The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America. *By David M. Henkin.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. xv + 221 pp. Index, notes, illustrations. Cloth, $38.00. ISBN: 0-226-32720-5.

Reviewed by Robert MacDougall

"Historians are always in the habit of pressing paternity suits for newborn social arrangements against the periods of their own expertise," admits David Henkin at the outset of *The Postal Age* (p. ix). In this thoughtful and well-crafted history of "postal culture" in nineteenth-century America, Henkin presses just such a suit for the parentage of modern telecommunications. According to him, it was not the Internet, the telephone, or even the electric telegraph, but rather the postal system of the 1840s, '50s, and '60s that begat the habits and experiences of interconnectedness that seem to define modern life. *The Postal Age* is not business history, even if broadly defined, but any historian who works with nineteenth-century correspondence ought to read it, and anyone at all might enjoy its plentiful anecdotes and engaging style.

Nineteenth-century Americans used the mail to court and to swindle, to earn a living, and to maintain distant family ties. They celebrated letter-writing as a surrogate for speech and bodily presence but fretted over potential dangers of mail fraud, junk mail, and even unsupervised female correspondence. One might well describe the postal system depicted in this book as "the Jacksonian Internet." Henkin doesn't use the term, but analogies to our own electronic era are never far from his mind: the early republican post was a "broadcast medium" (p. 42); junk mail is "spam" (p. 157); the United States was, by the 1870s, "wired for interactive mail exchange" (p. 172).

This argument is similar to those made by Tom Standage, in *The Victorian Internet* (1998), and Carolyn Marvin, in *When Old Technologies Were New* (1988), both writing on the telegraph and telephone. But Henkin does not attribute the social and cultural transformation *The Postal Age* describes to any technological breakthrough. The postal system was not, after all, a new medium in the nineteenth century. What was new was the system's growing role in American life. Thanks to cheaper postage, rising

literacy, and an increasingly mobile population, use of the mail rose significantly in the mid-1800s. The character of the postal system also changed, as what had been a broadcast medium disseminating printed news became a more interactive network carrying personal letters, packages, and objects.

The first half of Henkin's book describes this transformation in general—perhaps too general—terms. He is reluctant to date the spread of postal practices precisely, or even to speak definitively about the reasons for the change. Congress did significantly reduce the cost of sending a letter in 1845, and again in 1851. This obviously played a part in the popularization of mail use, but Henkin sees the reduction of postage rates as a symptom of social and cultural change as much as a cause. He is not deeply interested in the political or institutional history of the post office, and defers on these matters to Richard R. John's well-known *Spreading the News* (1995).

The second half of *The Postal Age*, and the real heart of the book, explores the rituals and practices of antebellum America's postal culture. Henkin's 1998 monograph, *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York*, revealed a promiscuous world of written texts, from street signs to posters to banknotes, that many historians had overlooked. In *The Postal Age,* Henkin performs a remarkable and imaginative reading of one ubiquitous sort of text, hardly ignored by historians as a source, but rarely interrogated as a genre: the personal letter.

Letters to loved ones were at once intensely private and potentially quite public. Nineteenth-century Americans cherished an "ideology of epistolary intimacy" (p. 109), but of course the privacy of the mail could rarely be guaranteed. Even when letters did remain private, Henkin argues, they performed a public function. Personal correspondence was enlisted in what he calls a national "performance of family." The mail was celebrated for its ability to convey "parental guidance, sisterly affection, or conjugal intimacy" across great distances (p. 144), particularly during episodes like the California Gold Rush and the Civil War, when so many young men were far from home.

Henkin's analysis of the conventions and clichés of nineteenth-century correspondence will be extremely valuable to any historian using such letters as a source—which is to say, almost any nineteenth-century historian. It is a shame, however, that he did not extend this analysis to include business letters too. Letter-writing was,

Henkin admits, "the paradigmatic activity of the business world," and commercial pursuits generated far more mail than private letters to family and friends (p. 95). Business letters had their own forms and conventions, and in their way combined expectations of privacy with a public "performance" of the new national economy.

Henkin's emphasis on sentimental correspondence may also undercut his argument for the modernity and familiarity of the antebellum postal system. Like Henkin's nineteenth-century postal users, we are all connected by a grand telecommunications network today. Yet how many of us believe that the highest purpose of this network is to reunite us with our sainted mothers, that they may offer moral inoculation against the corruptions of the world? In a lively final chapter, Henkin breaks from his focus on family correspondence to consider advertising circulars, solicitations, and greeting cards, particularly valentines, which exploded in popularity in the 1840s. The mass mailings described in this chapter were highly commercialized, more often local than long distance, and frequently anonymous, annoying, or both. Here is a postal culture that will seem all too familiar to modern readers. Here are the real roots of our interconnected age.

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