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**“Why is a Raven Like a Writing Desk?”: Post Office Reform, Collectible Commodities, and Victorian Culture**

Although we know Lewis Carroll as the creator of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), Carroll (née Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) immersed himself in the world of letter writing and postal ephemera. (slide 2) An avid letter writer,<sup>1</sup> Carroll is also author of a letter-writing manual, *Eight or Nine Wise Words About Letter-Writing* (1890), and inventor of a postage stamp case marketed with it. His fascination with letter-writing culture allowed his Mad Hatter in *Alice in Wonderland* to stump an already befuddled Alice with the riddle, “Why is a raven like a writing desk?” (97). (slide 3) Although ravens were denizens of the Tower of London long before the creation of the Penny Black, we can trace the rise of stamp cases, letter-writing manuals, writing desks, and a whole variety of postal products to the historical moment in Victorian Britain when the Penny Post and the prepaid adhesive postage stamp were born (1839-40). This talk offers a brief overview of the Victorian revolution in letter writing and focuses on three collectible commodities—writing desks, pictorial envelopes, and valentines—that grew in popularity as a result of this revolutionary change; when viewed as cultural objects, these postal products help us to reconstruct the Victorian British way of life.

**Section One: The Rise of the Penny Post**

We can trace the rise of postal ephemera to the years witnessing the rise of the Penny Post, 1837-40. Prior to postal reform, letter writing was the only way to communicate with a broad audience, but it was a luxury mostly afforded by the rich. In 1837, Rowland Hill (slide 4) published multiple editions of a landmark postal reform

pamphlet called *Post Office Reform: Its Importance and Practicability*, arguing why the British needed postal reform.<sup>2</sup> That same year, Queen Victoria (slide 5) came to the throne. Victoria, in 1839, instituted the Postal Reform Act of 1839 and, in 1840, ushered in Uniform Penny Postage. Instrumental to this legislation were widely publicized, arguably exaggerated tales about economic hardship and depravities resulting from high postage, which appeared in Hill's pamphlet as well as *The Post Circular*, a postal reform propaganda sheet.<sup>3</sup> The Victorians also rallied for and welcomed Uniform Penny Postage as a means to improve economics, morality, science, employment, and education. Visions of young women saved from becoming fallen women, sober and literate soldiers, contented mill workers no longer interested in striking, and home control—these imagined situations aligned with affordable postage moved the early Victorians, still shaken by the example of the French Revolution, to support a reform that had widespread social, political, and economic implications.

On January 10, 1840, affordable mail extended across England; a letter weighing up to one half ounce could travel anywhere in the UK for only a penny. Though we now humorously refer to posted letters as “snail mail” (slide 6), when the postage stamp first appeared, it was as revolutionary as e-mail, text messaging, and web blogs are to us today. By 1860, Victorians rushed to their post offices (slide 7), as George Elgar Hicks captures in *The General Post Office: One Minute to Six* (1860). The Penny Post transformed the mail from an expensive tax for revenue to a civic service for “the peer to the peasant.”<sup>4</sup> The abolition of franks—postmarks granting free carriage of mail—for Members of Parliament and the Queen chipped away at England's rigid class system. In

turn, the Penny Post led to an unprecedented boom in letter writing and became a vehicle for education, kinship, friendship, and commerce

Prepayment came via two inventions attributed to Hill: (slide 8) prepaid postal stationery (letter sheets and envelopes), and a postage stamp called the Penny Black. Ridicule greeted William Mulready's design for prepaid stationery featuring Britannia overseeing a glorious postal outreach extending to all four corners of the globe. The Penny Black (slide 9) won instant success. The stamp and the scheme of prepaid, affordable, uniform postage became a model for other nations, including the United States, which issued its first postage stamps in 1847.<sup>5</sup>

In Hill's heyday, *Punch*, the Victorian *New Yorker*, dubbed the hallowed postal reformer "Sir Rowland Le Grand," and (slide 10) Queen Victoria knighted him in 1861.<sup>6</sup> Today Rowland Hill is no longer a household name, even in Britain. On a January 2008 visit to the National Portrait Gallery in London, I sadly discovered that Hill's portrait has been relegated to storage. Nonetheless, Hill's legacy resonates today. The system he designed brought the Victorians postal blessings—it facilitated family ties, promoted business, and spread information to an ever-widening postal "network" that anticipates computer-mediated communication—but it also became a tool for blackmail, unsolicited mass mailings, and junk mail, problems that remain with us today.

## **Section Two: Victorian Commodity Culture**

The Victorians manufactured and imported fiction, food, drink, clothing, and—of importance to my talk today—postal ephemera. In fact, modern day consumerism has its roots in the Victorian age of production and consumption. Britain was the undisputed leader of the Industrial Revolution, which led to an increase in speed of work and

production, granting opportunities for leisure, choice, shopping, and collecting Victorian things, such as postage stamps. The Great Exhibition of 1851 (slide 11), the first World's Fair held at the Crystal Palace in London, showcased technological, economic, and military achievements and, in turn, created a greater demand for consumer products. Once connected with sin and indulgence, consumerism became a form of self-expression—identity intertwined with books readers chose for their libraries, foods people ate, fashions they wore, and, post-1840, goods they bought for daily life, including correspondence. Did the Victorians anticipate that in passing Uniform Penny Postage, they would foster a new field of industry? (slide 12)

Over two decades ago, Asa Briggs established the importance of commodities as “emissaries” (11) of nineteenth-century culture in a now seminal work entitled *Victorian Things* (1988). Setting a precedent for critical inquiry of household goods, song lyrics, museum artifacts, and postage stamps, Briggs calls attention to things Victorians “designed, named, made, advertised, bought and sold, listed, counted, collected, gave to others, threw away, or bequeathed” (12). Writing desks, pictorial envelopes, and valentines quintessentially are, to recall Briggs’s terms, “emissaries” (11) of meaning and sentiment, transmitting information about aesthetics, gender, social class, and Empire. These collectible commodities tell us what the Victorians treasured and commemorated and carry opinions on current events, customs, humor, prejudices, and preferences.

### **Part Three: Writing Desks**

Lewis Carroll’s writing-desk riddle, which appears in one of literature’s most famous tea party scenes, directs our attention to the growing popularity of an item demanded by and created for women and men of the middle and upper classes. Carroll’s

own postal products (slide 13) piggybacked on the popularity of his enduring *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Different from other manuals on the market, *Eight or Nine Wise Words About Letter-Writing* seems, in the words of Carroll's biographer Morton Cohen, "practical, sensible, and tongue-in-cheek" (*Biography* 493). Carroll advises the writer to reread a letter before answering it; to affix the stamp and to address the envelope before writing the letter to avoid the "wildly-scrawled signature—the hastily-fastened envelope, which comes open in the post—the address, a mere hieroglyphic" (*Eight or Nine* 2-3); to write legibly; to avoid extensive apologies for not writing sooner; to use a second sheet of paper rather than to "cross"—"Remember the old proverb '*Cross-writing makes cross reading*'" (16-17); and so on. Carroll even suggests where to store the postage stamp case: "*this* is meant to haunt your envelope-case, or wherever you keep your writing-materials" (37). "Curiouser and curiouser," why didn't Carroll designate "writing desk" as the logical depository for his postage stamp case given his riddle and the writing desk's popularity among the Victorians?

Beginning in the 1830s, writing desks (slide 14) came within economic reach of members of an increasingly literate middle class. Moreover, the grand display of writing products at the Great Exhibition of 1851 increased middle-class demand for affordable desks. The Victorians found their writing desks indispensable for storing writing materials; valuables, including money and jewelry; vital documents, such as passports and wills; and private correspondence, such as *billets-doux*. The writing desk—also called a writing box, lap desk, writing slope, dispatch box or case, portable or traveling writing desk, or simply a box or a desk—likely grew out of the medieval lectern<sup>7</sup> and

paved the way for subsequent innovations in writing that have replaced it: the brief case, the laptop, the Palm Pilot, the BlackBerry, and the iPhone.

There were four types of writing desks—the most basic being a box with a sloping lid, hinged at either top or bottom.<sup>8</sup> The desk has a writing slope; a place for stationery, blotting paper, envelopes, sealing wax, and small writing manuals; a pen rest for quill pens or steel nib pens (as the century progressed); a stamp compartment (used for wafers before the invention of stamps); one or two ink bottles (one likely for pounce, a chalky substance to blot ink, before the invention of blotting paper); and a key lock. Elaborate desks contain multiple storage compartments,<sup>9</sup> and some fancy ones are combination desks—writing desk/work boxes, and writing desk/dressing cases.

Writing desks—which we might aptly call Victorian laptops (slide 15)—tell us about privacy, security, and portability at a time when heating was inefficient, houses were not routinely electrified, and people made long visits to friends and family lasting weeks and months. Desks typically fit into one's luggage, making them popular for travel. The portability and size facilitated comfortable writing and confidentiality since a writer could move it to a good light source, a warm fire, or a private study to write undisturbed.

We can determine the gender and social class of a desk's owner by looking at its size, raw materials, and degree of decoration (slide 16). A man's writing desk is large enough to be useful (typical dimensions are 14" by 10" by 6"). Manufacturers and designers made gentlemen's desks of mahogany, walnut, ash, or rosewood, with superior veneers of good grain, color, and patina, leather-lined slopes, and brass bindings on the corners and edges. In contrast, affordable commercial desks are more commonly made of oak or pine. The Victorian gentleman favored clean lines, quality materials, simple

but tasteful decoration, and in writing desks that were not industrial, understated elegance. In contrast, ladies' desks appear smaller and daintier than gentlemen's desks (10" by 8" by 4") and carry knowledge of the growing Victorian fancy goods. Slopes have silk or velvet linings; lids contain mosaic and marquetry inlays, engraving, embossing, painting, and piercing. Expensive desks feature elaborate designs of fruits, flowers, birds, hearts, and topographical views and are exquisitely ornamented (slide 17) with pearls, gold, silver, precious gems, seashells, tortoiseshell, and china. A lady's desk still had to be useful for teaching, household accounts, correspondence, and novel writing: Jane Austen's father gave her a writing desk filled with stationery to encourage her talent (Harris 15); the Brontë sisters composed their memorable novels on slopes on display in the Brontë Parsonage Museum in the Yorkshire town of Haworth.

Some desks contain hidden chambers, called secret drawers (slide 18): places to safeguard novels in progress, possessions, *billets-doux*, and valuables that a wife might not wish her husband to know about—William Thackeray's infamous Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair* (1848) uses her writing desk for that very purpose. While the outside of a desk teaches us about aesthetics, gender, and social class, the inside, including the key lock and hidden drawers, reveals the clandestine life of its Victorian owner.

#### **Part Four: Pictorial Envelopes**

With the rise of the postage stamp came a surge in envelope production. Victorians, who rushed in record numbers to attend the Great Exhibition of 1851, marveled over Edwin Hill's and Warren De La Rue's envelope-folding machine (slide 19); fans of this "cutting-edge" Victorian technological wonder include Queen Victoria. Briggs suggests in *Victorian Things* that "the failure of the Mulready envelopes may have

given an impetus to the popularity of other envelopes bearing views of places and sketches of people and things" (343). Pictorial envelopes, a ready means of advertising and propaganda, record pressing social and political reforms as well as activities from daily Victorian life. While today a Victorian time traveler might be surprised to find people standing on street corners, holding protest signs and conducting rallies, over 150 years ago, this same Victorian might have expressed his or her views by purchasing and posting pictorial envelopes advocating, for example, affordable transatlantic postage, peace, abolition, brotherhood, and temperance.

One mid century temperance envelope shows scenes of inebriation in the home, pub, and street and includes the caption: "INTOXICATING DRINKS--ARE THE BANE & CURSE OF SOCIETY." Still others preach the positive side of abstinence by flanking the Goddess of Temperance with flag-bearing delegates from Europe, Asia, Africa, and America, all paying her homage.<sup>10</sup> Pictorial envelopes also promoted Overseas Penny Postage, a movement aligned with peace and brotherhood spearheaded by Elihu Burritt, United States consular agent in Birmingham. One such envelope circa 1849 (slide 20) includes Mercury in a winged cap positioned above an overseas vessel and contains the words "Ocean Postage." Clasped hands of individuals of different races join with a dove holding an olive branch and transportation symbols: a railway train, a canal boat, and mail packets. Scrolls unfurling along the top and bottom of the design display in bold, block letters, "BRITAIN! FROM THEE THE WORLD EXPECTS AN OCEAN PENNY POSTAGE--TO MAKE HER CHILDREN ONE FRATERNITY."<sup>11</sup>

While such didactic pictorial envelopes sermonize, others simply entertain. Anticipating the picture postcard (invented in Austria in 1869), scenic or tourist

envelopes showcase picturesque Victorian locales (slide 21)—the rural landscape, Oxford, Windsor Castle, and Castle Walks (Stirling Hume), for instance. Beginning in 1840, Richard and James Doyle created Fores's Comic Envelopes, offering a comical view of daily Victorian activities—musical soirées, dancing, hunting, horse racing, shooting, courting, and Christmas celebrations.<sup>12</sup> Looking at pictorial envelopes today, we glean what picturesque sites fascinated the Victorians, the causes they supported, the social activities in which they participated, and what they found humorous.

### **Part Five: Victorian Valentines**

Legend has it that “true” valentines date to the fifteenth century in England—Charles, the duke of Orleans, allegedly sent a valentine to his wife while held prisoner in the Tower of London—but valentines greatly increased after the coming of Uniform Penny Postage. In 1841, just one year after reform, Victorians sent more than 400,000 valentines throughout England; by 1871, three times that number passed through the London post alone (Mancoff 46). Today we typically purchase a ready-made valentine in a store, but in the Victorian era, stationer's shops sold an array of materials for creating original valentines: colored and gilt cards; paper cupids and hearts; bows and ribbons; printed verses and mottoes; appliqués of lace, feather, shell, and gold and silver foil. The many types of valentines offer insight into Victorian conceptions of humor, love, and national identity.

Very popular were mechanical valentines that open to reveal a hidden message or can be manipulated: a man nods his head, a woman beckons with her hand, and in bawdy valentines, a figure shows her ankle or petticoat. Novelty valentines sometimes took the form of telegrams from "Loveland" or notes from the "Bank of True Love." Some cards

offer gentle humor, for example, urging a bachelor to marry; others are insulting. Dean & Son of Ludgate Hill, London, produced a pair of valentines circa 1860 that deride a dandy and a lady of fashion (slide 22). The valentine poem for the dandy, inscribed "À Monsieur Chandelle," reads:

In your dandified hat, / From your boot to your glove, / I think I've quite pat, /  
Drawn your portrait above; / Pray don't take offence, / Nor to anger incline, /  
In dress show more sense, / You queer Valentine.<sup>13</sup>

The accompanying picture shows a dandy sporting a red cravat, yellow gloves, a yellow checked vest, a black felt jacket and pants, stylish black leather boots, and an exceedingly tall top hat. The dandy puffs on a cigar, carries a walking stick, swells his chest, and wears an expression of self-satisfaction that augments his "dandified" air.

My survey of over two hundred period valentines in two major collections in Bath, UK<sup>14</sup> reveals romantic valentines teach us about Victorian aesthetics and the new moral attitude of love that burgeoned in the 1830s, accompanying the coronation of Victoria, marking an end to the rakish ways of Victoria's wicked uncles, George IV and William IV. From romantic valentines, we discern stories of ardent passion, shy or secret love, warm affection, imagined happiness, and feared rejection. Flowers, churches, angels, birds and bird's nests, cupids, flaming torches, bows, butterflies, hearts and darts, arrows, musical instruments, and wedding rings are all common Victorian icons of romantic love. Romantic valentines feature clichéd messages, such as "Constant and True," "Be for ever mine," "Thine forever," and "Ever Affectionate," aligning romantic love with constancy and lasting affection as well as monogamy.

The two most ever-present icons on romantic valentines are flowers and churches (or church spires), as we see on this untitled mid-nineteenth-century valentine that features both icons (slide 23).<sup>15</sup> The Victorians were well versed in what they called the “language of flowers,” the sentiments and values different types of flowers represent (slide 24). Today, we still associate roses with love, but we might not link a foxglove with insincerity or realize that the color of a flower, such as a rose, could change its meaning: to the Victorians, a red rose meant “passionate love,” but a yellow rose signified “jealousy” (Greenaway 36-37). Placing specific flowers on a romantic missive offered a way to express love without words. Thomas Hardy in *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), for example, includes three flowers on the larky valentine that Bathsheba Everdene wantonly posts to Farmer Boldwood—red rose, blue violet, and carnation—which mean, respectively, “love,” “faithfulness,” and “Alas! for my poor heart” (for a red carnation) (Greenaway 36, 42, 11). No wonder Boldwood is entranced, even though Bathsheba intends the valentine as a practical joke. Other flowers that commonly appear on period valentines include lilies of the valley for “return of happiness,” bluebells meaning “constancy,” forget-me-nots for “true love,” daisies meaning “innocence,” and white lilies for “purity and sweetness” (Greenway 27, 10, 18, 15, 27).

The church and its steeple signified fidelity in love and honorable intentions as well as marriage plans (slide 25). This was an age when engagements often lasted for years. A couple could not marry until a man was financially secure, so a fiancé, by sending a card with a church spire, could assure his betrothed of his unflinching love. For those not yet engaged, the church icon offered a way for a suitor to inform his sweetheart of his honorable intentions. Popular nautical-themed valentines, which pair fidelity in

love with duty, tell us that the Victorian soldier or sailor, occupied in Empire building, promised to remain faithful to his true love as he dutifully served his country. (slide 26)

In one such period valentine called “Love and Duty,”<sup>16</sup> the heart on the side of the valentine is presumably the soldier's heart, and the church spire (in the background) stands as an assurance that marriage will reward a virtuous heart.

### **A Final Note: Why is a Raven Like a Writing Desk?**

These three popular postal products—writing desks, pictorial envelopes, and valentines—provide a window on the habits of Victorian consumers post-1840. Real and fictional Victorian letter writers used writing desks for correspondence and safekeeping as well as to store pictorial envelopes, valentines, and other writing materials including quill pens—conceivably even those made from a raven’s feathers. So let me return to Carroll’s riddle: “‘Why is a raven like a writing desk?’” (97) (slide 27) When Alice demands to know the answer, the Mad Hatter tells Alice, “‘I haven’t the slightest idea’” (101). In a preface to an 1896 edition of *Alice*, Carroll—who was hounded for the answer to his riddle for over thirty years—declares:

Enquiries have been so often addressed to me, as to whether any answer to the Hatter's Riddle can be imagined, that I may as well put on record here what seems to me to be a fairly appropriate answer, viz: 'Because it can produce a few notes, tho they are *very* flat; and it is nevar [NEVAR] put with the wrong end in front!' This, however, is merely an afterthought; the Riddle, as originally invented, had no answer at all.<sup>17</sup>

Carroll enthusiasts are “Nevar” satisfied with Carroll’s answers (Slide 28). Fans have come up with other plausible responses, including: "Edgar Allan Poe wrote on both," and

"Ravens and writing desks come with inky quills."<sup>18</sup> After hearing my talk today on Victorian writing desks and other postal commodities, perhaps you will propose an even more ingenious answer to Carroll's riddle.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Carroll kept an accurate register of all the letters he wrote and received throughout his lifetime.

<sup>2</sup> Hill, who analyzed the costly, unwieldy British postal system from the vantage point of an enlightened outsider, went on to become Secretary to the Postmaster General of the Post Office in 1846, and, by 1854, Secretary of the Post Office.

<sup>3</sup> *The Post Circular* had a run of 16 issues (March 14, 1838, until November 20, 1839).

<sup>4</sup> This appears in an article in *The Post Circular* 11 (Wednesday, April 17, 1839), 54.

<sup>5</sup> Zurich issued the 6 Rappen and 4 Rappen on March 1, 1843; Geneva released the Double Geneva on October 1, 1843. The Canton of Basel issued the Basel Dove on July 1, 1845. Brazil produced the Bull's Eye stamp on August 1, 1843, and on July 1, 1847, the United States issued 5- and 10-cent stamps featuring, respectively, Benjamin Franklin on a red-brown stamp and George Washington on a black stamp.

<sup>6</sup> "Sir Rowland Le Grand" is a John Tenniel cartoon appearing in *Punch* on the occasion of Hill's retirement as secretary of the Post Office in 1864.

<sup>7</sup> References to writing desks appear in Shakespeare's *A Comedy of Errors* to safeguard a "purse of Duckets." See Harris, *Portable Writing Desks*, pp. 10-11 for a complete history.

<sup>8</sup> The top of the box served as a writing slope if the box were hinged at the top, but the open lid acted as the writing surface if the box were hinged at the bottom.

<sup>9</sup> For descriptions and pictures of a range of Victorian writing desks, see Harris, *Portable Writing Desks*, especially 22-23.

<sup>10</sup> Evans in *Mulready Envelope* (217-21) is thorough in his discussion of temperance envelope designs but does not provide dates for them

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<sup>11</sup> An illustration of this pictorial envelope and further commentary about it appears both in Evans, *Mulready Envelope*, 190, and Lowe, *British Postage Stamp*, 94.

<sup>12</sup> Evans provides commentary about and reproduces two examples from the series of "Akermans's Comic Envelopes" in *Mulready Envelope*, 176-81.

<sup>13</sup> Valentine Cards collection, #268, Bath Central Library.

<sup>14</sup> The two collections I examined are the Valentine Cards collection, Special Collections, at the Bath Central Library and the Frank Staff Collection of the Bath Postal Museum.

<sup>15</sup> Item #253, Valentine Cards collection, Special Collections, Bath Central Library, Bath, UK

<sup>16</sup> Valentine 1993-08-29 forms part of the Frank Staff Collection, Bath Postal Museum.

<sup>17</sup> This quote comes from "Why is a Raven like a writing desk," accessed July 12, 2009. <<http://www.straightdope.com/columns/read/1173/why-is-a-raven-like-a-writing-desk>>.

<sup>18</sup> The following website offers responses from famous people, such as Aldous Huxley: "Why is a Raven like a writing desk," accessed July 23, 2009. <[http://www.straightdope.com/classics/a5\\_266.html](http://www.straightdope.com/classics/a5_266.html)>.

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