

“The Postal Age” Book Review

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Introduction

“The Postal Age” paints a vibrant picture of a society where possibilities proliferated for the kinds of personal and impersonal communications that we often associate with more recent historical periods. In doing so, it significantly increases our understanding of both antebellum America and our chapter in the history of communications. Henkin lays out his book in two sections. Joining a network focuses on a more nuts-and-bolts examination of the spread of the postal system, how and what people mailed, and mail in a growing urban environment. The second section, Postal intimacy, takes a more artistic approach towards common letter writing styles and clichés, the post as a lens for growing geographic mobility, and the rise of mass mailings. The following essay will review the main ideas presented by the author, along with their personal opinion about his handling of history and supported argument.

Review

“The middle of the nineteenth century, David Henkin notes, gave rise to such diverse practices as collecting autographs from famous people, valentine greetings, and junk mail and, most important, an explosion in letter writing that transcended class and geographic boundaries. In *The Postal Age*, Henkin challenges technological explanations for this expansion, which attributes the growth of communication to the invention of the telegraph and the spread of railroads^[1]. Instead, he argues that sending a letter, once an event rather than a feature of ordinary experience, became a staple of everyday life through a burgeoning postal culture, in which Americans became increasingly aware of their presence and participation in a communications network that spanned the nation.”

“In making this argument, Henkin extends our understanding of the first national post office rendered familiar in Richard John’s seminal *Spreading the News* through the middle of the nineteenth century. Whereas John’s argument centered on the post office as a broadcast medium for the dissemination of information through newspapers, Henkin argues that this culture, fueled by two reductions in postage rates at mid-century, coincided with a rapid increase in the need for long-distance communication to shape a network that enveloped the country.”

“As someone who often struggles with writing introductions, I was blown away at how Henkin handled his introduction. He used the story of Anthony Burns, a captured fugitive slave who somehow managed to write several letters from his jail cell in Virginia in 1854 and managed to use the facilities of the federal postal system, including those housed in Virginia, to engage in confidential correspondence with his abolitionist lawyer in Boston (Henkin 2007). Of course, Henkin used the

Burns anecdote as a particularly powerful springboard to launch into the introduction to the meat of his book, the cultural transformation over the past decades that made the story possible. If I ever manage to write such a quick introduction, I'd consider myself satisfied."

"I also particularly enjoyed his second chapter, Mailable Matters, which discussed what people emailed and how it evolved during his timeframe of the study. In particular, the history of transient newspapers (periodicals sent along through the post by someone other than the publisher) was fascinating. People used papers to anchor the recipient in a faraway place, provide information, and even work as a covert means of relaying personal messages. Due to its lower cost compared to letters, senders would mail newspapers with Cabalistic concealments, such as making sure marks or drawing pictures in the margins to convey the necessary information."

"The postal bureaucracy, of course, cracked down on this practice, and by 1845, Congress had passed a postal price reduction that lowered the price of letters and reduced the appeal of transient newspapers. Interestingly, Henkin chooses to glide through much of the federal legislation or campaigns behind critical postal reforms (such as the 1845 reduction) (Henkin 2007)."

"Henkin also discusses the growing transitory movements during the middle of the century, and in particular, how letters and familial correspondence played a role in morally anchoring migrant men during the Gold Rush and the Civil War. Surrounded by the debauchery of mining or army camps, personal letters from wives, sisters, and mothers became mythologized as virtual placeholders of domesticity and moral influence. In fact, contemporaries often referred to letters from home in near-religious terms, whose effects on otherwise rough and tumble forty-nines eerily resemble a conversion experience. Even men who had spent the previous night gambling, drinking, and carousing with prostitutes could open a letter from his far-away home and be swept up in a fit of repentance and (presumed) absolution."

"Finally, the last chapter I found to be the most fascinating: Mass Mailings: Valentines, Junk Mail, and Dead Letters. The information presented by Henkin took me by surprise, as I had no idea of the sheer scale and reach of such mass mailings. For instance, the rise of the postal system went hand-in-hand with the increase of Valentine's Day, as a new culture of exchange grew up surrounding the day (including cruel/hilarious V-Day pranks and mock valentines). The idea of Henkin's discussion of the phenomenon of dead letters, those pieces of post that never reached their intended recipient (due to faulty address-writing, not being picked up at the post office, etc.) is amazing. These letters would sit for three months in local post offices before being sent to the Dead Letter Office in Washington, D.C. In 1866 alone, almost 5.2 million letters ended up at this office (Henkin 2007)."

"Henkin moves skillfully through a broad range of topics and materials, examining the writings of postal reformers such as Pliny Miles, prescriptive literature, and hundreds of letters written by Americans, both ordinary and famous. Divided into two parts, the book first examines how Americans came to see themselves in the context of this new network. The postage-rate reductions and introduction of prepayment entrenched the letter as the medium of communication for a mobile and

rapidly expanding population. Letters thus eclipsed newspapers as the post's primary business, first as the paper industry shifted its focus to local events and then as a series of new regulations made postage cheaper and more flexible. In Chapter 3, Henkin returns to familiar ground from his former work (Henkin 2007), charting the geography of the post office as an urban social space. Detailing how the post office was a locus of interaction, and therefore a potentially dangerous and subversive space, especially for women."

"Henkin wryly notes that these letters were not quite dead, but they were certainly in critical condition. Dead letters fascinated an American populace, and for a good reason: their contents offered an incredibly intimate, almost voyeuristic, glimpse into the lives of everyday Americans. The list of items that were lost in the mail is a staggering array of oddities, including sewing machines, rattlesnake skin, and, of course, money of all denominations. Dead letters also revealed the inherent tension that accompanied the rapidly expanding social worlds of everyday Americans. A letter addressed to the big-faced Butcher, with a big wart on his nose in Cleveland, Ohio, may have worked for close-knit communities, but by the middle of the century, these familiar addresses proved inadequate to meet the requirements of a national postal network. In a beautifully crafted piece of writing, Henkin writes, Dead letters floated in the intermediate space between names and people, and between the personal recognition marked by an individually addressed letter and the impersonality of a large, mobile, and uprooted society."

Conclusion

"The Postal Age is, by the author's admission, a quick survey of the subject and leaves several questions unanswered. Though Henkin very clearly states that he is most interested in postal culture and letter writing, he seems to dismiss too quickly the importance of behind-the-scenes advances in technology and the law. Even more striking, Henkin's focus on the middle third of the nineteenth century occasionally underplays the scope of the transformation of the postal system from one designed for big-city political and commercial elites to one designed for the mass of Americans. However, these are minor quibbles with an otherwise well-argued and engaging book. This is a vital addition to the small but aspiring field of postal scholarship."

"The Postal Age develops a strong case for studying the developmental interplay of communication technologies, publics, and practices of reading, seeing, and writing as constitutive of self, other, and nation. By sensitively addressing the cultural implications of changing patterns of participation and use of mail exchange, it advances scholarship on the role of the post in everyday life. The Postal Age succeeds in joining two kinds of history writing: the thoroughly professional and the engagingly popular. David M. Henkin offers a clinic on how to combine social analysis of institutions with cultural study of the rituals, emotions, and meanings by which people pattern their lives. Henkin provides a valuable model for understanding the social and cultural history of a new communications medium by explaining how individuals encountered, understood, and wove it into the fabric of their lives."

Reference

1. Henkin, David M. 2007. The Postal Age. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press. ↑