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THE INDEPENDENT

November 22, 2009

'Dear John, the flock is doing fine...' The dying art of the billet-doux

By Joy Lo Dico

A new collection of the 'Love Letters of Great Women' celebrates the dying art of the billet-doux, and offers insight into various historical figures' idea of domestic bliss

When it comes to love, the great and witty manual remains Ovid's *The Art of Love*. There's one couplet that would make any modern Casanova or Casonovette laugh knowingly. "Et quotiens scribes, totas prius ipse tabellas," warned Ovid in Book 2. "Inspice: plus multae, quam sibi missa, legunt." To translate, "Whatever you write, make sure all previous letters have been erased from your tablets. Many girls read more than was ever sent to them." Or, more colloquially: be careful to delete those emails and text messages.

While such advice will have saved many a relationship from prying, jealous eyes, it will also have destroyed a treasure of letters, rendezvous notes, summons to midnight meetings and diaries filled with grief. The statesman, the thinker and the soldier may die secure in the knowledge that his formal letters will be bound, and even printed. But it is far rarer to find a lover who can tell future generations quite what he or she spent a lifetime doing, or dreaming of doing.

Among the great epistles, lovers' letters are a lucky find, even more so if they are written by the hand of women. Last year, Ursula Doyle brought out a collection entitled *Love Letters of Great Men*, a riposte to the scene in the *Sex and the City* movie in which Carrie Bradshaw wields a volume of romantic epistles and reads them to her lover, Mr Big. No such book existed, so Doyle went digging through the archives. This month she is bringing out a new collection, a sister - or perhaps girlfriend - volume, entitled *Love Letters of Great Women*.

While the men's letters were occasionally written "with an eye to posterity", thinks Doyle, the women's billets-doux betray something far more humble. Along with expressions of love, there is anxiety about reassuring an absent husband that their home is in order, dreams of domestic bliss and children, and a heart-breaking dependence on men. Lady Mary Pierrepont, about to elope with her lover, Edward Wortley Montagu, knows there is no return to the family bosom afterwards. "I tremble for what we are doing," she writes. "Are you sure you will love me for ever?" The hysteria of desire is unleashed by not having an eye on posterity.

There are many fine examples within the book - from Anne Boleyn, before her betrayal by Henry VIII, to Queen Victoria - particularly poignant when one knows the length of her period of mourning. Many of the letters display how devoted women are in their love for, and service to, their husbands. Abigail Adams, parted for many months from her husband John, the first US ambassador to Britain after the Declaration of Independence, uses her letters to write

about their home in Massachusetts, news of the neighbours, their children ("the little flock remember Pappa") and the state of the nation he has left behind. They are dutiful, but also tinged with regret that he doesn't write more often.

These are the kind of love letters that can safely make it into a canon and, as Doyle noted from her research, were discovered not because Abigail Adams was an artist of the epistle but because she was married to a famed man. "They exist only because of whom they were written to," says Doyle. "Women's letters were never prioritised or canonised. Even Mary Wordsworth I knew very little about, though of course we know all about Dorothy."

But Doyle has also come up with those letters that defy the rules of convention. There is one from the female writer George Sand, and another from Emily Dickinson, both of which reveal the power of a woman in love. Sand's letter is to the Italian doctor Pietro Pagello, who treated both her and her young lover while they holidayed in Italy in 1902. Her lover was dispatched as she attempted to embark on an affair with Pagello. "You can scarcely read a few words of my language," writes Sands before peppering the poor doctor with existential questions in English about love and fate. Ranting and crazed, revealing far too many a desire and desperation, it is a stream of consciousness written by one blinded by desire.

The letter by Emily Dickinson to her neighbour and "friend" Susan Gilbert is charged with unexpressable desire. "Will you let come dear Susie - looking just as I do, my dress soiled and worn, my grand old apron, and my hair. Oh Susie, time fail me to enumerate my appearance, yet I love you just as dearly as if I were e'er so fine, so you won't care will you?" It recalls the love letters between Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West, again wild with abandon. The absence of a male correspondent seems to send them off into a different sphere.

Now that Doyle has done something to bring together these letters as a body of work, there comes the inevitable question. Will we ever have a body of 21st-century love letters to sift through, or has email effectively consigned these fragile missives to the British library?

"The modern hand-written love letter is dead," says Doyle. "That is the consensus. People communicate differently now - though not necessarily without meaning. They still are learning to get to know each other through the written word." Love written digitally may not have the romantic image of quill and ink (though ink-stained fingers may also have dampened some ardour in the old days), but the new medium doesn't necessarily harden the heart. Think only of the popularity of dating websites, which prove that communicating feelings of hope and tenderness in text continues to thrive in certain quarters.

Back to the Sex and the City movie - and the fragility of the imprint of love. When Carrie Bradshaw is stood up at the altar by her beloved Big, she instructs her personal assistant to delete all the emails ever sent between the two of them - cleaning all the wax tablets of previous inscriptions, as Ovid would have it. Thank goodness for the renegade chronicler of love, in this instance, the humble PA, who secretly saves every missive.

Perhaps it is not the decline of pen and ink that will spell the end of the love letter, but the absence of people to capture and collect love letters before the wilful lover has a change of heart. n

'Love Letters of Great Women', edited by Ursula Doyle, is published by Macmillan, £9.99

Cherished memories: *Six writers, on the lost art of correspondence*

Julie Myerson

"When I was about 19, I went to Paris with a boyfriend and, at a party somewhere in the outskirts, got talking to a beautiful dark-eyed boy. I think we kissed. By the end of the evening he declared he was in love with me and, a week or so later, I received a love letter: three or four pages, written on black paper in silver ink and - this is the wonderful bit - stuffed with brown owl feathers. It's by far the strangest love letter I ever received and I have a bad feeling I never replied to it. But its strangeness - and all the possibilities it conjured - still haunts me."

Diana Athill

"I wish I'd kept my love letters but they've all gone. I kept a few bundled up when I was sentimental in my youth, but you let things go along the way."

Amy Jenkins

"My thought is that the love letter is a goner - the love text is where it's at. No great loss, brevity being a virtue in our hurly burly world."

Olivia Cole

"Carol Ann Duffy has a great poem, 'Text', which catches how texting has become our romantic mode of expression, and how it's also woefully inadequate... I have to say that I still cling to the handwritten word.

"Love letters I had no intention of sending' is a pretty good description for a lot of my own poetry... In my poem 'The Cure for Love', I have an image of the poem as an almost embarrassing note - a papery valentine.

Deborah Moggach

"Of course you don't often receive or send love letters now, but I do remember that my son, when he was young, and before that a friend who I lived with, both used to leave little notes, hidden at the bottom of the muesli jar or in winter clothes or between typing paper, so you would find them long after. It was a slow seeping of love. And because of the mundane places they were hidden, so much more potent."

Celia Walden

"I had a succession of Italian boyfriends when I was younger, who were notable for the premium quality of their love letters. I realised even then, I think, that they were probably from templates with spaces in which to insert various girls' names, but it didn't matter. The whole charade was fantastic. One of them sent me Pablo Neruda's 'Your Feet', claiming it as his own work, and I thought 'your wide fruit mouth' was one of the most wonderful lines I'd read since Marvell's description of his 'vegetable love' in 'To His Coy Mistress'. There should be more fruit and vegetables in love poetry."

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