

The Political Economy of Postal Reform in the Victorian Age

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The mid-nineteenth century postal reform movements in Great Britain and the United States were superficially similar, yet substantively different. The similarities were obvious. In both countries, postal reformers called for a radical reduction in postal rates, an innovation that they termed “cheap postage.” In both countries, cheap postage was dependent on the enactment of legislation, since, at this time, both postal systems were owned and operated by the central government. In both countries cheap postage became law: in Great Britain, postal rates were restructured in 1840; in the United States, in 1845 and 1851. And in both countries, cheap postage led to a huge increase in the number of letters sent through the mail at a time when letter-writing was the primary medium for the circulation of long-distance information by the general population.

The differences between the campaigns for cheap postage in Great Britain and the United States were subtler, yet considerable. In Great Britain, the rationale for cheap postage was market-based, in keeping with the tenets of an emerging tradition in political economy that political economists called liberal, and that would later be dubbed *laissez-faire*. By limiting the taxes that the central government imposed on letter postage, reformers contended, lawmakers hoped to more closely match the cost of mailing a letter with the price that the government charged for its delivery. In the United States, in contrast, the rationale for cheap postage was civic, or what the founders of the American republic might have called republican. By expanding the mandate of the central government to embrace the low-cost circulation not only of newspapers and magazines, but also of letters, lawmakers empowered individuals to circulate at low cost information on personal matters as well as public affairs and market trends. This mandate was in no sense market-based since it entailed the legal suppression of rival non-governmental mail carriers, and the extension to a new class of postal items—that is, letters—based on the presumption that, if necessary, the cost of their circulation would be paid for out of the treasury. This presumption was codified with the enactment of the Post Office Act of 1851, which obliged the Post Office Department to maintain the existing level of service even if this obligation forced it to draw on the treasury for support.¹

The origins, character, and legacy of the campaigns for cheap postage in Great Britain and the United States raise a number of questions that are worthy of careful historical scrutiny. Who supported these campaigns? What was their

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rationale? What were their consequences for public and private life? These are large questions, and ones that this essay cannot possibly answer in a definitive way. Yet they are worth posing, since their answers provide a context for understanding later innovations in communications that ranged from the rise of commercial broadcasting to the commercialization of the internet.

The most tireless promoter of cheap postage in Great Britain was the educational reformer Rowland Hill (Figure 1). Beginning in the mid-1830s, Hill lobbied energetically to convince his countrymen of the benefits of a radical decrease in the basic letter rate. The British government at this time regarded its postal system as a branch of the treasury and postage as a tax. The British post office was expected to generate a large annual surplus—which, invariably, it did—which the treasury used to cover the costs of running the government. In fact, the British post



FIGURE 1. Rowland Hill.

office would not run its first annual deficit until 1955.² By linking the actual cost of mail delivery to the price a postal patron paid to send a letter, Hill reasoned, the treasury could simultaneously lower postal rates and increase the total revenue it obtained.

Cheap postage had the further benefit of curtailing the special privileges that the British government lavished on the well-to-do. High letter postage was not only inept fiscal policy, but also a regressive tax that fell most heavily on the middle class and the poor. Rich aristocrats had little trouble obtaining free passes, known as “franks,” that permitted them to mail letters at no cost to themselves. Franks were harder to obtain by the middle class and unknown to the poor. Cheap postage would, as it were, level the playing field by providing the many with facilities that had formerly been a perquisite of the few.

The principal features of Hill’s reform—mandatory prepayment, the rollout of the now-ubiquitous postage stamp, and the reduction in the basic letter rate to a penny—might seem prosaic enough. Yet in the years following their introduction in 1840, many well-informed contemporaries hailed them as a triumph of civilization, an assessment that would be seconded by influential historians for over one hundred years.

The campaign for cheap letter postage in Great Britain coincided with a parallel campaign to reduce the taxes that the government charged on newspapers. Taxed newspapers paid fees that permitted them to be circulated in the mail; the rest of the newspaper press, in contrast, had to rely on other, non-postal means of conveyance. These fees often took the form of non-adhesive labels called “stamps”—a confusing term, in retrospect, since these labels were very different from the adhesive stamps that Hill advocated, and that the British post office began to issue in 1840. The proprietors of the unstamped newspapers resented their exclusion from the mail and lobbied Parliament to change the law. The “war of the unstamped,” as the resulting political contest has come to be known, is typically studied in isolation from the campaign for cheap postage. As a consequence, many questions remain. Did the war of the unstamped antedate the campaign for cheap postage and, thus, serve as a precedent for reformers like Hill? Or was it the other way around? Or were the two movements fundamentally distinct? Whatever the answers to these questions turn out to be, it remains suggestive that the two reform movements shared a common grievance—that is, that the cost of circulating information was too high—as well as a common remedy—that the price of mailing a posted item should bear a discernible relationship to the cost of its circulation.

Further questions are raised if the war of the unstamped is located in a transatlantic context. The campaign for cheap postage is typically understood as having originated in Great Britain and only later spread to the United States. In the war of the unstamped, however, British reformers looked to the United States, and with good reason. The U. S. Post Office Department admitted newspapers into the mail on a non-preferential basis beginning in 1792. Henceforth, postal administrators were proscribed from discriminating between one newspaper and another. The British post office, in contrast, would not begin to put its newspaper press on an analogous footing until 1836.³

Hill's priorities shaped the ways in which the campaign for cheap postage would come to be remembered. For many decades after 1840, historians echoed Hill's contention that the consequences of cheap postage were far-reaching. The "social and economic results" of this innovation, exulted the British cultural historian Llewellyn Woodward in 1938, were "beyond calculation."⁴ The hostility of British aristocrats toward cheap postage, Woodward elaborated, owed much to the studied indifference toward material considerations of a haughty elite. The aristocracy, Woodward recounted, arrogantly regarded it as "beneath their dignity to understand anything about a penny."⁵

Woodward was by no means alone in his admiration for cheap postage. French historian Marc Bloch regarded as highly consequential the comparable innovations that had occurred at roughly the same time in France. "When I ask for timbres [that is, adhesive postage stamps] at my post-office window," Bloch observed in 1940, "I am able to use that term only because of recent technical changes, such as the organization of the postal service itself, and the substitution of a little gummed piece for the stamping of a postmark. These have revolutionized human communications."⁶ The British political historian David Thompson found particularly notable the consequences of cheap postage for political reform. Cheap postage, Thompson observed in a history of nineteenth-century England that he published in 1950, had given the Anti-Corn-Law League a "new means" of "disseminating its propaganda," an innovation that hastened a dramatic reduction in 1846 in the import duty on wheat, or what the English called corn.⁷

Woodward, Bloch, and Thompson reflected the consensus of the generation of historians who came of age in the years preceding the Second World War. More recent historians have been more circumspect. To be sure, in his justly celebrated *Age of Revolution, 1789–1848* (1962) E. J. Hobsbawm did hail Hill's "brilliant invention" of a

"standardized charge for postal matter."⁸ Yet Hobsbawm attributed no particular consequences to Hill's innovation, an omission that, in more recent years, has become the norm. Monographs on specialized topics in British postal history abound.⁹ Even so, the campaign for cheap postage has failed to take its place alongside free trade and Catholic emancipation in the annals of Victorian reform. More broadly, the postal system itself no longer commends itself to historians as an agent of change. The institution, for example, goes unmentioned in several well-regarded recent overviews of nineteenth-century British history. From the standpoint of the generalist, the British post office is, at best, a bit player on the historical stage.¹⁰

Postal reformers in the United States shared Hill's conviction that cheap postage mattered. In fact, if anything, they were even more inclined to wax rhapsodic in pondering its consequences for public and private life. The moral effects of cheap postage were a preoccupation of Joshua Leavitt, an evangelical Protestant minister-turned-newspaper editor who combined a faith in postal reform with a hatred of slavery (Figure 2). The British Parliament had lowered postal rates and freed the slaves: why could not the U.S. Congress follow its lead?

The relationship between cheap postage and abolition was for Leavitt far from incidental. Of what consequence was it to "nine tenths of our population," Leavitt editorialized in 1844, "that time and space are half killed, while the absurd United States mail nuisance continues? Time is annihilated, you say? Why a common man cannot carry on a moderate correspondence with his friends, scattered as they usually are, without consuming his whole time to earn the money to pay for it." Cheap postage, Leavitt elaborated, had ironically become a rallying cry for certain publications, such as the New York City-based *Journal of Commerce*, for whom abolitionism remained anathema. Yet by championing cheap postage, the *Journal* was endorsing a political reform that, by empowering ordinary people to circulate information over long distances, was "dealing blows unwittingly at slavery": "Give us the British system of postage and slavery is dead."¹¹

The candor with which Leavitt linked cheap postage and abolition was unusual. Yet his faith in the emancipatory potential of cheap postage was not. The campaign united thousands of Americans in a common cause. Newspapers in New York City, Boston, Philadelphia, and many other commercial centers ran frequent editorials on the topic, and postal patrons flooded Congress with petitions demanding a host of postal reforms—including, above all, a reduction in the basic letter rate.¹² This well-organized protest preceded, and almost certainly hastened, the



FIGURE 2. Joshua Leavitt. Photograph by unidentified photographer. From *Portraits of American Abolitionists*. Courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society, Photo 81.404.

enactment of two laws—the Post Office Act of 1845 and the Post Office Act of 1851—which instituted a host of reforms that include, in addition to a steep reduction in the basic letter rate, the rollout of the first postage stamps.

Under other circumstances, the campaign for cheap postage in the United States might have taken its place in the historical imagination alongside the better-known reform movements of the period: temperance, abolition, women's rights. Yet it did not. The only general history of the United States to treat the campaign for cheap postage in detail is John Bach McMaster's *History of the People of the United States*, and it was published over a century ago in 1910. McMaster heaped praise on the movement, yet he failed to link it to any larger theme—such as, for example, evangelical reform or abolition—that might have

increased the likelihood that it would become incorporated into general accounts of the American past.¹³

McMaster's treatment of postal reform was the exception that proved the rule. None of his contemporaries treated the campaign for cheap postage in any detail. Henry Adams, for example, ignored it entirely in his *Education*, which Adams had completed by 1907, even though it can be credibly argued to have been no less important an innovation than the three events of the mid-1840s that Adams credited with throwing into an "ash heap" the political universe of his youth: namely, the commercialization of the telegraph, the spanning of the Appalachian mountains by the railroad, and the first regularly scheduled trans-Atlantic steamship.¹⁴

Adams's priorities became the conventional wisdom. For historians of the United States, not only the campaign for cheap postage—but also the history of the mail—were long topics that they felt safe to ignore. Had Cornell history professor J. B. Bretz published his long-promised history of the U. S. Post Office Department in the early republic, a project that originated in Bretz's 1906 Ph. D. history dissertation at the University of Chicago, it is conceivable that the situation might have been different. Yet Bretz sat on his manuscript for his entire academic career. Bretz's dissertation has disappeared, making it impossible to know how he might have treated the campaign for cheap postage, or even if he would have taken his story up to the 1840s. In all likelihood, he would not: the two essays that he cobbled out of his dissertation focused on the period before the adoption of the federal Constitution in 1788 and the War of 1812.¹⁵ Yet this much is known: Bretz never published his magnum opus, and the opportunity passed. Not until the 1990s would any topics in the history of the American postal system begin to attract sustained attention, and it would not be until the very recent past that the institution would figure in a more than incidental way in synthetic overviews of the American past.¹⁶

Modern historical writing on the American postal system began with the publication in 1972 of Wayne E. Fuller's *American Mail*—a thoughtful topical survey of American postal history from the colonial era onward. Fuller's overview included a cursory discussion of the campaign for cheap postage, which he analyzed through a neo-progressive lens as a victory of the "people" over the "interests." While Fuller's account has much to commend it, he was, in the end, less concerned with the campaign for cheap postage than with its implications for postal finance.¹⁷ More recently, Fuller's *Morality and the Mail* expanded our understanding of several related nineteenth-century reform movements, including Sabbatarianism and

anti-pornography, without putting either the campaign for cheap postage or its consequences on center stage.¹⁸ Most recent of all, David M. Henkin traced the consequences of postal reform, though not the cheap postage campaign itself, in his engaging *Postal Age*.¹⁹ Even so, much remains to be done. Specialists in nineteenth-century U. S. history have long been aware of the prodigious paper trail that the campaign for cheap postage generated, yet, as the well-known nineteenth-century historian Eric Foner recently observed, no one has yet fit it into a broader historical context.²⁰ The significance of cheap postage is underplayed even by Joshua Leavitt's biographer, Hugh Davis. From Davis's point of view, Leavitt's campaign for cheap postage was overshadowed by, and largely unrelated to, his crusade against slavery.²¹ Even Fuller and Henkin are ultimately less interested in tracing the origins, character, and legacy of the campaign for cheap postage than in mining the documents that the movement generated to generalize about postal policy and cultural trends.

Here lies a conundrum. In both Great Britain and the United States, contemporaries hailed the campaign for cheap postage as an epochal reform. Yet almost never have historians explored the origins, character, or legacies of these campaigns in any detail. As a consequence, they have been largely ignored. The early modern historian Elizabeth L. Eisenstein tackled a related challenge in her justly acclaimed *Printing Press as an Agent of Change*. Frustrated by the hype that had enveloped the invention of printing, Eisenstein traced the influence of this communications medium on three pivotal events in western civilization: the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, and the Scientific Revolution. No historian has undertaken an analogous investigation of the campaign for cheap postage in Great Britain and the United States. Might it not be time for someone to write a history of cheap postage as an "agent of change"?

Of the many dimensions of the campaign for cheap postage that would seem to be worthy of exploration, three would seem to hold special promise. These are its rationale; the process by which it was enacted; and its consequences for public and private life. Of these three themes, the consequences of cheap postage is the most ambitious and the hardest to pin down. Historians since the 1990s have become cognizant of the political, economic, and cultural consequences of the Post Office Act of 1792, while, in 2000, historian of technology Daniel E. Headrick posited that two postal "revolutions" transformed the West, one in the 1790s and one in the 1840s.²² The first of these postal revolutions is no longer obscure; the second, however, remains—at least in the United States—largely unknown.²³ In both Great Britain and the United States,

cheap postage hastened a huge increase in letter writing. How might this increase have shaped the identity of letter writers? What implications might it have had for other dimensions of public and private life?

It would be anachronistic to compare cheap postage with the communications innovations of the recent past, an age in which letter-writing is enjoying an unexpected revival, due first to email, and, more recently, to social network applications such as Facebook and Twitter. Yet there should be no hesitation about comparing the mid-nineteenth century "communications revolution" with what came before—and, in particular, to ask how cheap postage shaped an informational environment in which letter-writing previously had been expensive, and, in Great Britain, the circulation of newspapers limited by onerous taxes designed, at least in part, to prevent ordinary people from gaining access to information on public affairs.²⁴

While the consequences of cheap postage are hard to isolate, the process by which it was enacted is better suited to historical inquiry. Here it might make sense to begin with the reformers themselves. Hill and Leavitt were but two members of a small but determined cadre of postal reformers. In Great Britain, their counterparts included the reformist MP Robert Wallace and the career civil servant Henry Cole; in the United States, the anarchist Lysander Spooner and the anti-monopolist Barnabas Bates.

While much remains to be learned about these reformers, a few tentative generalizations can be ventured. Cheap postage enthusiasts in Great Britain often had close ties to the government; their counterparts in the United States, in contrast, did not. In large part for this reason, British postal reformers had less trouble enlisting lawmakers to generate the data necessary for an informed debate on the merits of the proposed reform. Postal administrators in the United States generated mountains of postal data, yet few lawmakers used this data to make the case for cheap postage, and no legislative hearings probed its implications. The most incisive public debate over cheap postage in Great Britain took place in Parliament; the best-informed public debate in the United States took place in the press—and, in particular, in the publications of postal reformers like Leavitt, Spooner, and Bates. This contrast helps to account for some of the differences not only in the evolution of the cheap postage campaigns in the two countries, but also in the ways they have come to be remembered.

In his celebrated 1837 brief for cheap postage, *Post Office Reform: Its Importance and Practicality*, Hill drew on data generated by Parliament. Leavitt, Spooner, and Bates, in contrast, had no comparable body of data to conjure with. Postal data was abundant. Yet contemporaries used

it mostly to speculate about the likely implications of cheap postage for public finance. The potential benefits of letter-rate reductions for postal users were downplayed not only by legislators, but also by almost every postal administrator who considered the issue. The principal exception was John M. Niles, a one-time Hartford, Connecticut, postmaster who served briefly as postmaster general in 1840 and 1841. Niles championed cheap postage in his 1840 annual report, to which he appended a prescient report on American postal finance by post office special agent George Plitt. The Plitt report had been originally commissioned by Niles's predecessor, Amos Kendall—a capable administrator who had briefly flirted with postal reform in the 1830s. Yet Kendall eventually changed his mind, and the Plitt report played, at best, a marginal role in the congressional debate over cheap postage in the years to come.²⁵

Hill was, of course, an outsider when he published *Post Office Reform* in 1837. Soon thereafter, however, he obtained an appointment in the treasury and following a brief hiatus, he obtained a high-level position in the British post office that he retained for almost twenty years. No American postal reformer ever obtained a comparable government position. In fact, high-ranking American postal administrators were, almost without exception, hostile to postal reform. The campaign for cheap postage was ridiculed in the 1840s by John Tyler's postmaster general Charles Wickliffe, James K. Polk's postmaster general, Cave Johnson, and the veteran postal administrators Selah Hobbie and John Stuart Skinner.²⁶ Even Amos Kendall challenged the rationale for cheap postage, reversing a position that he had taken as postmaster general in 1836.²⁷ The hostility of U. S. postal administrators toward postal reform was epitomized by the publication, in 1844, of an anonymous pamphlet ridiculing cheap postage.²⁸ This pamphlet had the imprimatur of the Tyler administration: it was reprinted, for example, in its official administration newspaper, the *Madisonian*.²⁹ Although no one in the Post Office Department claimed credit for this document, Bates was probably right to assume that it had been written by a postal administrator.³⁰ The hostility of American postal administrators toward postal reform goes far toward explaining why cheap postage remained obscure. Had Bates lived longer—he died suddenly in 1853 at the age of sixty-eight—or had Leavitt and Spooner enjoyed closer ties to the levers of power, it is conceivable that a triumphalist narrative would have emerged—with, conceivably, a hero like Hill. Yet they did not, and it did not.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to provide a detailed analysis of the process by which postal reform was enacted in Great Britain and the United States. Yet this much seems

plain. In both countries, the railroad and the steamboat created a new communications channel that made some kind of legislation inevitable. In both countries the campaign for cheap postage had considerable popular support; and in both it culminated in the enactment of legislation that mandated a major reduction in the basic letter rate.

Even so, the similarities between postal reform in Great Britain and the United States are easily exaggerated. Postal reform in Great Britain and the United States emerged in different political economies that shaped their legacies in ways both large and small. The campaign for cheap postage in Great Britain drew at least part of its inspiration from the campaign to expand popular access to newspapers, a reform that, in the United States, had been accomplished almost fifty years earlier with the enactment of the Post Office Act of 1792.

Equally notable was the contrasting relationship in the two countries between postal reform and postal finance. In Great Britain, postal reformers campaigned for cheap postage secure in the knowledge that even a radical reduction in the basic letter rate was not likely to throw the post office on the support of the treasury. The British post office generated a substantial surplus, it is worth underscoring, not only before Rowland Hill's reforms, but also for over a century after they were enacted. True, as the historian of British taxation Martin J. Daunton has astutely observed, Hill was overly optimistic in his estimation of the revenue increase that cheap postage would bring.³¹ Yet a surplus remained. In the United States, in contrast, the Post Office Acts of 1845 and 1851 preceded a long period in which the Post Office Department generated a large annual deficit that obliged legislators to borrow from the treasury to cover the shortfall, a pattern that would remain the norm until the establishment of the U. S. Postal Service in 1970. Explanations differed as to the cause of this deficit. Some blamed the reduction of letter-postage; others the continuation of a perquisite for lawmakers known as the "franking" privilege. Either way, one conclusion was incontestable: Congress paid far more to facilitate the circulation of information in the United States than Parliament did in Great Britain.

The precarious financial position of the U. S. Post Office Department highlights yet another contrast between the campaign for cheap postage in Great Britain and the United States, and that was its spatial logic. In Great Britain, postal reformers presumed that cheap postage would benefit regions on the periphery of the country's political and commercial center of London. Not surprisingly, a number of prominent reformers—including Hill and Wallace—hailed from the hinterland. Hill was from

Birmingham; Wallace from Scotland. In the United States, in contrast, postal reformers presumed that cheap postage would disproportionately benefit the country's principal commercial centers—including, in particular, New York City, Philadelphia, and Boston. Not surprisingly, the campaign for cheap postage in the United States had far more support in the thickly settled North and East than in the thinly settled South and West. In fact, legislators from the South and West feared, entirely plausibly, that if revenue failed to match costs, they might find themselves obliged to curtail the massive newspaper and stagecoach subsidies that their constituents currently enjoyed.

Just as the process of postal reform in Great Britain and the United States differed, so too did its rationale. Postal reform in Great Britain had much in common with the abolition of the Corn Laws and the ancillary economic innovations that ushered in a political economy that contemporaries termed liberal. Hill himself was very much a part of this tradition. Like a small yet influential cohort of self-proclaimed radicals whose ranks included the utilitarian political theorist Jeremy Bentham, Hill endorsed the then-novel moral philosophy that posited that the purpose of government was to promote the greatest good of the greatest number. Hill traveled in some of the same reformist circles as Bentham, and, like Bentham, was determined to simplify government and make it more economical. Hill did not regard cheap postage as a subsidy for the poor, for a region, or even for a specific kind of mail.³² Rather, he favored it as economically sound. Like popular education, competitive capitalism, and representative democracy, it would limit the power of the few to take unfair advantage of the many. In fact, Hill went so far as to endorse the abolition of the postal monopoly, a position that was hard to reconcile with the endorsement of internal cross-subsidies of any kind.³³

In the United States, in contrast, the rationale for postal reform was more expansive. Here cheap postage was championed not as an economic innovation that would match cost to price, but, rather, as a public good—or what a later generation would call an entitlement. Congress had facilitated the low-cost circulation of information on public affairs in 1792 when it admitted newspapers into the mail at low cost, and it had permitted Postmaster General John McLean to surreptitiously expand this mandate in 1825 to embrace information on market trends.³⁴ Now, or so the champions of cheap postage contended, Congress had an obligation to extend this mandate to information on personal matters such as the health of a distant relative. Postal reform in the United States, in short, was intended to promote the well-being of

the citizenry, rather than to limit the role of government in personal affairs. In Great Britain, cheap postage was backed by legislators who endorsed the abolition of the Corn Laws; in the United States, by legislators who approved of large expenditures for public works and favored the reestablishment of a national bank.

The contrasting rationales for postal reform in Great Britain and the United States help explain why the Nobel-Prize winning economist R. W. Coase has hailed cheap postage in Great Britain as a forerunner of what is today called “market liberalism.” Coase’s parents had both been post office telegraphers in Great Britain, a circumstance that spurred Coase’s interest in communications history and that, eventually, led him to characterize cheap postage as a prototype for communications deregulations, including the auctioning off of the electromagnetic spectrum to the highest bidder.³⁵ No social scientist in the United States has reached a comparable conclusion. This was not because cheap postage lacked a rationale, but, rather, because its rationale was emphatically civic—and, as such, harder to characterize as a prelude to deregulation. Joshua Leavitt supported the postal monopoly; Rowland Hill did not. In one sense this made Leavitt more old-fashioned as an heir to the civic ideals of the founders of the republic and the evangelical aspirations of the Protestant Reformation. In another sense, it underscored the degree to which, in the United States, though not in Great Britain, lawmakers regarded cheap postage as an innovation that fully justified whatever augmentation in the organizational capabilities of the federal government it might require or whatever cost it might incur.

From such a perspective, cheap postage had more in common with certain political projects to facilitate intercommunication, such as the construction of the Erie Canal, than it did with the market-oriented reforms such as the refusal of the Jackson administration to recharter the Second Bank of the United States. Then, as now, American postal policy drew its inspiration not only, or even primarily, from the supposedly inexorable logic of economic incentives, but also from the moral power of civic ideals. The campaign for cheap postage in the United States was but one of several reform movements that reformers hailed as a welcome augmentation in the role of the central government in public and private life. In this regard, it resembled Reconstruction and Prohibition more than the free trade or the constitutional guarantee of a free press. Its success has obscured not only its legacy for later communications innovations, but also its distinctiveness—and, in particular, the subtle yet profound ways that it differed from the campaign for cheap postage in Great Britain.

NOTES

For suggestions and advice, I am grateful to Diane DeBlois, Robert Dalton Harris, Nancy R. John, Tom Lera, Jonathan Silberstein-Loeb, and two anonymous referees.

1. Wayne E. Fuller, *American Mail: Enlarger of the Common Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), chap. 5.

2. Martin J. Daunton, *Royal Mail: The Post Office since 1840* (London: Athlone Press, 1985), p. 339.

3. John Crawford, *The Newspaper Stamp, and the Newspaper Postage Compared* (London: J. Reed, 1836), pp. 3–4, 8; A. D. Smith, *The Development of Rates of Postage: An Historical and Analytical Study* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1917), p. 122.

4. E. L. Woodward, *The Age of Reform, 1815–1870* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 47.

5. Woodward, *Age of Reform*, p. 47.

6. Cited in Asa Briggs, *Victorian Things* (1988; Phoenix Mill, U. K.: Sutton, 2003), p. 290.

7. David Thomson, *England in the Nineteenth Century, 1815–1914* (1950; New York: Penguin, 1985), p. 81.

8. E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789–1848* (New York: New American Library, 1962), p. 205.

9. Howard Robinson, *The British Post Office: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948; Briggs, “Stamps—Used and Unused,” in Briggs, *Victorian Things*, chap. 9; C. R. Perry, *The Victorian Post Office: The Growth of a Bureaucracy* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1992); “Send the Letters, Uncle John”: Trollope, Penny-Postage Reform, and the Domestication of Empire,” in Eileen Cleere, *Avuncularism: Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Nineteenth-Century English Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), chap. 5; Catherine J. Golden, *Posting It: The Victorian Revolution in Letter-Writing* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009).

10. Kenneth O. Morgan, ed., *The Oxford History of Britain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Simon Schama, *A History of Britain*; vol 3: *The Fate of Empire, 1776–2000* (New York: Hyperion, 2002).

11. “The Postage,” *Morning Chronicle* (Boston), December 16, 1844.

12. These generalizations are based on a survey of over 40 newspapers for the 1843–1847 period, as well as a personal inspection of the voluminous files of cheap postage petitions in the National Archives.

13. John Bach McMaster, *History of the People of the United States, from the Revolution to the Civil War*, vol. 7, 1841–1850 (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1910), pp. 106–120, 124–134.

14. Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*, ed. Ernest Samuels (1906; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), p. 5.

15. Julian P. Bretz, “Some Aspects of Postal Extension into the West,” *American Historical Association Annual Report*, 5 (1909): 143–150; Bretz, “Early Land Communication with the

Lower Mississippi Valley,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 13 (June 1926): 3–29.

16. Pauline Maier, et al., *Inventing America: A History of the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006), vol. 1, chaps. 8, 10; Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought? The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), chap. 6. Much of the recent interest in the history of the American postal system has been spurred by a recognition that the Post Office Act of 1792 was a landmark in the history of communications in the United States. The first historian to highlight the significance of the Post Office Act of 1792 was Bretz; his conclusions were echoed by Fuller, and elaborated on by myself in a monograph that I published on the early American postal system in 1995: Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), chap. 1. Since 1995, the significance of the Post Office Act of 1792 has been widely recognized by specialists not only in history, but also in historical sociology, media studies, political science, and law.

17. Fuller, *American Mail*, chap. 5.

18. Fuller, *Morality and the Mail in Nineteenth-Century America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

19. David M. Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

20. Personal conversation, fall 2009.

21. Hugh Davis, *Joshua Leavitt: Evangelical Abolitionist* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990).

22. Daniel R. Headrick, *When Information Came of Age: Technologies of Knowledge in the Age of Reason and Revelation, 1700–1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

23. One notable exception to this generalization is David A. Gerber, *Authors of their Lives: The Personal Correspondence of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2006). To a greater degree than any other historian of whom I am aware, Gerber has explored the consequences of cheap postage for letter writing, with an emphasis on its implications for personal identity and social relationships.

24. Joel H. Wiener, *The War of the Unstamped: The Movement to Repeal the British Newspaper Tax, 1830–1836* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969).

25. George Plitt, *Report*, 26th Cong., 2nd sess., 1841, Sen. Doc. 156 (serial 378); John M. Niles, *Report of the Postmaster General* (1840), pp. 479–484. The Plitt report had originally been commissioned by Niles’s predecessor, Amos Kendall. Amos Kendall, *Report of the Postmaster General* (1839), p. 617.

26. *Journal of Commerce* (New York), 5 January 1844; *New York Express*, 3 June 1844.

27. Amos Kendall, *Report of the Postmaster General* (1836), 509; Kendall, “Postage,” *Kendall’s Expositor*, 3 (13 June 1843): 193–195.

28. "Franklin," *An Examination of the Probable Effect of the Reduction of Postage: As Proposed to be Made by the Bill Introduced into the Senate of the United States by the Hon. Mr. Merrick, of Maryland* (n. p., 1844). This pamphlet can be found in the records of the Post Office Department at the National Archives in Washington, D. C.

29. "Reduction of Postage," *Madisonian*, Feb. 3, 1844.

30. Barnabas Bates, *A Brief Statement of the Exertions of the Friends of Cheap Postage in the City of New York* (New York: New York Cheap Postage Association, 1848), p. xi. The hostility of U. S. postal administrators toward cheap postage was so intense, Bates related, that Postmaster General Wickliffe lobbied for the dismissal from a "paltry office" of an officeholder who had "interested himself in this good cause" (p. xi). The officeholder very possibly was Bates himself.

31. Daunton, *Royal Mail*, pp. 37–38.

32. Daunton, *Royal Mail*, p. 54; Ronald H. Coase, "Rowland Hill and the Penny Post," *Economica*, 6 (November 1939): 423–435.

33. Daunton, *Royal Mail*, pp. 54–55.

34. John, *Spreading the News*, chap. 2.

35. Ronald H. Coase, "Ronald H. Coase," in *Lives of the Laureates: Eighteen Nobel Economists*, ed. William Breit and Barry T. Hirsch (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004); personal conversation with R. H. Coase, Chicago, Ill., 2007.

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