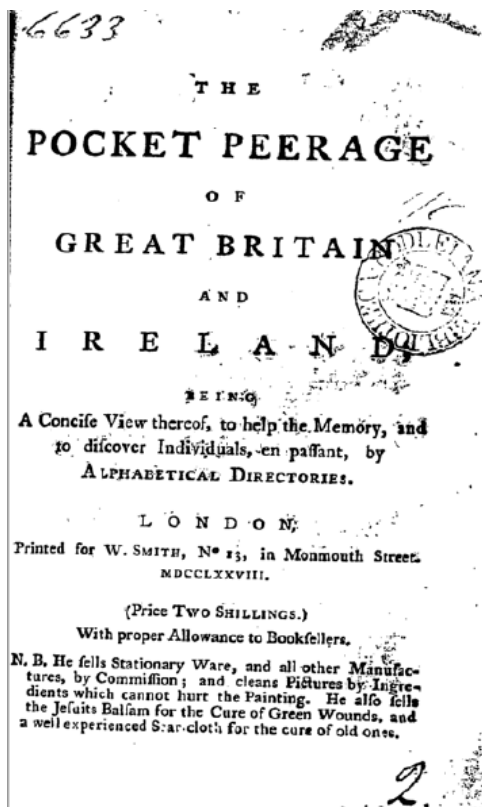


DIGIT.EN.S

The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

Portable directories

JETTOT Stéphane



Keywords

Collecting

Elite

Merchants

Politeness

Rank

Abstract

In the eighteenth century, portable directories were key instruments of sociability and were used to navigate in various social circles in the metropolis. While there have been many studies on the directories used by merchants and professionals in their expanding business, little is known of the family guides dedicated to social elites. The rapid socio-cultural change among the landed families required up-to-date reference books, which provided a snapshot of their ancestors, alliances and children. Whether it be during the London Season or in the provincial daily life, sociability was strongly shaped by the knowledge of family links and ancestry. The publication and the circulation of directories left many clues, which help us to understand how they were effectively used by consumers.

From the Restoration onwards, there was a close relationship between urban growth, sociability and the circulation of pocket directories. Directories were part of a booming market of services and products which catered to the needs of the emerging middling sort. Some were organised in an alphabetical order while others were structured according to trades and professions. They were used to provide a range of customers, including lawyers, merchants and travellers, with useful reference materials, such as tables of names, addresses and road maps. Furthermore, trade directories were instrumental in the strengthening of a mercantile interest in Parliament as well as in a wider public sphere. Not only did they fulfil practical functions but more generally they increased the influence of middling sort values on the fabric of social life.¹

The landed elites, whose status and prestige could no longer rely on their local reputation, were also in need of similar guides. To increase their wealth or to maintain their pre-eminence, they had to circulate in the larger public spheres in the provinces, in London and in the colonies. Whether old or new, landed families required portable gateways to navigate and to be seen in various venues. It should be remembered landed families went through a continuous process of reconfiguration. A high rate of extinction, an increasing tendency to change names and/or absorb the spouse's pedigree, confusing rules on titles meant that insiders as well as outsiders struggled to identify who was who. Shrewd London booksellers jumped at the opportunity and published hundreds of family compilations which listed all the names, pedigrees, alliances, and descendants of all living peers (*Peerages*), baronets (*Baronetages*), and later of the landed gentry. Along with giving an up-to-date snapshot of the titled families, they could be used by anyone in search of patronage and protections. They also made accessible some guidance on heraldry, on how to address social superiors in the correct manner and to hold a polite conversation.

Their publishers, mostly indexers, journalists such as Francis Nichols, John Almon or Edward Kimber, were collecting up-to-date data from almanacs, gazettes and letters sent by customers.² One key element provided by Nichols's *British Compendium* was to provide a didactic description of the several degrees of gentry, and their precedence, along with a method in order to recognise the Peers' arms, 'as commonly borne on their coaches'.³ At 3 shillings each, Nathaniel Salmon sold an abridged account of the present peers, 'their marriages, issue, and immediate ancestors; the posts of honour and profit they hold in the government (...) and their near relations, as was consistent with my design'd brevity, that it might fall in go every hand'.⁴ In the 1760s, John Almon sold five directories (*The New Irish Peerage*, *The New Baronetage*, *The Pocket British Peerage*, *The Extinct Peerage* and *the Pocket Herald*). One publisher, in his one-shilling *Companion to the Peerage* argued that he was able to give an up-to-date account of the latest marriages, 'subject of so fluctuating a nature, changes will arise every day'.⁵ In 1782, John Fielding sold his *New Pocket Peerage* (London, 1782) with a London guide plan and an index listing the public and private buildings of London, a metropolis where 'merchants [...] are as rich as Noblemen'. David Cannadine has referred to the growing significance of 'consolidated systematic guides to the titled and leisured class' which were conducted on a British and imperial scale.⁶ As they were sold in different formats and prices, these directories reached a larger audience than it would

first appear and their commercial success raises several wider issues.

Little is known about the ways in which they were actually used and read by customers. As they were very familiar to the public, they were mostly only mentioned in passing. Their commercial appeal raised several kinds of anxieties about the decline of traditional values or conversely the predatory behaviour of aristocrats, which were reflected by social commentators and novelists. Directories could be used by rakes and impersonators to move as effortlessly as possible in different venues through the appropriation of social spaces and practices. In particular, they were even suspected of being little more than a tool for preying on available heiresses (*The Master-Key to the Rich Ladies Treasury or the Widower and Batchelor's Directory*, 1742).

In terms of matrimonial strategy, their utility should not be overestimated. Courtship was a complex process which required access to well-guarded social venues and the participation of many various intermediaries during the London Season. Another common accusation, mostly peddled by novelists, was their instrumentalization by tyrannical patriarchs. In his 1771 drama (*The Man of the Family. A Sentimental Comedy*), Charles Jenner displayed a generational conflict between the young Charles and his 'poor father' who urged him to study Collins's *Peerage* in order to 'trace your own extraction, and contemplate on the importance and antiquity of your descent'.⁷ In the case of Austen's *Persuasion* or in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, family directories embodied the behaviour of aging and isolated fathers, who hoped to impose their matrimonial strategy on their sons and daughters. Labelled as the 'book of the book', Sir Walter Elliot's compilation appeared as the quintessential family treasure for a self-centred landlord.⁸ In *Vanity Fair*, the old Osborne placed a copy of a *Peerage*, next to a 'great scarlet Bible and Prayer-Book' in his library where 'no member of the household, child or domestic, ever enter [...] without a certain terror.'⁹

These negative comments should not deceive us into thinking that family directories were despised by the public or instrumentalised by evil-doers. In a rather benign way, they were used as a source of knowledge and distraction. Most of them were not kept hidden in a private library, but laid open on a table or kept in a pocket. Many consumers took them in their perambulations, to discretely identify a new face met in parks or at court. Some were even intended for ladies whose pockets, carried around the waist, contained all the accessories required in their social life (coins, keys, pins, jewellery).¹⁰ A few were equipped with extra blank pages in order to record family events and various social encounters. At home or in a polite company, they were read by kin and friends alike. In her diary, Gertrude Savile described how her brother and his wife spent hours in the evening, 'compareing the Pedigree of the Saviles (in a book of the Baronets lately come out), with the account Brother sent to be inserted'.¹¹ Interest in family history could be shared within and outside the household. It was supported by various institutions (*London Society of Antiquaries*, *Spalding Society*) and gazettes (*Gentleman's Magazine*, *La Belle Assemblée*). John Constable warned against the scourge of several categories of bores, notably the pedant who 'takes you into a long pedigree of some Greek, or Hebrew Origin'.¹² However, family history was not inimical to polite conversation and was recommended as a way to memorize the main kings, queens and famous politicians.

These directories should not be only remembered for their practical utility but for their ideological value. Their aim was to facilitate the daily interactions between new and old elites, to contribute to an inclusive polite culture. They also facilitated the rise of a public debate about the elites and their moral shortcomings. Adultery, prostitution, excessive gambling, drunkenness: there is a considerable amount of prints dedicated to the dark side of aristocratic sociability.¹³ A few authors proceeded to sell satirical directories by using false imprints and deceptive title pages. Inspired by the commercial success of William Smith's *Pocket Peerage*, Charles Coleman in *A satirical peerage of England* (1784) invented exuberant or ridiculous mottoes to mock the Lords' social standing. Laughter and derision fitted in a politics of sociability. However, in the late eighteenth century and at the outset of the nineteenth century, the sudden rise in the creation of titles reinforced a loyalist agenda. The market of genteel directories came to be dominated by fewer compilers, notably John Debrett and later John Burke, whose work on the *Commoners* was celebrated in *The Times* as a work which would 'connect in many instances the new with the old nobility'.¹⁴ In his most recent publication, Thomas Piketty pointed out the significance of these registers to the survival of noble values among the European social elites:

'The first *Burke's Peerage*, published in 1826, met with such resounding success that it was revised and reprinted throughout the century. [...] One finds similar catalogues, royal almanacs, and *bottin mondains* in many other countries, starting with the *Livro de Linhagen* compiled in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and continuing through the annual compilation of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Here, nobles and their allies could take stock, sing their own praises, and express their demands.'¹⁵

1. Perry Gauci, *The Politics of Trade: The Overseas Merchant in State and Society, 1660-1720* (Oxford, 2003), p. 28.
2. On the crucial exchanges between publishers and families, see Stéphane Jettot, 'Family input in the making of London genealogical directories in the 18th century', *Genealogical Knowledge in the Making. Tools, Practices, and Evidence in Early Modern Europe*, V. Bauer, F. Markus, J. Eickmeyer (eds.) (Oldenbourg-De Gruyter, 2019), p. 169-198.
3. Francis Nichols, *The British Compendium: Or, Rudiments of Honour. Containing the Descents* (London, 1725), p. iv.
4. *Short Views of the families of the present English Nobility* (London, 1750), p. i.
5. *A Companion to the Peerage of Great-Britain and Ireland, being an alphabetical list of such of the daughters of dukes, marquises and earls, (now living) who are married to commoners* (London, 1764), p. ii.
6. D. Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (Yale, 1990), p.13.
7. *The Man of the Family* (London, 1771), p. 3.
8. James Kinsley (ed.), *Persuasion* (Oxford, 2004), p. 12.
9. William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (London, 1993), p. 215.
10. Jennie Batchelor, 'Fashion and Frugality: Eighteenth-Century Pocket Books for Women', *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture* (vol. 32, n° 1, 2003), p. 1-18; Barbara Burman and Ariane Fennetaux, *The Pocket. A Hidden History of Women's Lives* (Yale, 2019).

11. Gertrude Savile, 29 Dec. 1727, in Alan Saville (ed.), *Secret Comment: The Diaries of Gertrude Savile, 1721-1757* (Nottingham, 1997), p. 87.
 12. John Constable, *The Conversation of gentlemen* (London, 1738), p. 138.
 13. Donna T. Andrew, *Aristocratic vice: The Attack on Duelling, Suicide, Adultery, and Gambling in Eighteenth-Century England* (Yale, 2013).
 14. *The Times*, 12 Sept. 1831.
 15. T. Piketty, *Capital and Ideology* (Harvard, 2020), p. 174.
-

Cite this article

JETTOT Stéphane, "Portable directories", *The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century* [online], ISSN 2803-2845, Accessed on 04/23/2024, URL: <https://www.digitens.org/en/notices/portable-directories.html>

Further Reading

Corfield, P. J., ‘“Giving directions to the town’: the early town directories’, *Urban History Yearbook* (vol. 11, 1984), p. 22-35.

Colclough, Stephen, ‘Pocket Books and Portable Writing: The Pocket Memorandum Book in Eighteenth-Century England and Wales’, *The Yearbook of English Studies* (vol. 45, 2015), p. 159-177.

Goss, C. W. F. (ed.), *The London Directories 1677–1855* (London: Denis Archer, 1932).

Jettot, Stéphane, Lezowski, Marie (eds), *The Genealogical Enterprise. Social Practices and Collective Imagination in Europe (15th–20th century)* (Peter Lang, 2016).

Norton, J. E. (ed.), *Guide to the National and Provincial Directories of England and Wales, Excluding London, Published before 1856* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1950)

Sweet, Rosemary, *The Writing of Urban Histories in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: OUP, 1997).

Woolf, Daniel R., *The Social Circulation of the Past: English Historical Culture, 1500-1730* (Oxford: OUP, 2003).

[The British Compendium \(1725\)](#)