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Charles Wesley as Correspondent

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Epistle and Gospel

The Place of Correspondence in the Eighteenth-century Revival of Religion

Peter S. Forsaith

Over the last two decades or so the optimist/pessimist debate has engaged church historical circles.¹ Was the English church in the eighteenth century at best negligent, at worst moribund and corrupt, in an immoral and decadent age? Or (as I would incline) does it merit a more generous view, that it was far from being all rotten, and should be understood within the tenor of its own times, which had some very positive features. The prevalent view over the last century and a half has been pessimistic, shaped by a Victorian suspicion of the preceding century and fueled particularly by the Oxford movement's negative views of the Georgian church and (from our ground) Methodists who depicted the Wesleys as providential beacons of light in an age of darkness, seeking to revive an almost apostate nation.

A parallel view can similarly be sketched of the postal service. Rowland Hill's "Penny Post" of 1840, with its "penny black" stamp, is popularly the defining moment of British postal history. Before that, the posts were generally slow, spasmodic and unreliable—or so the story goes.² Here too, I am an optimist; I want to show how in the "long eighteenth century," before 1840, the posts in Britain had developed considerably into an efficient and affordable service. Then I want in this article to explore something of how the development of the eighteenth-century postal service was critical to the spread and growth of the Evangelical Revival.

What we know as the Evangelical Revival, however, or maybe refer to as "early Methodism," at the time had no such label. Rather it was a network, or series of networks, with a broadly common ethos and purpose. One word that was current then was "Gospel"—"Gospel" ministers, "Gospel" preaching. Hence my title: "Epistle and Gospel."

The interlinking evangelical networks varied in type and character. Perhaps the most cohesive is that which will be familiar, Mr. John Wesley's "connexion," emerging in the 1740s, a web of "societies" which ostensibly existed within Church of England parishes, joined by Mr Wesley's rules and a quasi-order of itinerating preachers, of which John Wesley was the self-appointed chief executive: the spider at the centre of the web. Akin to that "associational" model, although not so widespread, was the Countess of Huntingdon's connexion. The colossus of the movement, George Whitefield, operated no such systematic orga-

¹ See William Gibson, ed., *Religion and Society in England and Wales, 1689–1800* (London / Washington: Leicester University Press, 1998), 9ff.

² See R. M. Willcocks, *England's Postal History* (London: the author, 1975).

nization with the result that after his death many of his groups survived as independent chapels in “new Dissent.” And there were other groups, such as the Inghamites.

But besides such identifiably “Methodist” bodies was a network of ministers and laity, mostly conformist but some Dissenting, which were influenced to a greater or lesser extent by the movement. There were clergy societies—such as at Elland or Truro, and I have written of one that John Fletcher of Madeley helped to establish around Worcester in the 1760s.³ The movement included those for whom the national church was essential to a cohesive society, and a threat to which was to risk a return to the bloody days of the Tudor and Stuart centuries. It included those for whom the Glorious Revolution signalled toleration of diversity. It included clergy such as Fletcher or William Grimshaw of Haworth, whose “Methodist” leanings were in little doubt; even John Berridge of Everton, or John Newton of Olney; it reached (I would argue) to the archepiscopal throne of Thomas Secker who was tacitly sympathetic. It also drew upon migrant groups from mainland Europe, such as the Moravians, and later developed a transatlantic commerce.

So the question I want to address is quite simple. Could these networks have developed and functioned as they did had it not been for the postal service? For the period of the “Revival” (to use that as shorthand), from the 1730s to the end of the eighteenth century, is coterminous with a significant period in the evolution of the post, together with a parallel growth of transportation systems, on which we shall also touch. For the Victorians, looking back from their new-fangled steam trains, the age of the mail coach or stagecoach was as of a bygone world. Yet the post and the roads were not so bad. Hitherto a neglected subject, the study of the letter, as a vehicle for communication as well as a literary form, has become a subject of growing research and writing, witness two recent books by Clare Brant and Susan Whyman.⁴

To outline the history of the post,⁵ beginning in the seventeenth century, the Royal Mail was first and foremost an intelligence arm of monarch and government. The role of the Post Office was repressive; to control communication, to intercept and censor correspondence which might be suspect. It did not exist to encourage people to write to one another: quite the reverse. Under Charles II there was “a secret room adjoining the General Letter Office . . . [where] employees could open letters, take impressions of seals, imitate writing perfectly, and copy a letter in one minute, using an ‘offset process of pressing damp tissue paper

³ Peter S. Forsaith, “An Eighteenth Century Worcester Association,” in Wesley Historical Society, West Midlands Branch *Silver Jubilee Miscellany 1965–1990* (Warwick, [WHS West Midlands Branch], 1990), 44–50.

⁴ See Clare Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Susan Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers, 1660–1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁵ See Whyman, 2010, 46–71.

against the ink.’”⁶ Hence the development of epistolary origami: the art of folding and sealing a letter to ensure its contents cannot be read by other than the addressee,⁷ and also the development of shorthands and ciphers. Yet despite this the culture of the letter was developing in the late seventeenth century, independent of a restrictive post.

The creation of a London penny-post in 1680 was the first change; limited in scope but challenging the government’s monopoly. People started to write to one another for social, not conspiratorial, reasons. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 ushered in an atmosphere of greater freedom so by the turn of that century a moderately efficient although still state-operated postal service existed which we might recognize as the forbear of that which we know.

The penny-post system operated in London was immensely successful with collections and deliveries up to eight times daily, and letters delivered rapidly and reliably to all corners of the capital. The envy of other capital cities, it also showed what might be possible in the provinces. This metropolitan centralization was broken by Ralph Allen of Bath. A born—and hugely successful—entrepreneur whose quarries supplied much of the stone for the building of Bath,⁸ Allen instituted a system of cross-posts from the 1720s onwards. Hitherto a letter from, say, Exeter to York was routed through London and double charged—for the Exeter–London leg then for London–York. It was a cumbersome system and mail often went astray or was delayed. On March 25, 1735, Charles Wesley wrote from Oxford to his brother Samuel at Tiverton, to tell him that instead of a spring visit to Devon, he had to travel to Epworth:

My Father declines so fast that before next year⁹ he will in all probability be at his Journey’s End & I must see him now or never more with my Eyes.

This letter bears a single postal mark “OXFORD,” and a penned “Z” squiggle indicating receipt of letter and/or payment. This single stamp suggests use of the cross-post, possibly via Bath, and probably reaching Devon on the second day. Tiverton may not have then been a postal town; so letters may have had to be collected from Exeter, twelve miles distant—possibly by a local carrier, who would likely have charged the recipient. Although the post was improving it was still far from the system with which we are familiar.

With the fading of Jacobite threats, more secure governments worked with Allen on improving the extent and quality of the service. The network of postal towns was broadened—Tiverton letters might no longer need to be collected from Exeter. Improvements in roads led to the inception of mail coaches on the main

⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁷ Frank Baker, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 20 (Letters I, 1721–1739) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 68–70.

⁸ See R. F. Neale, *Bath: A Social History 1680–1850* . . . (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).

⁹ The year ended March 31.

routes, although mounted post boys were still the norm besides that. In the 1780s John Palmer, another Bath entrepreneur, instituted fast mail coaches—rapid transit, few passengers (with the mails having priority), an armed guard and the strident distinctive note of the post horn to clear the road ahead, warn toll-gate keepers to open their gates and ostlers to have new horses in readiness for a pit-stop change.

In that time too, streets in towns began to be named, although house numbering really came early in the nineteenth century. Hence the difficulty in determining when the Wesley family actually lived at what is now 4, Charles Street, Bristol.¹⁰ In 1735 Charles Wesley might adequately and confidently address his letter to *The Revd. Mr. Wesley / School-master of Tiverton / Devon*.¹¹ Nearly fifty years later, John Fletcher needed to address his to Charles more specifically at the *New Chapel / City Road / London*.¹²

So in Charles Wesley's lifetime the postal service underwent steady but significant improvement. When he was an undergraduate at Oxford, a letter home to Epworth would be expensive and take more than a week. By his death, a letter from London (costing 4d)¹³ was delivered the following day in Bristol and letter writing and receiving was a focal part of business and social life, especially for a clergyman.

Will Jacob has noted how parish clergy formed a homogenous grouping in society. The development of a learned ministry in the seventeenth century meant that they might be the only university-educated people in their parish. They were also not only religious leaders and exemplars but had an important social, even political role. In a national church they effectively functioned as civil servants, acting as registrars for baptisms, marriages and burials, as well as administrators of the poor laws, but more informally as channels of communication between government and people, capital and provinces, elite and populace. So "They did not quite belong. They needed to be able to personify and practice the faith and values they preached, and to be worthy of emulation."¹⁴

Correspondence both with and within this emerging "professional" grouping mattered a great deal to maintain cohesion. Clerical correspondence probably accounted for a considerable proportion of the "familiar" letters conveyed by post. This is perhaps the point to suggest some definitions, for what is meant by "the letter" in eighteenth-century Britain is by no means straightforward. Items

¹⁰ Robert W. Brown, *Charles Wesley Hymnwriter, notes on research carried out to establish the location of his residence in Bristol during the period 1749–1771* (Bristol: the author, 1993).

¹¹ Charles Wesley to Samuel Wesley [2], March 25, 1735 (in Oxford Centre for Methodism and Church History, WHS Library).

¹² John Fletcher to Charles Wesley, Dec. 19, 1782 in Peter S. Forsaith, ed., *Unexamined Labours* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2008), 349.

¹³ British currency was then divided into the pound (£ or l), shilling (s), penny (d).

¹⁴ W. M. Jacob, *The Clerical Profession in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 306.

conveyed by the postal service might be divided broadly into two groups: official and business correspondence and “familiar” (what we might call personal or private) letters. There was, though, another entirely distinct kind of letter; the polemical letter, which Clare Brant examines at length.¹⁵ Examples of this may include the exchanges between John Wesley and “John Smith” in 1745–46, or Fletcher’s 1771-initial defence of Arminianism, the “First Check” *In five letters to the Hon and Rev Author of the circular letter* (i.e. Walter Shirley).

In both these examples can be seen something of the ambiguity of the genres. The letters of Wesley and “Smith” were designed for public consumption, even to appear in the press. Likewise Walter Shirley’s circular letter inviting Calvinist sympathizers to a 1771 meeting in Bristol to coincide with Wesley’s conference. While in both these cases these were actual letters, in that there was a sender and a recipient, and they were presumably consigned to the mails, they were hardly “private” correspondence. But Fletcher’s “five letters” went further in that it was straightforwardly a literary device, a form of setting out a case addressed in a certain way, but never intended to be mailed. Certainly there are no surviving holographs to indicate that these were ever letters transmitted through the mail. There was also a middle ground, the “pastoral” letter, intended to be read by (or to) a wider number of recipients than the nominal addressee—indeed even “familiar” letters might be expected to be read by more than the indicated recipient.

Recent writing has concentrated¹⁶ on the polemical use of the letter by evangelicals, while admitting that the sheer quantity of “familiar” letters which just passed between evangelical clergy (and which survives) is so great as to defy systematic treatment. John Wesley alone wrote many thousand letters, of which approximately one-third may survive,¹⁷ and although he was one of the more prolific epistolary scribes of his times, others were far from inactive. Lady Huntingdon¹⁸ and John Newton¹⁹ were two who corresponded extensively.

If a parish minister was not to feel entirely isolated, he needed the virtual company of like-minded churchmen via the postbag, to share events, opinions, news and so on. For evangelicals, sprinkled very sparsely, and often facing local hostility, this was even more so. They depended on their letters for mutual support, encouragement, and information.

My own research has been around the letters of John Fletcher, Vicar of Madeley, Shropshire, whose principal correspondent and closest friend was Charles Wesley. Of the two hundred or so letters of Fletcher’s which survive, about eighty were to Charles Wesley, some half of which were in French.

¹⁵ Brant, 2006.

¹⁶ Brant, 2006.

¹⁷ Baker, 1980, “Wesley as Correspondent,” 28ff.

¹⁸ John R. Tyson, Boyd S. Schlenther, *In the Midst of Early Methodism, Lady Huntingdon and Her Correspondence* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006).

¹⁹ See <<http://www.johnnewton.org/>>

Elsewhere I have analyzed this correspondence, particularly noting the intimacy which subsisted between the two, and which was equally noticeably absent from Fletcher's letters to John Wesley.²⁰ I have challenged John Wesley's statement that he and Fletcher were "of one heart and soul," in the Preface to his *Short Account*—which hardly mentions Charles.²¹

But here I want to take this body of correspondence as a kind of case-study, to show how it is not sufficient to study merely the textual content, it is also important to look at the context, both the context of the content—why A might write to B in such a way, using certain terms, covering certain subjects and avoiding others, and so on—but also the context of the document itself.

Fletcher's surviving correspondence to Charles Wesley (only a very few later return letters are known) can be divided into several chronological groupings relating to Fletcher's career, before and after his 1760 appointment as Vicar of Madeley, during the "Calvinistic controversy" of the early 1770s, his subsequent illness, stay in Switzerland then his marriage, and final few years in the parish. The letters in French span 1758–70; they start and end (and were written in French) for no clear or apparent reason.²²

To look first at one aspect of the "context of content," between 1770–76, during the years of the "Controversy," of the twenty-one letters from Madeley, ten were written on a Sunday; three each on Saturday and Monday, four on Tuesdays, and one on a Thursday. In other words, this is suggestive that Fletcher was treating Sunday at least as the day to write to his close Christian friend, although that might spill over to adjacent days. Unlike the Wesleys, Fletcher was not an organized person. His writing was prolix and his paperwork haphazard: any filing system seems to have been chaotic or non-existent. Was this an effort at personal organization, or was it something he learned from other evangelicals; a holy duty for a holy day? What might a similar analysis of Charles Wesley's letters show?

To move on to the "context of the document"; during Fletcher's first four years at Madeley (1760–64) he did not generally use the postal system when he wrote to Charles Wesley at Bristol. This can be deduced by the address (sometimes without even a place) and the lack of postal markings. Why? Because Madeley parish was on the River Severn and there was a great deal of commerce between this industrial parish and the major port of Bristol. Fletcher used a personal carrier, although technically that was illegal as it defrauded the mails. Occasionally he named the carrier, as in his first letter to Charles Wesley after he had been instituted as Vicar. Closing the letter, he first gave directions for addressing letters, which differentiate between the radial posts (from London) and the cross-post:

²⁰ Peter S. Forsaith, 2008, 26–28.

²¹ John Wesley, *A Short Account of the Life and Death of the Rev. John Fletcher* (London: Paramore, 1786), 3.

²² Forsaith, 2008, 35.

*Adressez a Madeley by Bridgenorth depuis Bristol
by Shiffnal depuis Londre
Shropshire.*²³

He then informed Charles about the carrier:

*Le Porteur de cette lettre est le fils d'une de 2 femmes qui sont les seule Chretiennes Apparentes de cette paroisse—Il avoit appris a travailler le lin, etant allé sur mer pendant 5 ans, et las de ce genre de vie il a dessein de reprendre son ancien travail, il paroît assés bien dispose—il va a Bristol chercher de l'ouvrage, si vous pouvez lui etre de quelque utilité vous rendre service a sa mere une pauvre femme Chretienne—et a l'ami de sa Mere un homme qui voudroit etre Chretien.*²⁴

Fletcher's preference remained for personal letter carriers where possible, probably on the grounds of cost, and he followed a general practice of enclosing a letter to a third party with another letter:

The young man to whom I gave My Letter to Mr. Madan under cover to you may bring me any little parcel. His name is Thomas Lees and he lodges at Mrs. Grace Roden Pawn broker Dock head London He will return hither in a week or ten days.²⁵

Fletcher used a personal messenger to send his important 1775 letter to John Wesley outlining his ideas for a "Methodist Church of England":

The preceding pages contain my views of Br. Benson's proposal. I wrote it immediately after dinner and was going to send it to you, thinking that now is the best time to deliberate upon this plan. But when my servant was gone to look for a messenger to go to Leeds, my heart failed, as not having had time enough to consider what I had wrote, or to pray over it: So I called her back. This evening the young man whom I mentioned to you in my last²⁶ being come to see me: I asked him if he would carry a letter to you; And, as I had some mind of sending him, barely as one that might labour on trial, if you accepted of him, and had need of help, upon his consenting to go, I send you my scrawl . . .²⁷

These excerpts indicate a double purpose: that not only was Fletcher using personal carriers to save himself postage, but also as a means of introducing people—linking individuals to the "gospel" groups (often "Methodist" societies of whatever kidney), recruiting preachers, getting employment—and so maintaining and strengthening evangelical networks.

²³ Translation: Address to Madeley by Bridgnorth from Bristol / by Shifnal from London (John Fletcher to Charles Wesley, Nov. 7, 1760, in Forsaith, 2008, 122).

²⁴ Translation: The bearer of this letter is the son of one of 2 women who are the only evident Christians in this parish—he has learned to work cloth [meaning unclear—possibly a sailmaker], being away at sea for 5 years, and being weary of this way of life he plans to take up his old work again, he seems well disposed enough—he goes to Bristol to look for work, if you can be of any use to him you will do a service to his mother a poor Christian woman—and to his Mother's friend a man who wants to be a Christian. (John Fletcher to Charles Wesley, Nov. 7, 1760, in Forsaith, 2008, 122).

²⁵ John Fletcher to Charles Wesley, April 20, 1773, in Forsaith, 2008, 306–308.

²⁶ This letter is now not known.

²⁷ John Fletcher to John Wesley, August 1, 1775, in Forsaith, 2008, 324ff.

Yet even personally conveyed post could go astray. In 1783 Charles Wesley admonished Fletcher:

Last night Dr Coke gave me yr. Letter which had slept just 3 months in his pocket. I need not caution you against such a messenger.²⁸

Fletcher himself had suffered at the hands of mislaid items; the recovery of a 1778 letter, in 1781, led to the resumption of correspondence with Mary Bosanquet that resulted in their marriage.²⁹

Fletcher did make some use of the “frank” when he was employed by Thomas Hill, M. P. for Shrewsbury. This was, in effect, a pre-payment voucher. Members of Parliament and nobility were entitled to an amount of free post, but there was frequent abuse of this privilege. At the outset of the Controversy in 1771, Fletcher had concerns about how best to send packages of his writings for publication to be edited by Charles Wesley (by then living in London) or for the printers:

If I send my manuscript to London with you be so good as to correct it and let it pass thro’ the hands of our Brethren who have critical heads, and patient hearts. Could you not send me some franks I might send it by the Shrewsbury coach. I think it might go safer that way . . .³⁰

So, to return to my main theme, that the “Evangelical Revival” could not have happened in the way that it did without the postal system, it starts to become clear that letters were more than just the routine organizational communications of the networks; the letters served a multiplicity of purposes. Charles Wesley used the letter as means to assess and control the preachers, as John Lenton has pointed out:

Many of these letters, both the ‘in’ and the ‘out’ letters . . . have survived and provide a useful correction to the idea that it was only John who led and directed the preachers.³¹

Another instance of the multiplicity of purpose of the evangelical letter is seen in Charles Wesley’s so-called “journal letters,” in which he systematically used letters to his wife to give a daily account of his activities, and thereby maintain their relationship. The evangelical vicar of Penryn, Cornwall, John Penrose, wrote home similarly from Bath in 1766–67.³²

²⁸ Charles Wesley to John Fletcher Oct. 11, 1783, [MARC DDCW 1/74], in Peter S. Forsaith, *The Correspondence of the Revd. John W. Fletcher: letters to the Revd. Charles Wesley, considered in the context of the Evangelical Revival* (Oxford Brookes University, Ph.D. thesis, 2003), 169.

²⁹ Patrick Streiff, *Reluctant Saint?* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2001), 265–66.

³⁰ John Fletcher to Charles Wesley, March 12, 1772 in Forsaith, 2008, 122.

³¹ John Lenton, “Charles Wesley and the Preachers,” in Kenneth G. C. Newport, Ted A. Campbell, eds., *Charles Wesley, Life, Literature and Legacy* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2007), 88.

³² Brigitte Mitchell, Hubert Penrose, eds., *Letters from Bath 1766–1767 by the Rev. John Penrose* (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1983).

Evangelicals may well have been making a wider use of the letter; certainly they seem to have embraced the opportunity the post offered to service their networks. The growth of Wesley's "connexion" was not an isolated phenomenon: the Revival was a widespread movement, but we might take John Wesley's maintenance of the growing preachers network, in which Charles had an important supervisory role, as an instance where the postal service was not only vital but its growth sat alongside the growth of the itinerancy.

Another factor to be considered might be the transport of packages; it was after all the sales of books, which kept Wesley's connexion financially afloat. Fletcher used the post to convey parcels of his manuscripts, as well as asking Charles Wesley to buy him books in London and send them on:

A Parcel may be sent with speed by the Shrewsbury Coach which puts up at the Neck and Swan Ladd Lane London: Directed for me to be left with Mr. Roberts Carpenter in Shifnal Shropshire.³³

But this could be costly:

I shall send the letter [i.e. the 'Second Check'] by the post, it will cost 3 or 4 Shillings. . . . I would stay for an opportunity of sending by a private hand, but I want to make an end of the affair.³⁴

He had good reason for concern as only months later his manuscript on Original Sin had been returned to him via the River Severn watermen:

[It] was lost some weeks, but was found wilfully or inadvertently conceal'd in the back room of an alehouse in my parish where the bargemen had left it.³⁵

But to turn from the mechanics to a key question of whether the evangelical use of the letter differed from the general? The eighteenth century was in many ways the age of the letter. From the Restoration people were starting to write differently, and, with the lessening of the risk that letters might be intercepted, writers were using the letter for self-expression. In a 1966 work on the "Familiar Letter," Anderson and Ehrenpreis wrote:

Writers so very dissimilar as Swift and Cowper, Sterne and Burke, claim along with Pope that their letters convey "thoughts just warm from the brain without any polishing or dress."

They then quote from Dr. Johnson, writing to Mrs. Thrale:

In a man's letters you know, Madam, his soul lies naked, his letters are only the mirror of his breast. . .³⁶

³³ John Fletcher to Charles Wesley, April 20, 1773 in Forsaith, 2008, 308.

³⁴ John Fletcher to Charles Wesley, Oct. 13, 1771 in Forsaith, 2008, 284.

³⁵ John Fletcher to Charles Wesley, Jan. 21, 1772 in Forsaith, 2008, 293.

³⁶ Quoted in Howard Anderson, Philip Daglian, Irvin Ehrenpreis, *The Familiar Letter in the Eighteenth Century* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1966), 272.

They proceed to observe that this self-revelatory use of the letter was in reality accomplished by writing about external things; using literary form such as analogy or figures of speech. So Lord Chesterfield, in his “Letters to his Son,” discusses the norms of outward behavior in order to speak of himself.³⁷

Were evangelicals any different in their use of the letter? I think that it is possible to point to some significant variations. Perhaps the most obvious is that while the genre as a whole was a literary expression of “polite society,” the evangelical writer was generally much more direct. Certainly when Fletcher—who may have been reflecting continental usage—wrote to Charles Wesley he was open and direct, whether writing of his religious experience, relationship issues, diet, finances, or Methodism there was no recourse to polite formulae. This was stream-of-consciousness writing so, for instance, after mixing French and English in August 1762:

*Pardonnez ma Rhapsodie de françois & d'anglois je vous écris ce qui me vient dans la tete sans penser Comme.*³⁸

The evangelical letter might be argued, then, to embody elements of preaching and testimony—indeed, that their communicative purpose was primarily evangelistic, designed to embody the gospel. The truth “plain and home” was not always the mode of expression for the “polite” letter of an increasingly literate society.

To conclude, although it leaves many areas unexplored, and may not have dealt directly with Charles Wesley as correspondent, I hope that this paper has offered some background and posed some questions. The background is the larger use of letters within what we broadly term the “evangelical revival,” both in terms of the mechanics of how they were used, the context; and in terms of their content, the way that they were used as modes of communication. So Charles Wesley’s letters are not merely useful for what they tell us about Charles Wesley, or Charles and John Wesley, or about early Methodism; they are part of a broader picture.

Not only is increasing scholarly attention being paid to the eighteenth-century letter, aside from content or literary form, but as a social glue—just as the place of religion is increasingly rehabilitated into the overall history of the long eighteenth century. Letters are one of the key primary sources; they have perhaps been overlooked partly because of their very proliferation. But attention is increasingly focused upon them, and the letters of religious people and groups are no exception.

There remains my own question: could these “gospel” networks have functioned and grown as they did had it not been for the postal service? I have not

³⁷ [Philip Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield], *Letters To His Son. By the Earl Of Chesterfield on the Fine Art of becoming a Man Of The World and a Gentleman* (1749).

³⁸ In Forsaith, 2008, 158, “Pardon my french and english rhapsody I am writing to you what comes into my head without thinking how.”

offered a fully extensive, perhaps not even tolerably persuasive, case. But I hope I have at least begun to address it. It seems clear to me that the growth of the evangelical revival, the “Methodist” movement, paralleled the development of the postal service, as well as the road system. Without these, like-minded clergy would have been isolated in their parishes; Methodist itinerants in their circuits; the opinion-forming centers (such as London) would have been removed from the interfaces of activity and organized groups, such as Wesley’s “connexion” could simply not have functioned as they did.

For Fletcher, whose world was Madeley parish, letters were his lifeline, whether conveyed through the post or via personal carriers. As he might pick up his pen at the end of one long week or the start of another, to tell of his woes or his joys, and started, typically *Mon tres cher Frere* it was in confidence that within a very few days his dearest friend Charles Wesley would be reading those lines. Whether or when Charles Wesley might reply is another matter entirely.

