

DIGIT.EN.S

The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

Gifts and Gift-giving

KNIGHTS Mark



Mots-clés

Charity

Empire

Friendship

Gift

Hospitality

Reciprocity

Religion

Résumé

Gift-giving was an ubiquitous practice that fostered sociability by reflecting and strengthening the ties between individuals (and even nations) but was also potentially fraught and could provoke tensions and anxieties. The practice was thus culturally ambiguous, creating doubts about the motives and expectations of the giver and about the obligations of the receiver. Gifts could be disinterested, given between friends and equals, but also, in unequal relationships, instrumental or extorted. Deciding how to place a gift on this spectrum was often difficult, especially in colonial contexts where different cultural values were often at stake.

Gifts were often central to long eighteenth-century sociability because they helped to create and maintain reciprocal bonds between individuals, groups and even nations (playing a recognised role in diplomacy).¹

Presents played an important part in long-eighteenth century Britain in the prized, and often intertwined, virtues of liberality, hospitality, charity, friendship, generosity, honour and patronage. The exchange of gifts helped to foster and deepen social relationships, from friends and kin to patrons and charitable donors. But gifts could also be problematic and create anxieties. The exchange of gifts was culturally ambiguous and could create doubts both about the motives and expectations of the giver, on the one hand, and about the obligations of the receiver, on the other. A gift of high value might show the esteem that the recipient was held by the giver; but a very valuable gift was more likely to be seen as a monetary, commercial transaction or even as a bribe. There were also ambiguities about whether a gift was expected or freely given: the former could be seen as extortion but identifying how freely something was given could often be challenging, especially in colonial contexts where different cultural values might be at stake between the giver and recipient. Gifting was, then, an ubiquitous social practice but one that could be fraught with tension.

Gifting was not, of course, new in the long eighteenth-century and there was already a long tradition of writing about the topic, from Christian, classical and humanist perspectives, that influenced eighteenth-century attitudes. Aristotle, Cicero, and Seneca offered advice about generosity, with all three authors stressing the need to give and receive freely, without obligation. All three argued that when gifts were given in the hope of advantage, they became shameful. *Seneca's Morals Abstracted in Three Parts* (1679) – Roger L'Estrange's translation of which had 11 editions by 1718 – argued that 'it is a Mean, and Dishonourable thing, to Give, for any other End, than for Giving-sake. He that Gives for Gain, Profit, or any By-End, destroyes the very Intent of Bounty'.² The three classical authors also stressed the need for moderation in gifting. These factors were repeated in eighteenth century works that saw the gift as both potentially virtuous and a threat to virtue, an ambiguity reinforced by humanist and Christian literature. The Renaissance had witnessed renewed stress on disinterested gifts, manifested in the gifting of books and advice manuals, a practice which continued into the eighteenth century. Christian advice literature warned against excessive gifting but also saw a place for it. The Anglican divine Jeremy Taylor's popular advice about friendship, first published in 1657, urged that one friend was not to refuse the 'kindnesses' of another, nor despise 'the impropriety of them' because a 'gift (saith Solomon) fastneth friendships [...] so must the love of friends sometimes be refreshed with material and low Caresses; lest by striving to be *too divine* it becomes *less humane*: It must be allowed its share of *both*'.³

Ideas about Christian charity – philanthropic sociability - also involved gift-giving, and prompted many acts of generosity to friends, kin and to the needy. Wills provided for the distribution of food and money at parochial level, gifts which strengthened social relations between rich and poor, even if more routine poor relief was both growing and resented. Paul Slack estimates that between 1660 and 1740, charitable trusts had doubled and possibly even

grown three-fold.⁴ Some of this philanthropy was more individual. The mid-eighteenth-century diarist and shopkeeper, Thomas Turner, gave small amounts of money to poor women and children each year at Christmas; and Edward Colston, the Bristol merchant whose involvement in the slave trade has aroused considerable criticism, was nevertheless a celebrated philanthropist to his town. Wills and private donations also helped to found and maintain almshouses, schools and hospitals: the 1730s and 1740s witnessed a surge in provincial hospital foundations and many relied on continuing benefactions. The Foundling Hospital (1739) even encouraged further gifts through its art gallery and concerts, both of which drew on fashionable sociability.

The social benefits of gifts were evident to contemporaries and care was taken about the choice of the present. Whilst simple meals and drink might be sufficient, rare, exotic or relatively expensive items of food, such as venison, were exchanged to foster, reflect and consolidate relationships between family, friends and patrons. Samuel Pepys, who had navy contracts at his disposal, was said to have been given ‘Jars of Oyl, and Boxes of Chocolett and Chests of Greek Wines, and Chests of Syracuse Wines, and Pots of Anchovies and Quarter-Casks of old Malago, and Butts of Sherry & Westphalia hams & Bolonia Sauceges & Barrels of Pickel’d Oysters and Jars of Ollives, and Jars of Tent, & Parmosant Cheeses’.⁵ Pepys was also given ‘Chests of Florence Wine and Boxes of Orange Flower Water’⁶ and drinking vessels. He accepted two flaggons and recorded that they made ‘a fine sight and better than ever I did hope to see of my own’.⁷

Gloves and engraved rings were common items in the eighteenth century – in death at funerals, as well as in life, at weddings; they were unifying ‘civilities’, ‘tokens of respect’ and aides-memoires for guests. This practice spread to New England in the early eighteenth century: Massachusetts governor Jonathan Belcher gave more than a thousand pairs of gloves when his father died in 1717 and again when his wife Mary died nineteen years later, whilst Peter Faneuil distributed more than 4000 pairs in 1738, alongside ‘hundreds of gold rings’, a type of excessive expenditure that resulted in Massachusetts banning such gifts in 1742, though the practice continued until at least the 1780s.⁸

Metal-work (‘toys’), dolls, hobby-horses, puzzles and kites became common Christmas presents by the end of the century. The positive diplomatic benefits of gifts were long-established and in the eighteenth-century clocks and guns, animals (especially thoroughbred horses), jewels and artworks (especially portraits) were sent abroad to smooth negotiations and commerce with foreign powers, a macro rather than micro form of sociability. Gifting was an intrinsic part of British policy towards native American tribes and of the East India Company’s relations with Indian princes, even if in 1793 it failed to oblige the Chinese emperor to open his market.

As that failure suggests, gifts were also inherently ambiguous and fraught. ‘He that gives for his own ends, makes his **Gift** a Bribe’, was a maxim collected by Francis Quarles in the early seventeenth century but still being republished in 1698.⁹ When the gift was between equals and friends, given freely and was non-instrumental it helped to cement a social bond and trust; but a gift was no longer a gift when it was not voluntary or transactional. Gifts could be

especially vexed in unequal power relationships, such as between a patron and client, or voter and candidate.



'Success to William's Plumpers', 1761, *The British Museum*, 1959,0402.1.

An election mug of 1761, from Liverpool, where Sir William Meredith sought the 'plumpers' who would cast only one of their two votes for him. A mug was apparently given to every burgess who voted on the winning side.

Similarly dangerous were gifts between someone seeking a government contract and the official in charge of procurement. 40 pieces of gold fell out of gloves received by Samuel Pepys (who had contracts to award) and he noted that it 'did so cheer my hear that I could eat no victuals almost for dinner for joy'; but he was also uneasy about receiving what could

easily be seen as a bribe and even closed his eyes when accepting one package ‘that I might say I saw no money [...] if ever I should be questioned about it’.¹⁰ ‘Gifts’ could easily be seen as extorted bribes. Richard Cooling, the earl of Arlington’s secretary, boasted, in a way that shocked even Pepys, that ‘he was made up of bribes and that he makes every sort of tradesman to bribe him; and invited me home to his house to taste of his bribe-wine.’¹¹

The ambiguity of the gift led to a linguistic contest. Whether a transaction could be described in socially legitimate terms as a ‘present’, ‘gift’, ‘kindness’, ‘compliment’ or ‘gratuity’, rather than the morally damaging ‘bribe’, really mattered. In the early eighteenth century Patrick Haldane, a candidate for judicial office in the Edinburgh Court of Sessions who was accused of electoral bribery, distinguished ‘betwixt Bribery to compass Offices, and Bribery in corrupting Judges’, condemning the latter but describing the former as acts of ‘personal Favour and Affection’ and ‘trifles’. Yet an outraged printed response called this ‘an imaginary Distinction’.¹² Gifts were particularly problematic in colonial contexts. Governors in the West Indies had repeatedly to be warned not to take presents from islanders because of the political leverage this offered, though these instructions were frequently ignored. But it was in the East Indies where gifting became most ambiguous because different contexts and customs confused even further the unclear rules about good and bad gifts. Gifting was ubiquitous in Indian society and Britons exploited this both to cement ties with princes and to advance their own personal wealth (money that often funded sociable activity on their return to England). In 1772 Robert Clive, who had received £234,000 from the Nawab of Bengal, tried to clarify a distinction between honourable and dishonourable gifts:

When Presents are received as the Price of Services to the Nation, to the Company, and to that Prince who bestowed those Presents; when they are not exacted from him by Compulsion; when he is in a State of Independence, and can do with his Money what he pleases, and when they are not received to the Disadvantage of the Company; he holds Presents so received not dishonourable: But when they are received from a dependant Prince; when they are received for no Services whatever; and when they are received not voluntarily; he holds the Receipt of such Presents dishonourable.¹³

The following year the India Regulating Act reinforced a company covenant that proscribed its servants from accepting gifts, though this prohibition had to be repeated in 1784 and 1793. Prosecutions were made, including the Governor General of India, Warren Hastings, who was impeached (1786-1795) for having inappropriately amassed bribes in the 1770s and early 1780s, though he defended himself on the grounds that ‘What in Europe would be considered as receiving a bribe is no more in India than complying with an established custom’.¹⁴ This was a case of what Edmund Burke called ‘geographical morality’, a moral relativity dependent on local customs.¹⁵



James Gillray, 'The Bow to the Throne,-alias- the Begging Bow', *The British Museum*, 1868,0808.5726, 1788.

Warren Hastings hands out presents of Indian money to Lord chancellor Thurlow and William Pitt, whilst the King and Queen grasp money on the floor.

Thus long after gifts had been outlawed, they remained a problem. In Mughal India, subordinates offered tributes or *nazr* (offering) and received in return *khil'at* (robes of honour) from the ruler; but in the early nineteenth century these were collected by Sir Edward Colebrooke, the East India Company's Resident of Delhi, and his wife, who saw them as customary but also sold them for their private profit, something that his prosecutor Charles Trevelyan regarded as corruption.¹⁶ By the early nineteenth century critics of East India Company rapacity used the Indian word 'loot' to describe ill-gotten gains.

Modern commentators, following the anthropologist Marcel Mauss, have seen the gift as under pressure from eighteenth century commercial society which made exchange into a monetised transaction. Karl Polanyi suggested a 'great transformation', from socially-embedded reciprocity, to impersonal market exchange, a process which he saw as occurring in

late eighteenth-century Britain. Avner Offer has nevertheless highlighted the persistence of the non-marketised gift throughout our period and beyond, because the act of giving created ‘the satisfactions of *regard*’ and social approbation.¹⁷

Pierre Bourdieu suggests that the gift was part of symbolic or social capital rather than the market, part of an essential bond that maintained patrimonial society. Whichever theory one goes with, gifts became entangled with polite and commercial society – not always in incompatible ways. Josiah Wedgwood, for example, manufactured and gave his name to anti-slavery cameos that he then gave away in large quantities to sympathisers such as Thomas Clarkson, who in turn gave them to the others, until ‘the taste for wearing them became general; and thus fashion, which usually confines itself to worthless things, was seen for once in the honourable office of promoting the cause of justice, humanity and freedom’.¹⁸

1. Although it continued to be customary for ambassadors, even in hostile countries, to accept lavish gifts on their departure from a Court, accepting gifts from a foreign power was always problematic. The danger was codified in the US constitution of 1788-9: Zephyr Teachout, ‘Gifts, Offices, and Corruption’, *Northwestern University Law Review Colloquy* (n° 107, 2012), pp. 30-54; Zephyr Teachout, *Corruption in America: From Benjamin Franklin’s Snuff Box to Citizens United* (2014), article 1, section 9, clause 8 reads: ‘no Person holding any Office of Profit or Trust under them, shall, without the Consent of the Congress, accept of any present, Emolument, Office, or Title, of any kind whatever, from any King, Prince, or foreign State’.
2. Robert L’Estrange, *Seneca's Morals Abstracted in Three Parts* (London: printed by T.N. for Henry Brome, 1679), pp. 77-78.
3. Jeremy Taylor, *A Discourse of the Nature, Offices, and Measures of Friendship with Rules of Conducting it* (London: Royston, 1657), pp. 100-101.
4. Paul Slack, *From Reformation to Improvement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 14 and p. 129.
5. *A Hue and Cry after P and H. and Plain Truth* [1679], p. 1.
6. *A Hue and Cry after P and H. and Plain Truth* [1679], p. 1. The last two items seem incredible but in 1674 Pepys kept a lion, a gift from Samuel Martin, the English consul in Algiers.
7. *Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ed. Henry Wheatley (London: George Bell, 1893), 9 Sept. 1664.
8. Steven Bullock and Sheila McIntyre, ‘The Handsome Tokens of a Funeral; Glove-giving and the Large Funeral in Eighteenth Century New England’, *The William and Mary Quarterly* (vol. 69, n° 2, 2012), p. 305-346.
9. Francis Quarles, *Wisdom's Better than Money: or, the Whole Art of Knowledge, and the Art to Know Men* (London, 1698), p. 132.
10. *Diary of Samuel Pepys*, 2 Feb. 1664 ; 3 Apr. 1663.
11. *Diary of Samuel Pepys*, 30 July 1667.
12. *The Case of Mr. Patrick Haldane, Advocate: With Some Remarks upon his Defence* (1723), pp. 31-36. Haldane’s appointment was blocked.
13. *Ibid.*, quoting from ‘A Letter to the Proprietors of East India Stock’, from Lord Clive (1764, reprinted 1773).
14. Rev. John Logan, *A Review of the Principal Charges against Warren Hastings Esq* (1789), p. 45.
15. *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*, in sixteen volumes (London: printed for F.C. and J. Rivington, 1808-1827), vii, p. 104.
16. Mark Knights, *Trust and Distrust: Corruption in Office in Britain and its Empire, 1600-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), chapter 2.
17. Avner Offer, ‘Between the Gift and the Market: The Economy of Regard’, *The Economic History Review* (New Series, vol. 50, n° 3, Aug., 1997), p. 450.

18. Thomas Clarkson, *History of the . . . Abolition of the African Slave-Trade*, vol. 2, p. 191–2, quoted by Susan Egenolf, ‘Josiah Wedgwood’s Goodwill Marketing’, in Linda Zionkowski, Cynthia Klekar (eds.), *The Culture of the Gift in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 203.

Citer cet article

KNIGHTS Mark, "Gifts and Gift-giving", *Encyclopédie numérique de la sociabilité britannique au cours du long dix-huitième siècle* [en ligne], ISSN 2803-2845, Consulté le 03/05/2024, URL: <https://www.digitens.org/fr/notices/gifts-and-gift-giving.html>

Références complémentaires

Finn, Margot, ‘Material Turns in British History II: Corruption, Imperial Power, Princely Politics and Gifts gone Rogue’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (vol. 29, 2019), p. 1-25.

Heal, Felicity, *The Power of Gifts: Gift Exchange in Early modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Knights, Mark, ‘Samuel Pepys and Corruption’, *Parliamentary History* (vol. 33, n° 1, 2014), p. 19-35.

Krausman Ben-Amos, Ilana, *The Culture of Giving: Informal Support and Gift-exchange in Early Modern England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Liebershon, Harry, *The Return of the Gift: European History of a Global Idea* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Mauss, Marcel, *The Gift. Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, translated by Ian Cunnison, with an introduction by E. E. Evans-Pritchard (London: Cohen & West, 1966).

Polanyi, Karl, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1944).

Riello, Giorgio, Anne Gerritsen and Zoltán Biedermann (eds.), *Global Gifts: the Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[Discourse of the nature, offices, and measures of friendship \(1657\)](#)