

## Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Later Eighteenth Century

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**Reviewer:**

Susan Whyman

Sarah Pearsall has found her sea legs in her analysis of Atlantic families who were launched alone and adrift 'into the ocean of the world' (p. 47). Family members in Britain, the Caribbean, and the American colonies were divided by the Atlantic in a period of revolution and war (1760–1815). Using dark, dangerous metaphors of oceanic travel, she presents her separated kin as 'loose fish' in need of ties and 'lines of authority' (p. 53). Fortunately, hundreds of family letters served as those connecting ties and 'lines'. They also provide her with valuable primary sources. Pearsall is master and commander of their contents as she analyzes the complex life experiences, personal relationships, and linguistic strategies of their writers.

*Atlantic Families* capitalizes on an intense interest in letter writing, as evidenced by books, articles, and special issues of periodicals relating to British, American, and French correspondence. Indeed Pearsall wants us to stop 'thinking of familiar letters as somehow inferior, less political, or less significant texts. Letters did count' (p. 18), she insists, and her book refreshingly confirms this claim.

The ambitious goal of the book is to integrate the domestic, epistolary and Atlantic contexts of her families. 'It is my hope', she states, 'that this study will illuminate the history of the Atlantic, the history of the family, and the history of letter-writing'. Her use of the 'Atlantic' is 'a way of circumventing national boundaries, of correcting exceptionalist narratives (which have particularly plagued American families)' (p. 10). Pearsall's core belief is that families were not just incidental to the growth and maintenance of Atlantic culture, they were central to its development. In order to justify this claim, she uses case studies to illuminate larger arguments about a changing, often violent slice of 18th-century society. In the eyes of this reviewer,

she generally succeeds in these aims.

Pearsall is also anxious to offer a corrective to stereotypes about family relationships, both in the eyes of contemporaries and subsequent historians. Rather than start from conventional models of patriarchy and female subordination, she locates evidence of more complex relationships in languages of sensibility, familiarity, and credit found in letters.

A particular strength of this book is the author's command of primary and secondary sources. The letters that she found cover areas including Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, England, Scotland, Ireland, Jamaica, Bahamas, Grenada, and Barbados. Pearsall supplements and checks their contents by locating other historical documents such as parish records, wills, and settlements that provide background and add perspective. Each new subject and case study is underpinned by a broad reading of secondary sources, which allows Pearsall to set her families in a wider historical context. She also employs literary texts and prescriptive literature including novels, magazines, letter-writing manuals, and printed letter collections.

Most of Pearsall's correspondence was written by an educated, Anglo-American elite that included merchant and planter families. Though she admits they comprise a 'limited stratum of society' (p. 18), her case studies have been carefully selected to show different regions, colonies, and types of chief protagonists undergoing some type of crisis. Furthermore, rare glimpses of the lives and voices of slaves are disclosed in the larger correspondence of their owners (pp. 106–7). They show the importance of family letters in revealing intimate information about people who usually lay outside the boundaries of recorded evidence. Her work thus joins recent studies of letters written by paupers, prisoners, and northern labourers.<sup>(1)</sup> They suggest new ways to consider the extent and uses of popular literacy in the 18th-century Anglo-American world.

To bring order to all of this material, the book first presents unifying themes and background; then it offers particular trajectories in the form of interesting personal narratives. This structure reveals the unity of epistolary practices and conventions across people and places – a fact that evokes continuities when we analyze letters. Yet it also reflects the diversity, imagination, and personal idiosyncrasies that make the genre so valuable. We can thus see the stresses and disorderly lives endured by separated families alongside their shared set of ideals and common epistolary strategies.

The introduction presents the concept of fractured families and discusses both the perils and benefits of Atlantic mobility and distance. Since the Atlantic economy and its colonies demanded separation of kin, members had to forge the family out of factors other than simple co-residence. Connections were sustained by affectionate letters that served as 'lines' of family feeling. Nonetheless, happy endings and reconciliations were often impossible to achieve. Consequently, letter writers developed epistolary tactics that bridged distance, brought hope, and revitalized connections.

Chapters two through four describe the shared ideals of familiarity, sensibility, and credit and show how they were deployed in epistolary language. Familiarity in letters meant more than just expressing intimacy or politeness. It implied a privileged ease and freedom that existed between particular correspondents. Over time, it replaced an older language of formality between wives and husbands, parent and children, as well as friends. But because it excluded as well as included people, it became a 'vexed social space' in practice (p. 65).

At the same time, a culture of sensibility, defined as 'the ability to possess and to display a feeling heart' (p. 84), became intimately embedded in family letters. During the century, a shift in style took place in the writings of both sexes. Epistolary languages of deference and religion were replaced by the language of sensibility, which became the dominant mode. One of the chief ways to express it was by 'writing with feeling' in letters (p. 89). How this change came about, its rise and fall, the means of its measurement, and the co-existence of other styles is not clearly set out. Nor does Pearsall mention the 'language of the head' that accompanied 'the language of the heart' or the desire for plainly-written prose by commercial families. In fact, scholars have located a backlash against the cult of sensibility by the early 19th century, when

sentimental epistolary novels fell from favour.[\(2\)](#)

Yet the language of sensibility did find a natural home in letters, and Pearsall brings new insights by linking it to the fragility of her families. Being a man or woman of feeling, she points out, ‘served as a fantasy for these men and women, in the face of an Atlantic economy, and a political world, in which indifference and even cruelty could be paramount’ (pp. 86–7). The book also shows how women in subordinate positions used the language of sensibility to advantage. Sometimes it brought them agency, as well as relief. Like the language of familiarity, it had origins in the family; then it moved outward into other realms.

Finally, a language of credit coexisted with those of familiarity and sensibility. Defining credit as ‘the right to be believed’ (p. 116), she shows how its fragility was simultaneously a domestic, political, and national issue. The creation and maintenance of Atlantic trade depended upon credit and it was needed to avert ruin on all three levels. But though it took time and effort to build, a reputation could disappear in a moment. When credit was linked to business, it became a masculine trait that could unman those who lost it. What is new here is Pearsall’s claim that the family had important agency in shaping economic cultures of credit. Indeed, the ideal of the man of credit was often first experienced by sons in letters from their fathers. Lest they became prodigal and later fail in business, fathers wrangled, dunned, quizzed, and scolded them with ‘a brutality that coexisted effortlessly, ominously, with a culture of politeness’ (p. 115). Hence market values sat alongside sentiment in family letters.

In the rest of the book, patterns of familiarity, sensibility, and credit are woven into a series of case studies that illustrate how families coped with the Atlantic world. Each one starts with stereotypes and standard explanations that seem plausible, but turn out to be either incomplete or unsatisfactory. Then the dense information in her letters allows her to build up layers of complex analysis. As she uncovers different points of view, we discover hidden motivations and unanticipated types of personal relationships that existed within her families. Finally, Pearsall compares her cases with those found in prescriptive literature and journals. The result is a detailed set of explanations enriched by epistolary evidence.

Chapter five tells the tale of the Parker family that spans Scotland, the Chesapeake, and London. A deep rupture between James Parker and his son Patrick ends with the inability of James to forgive his son, even after Patrick’s tragic death. Pearsall uses this case to probe notions of rigid loyalists and anxious patriarchs and instead focuses on pressures of sensibility and the Atlantic credit system. A supposedly tyrannical father and wayward son are revealed enmeshed in disturbing social and political circumstances. These facts help us to understand the family’s unexpected behavior and relationships.

In chapter six, we see the grim reality of war and empire faced by a separated husband and wife, whose happy reunion fails to take place. Pearsall explains the mystery of why Catherine and Charles Dudley remained apart both before and after the American Revolution in England and New England. Both sexes use the language of sensibility and familiarity to negotiate an uneasy balance between submission and friendship. This rhetoric lets Charles remain a man of feeling, while he pursues masculine prerogatives. It also gives Catherine limited success in asserting female agency. Both writers promised happy kisses amidst scenes of destruction and loss. ‘They could thus avoid the implications of what it meant for a nation to have lost a war against its colonies, for men to have done terrible things because of that war, and for some men never to have come home at all’ (p. 208).

The final scandalous case study shows the pressures on Anglo-Jamaican families in a brutal corner of the Atlantic, and also upon their return to England. John Tharp, a wealthy older husband, unexpectedly forgives his young second wife Ann for adultery with his son-in-law, an Anglican priest. Also treated by Linda Colley in *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh* (3), Pearsall uses this case study in a different way. She employs it to demolish stereotypes of brutal West Indian tyrants as well as the powerlessness of Anglo-American women in the Caribbean. In an analysis of Ann's letters, and those who wrote about her, we see how the rhetoric of sensibility helped scandalous subordinates to temper the authority of the family master. Pearsall finds answers to Tharp's complex behavior in his desire to maintain his family's reputation as English landed gentry for future generations.

Some of Pearsall's attempts to translate micro history into larger arguments are inordinately stretched and extend beyond the reach of her Atlantic world evidence – for example, arguments about the emergence of the modern self. In addition, there is no mention of the impact of religion and its links to sensibility. Yet all of her claims are thoughtful and provoke the reader to test their bounds. Pearsall does show that families were integral to the building and sustaining of the Atlantic world in a society fractured by imperial distance, global wars, and urban growth. In fact, 'family letters helped to make empire possible, bearable, justifiable, and profitable for many' (p. 11). They also helped to shape languages of sentiment and feeling that provided leverage for women and perhaps some benefits for slaves. In practice, 'overblown representations of loving families, perpetuated not only in print culture but also in familiar letters provided a powerfully compensatory ideology of family feeling, one that served to ameliorate the shock and struggles of life' (p. 243).

Pearsall's epilogue about the uncertain survival of letters provokes additional thoughts. Naturally, those from male patriarchs had better chances of preservation in elite families. But chance was not the only factor. Archival marginalia shows that men and women selectively preserved family papers in ways that augmented dynastic reputation. Documents that reflected on the family positively were more likely to be saved, whilst incriminating letters were often destroyed. Furthermore, lower numbers of surviving women's letters that depress perceived rates of female literacy are due to more complex causes. There is evidence that social pressures and ideas of female modesty led many women to burn or deface their correspondence – a fact they freely admitted.

Fortunately, the digitization of local archives and the huge expansion of online genealogical research will undoubtedly unearth an expanded universe of surviving letter writers of both sexes. In all probability, the letter collections we already have represent a tiny tip of the available archival iceberg. A problem for biographers and historians is how to ensure the preservation of emails for future studies like that of *Atlantic Families*. This is important, for as Pearsall warned us: 'Letters do count'. Without their varied viewpoints and intimate revelations, we would miss observing the complex family relationships that marked her Atlantic families. It is fortunate that her 'loose fish' were connected by family letters to the dark, wider oceanic world.

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

## Notes

1. *Essex Pauper Letters*, ed. Thomas Sokoll (Oxford, 2001); Deidre Palk, *Prisoners' Letters to the Bank of England 1781–1827*, London Record Society, XLII (London, 2007); Susan Whyman, *The Pen and the People* (Oxford, October 2009). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Thomas Beebe, *Epistolary Fiction in Europe, 1500–1850* (Cambridge, 1999). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Linda Colley, *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh* (London, 2007). [Back to \(3\)](#)

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