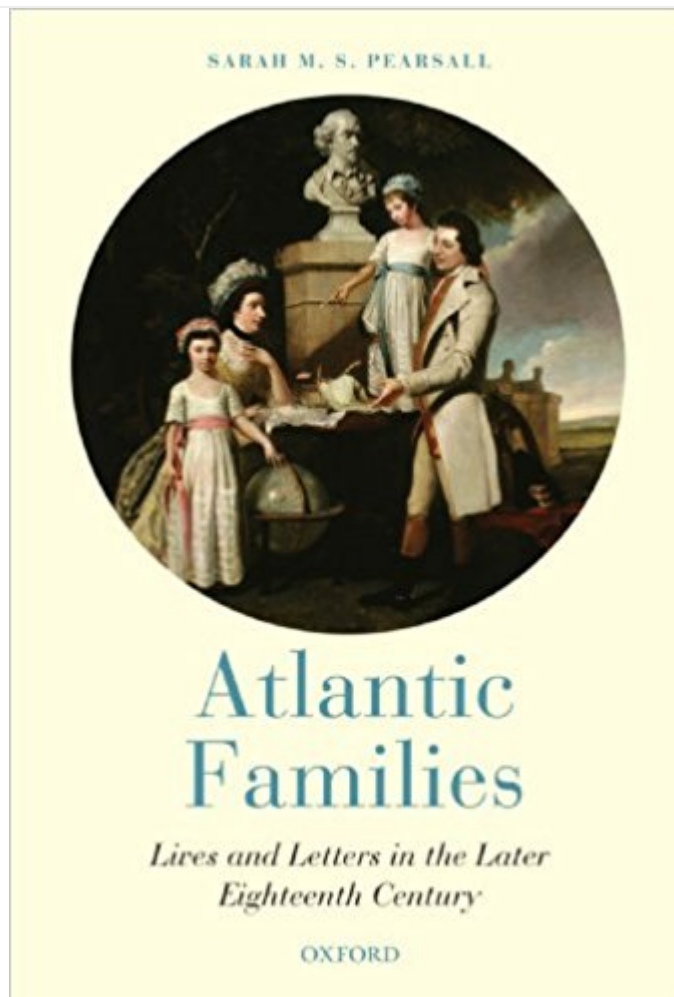


# {essays in history}

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## Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Later Eighteenth Century



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### Reviewed Work(s)

Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Later Eighteenth Century. By Sarah M. S. Pearsall (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Pp. 320. Hardback, \$110.00.

Sarah Pearsall's recent work, *Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Later Eighteenth Century*, provides another addition to the growing body of literature dedicated to the Atlantic World. Pearsall's work, however, should not be circumscribed to just one section of historiography. While Pearsall certainly concentrates on the dynamics of the Anglo-Atlantic World, her work also encompasses the history of the British Empire, the history of family life, and the hidden history of emotion as manifested through letter writing. Pearsall's finest contribution is arguably her ability to cogently convey information with which many of her readers may be unfamiliar, namely the key concepts of familiarity, sensibility, and "credit;" three terms which Pearsall argues had important connotations within the later eighteenth century.

Pearsall's sources are perhaps the most distinctive aspect of her study, as most of her primary source material comes from the letters written between families separated by the Atlantic Ocean. While other scholars have used letters as primary sources in their studies of early modern history, none have done so quite as concisely as Pearsall. Pearsall skillfully employs aspects of literary theory to extract the hidden elements within letters that otherwise appear as simple notes of love, disciplinary action, or confession. Indeed, Pearsall illustrates that letter writing was very much a part of British culture, and that a "coherent set of Atlantic values" was prevalent during this period (19). Indeed, Pearsall argues that Britain's existence as an "island nation" more directly prepared it for this period of rapid movement across local, regional, and national boundaries.

This shared culture of letter writing crossed the British Atlantic, and Pearsall submits that the primary importance of letters is that they allowed family life to continue, despite vast distances of separation. In a time when the convenience of cell phones, text messages, and webcams

were unavailable, a letter was the only method of not only reporting one's activities, but also displaying one's feelings. Such is the case in Pearsall's emphasis on "familiarity" and "sensibility." Familiarity was a method to broker relationships between individuals who were constantly moving. Pearsall argues that the concept of familiarity, as employed by letter writers seeking to establish connections in unfamiliar territories, enabled them "to create critical 'fictive families,'" and reinforce connections between individuals (56). Such a notion was also useful for courtship and marriage, as the skill of penmanship was one method to separate one suitor from the other.

Pearsall also dedicates numerous pages to the concept of sensibility. Sensibility connoted "writing with feeling," allowing husbands, wives, brothers, sisters, and children to move beyond the letter as simply cataloguing their activities. Pearsall's review of sensibility in these letters assists in revising the stridently defined stereotypes of the English father as a "rigid loyalist" or "anxious patriarch," and viewing how these fathers' letters illustrate their more humane and "sensible" characteristics. Thus, contrary to the popularly held belief concerning the fragile existence of "Atlantic families," Pearsall argues that British families separated by an ocean were able to maintain tightly held emotional and cultural connections to one another, despite physical separations.

Pearsall also displays the rather interesting aspect of the letter as a source of parental supervision, as the modern understanding of a "progress report" was not yet developed on a large scale in this period. Pearsall provides numerous examples of fathers chastising their sons because the son's letter writing skills were sub-par, which revealed that the son was not dedicating enough energy to his studies. In one particularly interesting correspondence between Ralph Wormley and his son Warner, the father criticizes his son for his "wrong spelling of the local adverb here, which you confounded with the verb to hear" (133). Ralph Wormley's criticism demonstrates that families receiving letters from their children sent abroad for educational purposes frequently used their children's letters as progress reports. These letters often revealed whether the child was worth the money being allotted toward the education.

In regard to parental disapproval, Pearsall also states that there are deeper implications beyond the immediate disappointment of a father

toward his son. The belief that a father's son was to become a man of "credit" was an idea entrenched in eighteenth-century thought. In this understanding, a "man of credit" was one who was trustworthy, respectable, and capable of paying back his loans. A man's "credit" in society represented his reputation. Within this context, one can understand why a father carefully read his son's letters not only for content, but also as an example of his son's progress in education. The importance attached to being a "man of credit" often made the decision as to whether or not a father financially supported his son. In many respects, the letters shared between father and son developed the son's understanding of exactly what connotes a "man of credit." As Pearsall demonstrates in the example of Wormley, some letters reveal that certain fathers frustratingly wondered if their sons were worth the effort.

Despite the many constructive elements of this book, one criticism some scholars may level toward it is in its somewhat limited selection of letters. Pearsall spends only a few pages on the emancipated African slave Ignatius Sancho's use of English methods of letter writing and primarily concentrates on the planter and merchant families scattered throughout the English Atlantic colonies. In other words, Pearsall provides little information for those classes of immigrants that had few economic opportunities. Pearsall is aware of the potential criticisms her choice of historical characters might draw, as she frankly states early in the book that these more wealthy classes of people in the British Atlantic produced nearly all of the letters available for her study (18).

Additionally, Pearsall covers a huge geographic terrain that includes the British Isles, the northern and southern colonies of British North America, and various Anglo-Caribbean islands. Pearsall is also synthesizing two sections of history, one being the history of families, and the other being the history of the Atlantic World. Pearsall not only demonstrates how the Atlantic World shaped family lives, but also argues for "the agency of families in shaping the Atlantic World" (13). Thus, Pearsall's study is by no means limited. If anything, Pearsall's work invites scholars of the Atlantic to further investigate this Atlantic culture that developed during the early modern period. For instance, one might consider the Irish or Welsh immigrants throughout the Atlantic colonies who left economically deprived homelands. Did these British Celts care to employ similar language when writing home to their families? Were concepts of familiarity, sensibility and credit limited to the English who

were formally educated? Were the lower class British also able to maintain connections to the homeland, and recreate communities in the Americas? Did other emancipated slaves employ similar literary methods as Ignatius Sancho? Such questions Pearsall leaves to a future investigator.

As the book claims, it is clearly a work in Atlantic history. As with many works of Atlantic history, however, one wonders if the book could have been written without the use of an Atlantic paradigm. Considering that one of the primary criticisms aimed at Atlantic history is its supposed tendency to remanufacture “old wine in new bottles,” Pearsall’s work must provide a framework that uses the Atlantic World as a unique vantage point in which to study the British Empire and family history in the later eighteenth century. In addition to the evidence already provided, I would argue that one of Pearsall’s most significant contributions is her ability to demonstrate that the Atlantic Ocean created, destroyed, and recreated kinship and family communities throughout this period of increased mobility. Pearsall is not the first scholar to use letters in her research, but she is one of the first to examine the connections experienced by families in the Atlantic World, and not just the aspects of separation that many prior historians emphasized. For Pearsall, the Atlantic Ocean in this period fostered a surprisingly cohesive culture that helped establish familial links that were arguably as sturdy as any others, despite thousands of miles of separation. In essence, *Atlantic Families* is an informative and refreshing book that proficiently centralizes the family as an important component in understanding the Atlantic World, while simultaneously demonstrating the lasting importance of the Atlantic paradigm.

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