

## IN TIME OF CIVIL WAR JAMES HOWELL (c. 1594-1666)



Far richer in social scenes and short narratives than those of John Donne are the letters collected in the *Epistolae Ho-Eliaanae* of James Howell, an Anglo-Welshman, in what purports to be his familiar correspondence under this title and achieves great literary success. To his first installment, issued in 1645, he adds three more, which appear in 1647, 1650, and 1655. The whole collection was frequently reprinted well into the following century.

Until 1959 it was widely suspected that Howell's supposed letters were clever fabrications mostly concocted while he was being held as a political prisoner in the Fleet. In that year, however, Verona M. Hirst was able to point to an actual letter from Howell to Lord Conway, half of which is incorporated in one piece in the *Epistolae*. Referring to his methods of composition in his other books, Hirst provides strong evidence that at least a very large part of the one for which he is remembered consists of material drawn from his real correspondence, passages from different letters being combined to produce the printed texts. I agree with Hirst and others that the longer pieces on set subjects, like the history of religions, are essays written to fill out the book for publication, and I recognize the strength of W. H. Bennett's earlier argument that many of the published texts "were possibly compiled from notes, or even re-written from memory." It should be noted that the dating of the letters, first introduced in the second edition of the whole collection, is erratic and often appears to be the product of guesswork. Thus what he speaks of as "That black tragedy which was lately acted here" and which "hath filled most hearts among us with consternation and horror" is recorded in a letter dated 20 March 1648; Charles I was executed on 30 January 1649. I regard *Epistolae Ho-Eliaanae* as a volume of heavily edited correspondence supplemented with a sprinkling of essays.

Writing to Carew Raleigh, the son of Sir Walter, Howell describes his published letters as “a legend of the cumbersome life and various fortunes of a *cadet*.” As a younger brother with fourteen siblings, Howell grows up to become responsible for his own livelihood, but an education at Oxford and a gift for languages are among his assets. He travels widely on the Continent, first as an agent for the glass manufacturer Sir Robert Maunsell, than on an unsuccessful mission to obtain the release of the *Vineyard*, a British merchant vessel seized, apparently on the flimsiest grounds, by the Spanish Viceroy of Sardinia. Later he serves on diplomatic missions to Spain and Denmark. In 1642, when he is about to take up his new post as Clerk to the Privy Council, he is abruptly arrested by officers of the Parliament, which is at war with King Charles I, and imprisoned in the Fleet for about nine years. The last letters in the *Epistolae* are written after his release in 1651 but well before the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 and his appointment the following year as Historiographer Royal.

James Howell is a man of scholarly inclination, omnivorous curiosity, and religious faith. Possessing the European consciousness of Ascham and Wotton, he is a Christian before he is a Protestant and a citizen of Christendom before he is a Briton. Well aware that the power of Spain, with her vast empire extending to the Philippines, looms over Europe, he remembers that she is a Christian nation, and he longs for peace in Christendom and a united front against the threat of Turkish expansion. For this reason he supports the project of a Spanish match for the future Charles I, a project vastly unpopular in England, and deplores the widespread hostility among his countrymen towards the Spanish Ambassador, who is working to promote the marriage:

Count *Gondomar* hath also helped to free some *English* that were in the *Inquisition* in *Toledo* and *Seville*; and I could allege many instances how ready and cheerful he is to assist any *Englishman* whatsoever, notwithstanding the base affronts he hath often received of the *London Boys*, as he calls them.

While Howell has little knowledge of Islam and regards it as “this poison” and “this black religion,” he declares:

Difference in opinion may work a *disaffection* in me, but not a *detestation*; I rather pity than hate *Turk* or *Infidel*, for they are of the same metal, and bear the same stamp as I do, tho’ the inscriptions differ: If I hate any, ’tis those schismatics that puzzle the sweet peace of our Church, so that I could be content to see an *Anabaptist* go to Hell on a *Brownist*’s back.

In the troubles and uncertainties of life, Howell finds that his stay is his faith. For him, it is the very mysteriousness of such doctrines as those of the Incarnation, Resurrection and Trinity, which “*are bones to philosophy, but milk to faith*,” along with its ethical imperatives that give his religion a unique sublimity and authority. While Thackeray, who loved to dip into the *Epistolae*, is too severe in calling Howell “priggish,” he is a serious moralist who rebukes such failings as seasoning one’s discourse with “deep, far-fetched oaths” and urges a young man who has set off on his travels, “you must not suffer any melting tenderness of thoughts, or longing desires, to distract or interrupt you in that fair road you are in to virtue.” He reports, that the servants at the Danish court inform him “without any appearance of shame,” that last night’s drunkenness keeps their masters late abed.

As a traveller, Howell informs himself about the histories of the places he visits and comments on the characters of their peoples: “The *Spaniard* is not so smooth and oily in his compliment as the *Italian*; and tho’ he will make strong protestations, yet he will not swear out compliments like the *French* and *English*.” National character interests him more than fine scenes, but he is duly impressed by the sight of Venice:

I protest to you, at my first landing I was for some days ravished with the high beauty of this maid, with her lovely countenance. I admired her magnificent buildings, her marvellous situation, her dainty smooth neat streets, whereon you may walk most days in the year in a silk stocking and satin slippers, without soiling them.

Politically, as well as morally, Howell is conservative, and he is a strong monarchist who defends Charles I’s legally dubious exaction of ship money, that does so much to bring on the Civil War:

Whether we are in danger or no at present, ‘twere presumption in me to judge, that belongs to his Majesty and his Privy-Council ... yet one with half an eye may see, we cannot be secure, while such huge fleets of men-of-war, both *Spanish, French, Dutch*, and *Dunkirkers* ... do daily sail on our seas.

Howell regrets the spread of learning to the lower class through free schools and commends the Chinese policy “*That the son is always of the father’s trade*.” Hints of his royalist sympathies in his first volume are followed in succeeding collections by denunciations of the Puritans akin to those of Swift in *A Tale of a Tub*:

There's a strange maggot hath got into their brains, which possesseth them with a kind of vertigo; and it reigns in the pulpit more than any where else, for some of our preachers are grown dog-mad, there's a worm got into their tongues, as well as their heads.

An assault of this nature speaks of a commitment to rationality, something also found when Howell argues that there is support for the belief that Dover and Boulogne were once joined: "For if one do well observe the rocks of the one, and the cliffs of the other, he will judge them to be one homogeneous piece, and that they were cut and shivered asunder by some act of violence." He is aware, too, that Galileo "hath brought us to a nearer commerce with Heaven." In view of this affinity with the modern world, it is as disturbing to find him outraged that anyone should doubt the reality of witchcraft as it is to find Pliny the Younger convinced of the diabolical nature of Christianity.

The *Epistolae* is not remarkable for vivid or trenchant sketches of character any more than for scenic descriptions, but, besides a wealth of historical material, it provides a feast of anecdotes delivered in an easy, familiar style, which accords with its author's view that in letters "we should write as we speak." Howell tells, for example, how a Spanish Viceroy of Naples was summoned to the court at Madrid to give an account of his rule:

being troubled with the gout, he carried his sword in his hand instead of a staff; the King misliking of the manner of his posture, turned his back to him, and so went away: Thereupon he was over-heard to mutter, *Esto es para server muchachos*; This it is to serve boys.

The King was told of this insult, and the Viceroy was confined in a monastery for several years.

In 1623, when Prince Charles visits Spain to court the Infanta, he goes one morning to surprise that princess but finds there is an obstacle between himself and the orchard where she is walking. Howell writes, "The Prince got on the top of the wall, and sprung down a great height, and so made towards her; but she spying him first of all the rest, gave a shriek and ran back." At the plea of the terrified old Marquis who guarded her, the Prince made a dignified retreat.

James Howell seems to be a companionable man and an enthusiastic raconteur. When he becomes a prisoner, he is forced, instead of travelling over Europe, to travel in what he calls "this little world, which I have carried about me and within me so many years":

This travelling o'er of one's self is one of the paths that leads a man to Paradise: It is true, that 'tis a dirty and dangerous one, for it is thick set with extravagant desires, irregular affections and concupiscences, which are but odd comrades, and oftentimes do lie in ambush to cut our throats: There are also some melancholy companions in the way, which are our thoughts, but they turn many times to be good fellows, and the best company.

For the reader, the letters of this lifelong bachelor — he once discloses, “Had I been disposed to have married for wealth without affection, or for affection without wealth, I had been in bonds before now” — have an unusual advantage. Because they have been selected and edited by Howell himself, their glimpses of history and view of the writer's life and personality are not weighed down by the longueurs and repetitions that are apt to be found in a complete collection of an author's correspondence.