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Messengers, Letters, and the Post Office: Private and Public Letter Distribution in Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Britain and its Empire

In his famous 1837 pamphlet calling for Post Office reform, Rowland Hill argued that "the Post Office assumes the new and important character of a powerful engine of civilization; capable of performing a distinguished part in the great work of National education, but rendered feeble and inefficient by erroneous financial arrangements."[1] The notion of the Post Office as an engine of civilization connects it to a variety of other nineteenth-century reforms and state projects, all of which were understood by contemporaries as capable of facilitating social improvement. Hill successfully argued that cheap, uniform, and prepaid postage would encourage enough people to use the Post Office so that its revenue would be secure, and that these reforms would serve to unify and democratize the nation.

The imagery that Hill used to promote his plan for the Penny Post comes clearly out of the industrial era. Victorians were fascinated by engines, machines, and progress. Inventions like the railroad had fundamentally changed their sense of what was possible. The Penny Post, as understood by contemporaries in the 1840s, was yet another marvelous invention that would lead to a better, fairer, and ever more connected world. Hill's reforms to the Post Office did indeed revolutionize the way that letters were written, sent, received, and imagined. The reforms ushered in the Victorian postal age, when observers were not only reliant on letters but were also fascinated by the

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[1] Rowland Hill, *Post Office Reform: Its Importance and Practicability* (W. Clowes and Sons, 1837), 7.

technologies of the post itself. Yet the technological and social changes that made the Penny Post possible began long before the postal reforms of the 1830s and 1840s. My study aims to bridge the gap between eighteenth and nineteenth-century studies of letter-writing, by examining the changes that letter-writing was undergoing around the turn of the century and by connecting questions of technological change with questions of genre and social practice. Studying the post helps explore the question of why the dissemination of information and knowledge through letters became dramatically more public during the early nineteenth century. It also allows us to investigate how notions of private and public shifted during the age of revolution and reform.

While the British Post Office was founded in the seventeenth century – building on earlier methods used by the monarchy for sending and delivering messages – the process by which it became available to the wider public was more gradual. For the most part, until the late eighteenth century, sending and receiving letters through the government postal service was expensive and uncertain. Furthermore, many letter writers correctly assumed that government agents might read or censor their mail. As a result, some people chose to send letters both within Britain and abroad by private messengers or through other unofficial channels. As the British Post Office underwent technological improvements during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, it also began to gain increasing trust from the public. By 1840, when the clamor for postal reform eventually led to the establishment of the Penny Post along with a more standardized system of routes and distribution methods, many people saw a cheap and efficient Post Office as a public right. Postal reformers argued that in an industrial, mobile, and increasingly literate society, the ability to send and receive letters was

essential to maintaining family ties, social harmony, and individual morality. My paper

will analyze the process by which the Post Office gained public trust and began to be

seen as the preferred method of distribution for private letters. It will also address the

situations, particularly in an imperial context, when people continued to use private

channels to send letters well into the nineteenth century.

Unequal Access and the Transition from Private to Public

Thanks to scholarship on postal services around the world, we know that post

offices often began as private messenger services that were then taken over by

governments, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly (as in cases where

governments had a monopoly over the distribution of mail, but outsourced it to private

firms).[2] The broad narrative of transition from private to public, then, can be understood

as a transnational one. In Europe, it was only gradually over the course of the early

modern period that monarchs and their employees began to realize that if they made

government postal services available to a wider population they could raise revenue. But

sending and receiving mail was, in most places, a privilege of elites until the eighteenth

century. One needed education to write, the funds to purchase paper and pens, and the

leisure time away from work or household duties that made writing possible. As Susan

Whyman has argued, during the eighteenth century relatively humble British people

began to understand letter-writing skills as crucial to social and economic advancement.[3]

But even if they could read and write, they could not necessarily afford to send their

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[2] For example, see Jay Caplan, *Postal Culture in Europe, 1500-1800* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), and Antje Richter, *Letter Writing and Epistolary Culture in Early Medieval China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013).

[3] See Susan Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers 1660-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

letters. This was in part because of high postage but also because of the relatively limited reach of formal postal systems. In regions and countries that did not have public postal services at all, or that had ones that did not reach rural areas efficiently, people often used private messengers, usually domestic servants (or enslaved people in places that had slavery) to transmit letters or to supplement some sort of more official postal system.[4] Since not everyone could afford servants, letter-writing was not available to the masses.

In his survey of the history of the British Post Office, Howard Robinson tells us the basic story of how technological change altered the late eighteenth-century postal service. In 1784 postal delivery shifted from letter carriers on horses, who often took circuitous routes along poor roads, to the mail coach. This change itself relied on the improvement of roads after 1760, due to turnpike legislation and particularly the 1773 General Turnpike Act, which took tolls from users to pay for road upkeep, as well as an increasing number of hard surfaced highways. These developments allowed for improvements in stage coach schedules and procedures. As stage coaches began to travel more quickly, people who had been sending their mail via the post began to send their mail illegally by stage coach because they realized that it would arrive more quickly that way. Reformer John Palmer thus made the argument that in order to stop losing postal revenue the Post Office itself should switch to coaches, thereby using the fastest available type of conveyance rather than one of the slowest. He also argued that coaches would be safer and more secure, since post boys could easily be robbed, or in some cases might themselves steal mail. The arguments for the mail coach, much like later proposals for reform of the Post Office, relied on a notion of improvement. As Palmer said, "where

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[4] See Katherine Grandjean, *American Passage: The Communications Frontier in Early New England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

new roads are now continually making, and villages growing into great manufacturing towns, the Post of such a country must be open to continual variation and improvement."[5] Palmer proposed that mail coaches be exempt from turnpike fees and came up with various other ways to make the mail service faster. This change also, significantly, increased postage and therefore revenue for government, and it was this that convinced the government to support the reforms.

The mail coach shortened the time needed to send and receive a return letter in many cases by half. If you sent a letter from London to Bath or Bristol on a Monday you could expect a reply by Wednesday, rather than by Friday as had previously been the case. Mail coaches were indeed now faster than other types of conveyance, which meant that people no longer tried to cheat the system by sending letters in other ways. The debate over the shift to the mail coach was later used as precedent for Rowland Hill's reforms, because it was an example of a radical change that despite initial skepticism had almost immediate success. Interestingly, one response to the new technology was concern about how fast letters were going in mail coaches. In this way, it was similar to later concern over what the railroad would do to the pace of life, or perhaps our own concern over the increasing speed of communications.

Indeed, by the late eighteenth century, the speed and efficiency of postal delivery was impressive when you compare it to our standards today, and this speed was part of what made letter-writing feel so central to so many people's lives. Of course, there were major differences between rural and urban areas. Londoners enjoyed multiple deliveries a day as well as prepaid postage, and they received letters on Sundays. The receiving boxes where people dropped their letters were emptied six times a day, and attempts to

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[5] Howard Robinson, *The British Post Office: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), 130.

make the London Post more efficient, with new routes and more regular districts, were ongoing. Yet until 1773 London was the only town where mail was delivered – elsewhere one had to go to the post office in order to receive mail (many people thought this was faster anyway, and continued to do so until many decades later). Gradually, local penny posts on the model of London's were set up in a number of other towns. Meanwhile, three separate postal services continued to exist: the penny post within London overlapped with the Inland Post Office serving the rest of the British Isles, and with a foreign Post Office. These three services were brought together in a new central post office building at St. Martin's le Grand in 1829, and separate foreign office carriers were abolished in the 1830s.

In addition to speed and efficiency, a major worry of late eighteenth-century observers of Post Office was financial corruption and special privileges, such as franking (free postage for aristocrats and Members of Parliament), earlier deliveries for merchants, and other types of preferential treatment. From the late eighteenth century and up through the period of Hill's postal reforms, the public rhetoric around post office reform was about making things fairer, more transparent, and more democratic. This emphasis on democratization, I believe, is not only connected to anti-corruption rhetoric in politics, but to the increasing accessibility of letter-writing itself. If large numbers of people could read, write, and travel, reformers argued, then they should also be able to afford to send and receive letters and they should be able to do so in a timely manner.

One way to explore the increasing trust in the government-run postal system is to look at fiction. Literary scholars have examined the process by which the eighteenth-century epistolary novel gave way to the nineteenth-century "postal plot." Unlike the

eighteenth-century epistolary novel, in which the contents of letters were central to the plot, the plots of nineteenth-century novels often revolved around the post office itself.[6] Letters certainly do not disappear in nineteenth-century novels, but often, what is important is the process of their transmission. This is not surprising given the Victorian obsession with technology – to many Victorians, the most interesting part of the letter was the mechanisms by which it was sent.

But it is not entirely true that the eighteenth-century epistolary novel ignored the process of transmission. Rather, when transmission affects the plot of epistolary novels, we often are asked to consider the difference between private and institutional transmission. A brief discussion of one of the most famous eighteenth-century epistolary novels demonstrates the point. Frances Burney's *Evelina*, published in 1778, is a novel written entirely in letters. In their letters, the characters make frequent reference to transmission. They express fear about their letters being intercepted, they explain that the timing of major events such as a marriage is dependent on when letters will arrive, and they describe the messengers, usually servants, who are central to the sending and receiving of letters.[7] Like many nineteenth-century novels, *Evelina* includes plots and subplots that revolve around the mishaps of mail delivery. But significantly, those mishaps almost always seem to occur when private messengers are involved rather than (or sometimes in addition to) the official postal system. Frequently, the cause of a delay in mail delivery is unclear, and given the mediation of servants it is often difficult to know whether that delay is deliberate or accidental. Moments in the novel when, for example, "a servant brought me a letter, which he told me had, by some accident, been

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[6] See Kate Thomas, *Postal Pleasures: Sex, Scandal, and Victorian Letters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 36.
[7] Frances Burney, *Evelina,* ed., Stewart J. Cooke (New York: Norton Critical Editions, 1998), 130 and 314.

mislaid" may not be significant in themselves, but they foreshadow the very real problems that can arise when an individual messenger takes matters into his or her own hands.[8] When there is no public oversight, anyone can call the delay "an accident."

Ultimately, the plot of *Evelina* hinges on a letter exchange. After an unfortunate development in their courtship, Evelina writes a letter of explanation to her suitor, Lord Orville, and she hands her letter to a servant. But the servant, who is not entirely trustworthy, is then bribed or otherwise convinced to give it to the rakish Sir Clement Willoughby instead of delivering it to its intended recipient. This allows Sir Clement to respond in the guise of Lord Orville, and the forged letter ruins Evelina's opinion of her actually upright suitor.[9] This plot device happens in the private world of servants and messengers, not in the public world of the post. While Evelina does not discover the mistake until close to the end of the novel, she does express her preference throughout the novel for a more public type of letter exchange. She believes that letters ought to be sent with transparency, and observes: "had this letter been the most respectful that could be written, the clandestine air given to it, by his proposal of sending his servant for my answer, instead of having it directed to his house, would effactually have prevented my writing. Indeed, I have an aversion the most sincere to all mysteries, all private actions."[10] Since the writer of the letter was not who he seemed to be, he of course had to use a servant rather than having the letter "directed to his house" through the postal service; had Evelina directed a letter to Lord Orville the whole plot would have been uncovered.

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[8] *Ibid., 335.*
[9] *Ibid., 208.*
[10] *Ibid., 216.*

The world of private messengers, it is clear, is dangerous, as is shown again when Sir Clement offers to carry a letter for Evelina to her friends at Howard Grove, and she responds: "I wrote to Miss Mirvan yesterday by the post."[11] Since we know that Sir Clement is not to be trusted, the institutional post is presented as the safer way to write. Evelina's decline of his offer demonstrates her independence and moral uprightness; it is part of her general ability throughout the novel to resist Sir Clement's advances. We also see moments when attempts to use the Post Office are stymied, as when Mr McCartney is on his way to send a crucial letter, but he is intercepted and refused passage. "I sealed this fatal letter, and, with a heavy heart, determined to take it to the post-office. But Mr. Branghton and his son suffered me not to pass through their shop with impunity."[12] The neutral and transparent power of the Post Office, here, is undermined by individuals and their domestic situations, while the most trustworthy characters are those who do their best (not always successfully) to make use of the Post Office. My suggestion is that *Evelina* points the way to a society in which the official, government sanctioned post is trusted and valued more highly than the system of private messengers. Clearly these systems overlapped. The Postal reform ended the private system by making postage cheap and available to all, but this did not happen until nearly seventy years after *Evelina* was written. But already in *Evelina* we are repeatedly told not to trust private messengers, who may take advantage of their role to gain their own ends. The shift to a public Post Office meant a shift away from secrecy.

The Campaign for Postal Reform

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[11] *Ibid., 173.*
[12] *Ibid., 191.*

A glance at the campaign for postal reform indicates that by the 1830s many people had accepted the premise that an affordable, accessible, and efficient postal service was something that the government ought to provide for its public. In early-nineteenth-century Britain, postage was paid by the recipient and letters were charged based on distance and on the number of "enclosures" within them.[13] The government saw the postal system more as a potential source of tax revenue than as a public service, and while rates fluctuated (especially due to wars) it is clear that paying postage on a regular basis was beyond the reach of many poor and even middle-income British people.[14] Hill believed that due to its high rates the Post Office was losing money, despite the recent increase in population. He calculated that the "natural" rate of postage was less than a penny per letter, and he estimated that with the increase in volume arising from reduced postage, the system would pay for itself. His argument therefore relied on the idea that more people would use the system if they could afford it, suggesting that he saw his society as one in which people both could and wanted to write letters. Hill's plan was simple: postage for all letters within Great Britain would be paid not by the recipient but by the sender, at the rate of one penny per letter regardless of the distance the letter was to travel and as long as it weighed less than half an ounce. Aristocrats and Members of Parliament would lose their privilege of sending letters for free. The postal reforms would also involve the establishment of new post offices in underserved areas, and an increase in the frequency and geographic reach of rural mail distribution.[15] Hill believed that cheap postage and the increased circulation of letters that would follow it would

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[13] Hence the habit of "crossing" one's letters in order to save paper. Crossing consisted of writing in two directions, one on top of the other, on the same piece of paper.

[14] For the general history of the pre-reform Post Office, see Robinson and Duncan Campbell-Smith, *Masters of the Post: The Authorized History of the Royal Mail* (London: Penguin Books, 2011).

[15] Thomas, 12.

bring not only economic but moral benefits. "The loss to the revenue," he argued, "is…

far from being the most serious of the injuries inflicted on society by the high rates of

postage…. [w]hen it is considered how much the religious, moral, and intellectual

progress of the people, would be accelerated by the unobstructed circulation of letters and

of the many cheap and excellent non-political publications of the present day."[16]

While penny posts already existed on a local level in several cities, Hill

envisioned a national system that would both represent and advance national unity.[17] He

believed that the Post Office would create sympathy and harmony, both because it was a

national system of distribution and because letters, by their very nature, insist that the

reader empathize with another person and imagine oneself in another person's shoes.[18]

Reformers also focused on the increased morality, happiness, and social harmony that

would supposedly come from cheap postage, which would allow the poor to stay in touch

with loved ones, find out about work opportunities, and gain access to moral and

educational publications. It is extremely significant that in 1830s Britain many people

came to understand the postal service as a public right. But like any democratizing

project in that period, the notion of letter-writing for the masses had its critics. The idea

of letters being cheap, accessible, and anonymous made some people nervous. Letter-

writing, then, can be seen as a site of conflict as well as a system of communication and

an impetus to unity. The debate over postal reform was in part about the question of

whether the masses should have access to letter-writing, and whether postal services

should in fact be public. Furthermore, postal reform fit into larger debates about political

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[16] Rowland Hill, 7.
[17] Thomas, 11.
[18] British postal reformers, while initially focused on achieving penny postage throughout Britain itself, were also interested in the wider empire and the world. See Thomas, 23.

reform and social change. The move towards penny postage was essentially a leveling

move that would make it possible for all kinds of people not only to engage in family

correspondence but also to participate in a literate public sphere. Contemporaries saw the

Penny Post as an equalizing measure that "transformed the post from a privilege for the

wealthy to a civic service extended from 'the peer to the peasant.'"[19] It was associated,

in part because of who its advocates were, with a society that was democratizing,

industrializing, and moving towards national standardization. So despite reformers'

constant assertions that postal reform was not a party issue, it is no great surprise that

some Tories opposed it, just as they opposed other projects of government centralization

and standardization.

For many anti-reformers, postal reform was simply the wrong political move. It

was associated with Lord Melbourne's Whig ministry, which was despised by

conservatives and associated with the reformed parliament after 1832. Conservatives

were also worried by the popular agitation (such as petition campaigns) on behalf of

cheap postage. More fundamentally, they saw postal reform as a major economic and

social risk, an untried "experiment" that was simply not worth the gamble. An 1839

Quarterly Review article by John Wilson Croker lays out the conservative point of view.

Like Hill, Croker began with the economic and moved to the moral. But for him the

economic arguments were all on the other side, and caution was needed before giving up

such a large source of government revenue. When he moved to the moral question,

Croker did claim to agree with Hill about "the paramount advantages of a cheap, rapid,

and certain post-communication, to the commercial, intellectual, and social interests of

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[19] Catherine Golden, *Posting It: The Victorian Revolution in Letter Writing* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009), 82.

mankind."[20] But as he went on this claim became less convincing, and his social

prejudices became evident. Croker attacked the scheme from all sides, suggesting that

poor people did not need to write letters, that they were too lazy to write letters, and that

they did not know how to write letters. But he also expressed the fear that letter-writing

could lead to political unrest.

Hill's insistence that more publications would circulate alarmed Croker, who did

not see why Hill assumed that all those publications would be good ones. He asked "is it

the fact that the public appetite, freed from all restraint, will accept only the wholesome

and nutritious, and steadily reject the pungent, the luscious, the exciting?"[21] He also

asked, in response to excitement about the possibilities provided for religious, moral and

charitable societies,

> are there no societies in this country which have *other* than *religious, moral,* and
> *charitable* objects – are there no societies which might wish to spread
> disaffection, irreligion, or faction?...Was the Committee ignorant – we think not –
> that the radicals in politics, and the sectarians in religion, have been the warmest
> advocates – and indeed …the only very zealous advocates for this penny post?[22]

He also suggested that unlike newspapers, which were public, the Post would allow

people to circulate all kinds of secret things:

> through the safe and sacred medium of the post-office, an illegal society may not
> only affiliate itself, …with similar societies in different quarters, but may *force*
> their incendiary publications upon parties who had never before heard or thought
> of such mischief: nor is the power that would be conferred of organizing with
> celerity and security the simultaneous *movements* of the population in distant
> districts to be wholly disregarded; and on the whole we feel that, so far from the
> *exclusive* benefits to '*order, morals* and *religion*; which Mr. Hill and the
> Committee put forward, there is, at least, as great a chance of the contrary
> mischief, and that the proposed penny post might perhaps be more justly
> characterised as '*Sedition made easy.*'"[23]

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[20] John Wilson Croker, "Post-Office Reform" in *Quarterly Review* 64:128 (October, 1839), 521.
[21] *Ibid.*, 530.
[22] *Ibid.*, 531.
[23] *Ibid.*, 531.

This suggests that Croker agreed with the fictional Evelina that secrecy was bad, but that unlike Evelina he did not see an efficient public postal service as useful in preventing secrecy. Instead, the very accessibility of the postal service would allow for secret plots and conspiracies. Ultimately, Croker was worried about the "possible political effect to which the post-office may be perverted."[24] Yet while Croker believed that "the facility given to mischievous publication is a positive evil, dangerous to the very existence of society," he also argued in the area of personal letters.[25] While he said that "letters of friendship amongst the middle and lower classes –[would be] a great advantage – a great increase to individual happiness, and in some cases, perhaps, a preservative from evil by maintaining the family tie;" he also believed that "even this advantage will not be unmixed. Will clerks write only to their fathers, and girls to their mothers? Will not letters of romance or love, intrigue or mischief, increase in at least equal proportions?"[26]

The Empire

We can see that the distrust could go both ways. Evelina was suspicious of private mail delivery because of the potential for abuse, while Croker was suspicious of the Post Office precisely because it was egalitarian and available to all. There were also people who distrusted the Post Office for the simpler reason that it did not always successfully deliver letters. Many people in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Britain and its colonies therefore used unofficial channels to send their letters.[27] The use of private

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[24] *Ibid.*, 571.

[25] *Ibid.*, 532.

[26] *Ibid.*, 532.

[27] See Suanne Sinke, "Marriage through the Mail: North American Correspondence Marriage from Early Print to the Web," in Bruce S. Elliott, David A. Gerber, and Suzanne M. Sinke, eds., *Letters across*

messengers to send letters lasted much longer when it came to overseas correspondence, if only because creating reliable postal infrastructure was more difficult when the distances were long and when colonial authorities had limited reach over the territories they claimed to be ruling. Eve Tavor Bannet tells us that "the letter mail carried by the post was therefore only a part, and most likely quite a small part, of the whole correspondence circulating in the empire and the nation."[28] Furthermore, letter-writing helped to develop infrastructure even as it relied on it. In their book about migrants' letters, Bruce Elliott, David Gerber, and Suzanne Sinke suggest that "the cycle of correspondence prompted by immigration, along with the flood of international business communications, assisted over the course of the nineteenth century in giving birth to modern postal systems and to the postal conventions that have allowed for *mail,* the commodified form of postal communications, to circulate across the globe relatively unimpeded."[29] So while Rowland Hill argued that a better postal service would lead to more letter writing, the opposite could also be true.

British postal reformers, while initially focused on achieving penny postage throughout Britain itself, also hoped to extend cheap postage beyond British shores. Their rhetoric about migration suggests that they saw the empire as the nation writ large, and they believed that cheap communication could serve to unite both nation and empire. But the experience on the ground was more complicated. Since the Australian colonies were among the most distant places to which nineteenth-century British people migrated,

Broders: The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 77 and 80.

[28] Eve Tavor Bannet, *Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1688-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 13.

[29] Bruce S. Elliott, David A. Gerber, and Suzanne M. Sinke, eds., *Letters across Broders: The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 3.

they provide many examples that demonstrate the lack of reliability in the post. These examples indicate the very important role of technology in shaping the contours of people's correspondence. They also suggest that not everyone had equal access to government postal services. Suzanne Sinke points out that it is always important to ask "to what extent infrastructure, in the form of communication systems and education, creates opportunities or sets limits on making personal connections across space and borders."[30] The infrequency and uncertainty of the mails between Britain and its colonies in the era of postal reform are reflected in the detailed discussions about how letters were to be sent and replied to, and the high level of awareness about ships coming and going. How to direct the letter, who to entrust it to, and when to send it were all topics that took up space on precious paper. The mail was so uncertain that it was common for people to test it before sending anything of value or even before sending a longer letter. The convict Margaret Catchpole wrote in 1809 (in an era when there was almost no "public" mail service between Britain and Australia), "i niver Cold venter to send aney thing until such a time as I Can receive a Letter from you my good Ladey."[31] As late as 1854 there was still uncertainty about the reliability of the mail. Michael Hogan, an emigrant to Australia, wrote to his brother in Ireland, "My Dear Brother, I have written to you about eight weeks since and sent a draft for thirty pounds. For fear of a disappointment with the first I now send you the other part which you will understand is for the same sum the first was for if you received it."[32]

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[30] Sinke, 75.

[31] Margaret Catchpole to Mrs. Cobbold, 8 October, 1809. State Library New South Wales, Margaret Catchpole Papers, 1801-1870, 16. Available at http://www2.sl.nsw.gov.au/archive/discover_collections/history_nation/justice/convict/MargaretCatchpole/catchpole.html

[32] Quoted in David Fitzpatrick, *Oceans of Consolation: Personal Accounts of Irish Migration to Australia*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 170.

Emigrants in general spent a great deal of their time in letters asking people to write to them, but some people seem to have been especially vulnerable when it came to receiving replies. Convicts, for example, enjoyed only limited movement in the Australian colonies, so there was no guarantee that they could go collect a letter if it arrived for them.[33] Catchpole made frequent references to the fact that she had written before without getting an answer: "My dear uncle and aunt you must well think what a Comfort it would Be for me to hear from you all as i her englent is in a ver Bad Stat - and this is the fouth time of my wrighten."[34] Catchpole went on to provide a detailed breakdown of her letter-writing woes:

> Fust i sent you a Letter by the ship i com in and the next was the Glatton and the next was the Calcutter - hopping that i should a had a Letter Long Before this. Time hear is Long - i's a nof to mak me go out of my Mind to se so maney Letters Com from London and poor i cannot git no not one - i all wayes thought that Mrs Cobbold would a sent me one Befor this time - But i hop my Dear uncle you will not neglect me…for i am very unhappey to think that i cannot hear from you and my Aunt and all my Dear Cusanes.[35]

In addition to letters, emigrants and their correspondents exchanged keepsakes, pictures, newspapers, and money, as well as useful things such as paper on which to write letters. If a package contained something valuable, there was even more reason for senders to trust private individuals who they did not see as likely to open and confiscate mail. The

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[33] It is also possible that friends in Britain may not have wanted to keep up a correspondence with a convict.

[34] Margaret Catchpole to Uncle and Aunt Howes, 20 December, 1804. State Library of New South Wales, Margaret Catchpole Papers, 1801-1870, 5. Available at http://www2.sl.nsw.gov.au/archive/discover_collections/history_nation/justice/convict/MargaretCatchpole/catchpole.html

[35] *Ibid*.

discussions of sending and receiving parcels could be lengthy. Catchpole continued for

an entire page about the boxes that had been sent back and forth and the items that had

been stolen or had failed to arrive at their destination:

> honored madam on the 08 of august I received my Cedar case that Captain
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> prtichard should a brought it is all most a year a goo sinces he landed the troops
>
> hear and mrs palmer my worthy good friend took … of it in her owen stoor room
>
> till I could goo …. My self and when I heard of it I set of and walked all the
>
> way… and it is fiftey miles from Richmond hill to seddney when mrs palmer that
>
> good Ladey Cold not think where it Cold a binnall that time But your Letter
>
> madam put all ….mindes very happey a Bout it …it give me great happiness
>
> when I found you received the Birds Quite safe and every thing that you sent me
>
> my good Laddey was very saf and delightfull packed up and…thousen thanks for
>
> them I niver can Be thankkfull a nof to you for it.[36]

These detailed discussions of mail getting lost and found again bring to mind the

postal plot. Lost letters and the resulting misunderstandings drive love affairs and human

tragedies in novels, but true stories of the Post Office affecting people's lives in serious

ways also abound in the nineteenth-century British Empire. Tina Picton Phillipps relays

the story of Susannah Francis, who received a letter in Britain from her husband Thomas,

a convict who had arrived in New South Wales in 1818. She responded "I had almost

gave up that I should ever hear from you more, and that you had forgotten me and your

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[36] Margaret Catchpole to Mrs Cobbold, 1 September 1811. State Library of New South Wales, Margaret Catchpole Papers, 1801-1870, 20. Available at http://www2.sl.nsw.gov.au/archive/discover_collections/history_nation/justice/convict/MargaretCatchpole/catchpole.html

Children, or that you were number'd with the Dead."[37] Although he claimed to have

written more than the one letter to her, she claimed to have never received them, and

added "I should have written before this but was at a loss to know how and where to

direct."[38] In her letter she promised to come to him: "if I could be obtain leave or find

the Means I would not loose one moment and be the bearer of this myself."[39] But as far

as we know her letter never got to him. As a convict, he moved around New South

Wales to work for different employers and his address continued to change. He may

never have known that a letter was waiting for him at the Post Office or that his wife was

anxious to join him, or even whether his children were alive or dead.[40]

   While mail service certainly became more regular and efficient by the middle of

the nineteenth century, Michael Hogan made references to the mail that suggest the

infrequency of correspondence even in the 1850s. He wrote to one of his brothers, "If you

hear from My Brother James send me word. I might have an opportunity of writing to

him as there are a great many vessels from here to America," and "she told me she meant

to send money to have her sisters come out. If they are Coming out you might send a

letter by them along with one by post and then I am sure to get either."[41] We see that

even mid-century people used unofficial means to communicate instead of relying

entirely on the government postal service.

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[37] Tina Picton Phillipps, "'These are but items in the sad ledger of despair,'" in Lucy Frost and Hamish Maxwell-Stewart, eds., *Chain Letters: Narrating Convict Lives* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2001),146.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid, 147.
[40] Ibid, 146.
[41] Quoted in Fitzpatrick, 171.

Whether and when people receive letters clearly affects their perception both of the postal system and of their own geographical mobility.[42] To engage in correspondence in the nineteenth-century British Empire, you needed to be literate or to be able to pay a professional letter writer, and you needed to be able to purchase paper and ink. And finally, you needed a functioning postal system or some alternative way to send letters, and an address to ensure the safe arrival of a letter, which might have been difficult for convicts and others whose movement was not under their own control.[43] While lost mail was an issue for stationary people as well as for migrants, and while difficult times such as war always meant disruptions to the mail, Elliott, Gerber, and Sinke say that "the…story of progress in communications, of fewer lost missives, as seen in the histories of national postal systems, still required a caveat of possible loss, perhaps more prevalent for migrant populations, whose mobility, different linguistic and cultural skills regarding correspondence, and at times legal status, made them more susceptible to lost letters."[44] What is clear is that in the context of postal uncertainty, many people would write multiple letters before receiving a reply. People referred almost constantly to past letters: when and if they arrived and what might have happened to them. People waiting for letters faced a constant nagging question about whether their correspondent was choosing not to write or whether the postal system had simply failed them.

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[42] See Elliott, Gerber, and Sinke, 8.

[43] See Bruce Hindmarsh, "'Wherever I go I whill right to you'," in Lucy Frost and Hamish Maxwell-Stewart, eds., *Chain Letters: Narrating Convict Lives* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2001), 175. There are also examples of convicts relying on other current or former convicts for safe transport of their letters, which may be because of the social networks that emerged in convict society but may also have to do with convicts' awareness of their specific obstacles to letter-writing.

[44] Elliott, Gerber, and Sinke, 8. For the similar difficulties that modern undocumented migrants face due to sudden changes of address, see Sinke, "Marriage through the Mail: North American Correspondence Marriage from Early Print to the Web," 89.

As many scholars of epistolary culture have reminded us, letters in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Britain were both written and read communally, and were sometimes also published in newspapers and guidebooks, thereby complicating the division between private and public.[45] For less literate people writing and reading letters communally was a necessity, as it was for people who had trouble affording postage and paper.[46] Letters regularly included additional letters to be handed to others or messages to be passed on.[47] Catchpole asked her correspondent, "madam pray Be so koind as to Leet docter Stebbenes hav that sid of the Letter," and in another case, "My Dear Uncle and aunt pray Giv my Lov to my Dear uncle and aunt Leedder and all my Cusanes - and for Gods sak and for my Sak Leet all that is Liven see this Letter."[48] If people preferred that their letters not be circulated, they might specify that in the letter, suggesting that privacy was not the default and that letters were sometimes intended for wider audiences.[49] Most emigrant letters, like other letters, were about domestic news rather than broad themes of emigration, but they also provided information and sometimes propaganda for particular

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[45] See Elliott, Gerber, and Sinke, 9; and Rebecca Earle, ed. *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-Writers, 1600-1945* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 7.

[46] See Daiva Markelis "'Every Person Like a Letter': The Importance of Correspondence in Lithuanian Immigrant Life," in Bruce S. Elliott, David A. Gerber, and Suzanne M. Sinke, eds., *Letters across Borders: The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 108. Markelis, in her study of Lithuanian migrants' letters, points out that helping neighbors, or parents, write letters was part of immigrant community life, and sometimes this process could also play a role in maintaining family cohesion in the context of assimilation in a new culture. Markelis, 118 and 120.

[47] Also see examples in Helen Brown, "Negotiating Space, Time, and Identity: The Hutton-Pellett Letters and a British Child's Wartime Evacuation to Canada, in Bruce S. Elliott, David A. Gerber, and Suzanne M. Sinke, eds., *Letters across Borders: The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 239.

[48] Margaret Catchpole to Mrs. Cobbold, 21 January 1802. State Library New South Wales, Margaret Catchpole Papers, 1801-1870, 2. Transcript available at http://www2.sl.nsw.gov.au/archive/discover_collections/history_nation/justice/convict/MargaretCatchpole/catchpole.html

[49] David A. Gerber, "Epistolary Masquerades: Acts of Deceiving and Withholding in Immigrant Letters," in Bruce S. Elliott, David A. Gerber, and Suzanne M. Sinke, eds., *Letters across Borders: The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 149.

destinations that was often shared widely beyond the recipient."[50] Letters certainly

played a role both in encouraging and discouraging further emigration. Angela

McCarthy, who looks at letters traveling in both directions between Ireland and New

Zealand during the nineteenth century, observes that "prior to arrival in the colony,

images of New Zealand mesmerized the migrant's mind. Such perceptions, invariably

shaped by emigrant letters, returned migrants, emigration agents, and newspaper reports,

also influenced the intending migrant's friends and family."[51] Letters, along with other

sources, included propaganda to show that New Zealand was a civilized, godly,

financially sound, and comfortable destination.[52]

The fluid line between public and private is perhaps most notably demonstrated

by the very common practice of reprinting letters in the press. Charles Dickens and

Caroline Chisholm, in their 1850 article "A Bundle of Emigrants' Letters," suggested that

"These 'simple annals of the poor,' written for no eyes but those to which they were

addressed, are surely very pleasant to read, and very affecting."[53] Their emphasis on the

authenticity and the emotional significance of the letters captures some of the public

appetite for migrants' letters. While historians have raised many questions about the

authenticity, selection, and representativeness of published letters, the very fact that

British readers were hungry for migrants' letters is significant.[54] Published letters helped

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[50] Eric Richards, "The Limits of the Australian Emigrant Letter," in Bruce S. Elliott, David A. Gerber, and Suzanne M. Sinke, eds., *Letters across Borders: The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 60.
[51] Angela McCarthy, "'The Desired Haven'? Impressions of New Zealand in Letters to and from Ireland 1840-1925" in Andy Bielenberg, ed. *The Irish Diaspora.* (Harlow: Pearson, 2000), 273.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Charles Dickens and Caroline Chisholm, "A Bundle of Emigrants' Letters," reprinted in Harry Stone, ed., *Uncollected Writings from Household Words,* vol. 1, (Indiana University Press, 1968), 96.
[54] William D. Jones, "'Going into Print': Published Immigrant Letters, Webs of Personal Relations, and the Emergence of the Welsh Public Sphere," in Bruce S. Elliott, David A. Gerber, and Suzanne M. Sinke, eds.,

market emigration and circulate information, and may have had great influence on potential emigrants and on public perception.[55] They also contributed to the emergence of a public sphere in which empire and emigration were central topics.[56] In his study of letters published in Welsh newspapers in the nineteenth century William Jones says that the practice was a way of "acknowledging demand for news of local people as well as providing reassurance that Welsh institutions were taking root abroad."[57]

How letters made it into the press varied. In some cases emigrants, or their hired letter writers, deliberately sent their letters to publishers, or asked their family members and friends to do so, in order to actively influence public discourses on emigration, to provide useful information, or because they hoped themselves to become widely known.[58] In other cases recipients chose on their own to send personal correspondence to newspapers, while at times editors actually requested letters. If original letters did not survive then it is hard to assess editorial intervention and to analyze the choice of letters for publication. Editors sometimes mentioned letters that they had chosen not to include in the paper, or mentioned details that they had cut out because they believed they were not interesting to the public.[59] In other cases, they may have actually altered letters, or even invented them, in order to produce propaganda for or against emigration.[60] While

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Letters across Borders: The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 175-176.

[55] Ibid, 175.

[56] Elliott, Gerber, and Sinke, 18. Jones points out that the expansion of the press in Wales was associated with industrialization, urbanization, population growth, literacy, and transport, thereby connecting it with postal reform itself. Jones, 179.

[57] Elliott, Gerber, and Sinke, 18.

[58] Ibid, 19. Jones, 187 and 181-183.

[59] Ibid, 178 and 184.

[60] The fact that originals rarely survived "severely limits our understanding of the relationships among the published text, the letter as originally written, and its writer." Ibid, 186 and 183.

published letters included both "private" and "public" news, many editors chose to publish at least some personal information because it brought credibility.[61]

Emigrants may have chosen to send their letters to the press for personal reasons as well. In some cases, they believed that publishing their letters would save them the trouble of writing to multiple people, or would make up for the failure to write.[62] One migrant wrote "I would be grateful if you would allow this letter to appear in the Gwladgarwr as everyone who asked me to write receives this paper."[63] Jones argues that "the published letters…make reference to the writers' desires to reach and maintain contact with as many people in the homeland as possible."[64] Some writers included their own addresses and used published letters to solicit replies from friends. The publication of emigrants' letters can be seen as part of a broader effort by newspapers to promote emigration and to provide useful information about whether and where to emigrate; often letters were published next to advertisements for emigration agents and shipping companies, for example.[65] But it is also clear that published letters had wider appeal beyond those who wanted to emigrate. In a context in which nearly everyone knew someone who had emigrated, many people were interested in reading migrants' letters.[66] This suggests that the question of public and private goes beyond the issue of how the letter is being sent. Rather, the very notion of a private or personal letter is challenged in a context where global travel brings infrastructural and financial constraints on letter-writing.

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[61] Ibid, 186. In some cases the letters had traveled to multiple destinations. Jones mentions a letter from Australia that was first printed in the United States and then reprinted in a Welsh newspaper. Ibid, 181.
[62] Ibid, 187.
[63] Quoted in ibid, 188.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid 180 and 187.
[66] Ibid, 189.

Correspondence was clearly necessary for the maintenance and prosperity of empire, so there was an incentive for the government to run postal systems that functioned smoothly and were affordable.[67] Yet the Post Office and the public were not always in agreement about priorities. Details of imperial postal rates and routes often became sources of public disagreement. In 1843, at a moment when the Post Office was highly visible to the public due to the process of reform and various internal disputes, British letter writers with family and friends in the colonies of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific were shocked by instructions issued by the Post Office to the effect that letters going through Bombay to "China, the Australian settlements, New Zealand, the Mauritius, or other places beyond the territories of the East India Company" would need additional postage that could only be paid by intermediaries in Bombay itself.[68] They were told that "Letters for, intended to be sent by the overland mails, through India, must be addressed to the care of correspondents in that country…they will otherwise be detained at Bombay for payment of the transit and ship letter postage due to the Indian Post-office for their conveyance to their destination."[69] As the *Times* pointed out,

> The appearance of the above has created great surprise, not to say indignation, in
> the city. It involves a declaration that all persons who may not have
> correspondents in India are to be utterly debarred from communicating with their
> relatives and friends in those places which are without the Company's limits. The
> merchants are not much affected by it, as they have correspondents to whom they
> can direct their letters; but a multitude of persons whose letters would be purely of

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[67] See Eve Tavor Bannet, ed., *British and American Letter Manuals*, Volume 1 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2008), xiv.
[68] *Times,* 3 May, 1843.
[69] Ibid.

a domestic nature are most cruelly prevented from writing to those for whose

safety and prosperity they feel the deepest interest. The relations of the English

now in China, of the emigrants in New Zealand, while they know that their

situation is fraught with danger, cannot address a single line to them if they have

not formed a connexion with Bombay, or some other place in India.

The paper went on to explain that "the parties who have friends abroad would rather pay

a trifle more than find their letters stopped altogether," and "never was a declaration

made with less regard to the wants of the public."

Another sarcastic response captures the public outrage. The *Morning Chronicle*

noted, "the authorities have taken the precaution to acquaint the many persons who have

friends in China, New Zealand, and Australia, that any letters which they may address to

such friends will still reach their destination, provided only that every writer adopts the

simple, easy, and obvious expedient of appointing an agent in Bombay to pay the postage

claimed by the east India Post-office for forwarding the letter!"[70] And then, to reinforce

the sense of the Post Office being completely out of touch with reality the paper went on:

Out of St. Martin's-le-Grand "no man, no woman, no child," would ever have

dreamt of gravely telling a poor widow, whose sons are laboring in Australia – a

merchant or banker, whose interests may be affected by the difficulty… - or any

of the thousands of our countrymen whose hopes, fears, and affections, - are

centered in the distant settlements which are…most speedily approached through

India – that the advisable mode of collecting this postage was by compelling each

of them to find a correspondent at Bombay, for the sole purpose of paying the

necessary threepence! To minds in which the last glimmering of commonsense

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[70] *Morning Chronicle*, 4 May, 1843.

had not been extinguished by the routine of the Post-office, it might have occurred

to collect these threepence here by prepayment, and hand them over to the Indian

government, which would probably have been ready to receive the money by an

agent situate at no greater distance than the East India House.[71]

This story ended with a victory for the public: only a few days later the Post Office

retracted its notice about the Indian mails.[72] A writer for the *Worcestershire Chronicle*

argued, "public opinion was never more powerful than at this moment."[73] Most

observers saw the dispute over postal routes as closely connected to the larger debate

about postal reform; proponents of reform at home also believed that the mail should

travel freely, affordably, and easily around the rest of the world.

Conclusion

As my paper has suggested, there continued to be a blurry line between private

and public. Once the notion of the Post Office as a public service had been widely

accepted, it was difficult for that Post Office to go back to private methods, as the

controversy over the Bombay mail suggests. The idea that all letter-writers needed to

find their own private intermediaries in Bombay was met with outrage from the public

who at this point understood the inherent inequality in relying on private individuals

rather than a public service accessible to all. Not everyone had equal access to private

services, and the people who were less likely to have that access were the poor, and

significantly, those whose letters were of a personal nature rather than a business or

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[71] Ibid.

[72] At least one newspaper defended the action of the post office and argued that the Indian government would do what it wanted to regardless of the efforts of the Post Office. See *Morning Post*, 5 May, 1843 and 10 May, 1843.

[73] *Worcestershire Chronicle*, 23 August, 1843.

public nature. While this may not have been seen as a problem in the eighteenth century, by the mid-nineteenth century it was. This in itself suggests an important change, although perhaps not a surprising one. In an age of democratization, letter writing had become one among a number of things that was seen as a public and more or less universal right. This shift relied on a recognition of dramatic social changes that made the masses more literate and mobile than ever before.

One of the ironies is that as private letters came to be sent through a public service, this public service came to be seen as protective of individual privacy. While a private messenger could always open a letter or in some other way act indiscreetly or betray the public trust, the government had come to be trusted enough so that its own long lasting role in censorship and snooping had become less offensive to most people. Scholars of letter writing have reminded us that despite our modern association between letters and privacy, this association is not universal or inherent. During the period that I have examined, privacy could be understood both as positive and negative, and was associated not only with intimacy but also with secrecy, a lack of transparency, and even corruption. As letters became cheaper and more accessible due to increasing literacy along with decreasing paper and postal costs, letters could also become more private, since there was no longer as much need for letters to be shared or communally written among family members and friends. It took far longer for this to happen with overseas letters than with letters traveling within Britain. But ultimately, privacy became more of the norm, and the privacy of people's letters simultaneously came to be understood as deeply connected to the ways in which those letters were transmitted, and the access that people had to a reliable process of transmission. Making letter-writing available to the

masses meant providing a public service that crossed both social and geographical

boundaries.