

Confessions of an archival addict

AS a child, I remember coming home from school in the late afternoon, doing my homework at the dining room table, seated so that I could see the mail carrier when he arrived at our front door. Rarely was there a letter for me, but occasionally one appeared, and this intermittent reinforcement was sufficient to maintain my daily vigilance. I have always enjoyed letters. They can be read and read again, a source of repeated pleasure. Sadly, the kind of correspondence I would call a 'letter' has largely vanished today, replaced by cheap long-distance phone calls, texting, and brief e-mails.

Of course not all letters are pleasant. Some should be read only once. Perhaps, some should not, or cannot, be read at all, as suggested by American poet Thomas Bailey Aldrich who sent the following reply to zoologist Edward S. Morse, a friend of Charles Darwin and, presumably, a friend of Bailey.

It was very pleasant to me to get a letter from you the other day. Perhaps I should have found it pleasanter if I had been able to decipher it. I don't think that I mastered anything beyond the date (which I knew) and the signature (which I guessed at). There's a singular and perpetual charm in a letter of yours; it never grows old, it never loses its novelty... Other letters are read and thrown away and forgotten but yours are kept forever – unread. One of them will last a reasonable man a lifetime. (Bartlett, 1955, p.681)



LUDLY T. BENJAMIN, JR on the joys of reading other people's mail.

Now I am a historian of psychology, letters continue to hold their fascination for me. I find that the most enjoyable hours of my professional life are spent in an archive reading someone else's mail. Letters express the gamut of human emotions – happiness, fear, love, anxiety, disappointment, sadness. Some letters are filled with hope, others with expectations of doom. They tell of pettiness and conspiracy, of ambition and courage, and of achievement and failure. In psychology, letters tell the history of great ideas and of the intellectual debates that have shaped the field. They allow us to travel in time and place, peering into the lives, indeed the very souls, of individuals who were important for the development of psychology as a science and profession (see Benjamin, 2006).

Consider this example from the correspondence of Harvard University psychologist and philosopher William James who, in the late 1880s, was struggling to finish the manuscript for what would be his first book and most famous work, *The Principles of Psychology* (1890). When he signed the book contract in 1878, he assured his editor, Henry Holt, that he would deliver the manuscript in two years. But nearly a decade had passed and Holt had yet to see a page of the promised book. In 1887, James wrote to his famous brother, novelist Henry, residing in England, describing the problems he was having with his book and expressing his envy of Henry's literary form that allowed him simply to invent the subject matter of his books: 'How you produce volume after



William James

volume the way you do is more than I can conceive, but you haven't to forge every sentence in the teeth of irreducible and stubborn facts as I do' (Skrupskelis & Berkeley, 1993, p.59). James complained that the discipline of psychology was changing too rapidly, making his task an impossible one. No doubt in mock sympathy Henry replied, that he was sad that science would not stand still for his brother.

William James eventually completed his magnum opus in May 1890, sending the entire 3000 pages of the manuscript to Holt, having insured the package for \$1000. He was a full 10 years late in its promised delivery. When two weeks had passed and Holt had not sent page proofs to James, James audaciously wrote to his editor:

It is a fortnight since the entire ms. was forwarded. Under these conditions I feel no further responsibility whatever about having the thing published by October. I shall take the vacation which I shall sorely need in September... After the beginning of the college year my duties will be so unusually heavy that the proofs must take whatever spare time they can get. I won't even promise to touch them until the following summer. I say this that there will be no misunderstanding on your part as to what you have a right to expect of me, and that you may govern your present treatment of the Ms. accordingly. (Skrupskelis & Berkeley, 1999, p.45)

Holt was likely prepared for that response, as he had dealt with James's brashness for a decade. Their relationship – a love-hate affair – seems typical of what exists between publisher and author, partly dictated by different goals for the book.

WEBLINKS

Archives of the History of American Psychology:

www3.uakron.edu/ahap

United States Library of Congress Manuscript

Collections: www.loc.gov/rr/mss/

British Library Manuscript Collections:

www.bl.uk/collections/manuscripts.html

Bodleian Library Manuscript Collections:

www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/wmss/#Sections

Darwin Correspondence Project:

www.darwinproject.ac.uk

John Locke, who worked for 20 years on his book, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), acknowledged as much in a letter he wrote to Anthony Collins in 1704: 'Books seem to me to be pestilent things, and infect all that trade in them...with something very perverse and brutal' (Locke, 1801, p.291).

Stories behind the stories

The few letters quoted here (other than the letter from Locke, whose papers are principally at Oxford University) are part of the more than 9000 letters of William James that are preserved in the Harvard University Archives and other locations. They provide a fascinating inter- and intrapersonal account of James's struggles to write one of the most influential books in the history of psychology. More broadly, they are the raw data of James's life and career. They are the bedrock upon which historians and biographers have based their attempts to make sense of this complicated individual, a man who is regarded as one of the founders of the science of psychology yet, paradoxically, one who spent much of his life attempting to establish the validity of paranormal phenomena, particularly communication with spirits of the dead.

Although some of James's letters indicate an interest in paranormal phenomena as early as 1869, he did not show a serious commitment to the field until a trip to London in 1882/83 that brought him into contact with the leadership of the Society for Psychical Research in England. He joined the British society the following year and in that same year was involved in the founding of its American counterpart in Boston. Needless to say, these activities were an embarrassment to his American colleagues, who saw his identification with psychical research as seriously undermining their efforts to establish psychology as a legitimate and respectable science. The story of James's involvement in psychical work on both sides of the Atlantic, and the conflict it generated among American psychologists, is known today largely from the richness of the accounts in his letters.

In this way, letters often tell the stories behind the stories we read in our history books. We know, for example, that Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung were once very close, that Freud viewed Jung as his 'crown prince' of psychoanalysis. We know too that their relationship dissolved, presumably due to changes Jung proposed

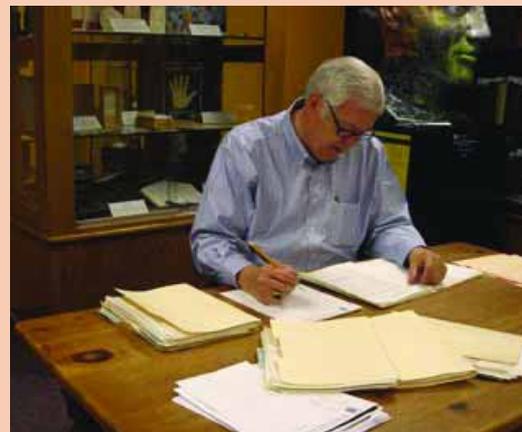
WHERE ARE THE ARCHIVES?

Letters are the *raison d'être* of archives. The principal contents of most archives are the manuscript collections, that is, the personal papers – mostly correspondence – of famous, and sometimes not so famous, persons.

Charles Darwin's vast letters and papers collection can be found in the University Library at Cambridge (many now available online through the Darwin Correspondence Project – see weblinks). The letters of **Alfred Russel Wallace** are housed in the British Library, and thus the two collections provide scholars and other interested readers a priceless look at the controversy over the co-discovery of natural selection as the mechanism for species evolution. The BL manuscript collections are extensive and include such prominent figures as **Charles Babbage**, **James Cook**, **Florence Nightingale** and **Robert Falcon Scott**.

In the United States, the papers of important psychologists can be found in many locations. The letters of **Edward Titchener**, from Chichester, who introduced structural psychology, can be found at Cornell University where he spent his career. **B.F. Skinner's** papers, like those of James, are in the Harvard University Archives. The letters of **James McKeen Cattell** who, after a post-doctoral stay with Sir Francis Galton, brought the intelligence test to America, can be found in Washington at the Library of Congress.

The single largest repository of psychology manuscript collections in the world is the Archives of the History of American Psychology, located at the University of Akron in Ohio. The papers of more than 700 psychologists are part of that archive, including such important figures as humanistic psychology's **Abraham Maslow**; attachment theory's **Mary Ainsworth**; intelligence testing's **Henry Herbert Goddard**, who coined the term moron as part of the classification system for mentally challenged persons; gifted education's **Leta Stetter Hollingworth**; and learning theory's **Kenneth Spence**. For historians of psychology, Akron is the Garden of Eden without the snake and the forbidden fruit.



in Freud's theory of psychoanalysis. No doubt the theoretical disagreements were key in the dissolution of their friendship, but the approximately 360 letters between the two men, exchanged between 1906 and 1913, tell another side to the story, suggesting that the competing personalities of the two had as much or more to do with the breakup. In the end, exasperated by mounting criticisms from Freud, Jung wrote to him:

You go around sniffing out all the symptomatic actions in your vicinity, thus reducing everyone to the level of sons and daughters who blushing admit the existence of their faults. Meanwhile you remain on top as the father, sitting pretty. For sheer obsequiousness nobody dares to pluck the prophet by the beard and inquire for once... Who's got the neurosis? (McGuire, 1974, p.535)

Freud replied, 'I propose that we

abandon our personal relations entirely. I shall lose nothing by it, for my own emotional tie with you has long been a thin thread – the lingering effects of past disappointments...' (McGuire, 1974, p.539).

Student life, 19th-century style

James McKeen Cattell was the first American to get his PhD in psychology in Wilhelm Wundt's Leipzig laboratory, graduating in 1886. His letters allow us to experience what it was like to be a graduate student in that historic time and place. Cattell wrote often to his parents, sometimes two to three times a week for the three years he was in Germany. He often discussed his classes, his research, his fellow students, and his professors, particularly Wundt, for whom he expressed little regard. In an 1885 letter to his parents he wrote:

Prof. Wundt lectured yesterday and today on my subject [the speed of

mental operations] – I suppose you won't consider it egotistical when I say that I know a great deal more about it than he does, but you will be surprised when I say that half of the statements he made were wrong. I cannot understand how he is willing to give as positive scientific facts the results of experiments which he knows were not properly made. I could write a paper on these two lectures most damaging to Prof. Wundt. It is to be hoped for his sake as well as mine that he passes me in the examination on philosophy. (Sokal, 1981, p.154)

Historians have concluded that Cattell was, in fact, correct about a methodological flaw in Wundt's mental chronometry studies. Nevertheless, Cattell's letters as a student in Leipzig portray him as self-centred, arrogant, disrespectful of others, and supremely confident; some might suggest that he suffered from narcissistic personality disorder. Perhaps some mix of those qualities served him well in his rise to become one of the most important and most influential psychologists in America.

Travel without leaving home

Earlier I mentioned Darwin, whose papers are located at Cambridge University (many now available online – see weblinks). It can be argued that few collections, if any, are as valuable in the history of science. After his five-year Beagle voyage, Darwin largely ended his travelling days, living out his remaining 45 years, mostly in the comfort of his home in the village of Downe in Kent. From there he initiated a vast correspondence with botanists, ornithologists, geologists, ministers, and so

forth – anyone who Darwin felt could give him the information he was seeking.

In fact, Darwin scholar and biographer Janet Browne (2002) wrote: 'If there was any single factor that characterised the heart of Darwin's scientific undertaking, it was [his] systematic use of correspondence' (p.12). Browne noted that it was a one-way street, with Darwin controlling the flow of information so that it always satisfied his needs. She saw the theory of evolution as the interplay between the creative vision residing in a single mind and a mass of information gathered from many different hands, including his own.

Echoing my own mail carrier stakeout, Browne reports how, 'in a passing compulsion, [Darwin] attached a mirror to the inside of his study window, angled so

'To profess a love for archival work often brings unusual looks from colleagues'

that he could catch the first glimpse of the postman turning up the drive. It stayed there for the rest of his life' (Browne, 2002, p.13).

Dear Skinner: Yours, disgusted

B.F. Skinner's papers in the Harvard University Archives can take you inside one of the most interesting psychologists, arguably the most important psychologist of his generation. Skinner himself relied heavily on his vast correspondence in writing the three volumes of his autobiography. He described how he taught pigeons to guide a missile to its target in World War II, his writing of the utopian novel, *Walden Two*, his invention of a teaching machine and the use of programmed learning, and the multiple criticisms he received from his controversial book *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, a book that led many to believe he was against personal freedoms.

One of the stories told in this correspondence was Skinner's invention of what he called the baby tender, a crib-like device that provided his daughter Deborah with a heat- and humidity-controlled environment and a great deal more freedom of movement than the traditional crib. There were numerous other advantages as well. Skinner first described his new childcare device in a popular American

magazine, the *Ladies' Home Journal*, in 1945. The magazine editor chose to title the article 'Baby in a Box': this proved to be an unfortunate choice of words.

Although Skinner continually emphasised the advantages of the baby tender for the baby and parents, including the increased safety for the infant, critics could not get beyond the fact that it was an enclosure and thus presumably disconnected the parents from their parental responsibilities (Skinner, 1945).

One disgruntled citizen wrote to the district attorney, 'This professor who thinks he can rear his little child by depriving her of social life, sun and fresh air. Can't you people of the law do something about this? These crack-pot scientists... If I lived in the same town as these people I would be tempted to tell them what I thought of them' (Benjamin, 2006, pp.202–203). Another evidently horrified reader wrote to the editor, 'Coming right on top of the atomic bomb, the artificial baby tender is almost too much for me to take' (p.203). A high school English class in Pennsylvania accused Skinner of bringing Huxley's *Brave New World* to life. They wrote to him asking:

What in the world do you think you are doing? We can not understand how you, as a psychologist, can eliminate the human aspects of raising a child by use of The Skinner Box... As long as you have gone this far, we wonder if you have ever considered inventing specialized baby boxes to make babies artistic, boxes for social climbing babies – just to name a few possibilities... By creating this 'revolutionary product', you have shown that you are ready to inaugurate a society composed of box-raised vegetables [sic] similar to the Brave New World of Aldous Huxley. More power to you Mustopha [sic] Mond. (Benjamin, 2006, p. 208)

Despite the critics, Skinner found many parents eager to try his baby tender. He initially joined with a manufacturer in Cleveland who suggested marketing the device as the 'heir conditioner'. But he stole the money from Skinner and others and skipped town without producing the devices. A later commercial venture, marketed as the aircrib, was more successful, selling, perhaps, between 500 and 1000 of the enclosures. But the device

DISCUSS AND DEBATE

What ethical issues are involved in historians' use and publication of private correspondence?

How will the various forms of electronic communication change the database for future historians and the way historians do their research?

There are thousands of letter collections that have been published, many of them intended for public enjoyment. What are the fascinations inherent in personal correspondence?

Have your say on these or other issues this article raises. E-mail 'Letters' on psychologist@bps.org.uk or members can contribute to our forum via www.psychforum.org.uk.

never became the household success that Skinner had envisioned.

Interestingly, this invention has led to one of the more persistent myths about Skinner, that the daughter raised in this box as an infant suffered horribly as a result. Some stories have her suing her father, another said she had been institutionalised in a mental hospital, whereas another said she committed suicide. Personally, I have always believed that if she really wanted to hurt her father deeply, she would have become a cognitive psychologist. Alas, none of these interesting stories is true. Deborah Skinner Buzan reports that she had a happy childhood and has enjoyed a successful career as an artist (see www.snopes.com/science/skinner.asp). She lives today in London.

Journey into the unknown

I have presented the smallest of samples of the riches to be found in the manuscript collections that make up archives. To profess a love for archival work often brings unusual looks from colleagues and students – a mix of dismay because you must be boring, and of sadness and pity because you can't find anything better to do with your life. Michael Hill (1993, pp.6–7) has provided an eloquent answer for the disbelievers:

Archival work appears bookish and commonplace to the uninitiated, but this mundane simplicity is deceptive... events and materials in archives are not always what they seem on the surface. There are perpetual surprises, intrigues, and apprehensions... Suffice it to say that it is a rare treat to visit an archive, to hold in one's hand the priceless and irreplaceable documents of our unfolding human drama... Each archival visit is a journey into an unknown realm that rewards its visitors with challenging puzzles and unexpected revelations.

If you can't get to an archive (see box overleaf), you may be able to read the letters in published form. William James's letters have been published in 12 thick volumes by the University of Virginia Press. Darwin's letters are appearing in a 30-volume set from Cambridge University Press, with 15 volumes published to date. The Freud–Jung letters exist in a single volume edited by William McGuire (1974). Cattell's letters from his study in Germany and England can be found in Sokal's book (1981). And you will find many other such collections in print.

Of course, if you do your letter-reading in the archives, you get to hold the genuine

articles in your very own hands. In either case, discover the joys of reading someone else's mail.

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