



SURVEY AND SPECULATION

Fleeting gestures and changing styles of greeting: researching daily life in British towns in the long eighteenth century

Penelope J. Corfield*

Department of History, Royal Holloway, London University, Egham, Surrey, TW20 0EX, UK

*Corresponding author. Email: penelopecorfield@gmail.com

Abstract

Researching the history of daily greetings is challenging, because references are casual and scattered through many sources. Nonetheless, some broad trends are apparent. In eighteenth-century Britain, the old tradition of deep bowing and curtsying was slowly attenuating into a brisker touching of the cap or head (for men) and a quick bob (for women). Yet that transition was not the whole story. Simultaneously, a new form of urban greeting, in the form of the handshake, was emerging. The strengths and weaknesses of many different sources are here assessed, including novels, plays, letters, diaries, etiquette books, travelogues and legal depositions, as well as artwork. Strategies for analysis are identified, with a warning against generalizing from single references in single sources. Finally, the emergence of the handshake among the middle class in Britain's eighteenth-century towns gives a clear signal that socio-cultural change does not invariably start at the 'top' and 'trickle down'.

Historians of the quotidian have to be patient detectives who put together many scraps of evidence to form a big picture.¹ There are no large central archives that collect material on fleeting matters, such as gestures and interpersonal greetings. Nonetheless, people's behaviour in daily life has many fascinating and important ramifications, as already indicated by pioneering collections of essays.²

¹This survey is dedicated to the indomitable urban historian, Vera Bácskai, a good friend who loved detective stories as well as historical archives. Her close interest in daily life in towns both large and small was an inspiration, as was her determination that interpretations should not be mangled to fit a pre-determined theory. Among her studies of urban history, see esp. V. Bácskai, 'Small towns in Eastern Central Europe', in P. Clark (ed.), *Small Towns in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1995), 77–89; and *eadem*, *Towns and Urban Society in Early Nineteenth-Century Hungary* (Budapest, 1989). For an overall appreciation of her life and intellectual impact, see P.J. Corfield, 'Honouring Vera Bácskai, 1930–2018', in www.penelopejcorfield.com/monthly-blogs/109 (Jan. 2020); and Hungarian translation in C. Sasfi and Á. Tóth (eds.), *A város örök. Tanulmányok Bácskai Vera emlékére* (Budapest, forthcoming).

²See variously J. Bremmer and H. Roodenburg (eds.), *A Cultural History of Gestures: From Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge, 1991); K. Harvey (ed.), *The Kiss in History* (Manchester, 2005); M. Braddick (ed.), *The Politics of Gesture: Historical Perspectives (Past & Present suppl. 4, 2009)*; J. Walter, 'Body politics in the

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The difficulties with sources should thus be seen as a challenge to historians, rather than as a deterrent. Accordingly, this survey, which forms part of a continuing research project, offers both a critique and a celebration of many types of evidence commonly used by urban historians. This discussion does not assume, by the way, that manners and mores in the countryside were static. Yet the focus of this survey is urban, because the social flux was at its most intense in the growing towns – and was impacting upon daily modes of greeting.

Knowledge of the human experience makes it evident that people in all eras did all manner of intimate things – from eating, drinking, defecating, waking, sleeping, having sexual encounters, giving birth, meeting others, feeling well and falling ill, and so on, all the way to reaching the point of death – about which there are very few direct and subjective accounts before the advent of mass literacy. Historians can, however, take comfort that, when studying the quotidian, they are studying things that *must have happened*. That observation applies to the study of interpersonal greetings. People very rarely wrote down how they acknowledged their close family, friends, acquaintances, business partners, distant strangers and so forth. All the same, they met and greeted people constantly, even if they did not say so.

The discussion looks briefly at the broad picture of changing styles of greetings in British towns in the long eighteenth century before assessing the variety of sources, with their characteristic strengths and weaknesses. And it concludes by reviewing the patchwork strategy of assembling a composite picture from numerous items of scrappy evidence.

Eighteenth-century greetings in flux

Particularly in the growing towns,³ styles of greeting in the long eighteenth century were in notable flux. That long-term trend underpins the first methodological warning. It is tricky to generalize from but one source, not only because styles of greeting were changing but also because different families, religious groups, age groups and regions had their own diverse patterns of behaviour, and because there were characteristic differences in emphasis between rural and urban styles.

In general, however, the big picture suggests that during the long eighteenth century there was a two-part transition. In the first place, the old convention of ‘hat honour’ (bowing) from men and the deep curtsy from women was slowly attenuating into a brisker touching of the cap or head (for men) and a quick, light bob (for women).⁴ At the same time, the second, parallel, trend saw the crystallization

English Revolution’, in S. Taylor and G. Tapsell (eds.), *The Nature of the English Revolution Revisited* (Woodbridge, 2013), 81–102; C. Jones, *The Smile Revolution in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Oxford, 2014).

³R. Sweet, *The English Town, 1680–1840: Government, Society and Culture* (Harlow, 1999); P.J. Corfield, *The Impact of English Towns, 1700–1800* (Oxford and New York, 1982); R. Harris and C. McKean, *The Scottish Town in the Age of the Enlightenment, 1740–1820* (Edinburgh, 2014); P. Borsay and L. Proudfoot (eds.), *Provincial Towns in Early Modern England and Ireland* (Oxford and New York, 2002); R.A. Butlin (ed.), *The Development of the Irish Town* (London, 1977).

⁴P.J. Corfield, ‘Dress for deference and dissent: hats and the decline of hat honour’, *Costume: Journal of Costume Society*, 23 (1989), 64–79; *eadem*, ‘From hat honour to the handshake: changing styles of communication in the eighteenth century’, in P.J. Corfield and L. Hannan (eds.), *Hats Off, Gentlemen! Changing*

of a new form of urban greeting, in the form of the handshake. It seems to have become especially common among mercantile society, where it marked the confirmation of a pledge. And in the semi-secret world of freemasonry, a special handshake confirmed membership of the fellowship.⁵ Thus, the 'language of hands', which is deployed very variously across many human cultures,⁶ was here being honed into an egalitarian greeting: with right arms gently extended, hands locking (without being roughly seized), eyes meeting and the locked hands cordially pumped up and down together.

These developments were linked, as will be seen; and the old and new styles overlapped. That is, people might over time switch from one form of greeting to the other – or they might come to use the handshake with intimate friends, whilst retaining the bow and removal of the hat for more formal encounters. In general, greeting styles in the course of the long eighteenth century were becoming faster, more streamlined and relatively more egalitarian. Or, to put the same point the other way round, interpersonal styles of interaction were becoming less stately, less elaborate and less hierarchic.

One example from the parallel case of written greetings indicates the difficulty of putting precise dates to quotidian changes. In September 1781, a young student named Jacob Pattisson, who was a trainee doctor 'walking the wards' in Edinburgh, wrote to his Essex tradesman father, Jacob Pattisson senior, as follows: '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.'⁷

It was a striking message, indicative of a wish to negotiate a more informal parenting style from a loved paterfamilias. The father's reply has not survived, although he clearly did not object. Interestingly, both before and after this request, the son was switching from 'My dear sir' to 'My dear father' and then back again to 'Dear sir'. (Close reading of the letters does not suggest any particular reason for this chopping and changing.) And his younger brother, William Pattisson, similarly veered in the 1790s between addressing Jacob Pattisson senior as 'Sir' and 'Father'. Thus, while this middle-class dissenting family, living in the small Essex town of Witham, was evidently moving from an old-style hierarchic model towards a more intimate and overtly affectionate mode of address, there was no once-and-for-all switch.

Hence, one surviving letter on its own cannot be taken as a definitive guide to all usages; and people cannot be assumed to be entirely consistent from day to day. Gradual changes in styles of greetings include oscillations and variations around the trend. Of course, it manifestly cannot be assumed that changes in written greetings exactly matched changes in one-to-one physical greetings. Yet it is worth citing

Arts of Communication in the Eighteenth Century / Arts de communiquer au XVIIIe siècle (Paris, 2017), 1–30.

⁵M.C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons, and Republicans* (London, 1981); D. Moore, *A Guide to Masonic Symbolism* (Hersham, 2009).

⁶J. Chevalier and A. Gheerbrant (eds.), *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. J. Buchanan-Brown (London, 1969; 1996 edn), 466–70, esp. 468.

⁷P.J. Corfield and C. Evans (eds.), *Youth and Revolution in the 1790s: Letters of William Pattisson, Thomas Amyot and Henry Crabb Robinson* (Stroud, 1996), 19.

this particular instance, since it provides rare evidence of an individual's conscious policy and its implementation. And the broad trend, towards greater simplicity and less formality, did eventually influence almost all forms of greeting, outside the purely ceremonial.

Similar questions of typicality or otherwise apply in the case of all other single items of information. In eighteenth-century Perth, for example, it was customary for men to salute the town dignitaries by doffing their hats. Furthermore, failure to provide that courtesy was liable to be punished with a spell in the lock-up. One town baillie there in the mid-1760s was so punctilious in demanding this acknowledgement that the cry: 'Put him up stairs [i.e. into the town gaol], as Baillie Robert says', became a byword in Perth.⁸ That snippet of information is intriguing in its own right. It confirms that the hat-doffing was still customary; that some magistrates were more touchy about their status than others; and that a certain number of townees and visitors were being negligent or casual, although presumably not on a scale that was sufficient to fill the town gaol permanently to overflowing.

However, historians would want to check the urban records to see if this anecdotal evidence was accurate; and, even more crucially, to check elsewhere, to see whether the Perth magistrates' concern was commonplace among Scottish urban dignitaries – or atypical. Was this case symptomatic of a broad regional variation? (Mayors in England do not seem to have been either so punctilious or so punitive.) Or was this behaviour particularly notable in the case of one town baillie who was intent on standing on his dignity – and was, perhaps, being laughed at behind his back?

Either way, the result is significant – but the nature of its significance remains uncertain without further corroborative and comparative data. As historians constantly confirm, understanding the full context is always needed to provide full meaning. And context is often lacking for scrappy evidence about greetings. Hence the need for a critical compositing of fragments from multiple sources.

Multiple sources and their merits/silences

Etiquette books certainly head the list of vital sources, not least for later researchers who are doing background preparation for a historical play or film. Guides and handbooks to polite behaviour were produced in some number during the long eighteenth century; and they manifestly filled a market niche.⁹ People appreciated expert guidance on tricky social matters. And possession of a 'How-to' manual gave reassurance. Moreover, such guides were invaluable indicators of expectations in greeting styles, as well as other points of etiquette.

Nonetheless, there was a huge gap between formal requirements and daily behaviour. Etiquette books constituted a conservative genre. They were slow to change, and, in the eighteenth century, often plagiarized from one publication to another. Like many later guides – to cooking, to dieting, to driving, to exercising

⁸G. Penny, *Traditions of Perth: Containing Sketches of the Manners and Customs of the Inhabitants...* (Perth, 1836), 15–16.

⁹J. Raven, *Publishing Business in Eighteenth-Century England* (Woodbridge, 2014), 180–205.

and to gardening – they were aspirational texts but not accurate renderings of daily behaviour. For example, detailed studies have shown how letter-writing in the eighteenth century was a distinctly fluid and personalized art, which did not conform to the advice of epistolary handbooks.¹⁰

Thus, it was not surprising that equally there were many variations in daily forms of spoken and enacted greetings. Generally, there were cultural inhibitions upon any form of close embracing between men and women who were not closely related, other than when couples were courting (and even then religious conventions applied, if frequently evaded).¹¹

But the dynamics of day-to-day salutations allowed for quite a range of hugs, back-slapping, handshaking and even kissing between non-kin.¹² There were different expectations in different social circles – and, while some Puritan families had strict inhibitions on all forms of physical intimacy, others were more relaxed. In general, people did not write much about their personal preferences. However, one clear instance was provided by the author Fanny Burney. When a young unmarried woman in London, she recorded in her journal that, on one occasion in May 1775, a young man who was a complete stranger gave her a hearty kiss, in full view of the assembled company. It happened at the end of a social evening, when the family had invited friends into the home. Burney's grandmother kissed her as a family benediction 'according to custom'. The other ladies present did the same, which Burney did not expect and found 'disagreeable'. So, for her, even friendly same-sex kissing was not acceptable, even though many of those involved were relatives.

And then the strange young man, unsolicited, gave Burney 'a most ardent salute!'.¹³ He evidently intended the gesture as a public avowal, which he followed the next day with a letter declaring his suit. Burney, however, was both surprised and indignant. She did not reciprocate his feelings; and confided to her journal: 'I wonder so modest a man could dare to be so bold.'¹⁴ Needless to say, the young man's suit did not prosper. The wider point, however, was that people readily broke or adapted conventions, as they thought fit – and as they thought that their company would accept and appreciate.

Advice given in etiquette books should accordingly be understood as referring to the highly formal end of a wide spectrum of actual behaviour. (It is a point which producers of period plays and films should bear in mind. Often they require actors to move and greet one another with the stately grace of courtiers in the presence of a monarch – rather than interacting with the more relaxed give-and-take of ordinary life.)

¹⁰L. Hannan, 'The imperfect letter-writer: escaping the advice manuals', in Corfield and Hannan (eds.), *Hats Off, Gentlemen!*, 53–72; S. Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter-Writers, 1660–1800* (Oxford, 2009).

¹¹W. Gibson and J. Begiato, *Sex and the Church in the Long Eighteenth Century: Religion, Enlightenment and the Sexual Revolution* (London, 2017).

¹²Harvey (ed.), *The Kiss in History*; J. Enfield, *Kiss and Tell: An Intimate History of Kissing* (Toronto, 2004).

¹³F. Burney, *Journals and Letters*, ed. P. Sabor and L.E. Torode (Harmondsworth, 2002), 46: journal entry 8 May 1775.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

Another very different set of evidence is provided by the witness testimony of strangers. Travel accounts can be very illuminating, provided that the travellers were able to view society freshly, without preconceptions.¹⁵ Not all voyagers were equally perspicacious. Some were prone to report platitudes. And there was nothing to prevent travellers from romancing or inventing. But sharp-eyed reporters were nonetheless helpful when noting social interactions that surprised them. Thus, Louis Simond, an American traveller in Europe, went first to Paris and then to London, where he reported in 1810/11 that, while people in London were civil in responding to his enquiries, they did not remove their hats, as was done even in post-revolutionary Paris. Instead, he noted that in England ‘a slight inclination of the head, or a motion of the hand, is thought sufficient’.¹⁶ Simond was here witnessing the attenuation of traditional hat honour. It remains an excellent clue for historians. Again, however, it can be asked whether what he observed was typical behaviour in London, in other large towns across the country, in small towns and in country villages? In reality, evidence is lacking to answer with precision. No doubt there were regional variations; but broad cultural trends were also shared, if slowly.

Other sources of a more personal and intimate nature can then be consulted, if surviving in sufficient quantity, to buttress observations from travellers and indeed from all social commentators. Letters have already been mentioned as a fluid and expressive medium for communication. They are admirable sources for thoughts and feelings. In terms of spoken (as opposed to written) greetings, however, they are less helpful for historians. People generally did not write down precisely how they acknowledged their close family, other relations, friends, acquaintances and strangers, when such things were commonplace – and not likely to interest the letters’ recipients. They were more likely to comment, as did Fanny Burney (in her journal, quoted above), when something strange or unusual happened. But it had to be something more than a fleeting gesture to capture a writer’s full attention.

Diaries, equally, are invaluable sources for many aspects of daily life.¹⁷ Yet they too, for all their immense detail, are often silent on matters like interpersonal greetings. Of course, these personal records vary greatly. There are no rules. Some have a distinctly specialist focus: for instance, there are religious diaries, food diaries, work diaries, travel diaries, military diaries, political diaries, prison diaries and so forth. Nonetheless, these resources share some common features. Overwhelmingly, they tend to concentrate upon everyday affairs. And often they are written in terse, even cryptic, prose. (And it is very common in British diaries to mention the weather.) It is also highly relevant for historians to consider their intended audiences. If

¹⁵C.L. Batten, *Pleasurable Instruction: Form and Convention in Eighteenth-Century Travel Literature* (Berkeley, 1978); C. Thompson (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Travel Writing* (Abingdon, 2015); K. O’Loughlin, *Women, Writing and Travel in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2018).

¹⁶L. Simond, *An American in Regency England: The Journal of a Tour in 1810/11*, ed. C. Hibbert (London, 1968), 28.

¹⁷Staple surveys are A. Ponsonby, *A Review of English Diaries from the Sixteenth Century to the Twentieth Century, with an Introduction on Diary Writing* (London, 1923; repr. New York, 1971); J.S. Batts, *British Manuscript Diaries of the Nineteenth Century* (Totowa, NJ, 1976); C. Huff, *British Women’s Diaries: A Descriptive Bibliography of Selected Nineteenth-Century Women’s Manuscript Diaries* (New York, 1985).

a diary has been written and kept in complete secrecy, perhaps in a secret code for the author's eyes only, the contents are likely to be more candid, including about the author's sexual adventures (or fantasies). But, if there is a risk that a diary might be read by others, then there are undeclared limits; and the contents are usually more discreet.¹⁸ These sources thus need careful winnowing, to detect big pictures amongst a sea of fascinating mundanity. They generally do not describe forms of greeting in close detail. On the other hand, a long sequence of diary entries provides unrivalled insights into a great variety of interpersonal relationships.¹⁹

That said, one further type of life-writing, which often focuses specifically upon themes of self-presentation and interaction with others, is very helpful. The retrospective memoir or autobiography is often written with a desire for self-justification or at least self-validation.²⁰ And such accounts do indeed include references to styles of greeting. Thus, for instance, Elizabeth Ham, a Dorset yeoman's daughter who later became a governess and minor writer, remembered that she was 'a little rustic, uncouth child' in her youth in the 1800s. Her evidence: 'I used to curtsy to all the fine-dressed ladies that I met, till told not to do so by the nurse-maid.'²¹ It is noteworthy that Ham attributed the formal style to old-fashioned country ways – and that, in her recollection, it was the family servant who advised her on how to behave. Her account did not constitute exact proof. Autobiographies are not obliged to be accurate; and memories may be fallible. Nonetheless, Elizabeth Ham's subjective memoir, when put together with other sources, does again confirm a tendency in the long eighteenth century to turn the old styles of deep reverence into quicker, more casual town greetings.

Legal depositions, by contrast, have the advantage of containing witness statements which were intended to be accurate. Of course, it was possible to lie on oath. Yet all parties, whether exactly truthful or otherwise, did their best to make their evidence plausible. Thus, historians can study direct statements from eighteenth-century people about many alleged criminal acts. Such records are characteristically illuminating about interpersonal encounters – and also about the locations and times of day when and where offences took place.²²

Again, however, they are rarely precise about greeting styles. Nonetheless, legal records reveal a world of unruly and unconventional behaviour. Some encounters were enigmatic. Thus, one John Laws, an Essex man, was tried for murder in 1696, after he bit a finger of the deceased, Ruth Haddox. She had been holding her hands behind her whilst buying linen cloth in an alehouse. The jury decided that her

¹⁸For further reflections upon diaries as a source, see P.J. Corfield, 'Foreword', in M. Bird, *Mary Hardy and Her World, 1773–1809*, 4 vols. (Kingston upon Thames, 2020), viii–xi: repeated in each volume.

¹⁹For an extraordinary publishing feat of an extraordinary sequence of diaries, see M. Bird (ed.), *The Diary of Mary Hardy, 1773–1809*, 4 vols. (Kingston upon Thames, 2013) and interpretative essays in *idem*, *Mary Hardy and Her World, 1773–1809*, vol. I: *A Working Family*; vol. II: *Barley, Beer and the Working Year*; vol. III: *Spiritual and Social Forces*; vol. IV: *Under Sail and under Arms* (Kingston upon Thames, 2020).

²⁰W. Matthews (comp.), *British Autobiographies: An Annotated Bibliography of British Autobiographies Published or Written before 1951* (Berkeley, 1955; 1984); J. Burnett (ed.), *Annals of Labour: Autobiographies of British Working-Class People, 1820–1920* (Bloomington, 1974).

²¹E. Gillett (ed.), *Elizabeth Ham: By Herself, 1783–1820* (London, 1945), 27.

²²H.-J. Voth, *Time and Work in England, 1750–1830* (Oxford, 2000).

subsequent death had not been caused by the bite. Laws, who declared that ‘he meant no harm’, was acquitted.²³ Evidently, he had not respected the personal ‘space’ of the unfortunate Haddox. And, equally clearly, Laws’ assault had not been just a playful nip but sufficiently ferocious to have prompted a criminal prosecution after her sudden death. This episode, however, cannot be claimed to manifest any specific historical trend. Instead, it was a reminder of the capacity of body language, to be unpleasantly rough as well as smoothly polite.

If legal evidence was precise, whilst sometimes enigmatic, then the evidence of art was always more playful, allusive and impressionistic. Portraits of individuals, families and groups are wonderful resources for historians;²⁴ but painters were permitted artistic licence. They were not obliged to be accurate. And in fact they often conveyed still scenes, in rather the same way that early photographs in the nineteenth century were consciously posed, because the initial photographic exposure time was so lengthy.²⁵ For historians of the dynamic interplay between individuals when they met, group portraits thus tend not to be very helpful.

Sketches and prints, by contrast, are more likely to convey fleeting interchanges. The artist Thomas Rowlandson was a particularly outstanding and humorous observer of ordinary life.²⁶ He loved to convey the complex nuances of interpersonal interactions. For example, he drew plenty of street buskers and beggars, holding out their hats to passers-by. So there is evidence of group encounters to be found. Nonetheless, extensive research to date has still revealed only very few pieces of eighteenth-century artwork showing the actual details of either a gentleman making a deep bow; or a lady making a deep curtsy; or attenuated versions of those greetings, as styles became more streamlined; or two people shaking hands. In other words, visual records of such interpersonal greetings were not common. It may be assumed that their lack of visual drama and fleeting nature was no encouragement either to artists or to subsequent sales. However, continuing research is yielding further examples – making the methodological point that researching the quotidian is a slow-burn research project, which needs time (often many years) to come to fruition.

Moreover, this survey of sources for studying daily life cannot be left without saluting two absolutely insightful, if still complex, sources in the form of eighteenth-century plays and novels. The products of imaginative literature naturally had no obligation to provide accurate social reportage. Authors’ imaginations were free to roam, as in the case of Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726). During one adventure, Gulliver travels to the land of the giants. There, he is the midget. One of the giant king’s giant Ladies of Honour uses him as a plaything,

²³*Proceedings of the Old Bailey, 1674–1913*, www.oldbaileyonline.org, t16961209–56: trial of John Laws for murder (1696).

²⁴K. Retford, *The Art of Domestic Life: Family Portraiture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven, 2006); *eadem*, *The Conversation Piece: Making Modern Art in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New Haven, 2017).

²⁵B.E. Jones (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of Early Photography* (London, 1981); G. Buckland, *Reality Recorded: Early Documentary Photography* (Newton Abbot, 1974).

²⁶S. Wade, *Rowlandson’s Human Comedy: A Biography of the Regency Artist* (Stroud, 2011); K. Heard, *High Spirits: The Comic Art of Thomas Rowlandson* (London, 2013); J. Hayes, *The Art of Thomas Rowlandson* (Alexandria, VA, 1990).

setting the hapless Gulliver 'astride upon one of her nipples'.²⁷ He recoils from this treatment, as well as from the outsize Ladies' coarse skins and pungent smell. In fact, Swift's satiric imagination does convey its own ambivalent messages about human bodily intimacy – but his ruminations are not to be read in a simple or straightforward way.²⁸ Creative writing comes from within given societies but simultaneously pushes the conceptual boundaries.

Having noted that, however, some equally imaginative literary works do make great efforts at conveying verisimilitude; and their scenarios can provide relevant evidence on daily lives, if read thoughtfully in context. Take plays, for example. How people meet and greet one another often provides humorous or thought-provoking by-play which advances the dramatic action. It is true that dramatists sometimes exaggerated for effect, as did actors. Yet they relied simultaneously upon well-observed familiarity to strike a chord with audiences.²⁹ For instance, plays assembled their casts at breakfast scenes, signalled by the presence of newspapers; or in coffee-houses, where characteristically the characters are 'Smoking and Drinking, News Papers on the Table'.³⁰

Equally intended to be familiar was a specific reference to 'hat honour' in George Farquhar's chaffing and enjoyable comedy, *The Recruiting Sergeant* (1706). One scene, set in Shrewsbury, introduced the question of how much social respect was due to the hero, who is a military officer. His deputy, Sergeant Kite, exhorts the locals with the words: 'Off with your hats! 'Ounds! off with your hats! This is the captain, the captain.' Yet the sturdy rustics – their country affiliation signified by their horticultural surnames – are signally unimpressed. Appletree retorts: 'We have seen captains afore now, mun [man].' Peartree echoes him, also in regional dialect: 'Aye, and lieutenant captains too...I'se keep on my nab [hat].' Then Appletree explains further: 'And I'se scarcely doff mine for any captain in England. My vether's [father's] a freeholder.' That is, he claimed robustly to outrank a mere captain.³¹ Such responses were no doubt familiar for Farquhar, who had spent some time recruiting in the region and wrote from experience.³²

Exchanges like that, when taken in context, were not written to make audiences bristle with indignation at the uppity attitudes of the local population. On the contrary, the scene was intentionally comic. Audiences were invited to laugh knowingly at the intricacies of social negotiation. Upon first meeting, the person of 'lower' status was supposed to remove his hat and bow deeply, while the recipient of this 'hat honour' was expected to nod positively, in affirmation, and perhaps lightly to move his own hat in symbolic reciprocity.

²⁷J. Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, ed. P. Dixon and J. Chalker (Harmondsworth, 1969), 158.

²⁸C.H. Flynn, *The Body in Swift and Defoe* (Cambridge, 1990).

²⁹L. Woods, *Garrick Claims the Stage: Acting as Social Emblem in Eighteenth-Century England* (Westport, 1984); J.D. Canfield and D.C. Payne (eds.), *Cultural Readings of Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Theatre* (Athens, GA, 1995).

³⁰U. Heyd, *Reading Newspapers: Press and Public in Eighteenth-Century Britain and America* (Oxford, 2012), 167–78.

³¹G. Farquhar, *The Recruiting Officer* (1706), ed. J. Ross (London, 1977), 40: Act 2, sc. 3.

³²See D. Roberts, *George Farquhar: A Migrant Life Reversed* (London, 2018); E.J. Heard, *Experimentation on the English Stage, 1695–1708: The Career of George Farquhar* (Abingdon, 2016).

Such moments of wordless mutual assessment happened with everyday frequency in the growing towns. It was far from always clear who, especially among many middling-status citizens, outranked whom. As a result, the eighteenth-century decline of hat-honour in the bustling towns occurred partly for practical reasons as well as because of changing socio-cultural attitudes to rank and hierarchy.³³

Novels, like plays, were often rooted in the quotidian. They also featured regular scenes of meetings, greetings and farewells. One impressive study of pre-Renaissance narratives has already demonstrated how much rich information about looks and gestures can be gleaned from stories which are deeply embedded in their contemporary culture.³⁴ In the case of eighteenth-century novels, the 'yield' of social data depended partly upon the authors' novelistic aims, and considerably upon their powers of social observation. Consequently, Gothic fantasies or science fiction, however enjoyable to read, were not as illuminating about daily life as were romances.

Unsurprisingly, the wryly observant Jane Austen emerges as an outstanding witness to usages and variations in styles of greeting. Her characters are generally life-like, if sometimes presented with a pleasing touch of satire; and they are unfailingly rooted in plausible societies.³⁵ Given that Austen's novels are describing an era of change, they are therefore filled with instances of both the traditional custom of bowing/curtseying *and* the new-style use of the handshake. That latter observation sometimes causes surprise. People object – sometimes quite vehemently – that Austen's characters do not shake hands. But, in certain circumstances, they do.

Dramatic body language cannot be bettered in the Austen canon than the encounter, in a crowded London salon, between Marianne Dashwood, who represents 'sensibility', and the cad, John Willoughby, who has unilaterally dropped their friendship. They have not met for some time; and have had no shared communications. When they unexpectedly find themselves face to face, Marianna Dashwood declares '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?"' In response, Willoughby is at first awkward and then cold. He touches Marianne Dashwood's hand briefly, drops it and turns away. Rejecting someone's proffered handshake is an outright snub; and in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811),³⁶ Austen accurately pinpoints Willoughby's callous evasion.

For historians, this fictional encounter shows that the egalitarian custom of shaking hands between a young man and young woman, both unmarried, was an accepted part of the cultural repertoire by this date. (This comment refers to the handshake between friends, which was becoming increasingly common in the long eighteenth century – not to touching or clasping hands between courting or dancing couples, which has a much older history). Marianne Dashwood was depicted as impulsive and lacking the socially useful capacity to hide her true

³³P.J. Corfield, 'Class by name and number in eighteenth-century Britain', in *eadem* (ed.), *Language, History and Class* (Oxford, 1991), 101–30.

³⁴J.A. Burrow, *Gestures and Looks in Medieval Narrative* (Cambridge, 2002).

³⁵J. Todd, *Jane Austen: Her Life, Her Times, Her Novels* (London, 2019); J.P. Hardy, *Jane Austen's Heroines: Intimacy in Human Relationships* (London and Boston, MA, 1984).

³⁶J. Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), ed. R. Ballaster (London, 1995), 167.

feelings. Yet her request to Willoughby was not considered unthinkable. There was no general recoil in consternation by the surrounding company. Moreover, plenty of other characters in other Austen novels also shake hands. Thus in *Emma* (1816), the relative social outsider, Harriet Smith, was ‘delighted with the affability with which Miss Woodhouse had treated her all the evening, and actually shaken hands with her at last!’³⁷

So a shared manual pledge between two people – not necessarily absolute social equals but meeting on terms of equality – was by this date a normalized pledge of social acceptance. The alleged ‘invisibility’ of the handshake in Austen’s novels – for those who claim not to see it – is thus a case of readers skipping over details which they are not expecting to find. That syndrome is quite common. Many researchers will have had the experience of suddenly spotting significant information in sources which they have consulted many times, without previously having identified anything of note. Hence, a further methodological rule for historians, who are searching for fragmentary references to fleeting gestures, is to keep eyes wide open for every little detail, including unexpected ones; and to reread sources several times.

Composite pictures

Multiple challenges in multiple sources for the study of styles of greeting have been highlighted here. The broad conclusion, however, is not a counsel of despair, but a recommendation of tenacious optimism. Enthusiasm for studying many different sources is also required. And a considerable amount of time. Projects like the study of greetings are ‘slow burn’ ones for post-doctoral work, and are not suitable for doctorates, which these days are expected to be completed in a finite number of years.

Diachronic trends in daily life can best be detected from the interstices of many different records, not from single sources in isolation. Keith Thomas has shown admirably how that can be done with reference to the consolidation of social expectations of polite manners.³⁸ Yet even his magnificent study has remarkably little to say about changing practices of salutation in the course of the long eighteenth century, as those were not his prime concern. So the handshake appears briefly, but without any in-depth commentary on the nature and significance of its spread.

To repeat: the slowly accumulating evidence of transformations in styles of greeting in the long eighteenth century is revealing a process of ‘change within change’. In an increasingly fast-moving urban world, the old-style formal bowing and curtseying was becoming attenuated, although not instantly abandoned. But, more than that, the egalitarian handshake was simultaneously emerging. More remains to be discovered about its social spread. Its antecedents can be seen in sixteenth-century merchants shaking hands to confirm a deal; in seventeenth-century ambassadors shaking hands to confirm a treaty; and in combatants shaking hands at the start of a fight to pledge fair play. And in the eighteenth century, it was manifest but not ubiquitous among some sections of elite society, as well as among the urban

³⁷J. Austen, *Emma: A Novel* (1816), ed. R. Blythe (Harmondsworth, 1969), 55.

³⁸K. Thomas, *In Pursuit of Civility: Manners and Civilization in Early Modern England* (New Haven and London, 2018).

middle and lower classes. As that happened, it marked a complete change in interpersonal style. It incorporated physical proximity and a stylized touching between complete strangers. Various socio-cultural requirements were necessary to allow that to happen: the spread of soap and an expectation of clean hands, for a start.³⁹

Detecting and dating these developments is slow work. When pursuing past styles of greeting, from the casual to the formal, it is essential not to jump to conclusions and not to exclude the unexpected. Scraps of evidence can be fitted together, rather like working on a jigsaw, but without knowing what the result is supposed to resemble. Gradually, a working hypothesis and chronology starts to emerge. Yet it remains salutary to consider whether initial conjectures have been prematurely elevated into certainty, when they should still remain conjectural. So it is good to keep a weather eye always open for contradictory or complicating evidence. And essential not to read any sources with a fixed preconception of what will be revealed.

Lastly and by no means least, the advent of the handshake gives a clear signal that socio-cultural shifts do not invariably start at the 'top' and simply 'trickle down'. That model is still widely repeated. And it has some validity, in that people do often copy the style and mannerisms of social leaders. Yet influences flow in many directions, sometimes contradictorily. For that reason, the pure 'trickle-down' theory, whether in development economics or in fashion history, has long faced criticisms. And there is now scope for a big probing summary of the theory's strengths – and also its limitations.⁴⁰

With reference to eighteenth-century polite manners, for example, Keith Thomas claims that changes were disseminated outwards physically and 'downwards' socially 'from London and the court'.⁴¹ But those undoubted social influencers were not one and the same. On some matters, such as styles of greeting, the practices of London merchants (say) were considerably at odds with strict court etiquette. And by the end of the eighteenth century, the styles of behaviour in the vicinity of the monarch had become specialized – not typical. Instead, the flows of influence ran in many directions. There are 'trickle-up' effects, also known as 'fountain effects'. And there are lateral movements, with customs circulating within specific classes, as well as within religious groups, like the strict Quakers, or private societies, like the Masons, with their esoteric handshakes. In other words, cultural practices percolated in complex patterns. They did not solely trickle 'downwards' nor indeed solely flow 'upwards'.

Mutating styles of eighteenth-century greetings thus present a composite picture. Older aristocratic conventions were being both upheld and updated, while new urban customs were gliding into use alongside. In styles of greeting, there were some contrasts between the social classes – as well as some elements of overlap.

³⁹J. Huggett, *Did They Wash in Those Days: Personal Hygiene, Cleanliness and Washing in the Fourteenth to Seventeenth Centuries* (Bristol, 2000); L. Wright, *Clean and Decent: The Fascinating History of the Bathroom and Water Closet and of Sundry Habits, Fashions and Accessories of the Toilet, Principally in Great Britain, France and America* (London, 1960; and later editions); P. Ward, *The Clean Body: A Modern History* (Montreal, 2019), esp. 18–29, 107–12.

⁴⁰See for examples C.M. King, 'Fashion adoption: a rebuttal of "trickle-down" theory', in M.J. Alexander (ed.), *Dimensions of Consumer Behaviour* (London, 1965), 114–217; and D.W. Harper and J. Seip, *The Trickle-Down Delusion: How Republican Upward Redistribution of Economic and Political Power Undermines our Economy, Democracy, Institutions, and Health...* (Lanham, MD, 2016).

⁴¹Thomas, *In Pursuit of Civility*, 302.

First meetings with strangers entailed a quick process of intense interpersonal negotiation. It kept everyone alert. A wide range of greetings in eighteenth-century towns included: the exigent hat-wearing town baillie of Perth; the many merchants shaking hands to confirm commercial deals; the kissing company in the Burney household, plus the young man who participated too enthusiastically and annoyed the young woman he hoped to impress; the hand-holding dancers at the town assemblies; the street buskers and beggars who held their hats out to passers-by; and the countrymen in the streets of Shrewsbury who refused to doff their hats to a captain. (Those latter were fictional.) Big trends were emerging, not led by monarchs but fostered within urban diversity.

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