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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

Beau Nash

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Mots-clés

- Fashion
- Gaming
- Manners
- Politeness
- Refinement
- Spa
- Wit

Résumé

Richard Nash, known as Beau Nash by his contemporaries, played a decisive part in the transformation of Bath, Britain's ancient watering-place, into a fashionable resort. The inventor of a new type of spa sociability, he contributed to the emergence of a British model of sociability in a decisive way. Through his conviviality, his influence on dress and manners, he participated in the forging of a refined and polite nation. This entry attempts to assess his action without downplaying his moral ambiguity.

Richard Nash, who was born in Swansea in 1674, has gone down in history as *Beau Nash* – the inventor of spa sociability in Britain – and the 'king of Bath', a remarkable contributor to the creation of a British model of sociability. Oliver Goldsmith, the author of his first biography, published shortly after his death in 1761, draws the portrait of a riotous young man and a womanizer who, after a few years at Jesus College, Oxford, and an unsuccessful attempt at pursuing a military career, read law at the Middle Temple, London.[1] From the start, he behaved as an 'easy companion' who struck innumerable friendships with people from different walks of life, evincing many of the qualities of a sociable young man. The gaming table quickly became his main source of revenue and it is the prospect of gambling gains that attracted him to Bath at the turn of the century.

His gambling activities were quickly concealed by his innovative action, which was decisive in transforming the place into a renowned spa, whose social life was imitated elsewhere in the kingdom, in particular in Tunbridge Wells or Scarborough. A more or less self-appointed Master of Ceremonies, he soon stole the limelight and used his popularity to further the building of the Mineral Water Hospital, which was funded by subscriptions. He developed a friendly relationship with well-known Bath doctors such as Dr William Oliver who paid tribute to his generosity in *A Faint Sketch of the Life, Character, and Manners, of the Late Mr Nash*[2] and Dr George Cheyne who often joked with him about the principles of good health. In spite of his modest means, he managed to cast himself in the role of the benevolent man, in the manner of Ralph Allen, and tried to alleviate poverty and misery: 'his generosity and charity in private life, was as great as that in publick, and indeed far more considerable than his little income would admit' (Goldsmith 233). Yet he also associated with such shady characters as the leader of the notorious Poulter-Baxter gang that operated on the London highway to Bath.[3] The victim of the dishonesty of the people of the Rooms, he was exposed when he attempted to sue them for refusing to grant him his part of the E&0 (a game that had been invented to circumvent the law) business.

A man of many fights, he strove to impose his own view of Bath and resisted the trend towards the transformation of the spa into a residential place. Such a conception clashed with John Wood's ambitious plans that aimed at designing a new Vicenza. The last part of his life was far less successful, since he was deserted by his friends, mocked by the witty, and contested by the virtuous and the proponents of evangelism like John Wesley:

> 'The statue placed, the busts between,
> Adds to the satire strength;
> *Wisdom* and *Wit* are little seen,
> But *Folly* at full length. (Earl of Chesterfield).[4]
> *A statue by Prince Hoare, originally located in the Bath Pump Room*'.

His stroke of genius was to invent[5] the very function of Master of Ceremonies, which survived him and was exported to other spas in the kingdom. While it may have been gambling that first brought him to Bath, it was the opportunity of social mobility that kept him there. He discovered his penchant for management and his character was well suited to the profitable publicity Bath presented. In his new capacity as Master of Ceremonies, he set out to define the principles of spa sociability, through the 11 'Bath laws' that were posted in various key locations (most particularly in the Pump Room in 1707), establishing an unheard-of social code. The unruly post-Restoration watering-place was metamorphosed into a well-regulated hive of sociability, a goal that would be shared by John Wood when he designed Queen Square, which displayed some of the key principles of Palladianism. 'Everything was to be performed in proper order' (Goldsmith 34) and all that was likely to disrupt the round of pleasures was banished from the spa: duels in particular were strictly forbidden. He put pressure on the Corporation to improve the well-being of the visitors. He was largely responsible for instituting the musical welcome of visitors[6] and *the visit of ceremony*; he also regulated nightlife, making it safer and restricting the duration of balls. He closely supervised the interaction of the spa goers, making sure that Bath society was more egalitarian, more open and more refined than in the past.[7]

Despite his moderate income, Beau Nash established himself as an arbiter of taste and refinement, the 'Arbiter Elegantiarum' (Goldsmith 11), spending more than he could afford on fine clothes: 'Though very poor he was very fine; he spread the little gold he had, in the most ostentatious manner, and though the gilding was but thin, he laid it on as far as it would go' (Goldsmith 9). His influence is undoubtedly to be ascribed to his administrative skills, but also to the very persona that he succeeded in creating, a 'beau of three generations' (Goldsmith 74-75). His 'constant civility [...] gained him the acquaintance of several persons qualified to lead the fashion both by birth and fortune' (Goldsmith 10): the Duchess of Marlborough, with links to the court and significant political influence, was a very powerful and wealthy acquaintance for him. Goldsmith explains that Nash used to wait in Smyrna coffee-house, just 'to receive a bow from the Prince, or the Duchess of Marlborough' (Goldsmith 128). But the duchess also found in him a friend and confidant in her otherwise troubled life, and 'frequently consulted him in several concerns of a private nature [and] business to which she thought his genius best adapted' (Goldsmith 100–101).

Though popular amongst the most fashionable, Nash was an eccentric. He always wore an expensive 'cream-coloured beaver' (Anstey, letter XII: l.96) and a tricorn hat: 'his dress was tawdry, tho' not perfectly genteel' (Goldsmith 49). He was not a 'Beau Garçon' as 'his person was clumsey, too large and aukward, and his features harsh, strong and peculiarly irregular', but 'Wit, flattery, and fine cloaths, he used to say, were enough to debauch a nunnery' (Goldsmith 73–74). He established a dress code previously unknown to Bath, and had a particular aversion to white aprons, swords and boots (Goldsmith 36–38; FRONTINELLA's *Invitation to the Assembly*', 38). Through a few simple rules and his authoritative personality, he transformed Bath into a place of fashion and sociability: 'Regularity repressed pride, and that lessened, people of fortune became fit for society' (Goldsmith 40).

The son of a Welsh gentleman, Nash had also inherited some of the features of the chivalric code of behaviour. He built the public image of a protector of damsels in distress and inexperienced youths.[8] This was an aspect of his general policy of promoting harmony in the Bath microcosm, which Sheridan later described as a 'School for Scandal', and of trying to eliminate potential causes of conflict. His main weapon in this enterprise was his famous wit that he displayed in his Bath rules, in his repartees or when telling one of the numerous stories that were part of his entertainment fund. His jests have been collected in a volume, *The Jests of Beau Nash, Late Master of the Ceremonies at Bath, 1763,* but far from being instruments of sociability they turned out to antagonize a number of his victims (Goldsmith 156): '[He] asked her if she knew her Catechism, and could tell the name of *Tobit's* dog? His name, Sir, was *Nash*, replied the lady, and an impudent dog he was'. His legacy is best described by his first biographer as the diffusion of 'a desire of society', the teaching of a 'familiar intercourse among strangers' and the transfer of sociable manners from the spa to the 'metropolis' as 'the whole kingdom by degrees became more refined by lessons originally derived from him' (Goldsmith, p. iii–iv). As an 'established celebrity'[9] of the eighteenth century, he remains an ambivalent figure that invites reassessment. His contribution to the transformation of the British into a polite people cannot be underestimated.[10]

Nash's diverse social network sheds a contrasting light on his personality, which remains open to interpretation. A 'social symptom' (Briggs 215), he embodied all of the tensions inherent in the re-creation of Bath: between health and entertainment, the openness of a new society and a later trend towards privacy, and ultimately tensions between the therapeutic, highly theatrical display of the self and the retirement ideal. His literary representation matches that of the city of Bath, alternately eulogized and satirized. He promoted his own vision of sociability based on consensus and the quest for social harmony – at odds with, for example, Adam Ferguson's conception of sociability as including conflict. Ultimately, he found in Bath a platform in which he could create new avenues for social conduct, devising rules for behaviour and friendship and challenging social constructions.

1. Oliver Goldsmith, The Life of Richard Nash, of Bath, Esq. Extracted Principally from His Original Papers (London, 1762).

2. William Oliver, A Faint Sketch of the Life, Character, and Manners, of the Late Mr Nash (Bath, 1761), p. 4-5.

3. John Poulter, The Discoveries of John Poulter, alias Baxter, 1753, ed. Ivan Volkoff (Los Angeles: Advertisers Composition Company, 1962).

4. The Gentleman's Magazine, February 1741, p.102.

5. See the title of John Eglin's biography of Nash, The Imaginary Autocrat: Beau Nash and the Invention of Bath (London: Profile Books, 2005).

6. Christopher Anstey, The New Bath Guide, 1766, ed. Annick Cossic (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010).

7. See Lawrence Klein, 'Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century', The Historical Journal (45, 2002), p. 879.

8. Michele Cohen has demonstrated that 'the focus on gender relations was a characteristic feature of chivalry as it was of politeness' in ''Manners' Make the Man: Politeness, Chivalry, and the Construction of Masculinity, 1750-1830' Journal of British Studies, 44:2 (2005), p. 320.

9. Peter M. Briggs, 'The Importance of Beau Nash', Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture (22, 1992), p. 212.

10. For the difference between etiquette and politeness, see Michele Cohen, ''Manners' Make the Man: Politeness, Chivalry, and the Construction of Masculinity, 1750-1830', p. 314: 'politeness, though concerned with social performance, was also an attribute of identity and a social virtue'.

Citer cet article

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The Life of Beau Nash (1762)
The New Bath Guide (1766)