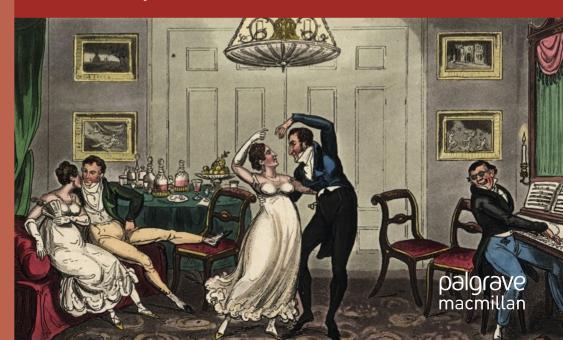# British Sociability in the European Enlightenment

Cultural Practices and Personal Encounters

Edited by Sebastian Domsch · Mascha Hansen

British Sociability in the European Enlightenment

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Editors

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As we finish this book, the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 keeps us home-bound and in search of new sociable practices. Future historians will have a lot to say about how this crisis changed twenty-first century sociability—for good, or temporarily? Virtual varieties of sociability have emerged over the last decades, social media are an established feature of many friendships, and video conferencing is not entirely new, either. However, friends sharing a pint in front of the webcam while each in fact stays in their own kitchen is still unusual. Once this is over, will we scramble to get back to the pub-shared pint, or will the webcam be the new normal? Time will tell. However, right now one feels grateful to a number of people not usually given credit in academic volumes: all those who make it possible for us to stay safely at home and still enjoy running water and food supplies—and books: thank you.

now assembled in this volume. Particular thanks go to Dr Christian Suhm of the Alfried Krupp Wissenschaftskolleg Greifswald, our conference's kind and competent host. In February 2020, Felix Schmid joined the editors of this volume as a student assistant, and a most valuable one he has proved to be!

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Mascha Hansen

Throughout the long eighteenth century, in Britain and all over Europe, whether in the private, semi-public, or public sphere, through correspondences or commerce, what may be termed sociable encounters took place at an increasing rate: meetings, exchanges, negotiations, conversations or friendships framed by the sociable practices of the day. 'Encounter' is a term that has spawned its own literature, and within travel-related genres usually refers to Europeans exploring and/or exploiting the cultural and racial Other in remote parts of the world—remote, to be sure, only from a European perspective (for a recent discussion, see Craciun and Terrall 2019). This book, by contrast, seeks to highlight the importance of encounters between Britons and continental Europeans, moments when not only people but also their different cultures and their varying sociable practices got together. Individuals frequently felt torn between the conviction of being basically of a similar kind, as Europeans whose frequent meetings and exchanges had seemingly aligned social practices, and fundamentally different nevertheless, as nations who did things in quite distinct ways, be it waltzing or writing or wrestling. Whether consciously or not, continental sociabilities willy-nilly influenced British travellers—but in

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turn, British tourists' sociable interests also impacted on continental spaces, generating the infrastructures to accommodate them, since—as was frequently flagged up by critics of the practice in Britain—they brought a lot of money into the countries they visited (see, for instance, Black 1999, 86). Money, indeed, cannot be kept out of a discussion of sociability, as funds, high or low, facilitated or prevented private commerce and travel, be it the purchase of a book or that of a passage to France.

Tourists, traders and even readers, with their varying social convictions and cultural practices, met, traded, clashed and compromised, in fact as well as in fiction, and their meetings more often than not eventually led to cultural transfers that had in turn to be comprehended, negotiated and finally encompassed by the individual within a larger social frame. Encounters between private persons and professional groups served to spread the sociable ideals of the Enlightenment, here taken in the sense advanced by Roy Porter as based on instructive conviviality as well as practical results: "In Britain, at least, the Enlightenment was thus not just a matter of pure epistemological breakthroughs; it was primarily the expression of new mental and moral values, new canons of taste, styles of sociability and views of human nature" (2001, 14). All of these, we argue, had an impact on the European Enlightenment, too, via the spreading of British notions of sociability on the Continent through personal, practical, and fictional encounters. Travellers as well as books, be they novels or advice manuals, disseminated these new values, conveying the sense of a modern taste for sociable encounters. Newly-found leisure contributed to the vogue for foreign travel, as did the realization of the necessity of professional exchanges despite, or perhaps because of, frequent political turmoil. Modern languages had become a matter of course in middle-class education, and a thriving book market as well as circulation libraries made European literature and travel advice manuals freely available to all.

A surge in tourism and private travels in the later eighteenth century, lasting roughly until the French revolution and the subsequent wars made travelling difficult, may have contributed to a (temporary) decline in xenophobic reactions at home, possibly, as Jeremy Black has argued, because Britain felt "politically and culturally more secure", a security to which economic factors certainly contributed but which also points to a new-found self-confidence (Black 1999, xiii). Travelling inevitably also led to a change not only in the perceptions of those travelling but also in how they were perceived by others, and Britons and their cultural practices were "ridiculed, revered and emulated" in the rest of Europe, frequently at the

same time (Farr and Guégan 2013, 1). Some derision notwithstanding, British travellers could generally count on the Anglophilia of at least the Northern and Central European countries, on an "admiration for political liberty and commercial and manufacturing progress" in Britain (Sweet et al. 2017, 4), a fascination with the British way of life, and thus—this volume argues—with British sociability. Conversely, while British liberty and literature were admired or rejected, advanced or contested throughout Europe, any actual sociable encounters would still have to cope with national prejudices, patriotism and largely irrational feelings of superiority on all sides. To some British travellers, however, the neighbouring European countries hardly counted as foreign countries any more: "The manners of nations who have so much intercourse with each other, have very little variety", the Bluestocking Elizabeth Carter deplored already in 1763 (Pennington 1807, 193), a claim with which Samuel Johnson would have agreed. Nonetheless, on being abroad, both found much to puzzle over, delight in, or disapprove of. Their letters are filled with comparisons to England, and mostly, confidence and pride in their nation prevail. Indeed, as critics have argued, many travellers came home "better-informed xenophobes" (Black 1999, 235), and it is certainly true that British travellers by and large voiced a decided preference for their own country. Yet this can be said of the travellers of other nations as well, and many such statements were due to the relief of finally being back at home, or even to homesickness while abroad. Back in Britain, once the strains of travel had worn off, the fascination with other countries remained. This volume, thus, is meant as another challenge to the "enduring trope" of British travellers returning home "firmly embedded in the culture that they had brought with them" (Sweet et al. 2017, 4), even if they themselves may have thought so (see also Barczewski 2013, 38).

This is not to say that British travellers, or even British readers, easily adopted foreign ways, as contemporary critics feared: "there was relatively little unthinking assumption of foreign customs, manners and mores", instead, there was a growing openness towards foreign cultural influences, more willingness to accept other cultures on their own terms (Black 1999, 302). There were, in short, more frequent personal encounters between the different nations, and paradoxically, while each individual encounter may have served to foster prejudices, xenophobic reactions gradually began to decline, and even to be replaced by curiosity. Over time, even the favourite destinations on the Continent changed, and while going on a Grand Tour to Italy was still a dream for some, costs and other

complications led many to prefer a less ardent route. This may have been due to a more general shift in the goals of travelling, away from educational purposes towards leisure and pleasure, self-serving goals which no longer needed defending. Journeys especially to Northern Europe, including Britain, were undertaken in search of modernity rather than antiquity, attracted by "contemporary power, society and culture" (Sweet et al. 2017, 5–6). Health had long been another reason for travel, and with the amelioration of continental infrastructures, this goal seemed within reach, or at least accessible, to British travellers in search of alleviations for their sufferings. Last but not least, impecunious middle- and upper-class families began to move abroad for a few months or even years to save on the costs of living, or in some cases, avoid scandal, and these, too, would have brought their own notions of contemporary sociability to the Continent.

Nonetheless, the concept of British sociability should not be stretched, or contracted, into a uniform or homogeneous practice; neither should it be taken for granted, as every British book or traveller of the time followed their own preferences rather than a predetermined code of conduct. As Michèle Cohen has pointed out, "sociability changed over time […] it was a living practice" in which "apparently contradictory practices could co-exist without being antithetical" (2019, xv). Clearly, the spreading of a new kind of sociability does not require everyone to follow suit, it just needs a critical mass, or general awareness, to reach a state of widespread acceptance and emulation to establish itself as the dominant mode of procedure in social situations. Politeness, for instance, served different purposes at different times, and for different classes. Jeremy Black, for one, has raised the interesting point of the connections between sociability and morality: he questions the usefulness of the concept of politeness in the context of the aristocratic Grand Tour's frequent sexual encounters. Love affairs, or sexual exploits, could be a dominant trope, related in rather crude language, indeed in "a clear contrast to Addisonian restraint", in letters to friends rather than family back at home. Black continues:

> Any stress on this politeness has to address the question as to how far it was deliberately inculcated in order to cope with a very different culture. A self-image of politeness must be understood as a cultural artefact, a socio-ideological aspiration designed to foster particular ends of moral improvement. (Black 1999, 194)

Politeness is certainly a means of coping with a very different culture: to facilitate encounters of whatever kind is the mandate of politeness, and social usefulness the indicator any practical concept of politeness has to be measured by. This is not to say that British sociability relied on politeness alone, or that "moral improvement" of the limited sense implied here was its main goal. On the contrary, morality and politeness were and often still are at cross-purposes, especially in the area of the polite lie. Black is looking at the kind of wealthy young men, those on the Grand Tour, for whose moral example Richardson invented Sir Charles Grandison. For other tourists, male or female, sexual exploitations would not have constituted the basic excitement of travelling; instead, they actively employed and adjusted their own standards of politeness in order to socialize successfully with their European neighbours. Nonetheless, even a sexual liaison of the kind described by Black counts as a cross-cultural encounter, outlining the conditions of polite sociability each party relied on. One of the letters detailing such a sexual encounter between a young aristocrat and a penniless Italian—possibly a servant as she is called "Ancilla" in the letters—highlights the theatricality that is also part of sociability: the young man, having left never to return but still keeping up the semblance of a correspondence with his 'beloved', knows that she needs to move on to another lover for financial reasons, and reflects on this to his friend: "I wrote her however most violent letters for doing what I had tacitly consented to" (quoted in Black 1999, 194), a stance no doubt taken in order to maintain the fiction of a loving encounter between them, rather than admitting to a heartless exchange of money for sexual favours. Indeed, Brian Cowan raises the spectre of a "paradoxical juxtaposition" of politeness and libertinage in the eighteenth century only to conclude that the progress of both "went hand in hand" (2019, 19). Love and sex in any case were matters of sociability, too, relying on the same means of polite negotiation, or cover-up, as other encounters: the young man is saving face here, his own most prominently, but arguably also that of the woman, by politely pretending that she has chosen to desert him rather than being compelled by necessity to move on. Judged by any moral standards, this is inacceptable behaviour, but from the point of view of social politeness, the young man at least would not have considered himself wanting, whatever 'Ancilla' may have thought about the matter (if she was in love, she might have preferred those insincere letters to a blunt cheque). Polite sociability relies on a certain amount of adroitness, or even theatrical know-how, rather than on sound moral principles. However, even the young nobleman's

traditional Grand Tour was changing: Sarah Goldsmith speaks of the "staggering effort devoted to socializing" (Goldsmith 2017, 67) by young aristocrats in the later eighteenth century. These young men not only represented the British elite on tour, they also served to promote British ideas of sociability abroad, and brought back their own accounts of social practices in other countries. This "social itinerary", Goldsmith argues, should not be confined to an educational frame but be linked to larger sociopolitical concerns of the time, though it did teach "vital skills in social versatility" (70). Social customs and reactions to the political situation in Europe were closely interrelated, then as now.

This volume, then, is meant to address a broad range of private and public, touristic, commercial and even fictional meetings that led to a meaningful exchange of opinions, and of practices of sociability, in Europe. Drawing on recent publications such as Capdeville and Kerhervé's innovative *British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century* (2019), this book takes the existence of a specific British variety of sociability as its vantage point. Going beyond the English-French connections, we are interested in debating how those sociable encounters played out in a European rather than national frame. Even apart from clubs and coffee-houses, face-to-face encounters took place—quite literally taking up some space somewhere— in specific locations that also require further attention: whereas the polite society of salons and debating rooms has received quite some consideration by now (for recent work see e.g. Schmid 2013; Prendergast 2015; Lilti 2007/2015), other places and other forms of spreading sociability still need to be investigated. Most kinds of encounters require specific spaces at least in the sense of material or physical requirements that have to be met before an encounter can take place. Letters rely on ink and paper as well as postal services, and may be read by others than those they are addressed to, while European travel even then was largely based on a newly emerging reliable infrastructure of coaches and ships, roads and inns, all of which offered numerous opportunities for chance encounters. Martin Farr and Xavier Guégan point out that the long-standing tradition of British travelling abroad itself entailed the "export of British tourism practices to Europe and beyond" (2013, 1). The notion of travel, and especially that of tourism, in turn depends on its being defined as a "cultural and political experience, generating images, dreams and promises of alternatives to life at home" (2), and, we might add, of alternatives to local modes of sociability.

The essays in these volumes try to capture a broad variety of situations: the everyday moment, the shifting attitude and explanation, the cultural practice in the process of changing. They show that defining Britishness against the social practices of other cultures is only one way of accepting that those have inevitably already impacted on, and probably significantly changed, individual British perceptions and practices, and that this process can rarely be pinned down to particular events (or encounters). Reciprocally, of course, the British left their own stamp on the places they visited and people they met abroad, no matter whether these were local servants they hired to interpret for them or urban spaces redesigned to suit their conversational habits and tourist requirements. Given the demand for British fiction abroad, the imaginary encounter may well have had a comparable impact not only among British readers, but also among continental European markets keen on immediate translations of British novels, plays, poems, histories, and philosophical treatises. The personal and fictional experiences of the people and places mentioned in this volume thus exemplify larger topics, such as the influence of specifically British practices of sociability on sociable practices in the rest of Europe (or vice versa); the reception, appropriation, or transfer of local and regional customs; the expectations travellers brought to other countries concerning conversation and/or conviviality; the emergence of tourism as a practice of sociability closely tied to the spreading of (fictionalized) travel accounts, and travel writing as a means of literary production and consumption in Europe throughout the long eighteenth century.

On a more practical level, this raises various questions: how did sociable meetings between individuals of different cultures actually proceed, and which meetings proved to be meaningful or influential in the long run (for instance by being described in letters preserved for publication)? What was the importance of gender in areas of sociability that go beyond those notions of politeness in which women held sway, at least nominally? What happened if sociability turned sour? Not all initially sociable encounters ended in mutual understanding, let alone an advancement of politeness or civilization. Failures in the expectation of finding sociability and explorations of unsociable outcomes need to be explored as well: not for nothing is the term "encounter", which has no entry of its own in Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), made use of to explain the sense of "affront" (s.v. 'affront', 95:3). Encounters can be hostile indeed, and it is interesting to note the cultural rather than personal reasons why:

which convictions in the field of sociability contributed to confrontational encounters?

Johnson himself makes an appearance in the first part of this volume, concerned with examples of actual, personal encounters between British and continental travellers and tourists, and the ways and means—for instance using literary texts as guidelines—by which these travellers dealt with, and puzzled over, cultural differences in the field of sociability. The descriptions of such encounters, frequently revealed by means of private correspondences, offer a rich field for contemporary scholars in which to conceptualize sociability. In the second chapter, Allan Ingram outlines the travel impressions of Samuel Johnson and Hester Thrale on their first, and for Johnson only, tour to France, the prejudices they brought and shed on this trip, the difficulties they faced, and the languages they used to get by—in Johnson's case, Latin rather than French determined his personal encounters, since he was more at ease conversing with French priests who spoke Latin than with literary people who did not. In the third chapter, Sebastian Domsch focuses on the significance of various encounters, in Corsica as well as Britain, between James Boswell, Pascal Paoli, and Samuel Johnson, and the ways in which the sociable aspects of their (anticipated) meetings were framed to fit in somewhere between expectations of Roman simplicity, the noble savage, and actual urbanity. The impact of British travellers' sociable interests on continental European spaces—such as spa cities, and even, somewhat paradoxically given the nature of sociability, graveyards, which began to attract tourists, is outlined in the next two chapters: Helen Williams sketches the crossover from fact to fiction, and fiction to fact, in the wave of literary pilgrimages following the publications of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67) and *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768): readers hoped to see the graves of the fictional Maria, and were lured by entrepreneurial hosts to places where they experienced an intensely social form of shared grief, feeling spiritually, if not actually, connected to a community of readers. The last chapter of this part, by Mascha Hansen, outlines in detail how the Belgian, or as it was then known, the German Spa attracted tourists such as Elizabeth Montagu and Elizabeth Carter, who went abroad in search of health and society in 1763, visiting nunneries and monasteries rather than graveyards on the road, and braving the war-torn roads to cross into Germany. Travelling, at that time, was not so prevalent that their friends could dispense with frequent letters giving a blow-by-blow account of things done

and people visited, and the topics raised in these letters shed a light on the polite sociability of European travels.

The second section deals primarily with sociable cross-overs in the various fields of cultural practices such as dancing and private theatricals, moving on to encounters in the larger sphere of commerce. Cultural differences attracted and repelled, and occasionally turned out to be decisive for (economic) success or failure, so that the precautions taken to avoid cultural conflicts, especially in times of war, for instance by studying manuals, in turn spurred further commercial enterprises, not only in the literary marketplace. Travel writing itself was one such marketable activity, and as Annick Cossic outlines in Chap. 6, the eccentric and rather quarrelsome Philip Thicknesse's attempts to rival the publications of Tobias Smollett led to further (actual and imaginary) cross-cultural encounters as both vied to be the foremost authority on travel in France. Susanne Schmid in turn considers the theatrical imports from Germany that the traveller, writer and socialite Elizabeth Craven, by then Margravine of Anspach, brought onto the semi-private London stage at Brandenburgh House with the help of semi-professionals. Craven felt obliged to tone down the political implications of Schiller's *Robbers* (1781) in her stage-production in order not to attract further criticism, but at the same time she was able to present a play that would not have been stageable at all in one of the public theatres, despite the sentimental appeal of its characters. In Chap. 8, Kimberley Page-Jones discusses the shifting attitudes towards the waltz, another import from Germany, as it slowly made its way from the Continent to Britain, and the political assumptions that crept in with it: like the *Robbers*, the waltz seemed a dangerous imposition not only on British moral codes due to its display of women's bodies but also in political terms, being closely associated with the Revolution in France. The question how to avoid conflict is prominent in Alain Kerhervé's contribution on model commercial letters, which brought the various polite phrases to be used by anyone corresponding in European languages such as French, Spanish and Portuguese to the attention of aspiring British merchants. Politics, here, too, were considered a taboo topic, whereas the degree of familiarity and friendship to be displayed in such letters remained a controversial issue: which would further trade most?

In the third part, fictional encounters are given prominence, including imaginary conversations in the form of philosophical dialogues. How did literary or philosophical encounters highlight notions of sociability, which images of cultural transfer were used, and how were these read and

received by an increasingly heterogeneous readership? Katrin Berndt focuses on aspects of friendship, a central concern in Frances Brooke's *The History of Lady Julia Mandeville* (1763). Berndt argues that the capacity to sustain friendship is used not only to illustrate character but as a central plot-driving device, proving the versatility of the concept of sociability. The absence of friendship for most of *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), by contrast, serves to highlight the sociable nature of human beings, Jakub Lipski claims: drawing on other writings by Daniel Defoe, he proves the importance of conversation to both Crusoe and Defoe himself, as well as the novel's early promotion of the advantages of natural sociability in simple surroundings before the onset of colonialism. Chapter 12 shifts the discussion to the realm of philosophical encounters: Patrick Müller returns to the roots of the enlightened concept of sociability as outlined in the works of Anton Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury. An ardent Whig, Shaftesbury considered the fundamental wellbeing of the nation to be based on its global relations, and battled adversarial opinions in less sociable encounters of the kind that Johnson might have called affronts. Michael Szczekalla picks up the notion of fundamentalism in the last chapter, which serves to tie up the volume's various expeditions into the Enlightenment by a detailed discussion of the argumentative encounter between David Hume and Joseph de Maistre.

Taken together, the essays in this volume contribute to the claim that there is a perceptible shift towards a more tolerant stance on all things foreign in the late eighteenth century (Black 1999, 213; 230), but with regard to political controversy, the picture is more complex: while the polite letter deemed politics a taboo subject, and actual personal encounters between women may have excluded such discussions, politics were a frequent topic in mixed meetings, and any transfer of cultural practices or mores sparked political debate and social critique in the newspapers of the time. Travel and literature generally served to facilitate women's participation in British sociability but female forays into the world of travel writing or that of theatrical productions were usually accompanied by controversy and criticism. Nevertheless, cultural sociable exchange was a vibrant area of eighteenth-century life, via consumption, commerce, and practical experience: Britishness, then as now, relied on a mode of successful adaptation to, and adaptation of, foreign impulses, and the Enlightenment must be seen as a truly European, and truly sociable, enterprise.

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