

PROLOGUE: EPISTLERS OF THE REVOLUTION

Upon being appointed postmaster general of the United States of America in 1782, Ebenezer Hazard designed a seal for the burgeoning postal service. Hazard, a classicist and a Greek scholar, chose as the symbol of the post office the Roman god Mercury, the messenger of the gods and patron of commerce and travel. Mercury stood for the activities and characteristics that Hazard and his contemporaries, the Americans attempting to win independence from Great Britain, most cherished. Hazard's role during the War of American Independence was that of a messenger. When the war began he was appointed postmaster for New York; when New York fell to the British in 1776 he earned the job of surveyor of post roads. He succeeded so well as surveyor – planning, maintaining, and securing post roads – that he was appointed postmaster general. Throughout this conflict Hazard, constantly 'hurried through life on horseback', anchored himself in the written word. He was, like all of his friends and contemporaries of culture and learning, a master of the epistle. His favourite correspondent, Jeremy Belknap, was also devoted to the epistler's art. The two men lived in different parts of the country, but being hungry to know all that was happening in war and government, took upon themselves the onus of being messengers to one-another, sending news and commentary – their own and that of others as well – whenever the post presented the opportunity. The letters of Hazard and Belknap are filled with attempts to understand and to impart intelligence to others.¹

Mercury was the god of thieves and deception, which was not lost on Postmaster Hazard when designing the seal for the nascent post office. His years as surveyor general of post roads during the War for Independence taught Hazard that subterfuge and the ability to escape detection were qualities enabling the post rider to evade capture, like a thief in the night. Communications during wartime were hazardous and unreliable; the careful correspondent used guarded wording or more direct forms of deception. Letters were sealed with wax and delivered often by anyone who happened to be available. Belknap's friend and cousin by marriage the Boston clergyman John Eliot wrote of the irregularity of his correspondence with Belknap in a letter dated 4 July 1776, complaining of

the fate of one [of] your former letters, which pass'd thro' several towns & fifty or an hundred hands in every place, each one altering & emending the superscription till it was so variated & filled up as rendered it difficult to know the meaning & took me longer to read it *by odds* than the contents of the letter.

Hazard, as a postal official in a rebellion against the most powerful empire in the world, had to be particularly careful. It was already the habit of eighteenth-century letter-writers to use only the initials of the names of important or noteworthy people. Hazard and his friend Belknap went further, inventing a code to describe the subjects of their correspondence and to deceive anyone who read their letters by chance or wilfulness. John Eliot, who shared in the jocularly of their puns, was the *Freemason*, indicative of his political and social leanings. Eliot was Belknap's wife Ruth's cousin and his long-time correspondent who lived through the British occupation and subsequent poverty and disorder of Boston during the war. He was perceptive and witty, and enjoyed contributing to Belknap and Hazard's game of pseudonyms. Dr William Gordon, clergyman and historian, author of the *History of the Rise, Progress, and Establishment of the Independence of the United States* (1788) and Hazard's friend, was the *Plain Doctor*, as he lived at Jamaica Plain (Roxbury), outside of Boston. Hazard stayed with Gordon whenever his postal work took him to New England. Joseph Buckminster, a Portsmouth, New Hampshire clergyman, was the *Metropolitan*, a tongue-in-cheek reference to the actual size of Portsmouth compared to its importance in the estimation of its populace. Local pastors were frequently designated *bishops*, which of course the New England congregational scheme of independent churches eschewed. But that did not keep Belknap, Hazard and other correspondents from having fun at the expense of such humble pastors as Joseph Adams of Newington, New Hampshire, called the *Bishop of Newington*, and Joseph Haven of Rochester, New Hampshire, the *Bishop of Rochester*. Peter Thacher, a devoted servant of Christ and clergyman of Malden, Massachusetts, was *Cephas*: the rock. Isaac Mansfield, a clergyman of Exeter, New Hampshire, was *Democritus* in honour of his cynical wit. The Connecticut lexicographer Noah Webster was nicknamed the *Monarch* to evoke his formality and arrogance. Dr Geraldus Clarkson, physician of Philadelphia and Hazard's friend, was labelled *Ulysses*, the great-grandson of Mercury, while Philip Freneau, the American poet, when a young clerk in Hazard's office, was *Telemachus*, mercurial descendant and youth of promise. Hazard, a newlywed in 1783, referred to his wife as *Miranda* (wonderful); Belknap, married since 1767, was not so prosaic.²

Objects and ideas had pseudonyms as well in the correspondence of Belknap, Hazard and friends. After Belknap published a satirical piece designating the New Hampshire state constitutional convention a *hen* and the imperfect constitution of their creation the *egg*, neither man could refrain from designating any state constitutional convention as a hen producing eggs of various merit.

When Charles Chauncy, the venerable Old Light Boston pastor and theologian, penned a long manuscript on the subject of universal salvation, he nicknamed the subject, so objectionable to mainstream and conservative Protestants of his day, the *Pudding*. ‘The *pudding*’, explained John Eliot to Jeremy Belknap in 1781, ‘is a word which he uses when persons are nigh not acquainted with our sentiments’ which, should it be known that less renowned clergymen such as Belknap and Eliot were universalists, could destroy their careers.³

Although there existed a variety of sources during the early years of the Revolution by which to gain information on political, military, social, economic, cultural and intellectual affairs, the epistle was nevertheless the chief means by which revolutionaries divided by long distances shared news and experimented with new ideas that were the *sine qua non* of revolution. The period from the 1770s to the 1790s was a mercurial age. During this time the United States of America was warring against England, establishing new governments, building a national identity, exploring the hinterland, and refining an American identity in both prose and verse. American patriots such as Ebenezer Hazard and Jeremy Belknap believed their role was to be involved in and be cognizant of the important changes in America. The letters of Belknap and Hazard encompassed twenty years, beginning in January of 1779 and extending until 1798, when Belknap unexpectedly died. During these years Belknap and Hazard were busily involved in all that was going on – the pitfalls as well as the promise. Their correspondence traced the course of the war and its aftermath from several different perspectives, as Belknap lived in northern New England until 1787 and Boston thereafter until his death, while Hazard, as a postal official, travelled throughout the thirteen states, making his headquarters (and home) variously at Philadelphia, Boston and New York. Belknap, raised in Boston but accepting the call of the first parish of Dover, New Hampshire, in 1767, was during the time of their initial correspondence thoughtful and lonely, wondering about his life’s work, using quill and paper to ask questions and seek answers, to seek consolation and advice, to wonder aloud and invite comments and suggestions. Belknap envied Hazard, who was from 1776 to 1782 the surveyor of post roads for the United States of America, always on the road, seeing new places and enjoying (or enduring) a variety of different experiences. Hazard, thoughtful and lonely in a different way from Belknap, was always on the pad but wishing for the quiet moment next to the fireplace to examine some new find to go into his travelling ‘museum’ of historical and natural curiosities. Hazard was a bachelor unwilling to entertain the idea of marriage or family during a time of revolution, while Belknap was planted ‘like a cabbage’ at his parsonage at Dover on a fixed income dwindling in significance because of wartime inflation, trying to keep ‘the belly from grumbling and the kitchen-fire from going out’, challenged with rearing a family of six children during difficult times when money was scarce, school-

ing nonexistent, and his wife yearning for family, friends, culture and society in Boston. The War for Independence was not kind to the Belknap family: Ruth Eliot Belknap, wife of the pastor, showed signs of nervous exhaustion; and Rev. Belknap's income, which arrived sporadically and sometimes not at all from his financially-challenged parish, was never sufficient. Added to this was a crisis in belief brought on by the war, which engendered in Belknap doubts about his own self, spirituality and chosen career. He found mental and emotional release by means of historical and scientific inquiry.⁴

The mutual fascination in the questions of natural and human experience formed the foundation for the friendship of Belknap and Hazard. Belknap referred to their friendship as that of 'fellow travelers' into the human and natural past. The two men referred to themselves as antiquarians and collectors, researchers into 'antiquity'. Hazard's existence centred upon the written word. He was during his long life a bookseller, postal official, translator, editor and entrepreneur. Even as he served as surveyor of post roads and postmaster general, he transcribed, edited, produced, wrote and sold books, notably his friend Belknap's *History of New-Hampshire*. In 1794 Hazard published the results of his antiquarian labours, *Historical Collections*, and eventually collaborated with Charles Thomson to produce a translation of the Holy Bible (1808). Hazard's activities as a scientist were less empirical than literary. His friendships were with literary men with whom he engaged in extensive correspondence over countless pages and many years. A Presbyterian elder, Hazard recorded the details of his life for his own reflection and for the benefit of his posterity. As so many of his contemporaries did during the years of the American Enlightenment, Hazard used paper and quill to keep track of his experiences, journeys, thoughts and actions.⁵

Belknap, likewise, spent most days crouched at his writer's desk for long hours, scribbling memoranda, narratives, letters, transcriptions, verse and sermons. Belknap, raised in Boston and educated at Harvard, became well known for his three-volume *History of New-Hampshire* (1784, 1791, 1792), lauded by critics since its publication as the finest contemporary example of historical scholarship as well as a model of the narrative art. Belknap also wrote the two-volume *American Biography* (1794, 1798), one of the first attempts at a broad historical approach to understanding the American experience; the *Foresters* (1792), a political satire about early America; and *Sacred Poetry* (1795), a psalter modelled after Isaac Watts. Belknap was the founder of the Massachusetts Historical Society (1791), and the finest naturalist of northern New England. His accounts of the White Mountains of New Hampshire are some of the best natural histories of the late eighteenth century.⁶

In addition to their other literary interests, Hazard and Belknap were epistlers of note. The eighteenth-century Enlightenment was a time when the epistle

was, along with the essay, narrative and verse, an art form reflective of a culture focused on beauty, grace and wit. English novelists such as Samuel Richardson and Americans such as Hannah Webster Foster used the epistolary form. So, too, did essayists – one thinks of Hector St John de Crevecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782). The English poet Alexander Pope published a volume of personal letters, making the letter an accepted form of literary expression. The more mundane letter-writers of the eighteenth century sought to convey by means of their letters, their experiences, observations, thoughts, feelings and the news of their own times and places. The correspondence of Hazard and Belknap included letters to statesmen and soldiers such as Thomas Jefferson and George Washington, letters dealing with postal and governmental affairs, letters about the Articles of Confederation, state constitutions, and the Federal Constitution; letters about religion; and especially letters to friends and colleagues who shared with the two men a love of science in all its forms: history, geography, natural philosophy and medicine. Noteworthy 'sons of science' with whom Hazard and Belknap corresponded included the physician Benjamin Rush, the geographer Jedidiah Morse, the German geographer Christoph Ebeling, the lexicographer Noah Webster and the botanist Manasseh Cutler. But it is their letters to each other that is one of the great monuments to the eighteenth-century epistle.

The letters of Hazard and Belknap tell of an age when science and religion had not yet divorced owing to irreconcilable differences, when the most profound philosophy nestled comfortably next to a childlike fascination with the remarkable. The two men filled their letters with inquisitive attempts to know, to understand, and to express. The accomplished epistler is fascinated by the grand and trivial, the universal intersection of truth and self. The two friends explored in their epistles the nature of love, death and piety; the best way for humans to govern themselves; matters of religious and scientific truth and the best means to arrive at it; the methods and writing of history; human credulity; and the wonders of nature. If they were fascinated by the grand schemes and ideas of history and philosophy, they were at the same time fascinated by the momentary, the spontaneous and the banal: the alterations in the daily weather, the changes of nature, the slow movement of time and the daily happenings of the community. In this interest in the *remarkable* occurrences met with every day, we find American thinkers similar to Benjamin Franklin; minds as content with the yearly American almanac as with Locke's essays, as fascinated by fireflies in the night as by the transit of Venus across the disk of the sun.

The Belknap–Hazard correspondence provides a record of human events and natural history in late eighteenth-century America. The clergyman and the elder discussed the religious issues of the time, such as predestination and universalism; both surprisingly accepted the idea of a just God and universal salvation. The scientists discussed geology and geography, botany and biology;

they particularly enjoyed discoursing on their personal discoveries during journeys through forests and among mountains. The historians were on a joint quest to discover the American past, to build a national history, and hence a national identity of the American people. Patriots and citizens, both took a deep interest in the Revolution, the establishment of state governments and writing of state constitutions; the two friends were conservatives who criticized the Confederation and supported the Constitution. They examined contemporary culture and society and praised or criticized according to the apparent degree of human folly. Sometimes the correspondence was mundane and newsy, at other times profound. The letters are a journal of the lives of two Enlightenment thinkers in late eighteenth-century America, their personal almanac, a register of private, local, regional and national occurrences. Hazard, in one 1784 letter to Belknap, referred to his friend's epistolary meanderings as 'Essays on Man', suggesting that they were equal to the writings of the great eighteenth-century poet Alexander Pope. Indeed, the letters of Belknap and Hazard are inquisitive trials, spontaneous inquiries and experiments seeking to understand the nature of human experience. The Belknap-Hazard epistles, if they are not objective and disinterested, concrete in their knowledge and secure in their wisdom, are at least honest attempts to know.⁷

The English letter-writer Horace Walpole told a correspondent in 1784 that 'familiar letters written by eye-witnesses, and that, without design, disclose circumstances that let us more intimately into important events, are genuine history; and as far as they go, more satisfactory than formal premeditated narratives'. Walpole's comment is particularly apropos of the Belknap-Hazard correspondence. Historians, because of their perspective on time, make excellent critics. Hazard and Belknap possessed a unique ability to perceive and to assess society and culture in light of their own lives. If their published writings were significant, their private, informal letters, because of their forthrightness and penetrating observations and criticism, yield more important information about the nature of life, society, culture, government, religion, science and humanity during an age when Americans had won their independence and were attempting, in the words of Noah Webster's 1830 dictionary, to form, 'under the influence of Mercury,' something 'active; sprightly; full of fire or vigour; as a mercurial youth; a mercurial nation.'⁸