

*Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the
Later Eighteenth Century* Sarah M.S.

Pearsall

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‘Letters did count.’ This simple statement justifies Sarah M.S. Pearsall’s excellent book on the letters of (extended) families in the eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Anglophone Atlantic World. These familiar letters allowed relatives distant from one another to ‘question tyranny, to lament domestic and political disorder, to connect households with larger social and political landscapes, to keep bands from loosening in times and places when they seemed most in peril of doing so’ (p. 18). Pearsall analyses the way in which families cast into the ‘ocean of the world’ (p. 54) across the British Isles, North America and the West Indies sought to maintain and develop their personal connections through the use of letters.

This work explores in depth how the creation of the Atlantic World in the eighteenth century affected the family make-up and

how relatives communicated their sentiments to one another. The book uses an extensive array of primary resources and research in order to build a compelling picture of the way in which the development of the British Empire in the eighteenth century impacted on the personal lives of the merchants, colonists and would-be imperialists. The book uses the metaphor of a dangerous 'launching into the ocean', a 'wide Ocean of danger' (pp. 46-7), as the starting point for discussion. Pearsall is keen to show, however, that this hazardous ocean was also the means of connection for the peoples spread across the Atlantic rim. In this way, while members of families could become 'loose fish' lost in the wider *imperium*, their letters kept open the 'line' of contact, a 'line [which] should reach from Greenland to St. Domingo or Nova Zembla' (p. 53), and which maintained close personal relationships across vast distances and kept distant family life alive.

The author seeks to integrate the study of letter writing, domestic affairs, and the political connections forged (and broken) during, primarily, the periods of revolution in the last decades of the eighteenth century. In this way, Pearsall argues that the family played a central role in the development of the Atlantic community at this time and that in order to fully understand the period we must look at such correspondence. This point is clearly argued and supported by an array of primary and secondary source materials.

Pearsall argues that families were able to deal with long periods of separation in a large part due to changing literary devices used in the art of letter-writing. These changes are branched under three

main headings: ‘familiarity’; ‘sensibility’; and ‘credit’. Each of these is explained in some depth and is supported, as is the norm throughout this work, with excellent and illuminating examples. In particular, the author uses examples from epistolary novels – or, letter-writing guides – which were hugely popular in Britain and America at this time. While the focus of the book is Atlantic history, the discussion of the creation of a separate *American* system of letter-writing is very interesting. Pearsall notes that *The Complete Letter-Writer* was republished in New York in 1793 without any changes from the original, English, edition. By the turn of the nineteenth century, however, and with ‘the renewal of hostile relations between the United States and Great Britain’ (p. 71), *The Complete American Letter-Writer* (1807) was written with a preface explaining that ‘its letter models “are not taken from the English books or forms, nor are they copied from the ignorant productions [...] but are obtained from the best American authorities”’ (p. 71). This is a fascinating insight into the ways in which letter-writing culture played a part in the creation of national identity.

These guides allowed the authors of letters to become well versed in the ‘correct’ epistolary formats. ‘Familiarity’ allowed for correspondents to overcome the issues surrounding intrusive politeness (which allowed for ‘decent’ company, as one correspondent noted, ‘*sans ceremonie*’ (p. 59)) while maintaining appropriate levels of intimacy. This ‘familiarity’ allowed for people not connected by blood to develop close relationships and connections, which was particularly important when families had to

be separated and children left in the care of others. This led, for example, to a Scottish family with wide imperial connections in the eighteenth century having to decide on whether a young daughter ought to stay in America with her new 'family' or move back to Scotland, with the adoptive guardian writing 'I look on her as one of my children ... I sincerely love her, & it would be a great shock to me to part with her' (p. 64). The events of the American Revolution forced this separation, but the use of familiarity in letters allowed for two important developments: the creation of new ties of kinship and closeness; and the continuity of emotional intimacy with close relatives across the seas.

'Sensibility' worked in similar ways to maintain emotional intimacy, and allowed letter-writers to convey heart-felt emotions in letters. It replaced an older tradition of appealing to God, and submitting the love of family to a position of importance below the love of 'Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior' (p. 80), with an attachment to the importance of feelings. This new type of letter-writing allowed for women to speak of marriages as friendships - and charts in some way the move away from female subordination and patriarchy - and appealed to a 'feeling heart' to convey emotions. More than that, sensibility demanded that emotions were portrayed through the impact they had on the body and other physical objects (tears of joy or sadness, convulsions, a leaden heart) as it was important to describe the impact such feelings had on the wider world. This device allowed correspondents to bridge the gap of distance when sharing their emotions and feelings, and brought them

closer together, even when far apart. Unfortunately, Pearsall does not tackle the ways in which this change came about – why it appeared and how it developed – or the ways in which rationalism (thinking with the ‘head’, as well as with the ‘heart’) played an increasingly important role in letters at this time.

The last of the three methods, that of appealing to ‘credit’, sheds a different light on the communications of eighteenth century Atlantic peoples. Pearsall focuses here generally on how fathers communicated with distant sons. The use of credit in this way emphasised that young men maintain honour, valour and dignity in their business (and social) adventures when creating a name for themselves in order not to damage the family name. The letters were serious in tone and often castigated sons for their ‘usual idleness and indisposition’ while enforcing that ‘nothing but assiduity and labour can make amends for this ignorance and loss of time [spent in literary pursuits]’ (p. 111). This type of letter was formed from a much wider circle of influence – the Atlantic economy was one built on credit and reputation – and Pearsall argues that the importance of credit penetrated into family life as well as that of businessmen. As a result, fathers often wrote to sons – worried that they might fail in business and lose their position as a ‘Man of Credit’ or a ‘careful as well as an honest Man’ – with ‘scrutiny, scoldings, harangues, and a brutality that coexisted effortlessly, ominously, with a culture of politeness, refinement, self-mastery’ (p. 115).

This work is of an excellent standard and is a very welcome addition to the history of the Atlantic World. While the author has

focused on primary sources, the book could pay more attention to its wider historiographical position, as this has been left somewhat to the background and ought to be remedied. Nevertheless, this work is based on extensive archival research and provides fresh interpretations on the importance of the family in social and political history, on the roles played by different genders in the Atlantic community, and on shifting literary techniques. This book will be of significant benefit to scholars of history, society and literature.

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