

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2002

Historical letters in modern dress



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Do you print out your e-mails? I don't mean the terse messages bereft of greetings or a brush with Spell Check. And I don't mean the haikus, menopausal *bons mots* or Amazon.com apologies for delivery delays that regularly engulf my screen.

I mean the e-mail messages that are old-fashioned letters in modern dress. The kind that will be fun to read in the years to come. The messages from friends and relatives that, unlike day-to-day grunt stuff, include fully formed sentences and individualized salutations. (I threw a cyberspace tantrum when my own brother signed off with his standard template: "Yours sincerely, Nick Gray, Film Director.")

For the past 200 years, changes in technology have regularly reshaped patterns of communication. I am currently editing an anthology of letters written by Canadians between 1800 and 2000. (If you want to find out more about it or contribute, please visit www.randomhouse.ca/letters/). I have been struck by the ebb and flow of missives according to their ease of delivery.

In 1833, the pioneer writer Susanna Moodie lived only 50 miles from her sister, Catharine Parr Traill, in the Upper Canadian backwoods. But she had to depend on willing travellers who were going in the right direction to carry a letter to Catharine, and it might be several weeks before the letter arrived.

Yet within three decades, when Susanna was settled in Belleville and Catharine in Lakefield, north of Peterborough, the sisters could exchange letters within a couple of days. Mail services had improved in response to demand, better roads and the arrival of the railways.

By the turn of the century, if you dropped a note to someone in the same city, it would be delivered the same day. In 1907, Mackenzie King could receive a dinner invitation by mail, accept it by mail, and turn up for dinner — all within 24 hours. If you wrote to someone in the far west, the letter would reach its destination almost faster than you could. In 1913, the Dominion Post Office employed more than 1,000 clerks in its Railway Mail Service Branch, who spent days and nights sorting letters as the CPR train thundered

rived. As a biographer whose primary research resource is personal correspondence, I am painfully aware of the revolution wrought by Alexander Graham Bell. The scrawled notes filled with delicious trivia — lovers' *billets-doux*, quick queries, hot news tips — all disappear. There are still letters, but much of the texture of correspondents' relationships disappears. It was so much easier to lift the receiver and talk. Letters were only for distant loved ones, to whom a phone call was either impossible or costly.

However, that is changing, too. When I came to Canada from England in 1979, I wrote to my parents every week: only births, marriages and deaths justified a transatlantic call. These days, I phone almost weekly, since the price of calls has plummeted as fast as air fares have risen.

Now the newest technology is reshaping communication once again. Admittedly I don't e-mail my parents in England: They still think air mail is a wonderful innovation. But thanks to my modem, I am in touch with friends for whom I would never address and stamp an envelope. A former colleague now in Australia, an old school friend: We have all discovered each others' e-mail whereabouts and are happy to spend 10 minutes at the keyboard, then hit the Reply button.

The exchanges have a slapdash spontaneity none of us would tolerate in a letter: They are more like those scrawled 19th century notes rendered superfluous by the telephone. And yes, I print out the good ones.

My current editing project has also taught me that, at certain points in our personal and national history, the physical presence of a message is particularly reassuring. Many of the letters I have collected so far have been from or to soldiers serving overseas during the two World Wars. Often they are letters that have been read, folded up and stuffed into a back pocket, then reread in a quiet moment. When I appealed for more recent letters and e-mails for inclusion in the anthology, I was thrilled to receive an exchange with a Canadian peacekeeper in Yugoslavia in the 1990s. The correspondents had communicated by e-mail, but printed out their responses.

That way, they could each carry the missive close to their hearts, and mull over it at leisure. A message lodged in cyberspace is too ephemeral to allow a soldier to feel close to home. Real letters last.

Ottawa writer Charlotte Gray's biography of Pauline Johnson, the Mohawk poet, will be published by HarperCollins