Civilization Boundaries
Цивилизационни граници

SOCIAL HISTORY AS REVEALED BY GESTURE: CHANGING EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY STYLES OF MEETING AND GREETING

Penelope J. Corfield
Professor Emeritus – Royal Holloway, University of London
and Visiting Professor – University of Newcastle (UK)

Abstract. This essay explores the significance of changing styles of interpersonal greetings in Britain in the long eighteenth century (from 1700 to the 1850s). Everyday rituals of hat honour, when men removed their hats and women curtseyed, were increasingly undertaken in a brisker and much less elaborate manner. Yet there was also change within change. A new alternative style of greeting was emerging in the form of the handshake. The urban, social, cultural, and class contexts of such changes are analyzed, pointing to multi-directional historical trends in the intimate rituals of everyday life.

Keywords: greetings; everyday life; hat honour; curtsey; handshake; urbanisation; commercialisation; social trends

It is hard to find good evidence about fleeting day-to-day routines, on which people rarely comment, either today or in the past. Yet the task is not impossible. This essay focuses upon interpersonal greeting styles in Britain during the long eighteenth century, which is generously defined as stretching from the late seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries[1)]. As will be seen, a fascinating process of interlocking change unfolded. On the one hand, there was a slow adaptation in old forms of politeness, which traditionally entailed saluting with the hat (for men) and curtseying (for women). Those gestures were shifting into a speedier, more casual style. Yet, simultaneously, a historically new style of greeting was emerging alongside, in the form of the egalitarian handshake. These shifts gave people options – and made choosing the most appropriate style of greeting into a social performance art.

There are, however, many classic problems for historians in detecting such transformations. The fleeting nature of gestures make them particularly elusive, as acknowledged both by the eighteenth-century founders of gesture-history and by later successors[2)]. In particular, it is tricky to date gradual changes and to differentiate long-term trends from temporary fashions.

People in their private letters and diaries only rarely mentioned such apparently trivial things as how they met and greeted others. Novelists writing about daily life tended to focus upon significant actions and conversations. Furthermore, they had no obligation to be completely accurate. Nor did autobiographers. They wrote what they pleased; and their memories were selective and hard to check. Similarly, paintings or drawings of individuals in relationship to others, in group portraits, were characteristically stylised and artificially posed. (The same qualification applied to early photos).

Above all, prescriptive etiquette manuals and conduct books were socially conservative. They were frequently reprinted over the years without amendment, which meant that, even if accurate when first published, such guide-books quickly became out-of-date and repetitive. As a result, tracing an accurate history of manners from conduct books is as misleading as analysing the realities of driving in Britain by reading the handbook to the *Highway Code* – and the *Highway Code* does at least have official government status.

Nonetheless, despite these cautions, the theme of interpersonal greetings can be studied by putting many fragments of evidence together. They can be tested by comparing one account with another. And all can be cross-checked in the light of observations from particularly sharp-eyed foreign visitors.

Traditionally, polite gentlemen were expected to send social signals by means of their visible headgear. In the case of men, hats were to be removed with something of a flourish, when greeting social equals and, especially, when encountering those above them in terms of social status. This technique was known as 'Hat Honour'[3]. It was also used as a means for men to demonstrate respect for ladies, who were not necessarily ranked above them but who were deemed deserving of their chivalrous acknowledgement. In such encounters, the hat stands as proxy for the head, at the apex of the body. Lowering either the hat or head (or both) before another individual indicates polite submission from the 'lower' person to the 'higher'.

An advice manual like *The Rudiments of Genteel Behaviour* (1737) gave precise instructions as to how, theoretically at least, gentlemen should use their hats in greeting. Their manner should be easy, with the eyes directed at the person receiving the compliment:

The right Arm must rise to the Hat with moderate Motion sideways ...; and whilst taking it off, let the Look and Action be complaisantly address'd to the Person to whom the compliment is intended; the left Arm should fall neither backward nor forward ... but gently by the Side, ... and holding the Glove in an easy, careless Manner.

Too much ostentation would appear obsequious. But too abrupt a gesture might seem rude. Getting it right was a potential source of anxiety, as the diarist Samuel Pepys found in 1660. When walking in London's fashionable Pall Mall, he passed the Duke of York, the king's brother, who was also Lord High Admiral. Pepys,

as a naval civil servant, duly saluted his social and administrative 'superior'. The Duke, however, sent a footman running after Pepys to check his identity. 'What his meaning is, I know not', confided Pepys to his diary, 'but was fearful that I might not go far enough *with my hat off*'. Had he inadvertently snubbed a royal duke?

Such considerations were most perplexing in casual encounters, whereas upon formal occasions the etiquette was usually clear. In principle, a king always remained hatted, while all other men uncovered in his presence. (Ambassadors from foreign monarchs were exempt from this rule, as they represented fellow royalty). Yet, upon occasion, even a king might doff his hat. When visiting one celebrated schoolmaster Dr Richard Busby, Charles II was said to have removed his hat to show the students that the schoolmaster was king in his own schoolroom.

Flouting these intricate conventions was sometimes done by mistake. Or it could be done as a social statement. A number of religious radicals refused to take their hats off to people conventionally regarded as their social 'superiors' as a point of principle. They believed in the spiritual equality of all true believers. In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain, it was the Protestant denomination of Quakers, known as the Society of Friends, who were the most consistent in refusing hat honour. (It was on the basis of that social egalitarianism that the Quakers were also among the earliest campaigners to oppose the eighteenth-century slave trade and the institution of slavery).

Individuals needed some personal courage and/or social obduracy to stand outside the

Fig. 1. Detail from James Gillray's satirical print *Affability* (1795), showing a bonhomous King George III, dressed informally in country-farmer style, invading the personal 'space' of an unnerved agricultural labourer, who has removed his hat before the hat-wearing monarch

accepted conventions of polite manners. But some people were bold enough to do so. And such variations gave scope for others to adapt or adjust their own behaviour too.

Even in the most formal systems of etiquette, it was open to the highest-ranked person to relax the conventions from time to time: either to show favour to one individual or to provide light relief from oppressive ceremonial. Sustaining high rank in the eyes of the world thus also required judgment, mixing some spontaneity amidst the grandeur. In his prime, King George III of England was known for his cheery greetings *('Hey! Hey! Hey!')* on informal occasions. It was a mannerism which could disconcert his startled subjects, as James Gillray noted in his satirical print *Affability* (1795). When visiting a small coastal resort in rural Dorset, the King shed some of his grandeur. The men he encountered, however, took off their hats, whilst George III still wore his.

Over time, therefore, styles of greeting were open to adjustment, especially in changing circumstances. In eighteenth-century Britain there was a slow shift towards greater simplicity in everyday salutations. That trend can be understood as the country was becoming increasingly commercialised, urbanised, and then industrialised. People began to favour quicker, less elaborate styles of greeting, as they experienced a growing number of fleeting contacts. It was not always easy to calculate at a glance who outranked whom. It made sense, therefore, to streamline manners. A deep bow and removal of the hat was being replaced by a slighter inclination of the upper body and a nod.

On a visit in 1810 – 1811, for example, the American Louis Simond commented that, while people in London were civil in responding to his enquiries, they did not remove their hats, as was done in Paris. Instead 'a slight inclination of the head, or a motion of the hand, is thought sufficient'[4].

Equally, lower-class men giving a mark of respect to their social 'superiors' gave a slight pull to their caps. Or, if hatless, they tugged their forelocks or simply raised a hand to the head. In the military context, this gesture was codified into the army salute. During the eighteenth century, each regiment had its own custom as how it was done. Only in 1917, amidst mass warfare, did the British army decree that military salutes should thenceforth be made with the right hand, not the left. And that standardised form came to stay.

In the case of interpersonal greetings made by women, there was a parallel eighteenth-century shift from great ceremony to a simpler, more streamlined style. Female bonnets were often elaborate articles of clothing, not to be removed in a hurry (even in church). Instead, traditional custom required a woman to sink her upright body downwards, whilst holding her skirts out wide in a show of deference and slowly bending her head. It was a manoeuvre that long survived at court and at formal events in smart society.

Gradually, however, the deep curtsey was giving way to a quick, little bob, usually accompanied by ducking the head. One rare personal reference to changing styles

of greeting appeared in the posthumously published autobiography of Elizabeth Ham. She was the daughter of a Dorset yeoman farmer, of middling status. Writing of her youth in the 1780s, she recollected that: 'I used to curtsey to all the fine-dressed ladies that I met, till told not to do so by the nurse-maid, with whom I generally walked out'. Such behaviour marked her, in her later adult memory, as 'a little rustic, uncouth child'[5].

Of course, Elizabeth Ham's account was retrospective and cannot be directly checked. It is interesting, however, on two grounds: firstly, for her memory of the nursemaid advising the child about 'proper' behaviour. That process indicated that live-in servants were often sensitive about their employing family's self-presentation, and were attuned to social conventions. Secondly, Ham clearly implied that the changing style of salutations was being led by Britain's growing towns and copied more slowly in the countryside. Her point fits with other contemporary evidence teasing 'country bumpkins' about their slowness to follow urban fashions, thus tending to authenticate Ham's account which was much preoccupied with questions of status.

Viewed simply, this slow transition from formal ceremony to a more casual greeting style might be described as a simple shift from 'pre-modern' to 'modern' manners. Yet, in fact, the trend was by no means so straightforward. There was change within change.

Innovation was signalled by the advent of the egalitarian handshake. Again, the change was gradual and patchy. In commercial dealings, a handshake was long known as a mode of confirming a deal. The giving of one's hand was also a personal pledge, as customary when giving one's hand in marriage. It sealed a compact of trust between equals, whilst still retaining a certain physical distance between them.

Graphic illustrations of the handshake are very rare to find in eighteenth-century paintings and drawings. Yet the emblem of linked hands was well known as signifying mutuality. It was

Fig. 2. Lead wall-mark no. 77903, issued by the Hand-in-Hand Fire Insurance Company (1758), showing the powerful symbol of clasped hands as a pledge of mutual support

often used by benefit societies and early trade unions. In addition, one eighteenth-century London Fire Insurance Company was named as the Hand-in-Hand, and used the reassuring image of two clasped hands on its lead wall plaques, affixed to the insured property.

Shaking hands began to spread in eighteenth-century Britain, initially between urban men with shared commercial backgrounds. Styles varied from the gentle touch, to the firm grip, to the grip with elbow-hold, and the secret alignment of the fingers between members of a Masonic Lodge (the first Grand Lodge in Britain being founded in 1717). In addition, the handshake spread in the commercialising and relatively less formal North American colonies. After 1776, too, it became a standard republican greeting between free citizens of similar social standing. Thus it was not used between masters and slaves.

Not everyone approved of the relative informality of this new style. Frances Trollope, who shared her novelist son Anthony Trollope's interest in social mores, declared in 1832 that the American habit of universal handshaking between men and women was too 'forward'[6]. Some also complained that the intimate touch of palms was unhygienic, especially if adopted by the masses, who were unkindly known as the 'great unwashed'. Thus there was often uncertainty as to whether to offer a hand in greeting to someone of markedly different class background.

Nevertheless, the habit began to spread in Britain, not only among men but also, to an extent, between men and women. A literary example from Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) confirmed that development. The impulsive Marianne Dashwood is shown as an advanced young lady, who does not seek to conceal her romantic sensibilities, even in a crowded London party[7]:

She [Marianne] started up, and pronouncing his name in a tone of affection, held out her hand to him. ... [Her erstwhile admirer, John Willoughby, approaches and mutters something inconsequential]. Her face was crimsoned over, and she exclaimed 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?"* He could not then avoid it, but her touch seemed painful to him, and he held her hand only for a moment.

Here Willoughby did just brush Marianne Dashwood's fingers. Yet his abrupt behaviour signalled his callous change of heart. His social discourtesy was clear to all. Indeed, a refusal to accept someone's outstretched hand is always interpreted as a public snub.

Another literary case occurs in *North and South* (1854/5). Elizabeth Gaskell's well-bred heroine Margaret Hale, internally exiled from Hampshire to Manchester, is initially taken aback when the Mancunian businessman John Thornton offers, in 'the frank familiar custom of the place', to shake her hand. She was unprepared for his gesture and responded with a cool bow, making him think her 'proud' and 'disagreeable' [8]. It was a small incident, indicating the uncertainties in the couple's early relationship. They

embodied the contrast between the fast-paced industrial 'North' and the slow customs of the rural 'South'. In their case, however, the gulf was eventually bridged by mutual love.

Given that unrelated young men and women of middle- and upper-class backgrounds did not often touch hands, it was not surprising that some erotic tension was attached to a couple's first handshake. One of the few places for such intimacies to occur respectably was in the ballroom, which explains why dancing was so popular among the young. Meanwhile, eighteenth-century British culture retained a general aversion to excess bodily intimacy in greeting styles. There was some back-slapping between men; but public hugging and kissing outside the family environment was not considered respectable[9)].

Prohibitions such as these applied especially in polite society. When some super-chivalrous gentlemen in the mid-nineteenth century began to greet powerful ladies by kissing their hands and bowing as they did so, this approach provoked mixed reactions. On the one hand, the gesture signified homage and a theatrical admiration. Yet it was also derided as overly effete and 'slobbering'. Either way, for most right-minded Britons, hand-kissing, like clicking heels when bowing, was viewed suspiciously as 'too foreign'.

Personal preferences thus tended to match social customs, because those were socially learned during a lifetime. But, as already indicated, there was always scope for variation, neglect, or quiet subversion. Overall, the advent of the handshake was part-cause and part-response to the attenuation of the traditional etiquette of bowing and curtseying.

Hand-shaking, in the early days of the gesture, also conveyed a distinctive political message. Young radicals among the English intelligentsia in the 1790s, like the poets William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and John Thelwall, would shake hands on meeting, to confirm their fraternal allegiance. It was a conscious choice, signalling a radical egalitarianism. Thus, when Coleridge and Thelwall later disagreed over politics, Coleridge declared in 1801 that the 'chasm' between them was too great for them to shake hands again.

Overall, it would be misleading for historians to generalise about universal behaviour either from the relaxed mores of the young Coleridge or from the stately grandeur of court etiquette. Instead, there were social options, adopted differently by different social sets. Hence the story was more complex than a tidy 'decline' of one usage neatly matching the 'rise' of another. Handshaking between strangers, especially those of unknown social status, came only slowly into usage. Commercial men led the way, whilst those living in rural societies remained the most resistant. And everywhere egalitarian handshaking was slower to come into public use between women than it was between men.

The upshot of change within change was to turn styles of greeting into a performance art. In a globalising world, options can be borrowed and shared between cultures. Today people in Britain veer between touching styles, including handshakes, high fives, fist bumps, hugs, and air kisses (also known in Britain as

the 'continental kiss') and non-touching styles of greetings, including a hand to the head, a nod, a slight bow, and/or signalling Namaste. Meanwhile, the very deep bowing and curtseying has all but disappeared, except in formal dancing.

My own view is that, in the long run, handshaking has a great potential future as a global democratic style that is egalitarian but not too physically intrusive. Yet in matters of deeply engrained interpersonal behavioural styles, traditional customs have great tenacity. In this world of immense cultural variety, non-touching styles of greeting are not likely to disappear. Historians can, however, confirm that even the most entrenched customs are liable to evolve. Urbanisation and commercialisation offer options – and, with globalisation, those options are being shared globally.

NOTES

1. Essay expanded from a lecture given at the University of Sofia on 8 November 2017, with warm thanks to all participants for lively questions and discussion, and to Prof. Ivan Parvev for the guest invitation.
2. E. Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (Edinburgh, 1959); J. Bremmer and H. Roodenburg (eds), A Cultural History of Gestures: From Antiquity to the Present (Cambridge, 1991).
3. P.J. Corfield, 'Dress for Deference & Dissent: Hats and the Decline of Hat Honour', Costume: Journal of the Costume Society, 23 (1989), pp. 64 – 79; and on-line in www.penelopejcorfield.co.uk/british-history-essays/Pdf8. Also in German translation in K. Gerteis (ed.), Zum Wandel von Zeremoniell und Gesellschaftsritualen in der Zeit des Aufklärung, Aufklärung, 6 (1991), pp. 5 – 18.
4. L. Simond, An American in Regency England: The Journal of a Tour in 1810/11, ed. C. Hibbert (London, 1968), p. 28.
5. E. Gillett (ed.), Elizabeth Ham, by Herself, 1783 – 1820 (London, 1945), p. 27.
6. F. Trollope, Domestic Manners of the Americans (1832), ed. R. Mullen (Oxford, 1984), p. 83.
7. J. Austen, Sense and Sensibility (1811), ed. R. Ballaster (London, 1995), p. 167.
8. E. Gaskell, North and South (1854/5), ed. D. Collin (Harmondsworth, 1970), p. 127.
9. See essays in K. Harvey (ed.), The Kiss in History (Manchester, 2005).

✉ **Prof. Penelope J. Corfield**
London, UK
E-mail: p.corfield@btconnect.com