

Women Writing Home, 1700-1920

Volume 6: USA

Sample letter by Esther de Berdt Reed

Introduction

Esther de Berdt Reed was born on 22 October 1746 in London. Her father Dennys de Berdt (1694–1770) was a prosperous merchant and her mother was Martha Symons. According to William Bradford Reed, her grandson and biographer, Esther was ‘slight of frame, with light hair, and fair complexion, and an air of sprightly intelligence and refinement’.⁸ The de Berdt children grew up near the Houses of Parliament, in Artillery Court, with summers spent in Enfield. In 1763, Esther de Berdt met Joseph Reed (1741–85), a lawyer from Trenton, New Jersey, while he studied law in the Middle Temple, London and transacted business with her father. They married in England in May 1770. Upon the death of her father, Esther de Berdt Reed, Joseph Reed, and her mother, Mrs de Berdt, travelled to America. They arrived in Philadelphia on 26 October 1770. While her husband served as an adjutant-general to George Washington in the Continental Army, Esther Reed continued to take up the patriots’ cause with great vigour. She helped organize the Daughters of Liberty and the Ladies Association of Philadelphia, serving as its President, and issued a broadside on their behalf, *Sentiments of an American Woman* (1780), which rallied support for the troops. She died suddenly in Philadelphia, during a dysentery epidemic, on 18 September 1780.

Although Reed was initially hesitant about her removal to the less developed, more provincial culture of colonial America, she gradually embraced the patriot cause. Reed was at once dismayed by her native country’s treatment of its American colonists and in favour of a move towards independence, however frightful that change might be. Expressing homesickness early on, Esther de Berdt Reed writes to Dennis from Philadelphia, 12 December 1770: ‘America, my dear Dennis, is a fine country, but to com-

pare it to England in any respect, except the clear weather, is wrong; for it will not bear the most distant comparison. However, with the hope of returning, I can spend some time here without repining, and with the hope of seeing you here, I keep up my spirits.’⁹ America appears less refined, though with greater potential than a life in England. Esther de Berdt Reed also displays a keen sense of trade and advises her brother to study the situation and know the markets. In this regard, Reed’s letters provide a valuable accounting of both the mercantile possibilities available in America and the subsequent sacrifices necessary for adjustment.

Initially, the correspondence between Esther and her brother had been focused on the possibility of securing him an agency, along with the help of Joseph Reed, and the presumption that she would eventually return.¹⁰ Four years after her arrival, however, the focus shifted dramatically, as trade relationships between America and England become increasingly strained. Although she consistently wishes for her brother’s passage to America, nostalgia gave way to patriotism when it becomes clear that war was inevitable. Reed thus dismisses any false hopes of reconciliation as she writes on 2 November 1774: ‘The people of New England have not such expectations. They are prepared for the worst event, and they have such ideas of their injured liberty, and so much enthusiasm in the cause, that I do not think that any power on earth could take it from them but with their lives.’¹¹ Seven months later, on 22 July 1775, Reed eloquently evokes the sprit of patriotism when she unabashedly declares:

The whole continent is so engaged now that they never will give up. Georgia has joined the Congress, – every heart and every hand almost, is warm and active in the cause: certainly, my dear brother, it is a glorious one. You see every person willing to sacrifice his private interest in this glorious contest. Virtue, honour, unanimity, bravery, – all conspire to carry it on, and sure it has at least a chance to be victorious. I believe it will, at

last, whatever difficulties and discouragements it may meet with at first.¹²

The cause of America thus mirrors Reed's own evolution from loyal subject to impassioned patriot. From such passages, chaos and conviction intertwine as events precipitate reaction that led to reassessment, and eventually to action.

Along with other letter writers, Esther de Berdt Reed also included requests for British goods unavailable in colonial America, such as clothes, needles, shoes and books. In a postscript on 12 December 1770, she sent this shopping list to her brother requesting among other items: 'A fine damask table-cloth, largest size, price £1 1s., and one of the next size; a very neat fan (leather mount, if it is to be had), handsome for the price, if not, paper.' Reed was quite dismayed by America's lack of mercantile goods: 'I would give something to be in Price's or Mr. Anybody's shop in London, even in Thames Street.'¹³ Two years later, on 12 October 1772, Reed remains enamoured of her homeland, but does sense America's potential, as she notes, 'America must be allowed to be a fine country, but the conveniences and elegancies of England are unrivalled; they are not to be expected here; but I make myself contented.'¹⁴ Where initially she complained about provincial behaviour, such as neighbour gossiping and poor manners, however, she grew impatient with British policies towards the colonies and defended their right to protest and fight off oppressive laws and unfair trading practices. Reed also notes the lack of educational opportunities for girls and tries to maintain genteel standards in a rather unfinished social environment. Reed remarks on the cold winters and hot summers and provides updates on the family's health. In general, domestic life is realistically presented, and the aspirations of the patriots' cause duly glorified.

Esther de Berdt Reed to Dennis de Berdt

Philadelphia, 2 November 1774

I have two of my dear Dennis's letters by me unanswered, one of which is of a very early date, and ought to have been acknowledged long ago. But when I tell you I have another daughter,²² you will not wonder that I have this time been a little negligent in answering letters. I assure you my hands are pretty full of business. Three children seem to take up all my time and attention, but, amidst these surrounding family concerns, my dear brother keeps his place in my affectionate regards with undiminished warmth; but what need of assurances. Our hearts must have suffered some dreadful change if we could suspect each other's tenderest affection. I am now in great hopes of seeing you here. The total stop of business would give you leisure at home, and if American affairs take the wished-for turn, I am sure a voyage and knowledge of the country would be the most advantageous step you could take; but on this subject what can I say or advise-important it is become indeed. The next news from England after Parliament meets, I imagine, will be decisive. May God grant it may not be hostile. A determination to proceed and enforce must inevitably plunge New England into a scene of blood and all the horrors of civil war, and how far it would extend it is impossible to say.

When I realize these dreadful events, I wish for a safe retreat in Old England; but when I think further that England would not long be at peace if a civil war should break out here, I hardly know in which country the safest retreat could be found. Perhaps, it would be here, but may God grant wisdom and moderation to our rulers, that such dreadful events may not take place. Many people here are very sanguine in their expectations that the Acts will be repealed immediately, and I believe many have sent orders on that ground, but I cannot believe any such happy change will speedily take place. The people of New England have not such expectations. They are prepared for the worst event, and they have such ideas of their injured

liberty, and so much enthusiasm in the cause, that I do not think that any power on earth could take it from them but with their lives. The proceedings of the Congress will show you how united the whole continent is in the cause, and from them you may judge of the sense of the people, – but I can say nothing new on politics. Sentiments of this kind will reach you from every quarter.

The Congress brought some private pleasure as well as public advantage. It gave us the opportunity of seeing some of our old correspondents, Mr. Cushing, Mr. Adams, etc., with whom we spent some cheerful hours, but especially our very worthy friend, Mr. Cary, who has just left us, after spending near a month with us, and giving us much pleasure with his company. He is a most cheerful, worthy old gentleman, and from his former friendship with our dear father, and regard for us and you. I never entertained any person more affectionately or with greater pleasure. We were all low-spirited when he went away. His son also was a week with us, and we were happy in their company. He gave us a kind invitation to his house, which we intend to accept about this time next year,²³ if no accident prevents, and if things take a favorable turn, I think you must come and go with us. I can't help looking forward to the time I hope to see you, and that you will find your advantage in it. But on the subject of business what can I write that can be pleasing, since it is entirely stopped. However, for your comfort I must tell you that when trade returns (if it ever does) you will have an opportunity of extending your connexion here to advantage. The agency affairs must rest as at present, as no Assembly has met, and nothing can be done till then. You may depend on every endeavour to serve you in that respect when the opportunity offers. Your letter to one of the members of Jersey was delivered to a gentleman, a particular friend of Mr. Reed, and of great influence in the House. You will see the Assembly of this Province has again chosen Dr. Franklin their agent, and doubled his salary, and by his son's, the Governor's, conversation, a little time ago, the Doctor was coming into favour again. Is it so?

Pray write us as particularly as you can about politics, as everybody is anxious for every piece of intelligence on that subject, and they look upon Mr. Reed's advice from you as pretty authentic ... Pray let us know the first moment you determine to come to America, as I must give you a whole sheet of advice and caution, and let you know what you must expect when you come to this part of the world, and prevent your falling into many errors, which almost every Englishman does on his arrival here, and very much to their prejudice ... But I must conclude this long letter, or I shall not have room to assure you how affectionately I am ever,

Yours,
E. Reed

Editorial Notes

Introduction

⁸ William Bradford Reed, *The Life of Esther De Berdt, afterwards Esther Reed, of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, C. Sherman, 1853), p. 23.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

¹⁰ Dennis de Berdt served as an agent for Massachusetts and Delaware (1776–70??).

¹¹ Reed, *The Life of Esther De Berdt*, p. 203.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 219.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 163–4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

Sample letter

²² another daughter] The Reeds had six children: Martha; Joseph (1772–1846); Esther; Theodosia, who died as an infant in 1778 of smallpox; Dennis de Berdt; and George Washington (b. 1780). This child is probably Esther, whose exact dates are unknown.

²³ this time next year] From Reed's notes: "'This time next year", the reader need scarcely be reminded, found civil war throughout the land. Mr. Cary's home at Charlestown had been reduced to ashes by a British bombardment, and its ruins were overlooked by the American soldiery who encircled the army of the mother country, beleaguered within the limits of Boston', *The Life of Esther De Berdt*, pp. 204–5.