,000 four years later; and Ellis notes that revenue rose from £121,800 in 1715 to £186,500 in 1764. However, this only indicates overall trends. The accounting system was poor, and reported revenue did not include the pensions that were taken out of it or the large amounts of franked mail carried gratis. These calculations also involve