



Philip Yorke and Thomas Birch: Scribal News in the Mid 18th Century*

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This article examines the newsletter-writing practices of the Hardwicke circle, the intellectual coterie centred on Philip Yorke, 2nd earl of Hardwicke (1720–90), and Thomas Birch (1705–66). It begins by examining the ‘Weekly Letter’ written between Birch and Yorke from 1741–66 (BL, Add. MS 35,396–35,400). This comprised a letter written by Birch every Saturday when Yorke was not in London, describing the political and literary events of the week, together with Yorke’s less regular replies. In form the Weekly Letter was modelled on a historical example of the scribal newsletter, itself a significant focus of the historical research of the Hardwicke circle. Yorke and Birch collected and preserved historical collections of 17th and 18th century scribal newsletters, as well as conducting research into the history of printed news. Yorke’s interest in scribal news, encouraged by Birch’s regular Weekly Letter, saw him subsequently establish an extensive network of newsletter correspondents on parliamentary affairs. As a case study of those interests, the article examines Yorke’s ‘Paris alainain’, a commercial *nouvelle à la main* he secured from Paris through personal connections in France.

Keywords: Hardwicke circle; *nouvelle à la main*; newsletter; Thomas Birch; Philip Yorke, news history

1.

Scribal news was an important aspect of the news culture of the ‘Hardwicke circle’, the intellectual and sociable coterie associated especially with Philip Yorke, 2nd earl of Hardwicke (1720–90), and Thomas Birch (1705–66), secretary of the Royal Society. In the mid 18th century, the coterie developed sophisticated interests in a wide spectrum of news culture, including the history of scribal and printed news; the collecting of early newspapers and newsletters; and refining their own practices of scribal news. Birch, for example, wrote a manuscript weekly newsletter to Yorke on political and literary topics, the ‘Weekly Letter’, from 1741 to 1766; and Yorke wrote and published creative essays and hoaxes in news history.¹ David Miller has shown how the ‘Hardwicke circle’, so named for the first time in the 20th century, exercised considerable influence in intellectual institutions in London in

*In writing this article I would like to thank Christopher Reid and Rebecca Beasley, my colleagues in newsletter studies including Joad Raymond and Alex Barber, and the editors of this volume, Robin Eagles and Michael Schach, for their help and assistance. All the mistakes I made by myself.

¹Markman Ellis, ‘Thomas Birch’s “Weekly Letter” of “Literary Intelligence” (1741–1766): Correspondence and History in the Mid-Eighteenth Century Royal Society’, *Notes and Records: The Royal Society Journal for the*

the mid-century, holding high office in or influencing the proceedings of the Royal Society, the Society of Antiquaries and the British Museum.² Although their activities in these institutions often focused on administrative reforms and secretarial diligence, rather than the kind of research outputs and projects to which the institutions were dedicated, both Birch and Yorke were also historians, writers and literary patrons of some influence. In this mode, they were also significant innovators in history writing, especially in their methodological insistence on the value of original documentary evidence, which they privileged over grand historical narrative.³ In this sphere of activity, their innovative contribution to the history of news, both printed newsheets and manuscript newsletters, is contiguous with their history-writing practice. But, as this article explores, Yorke's experience with a commercial French *nouvelle à la main* service in the early 1750s, showed to him that not all scribal news was equal. In particular, he discovered that the *nouvelle à la main* from Paris, as a commercially driven enterprise, privileged scandal over news, and was operated in a distinctly different cultural and regulatory regime in France that severely constrained its contents.⁴ As such, the Paris almain, as he called it, failed to provide him with the private insight to literary and political news that he desired, especially in comparison with the Weekly Letter from Birch. In subsequent decades, in the 1760s and 1770s, Yorke, having learned from his experience with the Paris almain, developed, as Christopher Reid has described, an extensive network of personal contacts and informants who wrote for him private letters of news reporting on debates in the house of commons.⁵

2. The Weekly Letter Collaboration

Yorke's interest in newsletters and scribal news emerged when he was still an undergraduate at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, just before he first met Thomas Birch in 1740. Birch was a historian and clergyman who had benefited from the patronage of Yorke's father, also called Philip Yorke (1690–1764), later the 1st earl of Hardwicke.⁶ Birch had been born a Quaker in Clerkenwell in London, the son of a coffee-mill maker, and had been educated in Quaker schools, where he also subsequently taught as an usher. After the death of his wife and son in 1729, Birch was baptised into the Anglican church in 1730, and ordained in 1731. Hardwicke presented him to the vicarage of Ulting in Essex in 1732, a parish in the gift of the lord chancellor, the first of a series of preferments made by Hardwicke.⁷ Birch's skills in history writing, and in the management of scholarly projects, were demonstrated in his role as one of the chief editors of the *General Dictionary, Historical and Critical*, an expanded

¹ (continued) *History of Science*, lxxviii (2014), 261–78; Markman Ellis, 'The English Mercurie Hoax and the Early History of the Newspaper', *Book History*, xxii (2019), 100–32.

²D.P. Miller, 'The "Hardwicke Circle": The Whig Supremacy and its Demise in the 18th-century Royal Society', *Notes and Records of the Royal Society*, lii (1998), 73–91, at 76.

³Laird Okie, 'Birch and the Historians', in *Augustan Historical Writing: Histories of England in the English Enlightenment* (Lanham, MD, 1991).

⁴*De Bonne Main: La communication manuscrite au XVIIIe siècle*, ed. François Moureau (Oxford and Paris, 1993).

⁵Christopher Reid, 'Reporting by Letter: The 2nd Earl of Hardwicke and his Parliamentary Correspondents', *Parl. Hist.*, xxxix (2020), 239–54.

⁶For the sake of clarity, this essay will refer to Philip Yorke, 2nd earl of Hardwicke, as Yorke, and the lord chancellor, Philip Yorke, 1st earl of Hardwicke, as Hardwicke.

⁷Birch was rector of St Margaret Pattens, a wealthy City parish, from 1746 to his death in 1766.

ten-volume edition of Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* (1697) that appeared between 1734 to 1741, for which Birch completed more than 600 biographies. While Yorke was still an undergraduate at Cambridge, Birch offered assistance to him as a tutor, and as a literary agent in London, undertaking a variety of roles including research and proof correction, literary advice and bibliographical services, as well as searching for and buying books and manuscripts for Yorke's library. Birch assisted in the publication of Yorke's ironic historical essay on Roman news writing, eventually published as 'On the *Acta Diurna* of the *Old Romans*' in the annual preface to Edward Cave's *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1740.⁸ Birch also helped with the publishing arrangements for his prose fiction, *Athenian Letters* (1741–3), a collaborative work mostly written by Philip and his younger brother Charles Yorke, assisted by at least ten others including Birch, that anachronistically repurposed the scribal newsletter to relate the history of the Peloponnesian War between Greece and Sparta in the 5th century BC, as recorded by Thucydides and Plutarch.⁹ Yorke left Cambridge (without completing his degree) on his marriage, on 23 May 1740, to Lady Jemima Campbell, *suo jure* Marchioness Grey, whose inherited property included a substantial country house, Wrest Park, near Bedford. Yorke and Lady Grey had an affectionate marriage, sharing interests in landscape gardening, architecture, natural philosophy and scientific institutions.

From 1741, Birch was closely engaged in the Yorke household's literary and intellectual life. When Yorke was in London, he attended breakfast with Yorke and Lady Grey at their townhouse in St James's Square. When the Yorkes were at Wrest, as they were for at least six months of the year, following the parliamentary calendar, Birch began a habit of writing a regular Saturday newsletter to Yorke. Birch's *Weekly Letter* was initiated on Tuesday 18 August 1741, apparently without any contractual negotiation or agreement, and was continued until 2 January 1766. It comprises 680 letters (1741–66), of which 428 are written by Birch, and 252 replies by Yorke.¹⁰ Birch's newsletter summarised the political and literary events of the week: or, as Yorke described it in 1747, it mixed 'the occurrences of the literary with those of the political world'; Yorke's shorter response made 'observations' and responses to Birch's news and information.¹¹

In format, Birch's newsletter was deliberately modelled on his understanding of 17th-century scribal news, derived from his research, noted below. In this way, it was typically a half-folio sheet folded in two to create four pages (bifolium), although there was some variation that saw it extended by another bifolium to five or six of potentially eight pages. Birch habitually added postscripts vertically to the fourth page, and occasionally to the central margin of page three, reflecting the high regard he had for filling his page. Yorke's reply comprised a letter of up to four pages, but often less, on the same format paper, usually every week or second week. The hebdomadal regularity of Birch's *Weekly Letter*, to which

⁸Philip Yorke, 'On the *Acta Diurna* of the *Old Romans*', *Gentleman's Magazine*, x (1740), preface, iii–viii.

⁹*Athenian Letters: or, the Epistolary Correspondence of an Agent of the King of Persia, Residing at Athens during the Peloponnesian War. Containing the History of the Times, in Dispatches to the Ministers of State at the Persian Court* (4 vols, 1741–3).

¹⁰Correspondence of Philip Yorke, 2nd earl of Hardwicke, with Rev. Thomas Birch, D.D., Secretary to the Royal Society, Hardwicke Papers, vols XLVIII–LII, BL, Add. MSS 35,396–35,400. The term 'Weekly Letter' appears to have been coined in the only extant book-length treatment of Birch's life: A.E. Gunther, *An Introduction to the Life of the Rev. Thomas Birch D.D., F.R.S., 1705–1766: Leading Editor of the General Dictionary ... 1741, Secretary of the Royal Society and Trustee of the British Museum* (Halesworth, 1984), 45–6.

¹¹BL, Add. MS 35397, ff. 64–5: Yorke to Birch, 4 Aug. 1747.

he was very committed, recalled the scribal newsletter. Furthermore, he used some of the typical formations of the scribal newsletter — notably the paragraph as a unit of news or information — but also borrowed framing structures from the familiar letter, including extensive polite salutations and humilific personal closing statements. There is evidence that Birch took some care over the compilation and composition of the Weekly Letter: for example, between 1759 and 1761, he used a small notebook to record potential topics and memoranda. As each topic was used, he scored a line through it, to gauge his progress through both the information and the material letter.¹² Birch's archive also preserves some rough drafts of his newsletter, demonstrating that on some occasions at least the letter sent to Yorke was a fair copy, improved by emendations and corrections to expression and style. A small number of his Weekly Letters were also copied and sent to other members of the Hardwicke circle, including Yorke's brother Charles, Daniel Wray and John Lawry.¹³ Yorke was also in the habit of reading aloud from Birch's 'weekly Dispatch' to 'the good company' gathered at Wrest.¹⁴

Birch's weekly newsletter followed a distinctive pattern. Broadly, the first two or three pages were devoted to political news, which included information gleaned from other newsletters, printed newsheets and gossip or rumour collected by Birch. The latter half of the newsletter contained literary news and information from the intellectual culture of London, including notices of book publications, meetings of learned institutions and summaries or abstracts of learned journals. An important source for both, at least imaginatively, was Birch's London life, especially his visits to the coffeehouses, dining societies and theatres. Birch figured himself as, and probably was, a regular habitu  of several 'literary' coffeehouses in London: notably Rawthmell's in St Martin's Lane, and George's and Tom's in Devereux Court, near to the Royal Society in Crane Court, as well as, on occasion, visiting other coffeehouses in search of news, such as Lloyd's in the City, and the Chapter in St Paul's Churchyard. His closeness to this associational world of intellectual culture in London was an important part of his value as a *nouvelliste*: even if his assiduity in collecting and reporting intelligence from these sources to some extent allied him with the calling of the Grub Street newsmonger.¹⁵ Richard Flecknoe's 'Character of a Common Newsmonger' (1677) describes how the newsmonger or journalist picks up rumours and spreads them as true news in the gazettes and the coffeehouses.

In my 2014 article on the Weekly Letter, I argued that evidence from the material text, and internal evidence, suggested that for Birch there was a profound psychological dimension to completing the newsletter. In material terms, there is evidence that he took great care with the preparation of the Weekly Letter, that he aimed to fill his page, parcelling out his material to exactly fill the space available, squeezing in felicitations and greetings at

¹²BL, Add. MS 4471, ff. 143–56: Thomas Birch, memorandum book and diary combined, 1759–61. On the paragraph see Will Slauter, 'The Paragraph as Information Technology: How News Traveled in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World', *Annales (English Ed.)*, lxxvii (2012), 253–78. On the memorandum book, see John Guillory, 'The Memo and Modernity', *Critical Inquiry*, xxxi (2004), 108–32, and Richard Yeo, *Notebooks, English Virtuosi, and Early Modern Science* (Chicago, 2014).

¹³References to reading Birch's 'Weekly Pacquet to Wrest', BL, Add. MS 4322, f. 95v: Daniel Wray to Birch, Queen's College, Cambridge, 23 Nov. 1744; Add. MS 4312, f. 103: John Lawry to Birch, Rochester, 28 Nov. 1756.

¹⁴BL, Add. MS 35396, f. 226: [Yorke] to [Birch], note, endorsed by Birch 'July 24 1744'.

¹⁵Richard Flecknoe, 'Character of a Common Newsmonger', in *Seventy Eight Characters of so Many Vertuous and Vitious Persons* (1677), 6.

the end. Chronologically, Birch was remarkably committed to the regular Saturday slot of the letter, and equally remarkable for his assiduous application to its completion for over 26 seasons.¹⁶ Although the newsletter writer is habitually demeaned or diminished in contemporary ideations, and their output is considered as a low or vulgar production, hastily hammered out by a kind of Grub Street hack, Birch found a kind of historical nobility in his calling. The relationship between Birch as *nouvelliste* and Yorke as client, was clearly marked by their difference in status and class. However, there is no evidence that Birch was directly remunerated for the Weekly Letter. Rather he was careful to maintain his self-construction as an independent gentleman of some means, as a rector of a wealthy parish in the City of London, with his own intellectual interests. Preferment was the wages of Birch's allegiance to the Hardwicks, and even that remained a largely unspoken debt. Birch figured his newsletter as a service to the Hardwicke family, voluntary, unpaid and as such genteel. The framing language used to describe the Weekly Letter correspondence helped to regulate this social equilibrium, especially phrases that located it in the 'republic of letters' and 'the literary world', suggesting that they met there as equals.¹⁷ Furthermore, Yorke's letters were larded with professions of friendship and equality, well in excess of the conventional polite discourse of correspondence. He also repeatedly phrased his commands and requests using a gentle self-deflecting irony, undercutting his social precedence. Rather than the simple contractual and commercial arrangement of a newsmonger and client, Birch and Yorke's Weekly Letter correspondence was managed in and through complicated patterns of emotional entanglement, signalling of gentlemanly virtue, and notions of equality between men of letters.

The nomenclature of the Weekly Letter is further contextualised by the Hardwicke circle's historical interest in newsletters, which informed the way the letter was described and preserved. Both Birch and Yorke, but especially Yorke, laced their discourse on the Weekly Letter with a kind of self-deprecating irony intended to complicate and mystify the debts of obligation and deference embedded in the correspondence. Yorke in particular enjoyed describing his research and writing using the diction of its 17th-century antecedents, extending this to Birch and his more extensive writing projects whenever he could. In this way, Yorke referred to Birch's Weekly Letter using a series of technical terms associated with the early modern newsletter. He repeatedly used the term '*aviso*' or '*Avisi segreti*', for example, an Italian word for a newsletter in 17th-century diplomatic correspondence: in 1743, for example, he comments that he had 'just perused your weekly *Avisi segreti* with great pleasure, but am sorry they brought no more decisive news'.¹⁸ As this suggests, one of the qualities Yorke liked about his newsletter was that the knowledge of public affairs it contained was private or secret, or at least, not known publicly. 'I wish you could pick out a little, what is said to be going on behind the Curtain — we see enough of public appearances in the Papers'.¹⁹ In 1747, Yorke had compared Birch's newsletters to those of

¹⁶Ellis, 'Thomas Birch's "Weekly Letter"', 261–78.

¹⁷Birch used the phrase 'the Republic of Letters', BL, Add. MS 35398, f. 1: Birch to Yorke, London, 29 June 1751; and Add. MS 4322, ff. 109–10: Birch to Wray, Wrest, 23 Oct. 1752. Yorke referred to 'a free literary Republic', Add. MS 35396, ff. 207–8: Yorke to Birch, 'Rest', 24 June 1744. Birch used the phrase 'the literary world', Add. MS 35396, ff. 13–14: Birch to Yorke, London, 29 Aug. 1741; and Add. MS 35396, ff. 184–5: Birch to Yorke, London, 29 Oct. 1743.

¹⁸BL, Add. MS 35396, f. 109: Yorke to Birch, 'Rest', 19 June 1743.

¹⁹BL, Add. MS 35396, f. 109: Yorke to Birch, 'Rest', 19 June 1743.

three 17th-century ‘novelists’, by which he meant the *nouvelliste* or newsletter writer: ‘I shall set you far above those illustrious Novelists your Predecessors, Rowland White, Mr Chamberlain, & Master Garrard’.²⁰ In this letter, Birch was compared to an unrelated group of newsletter writers uncovered in Birch’s own historical research: Rowland White, a secretary and news writer for Sir Philip Sydney in the period 1598–1600; George Garrard, master of the charterhouse and a gossipy newsletter writer to the earl of Strafford, 1633–5; and John Chamberlain, secretary in the household of Sir Dudley Carleton in the period 1598–1625. This is a somewhat precarious compliment of course, as these men, although in the service of great men of state, were themselves hired pens not so distant from the disreputable and vulgar trade of the newsmonger. Yet another historical analogy was coined by Yorke when he referred to his archive of Birch letters at Wrest as his ‘Paper Office’, recalling with some irony the government office of the secretaries of state that controlled the 17th-century newsletter system.²¹ The deliberate archaism and foreignness of these terms helps Yorke associate Birch’s weekly letter with an historically enduring practice of news writing.

3. *Historical Newsletter Research in the Hardwicke Circle*

Yorke’s historicised descriptions of Birch’s newsletter writing practice located it within the context of Birch’s own historical research on early modern news systems. Birch’s historical research was directly concerned with 16th- and 17th-century newsletters and their writers. Both Birch and Yorke were avid collectors of early modern correspondence collections when they found them, and Birch especially went to considerable lengths to consult early modern English correspondence in private and public collections. In 1740–1, for example, he took on the compilation of a seven-volume folio edition of the correspondence collection of John Thurloe (1616–68), secretary (1652–8), first, to the council of state, and afterwards to the two Protectors, Oliver and Richard Cromwell. In the course of his duties, Thurloe had organised a considerable and efficient network of correspondent newsletter writers, both domestic and foreign, and a comprehensive system for collating and managing the correspondence. Thurloe’s papers were found concealed in the wainscot of a garret in his chambers in Lincoln’s Inn in the 1690s: in 1740, Birch was commissioned to publish a selection of them by the bookseller Fletcher Gyles.²² Birch’s seven volume folio publication, *A Collection of the State Papers of John Thurloe, Esq* (1742) was at the forefront of a new innovation in history writing, the compilation of ‘State papers’. This was a new term for official papers concerning government, first seen in a title in Samuel Haynes’s publication of *A Collection of State Papers* from William Cecil’s archive in 1740.²³ In the ‘Preface’ to *Thurloe*, Birch argued for ‘the importance of state-papers, as the most solid and

²⁰BL, Add. MS 35397, f. 77: Yorke to Birch, Wimpole, 22 Sept. 1747.

²¹BL, Add. MS 35397, f. 206: Yorke to Birch, Paris, 29 Aug. (OS) / 9 Sept. (NS) 1749.

²²Birch’s preface details the provenance of Thurloe’s papers from their rediscovery to their purchase by Gyles in 1739. Most of the originals are now held in Oxford at Bodl. MS Rawl. A 1–73.

²³*A Collection of State Papers: Relating to Affairs In the Reigns of King Henry VIII, King Edward VI, Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth: From the Year 1542 to 1570*, ed. Samuel Haynes (1740). The term ‘state papers’ is also seen in *Letters, Memoirs, Parliamentary Affairs, State Papers, &c. [...] Publish’d from the Originals of the Lord Chancellor Bacon*, ed. Robert Stephens (1736).

useful foundation of history'.²⁴ As well as Thurloe's own correspondence, Birch included a large number, estimated at 350, of newsletters or 'letters of intelligence', albeit sometimes in truncated extracts, from Thurloe's extensive network of paid but otherwise unrecognised intelligence-gatherers.

Birch also assembled his own personal collection of newsletters. These were relevant to Birch's publication of the correspondence and papers of the Elizabethan spy Anthony Bacon (1558–1601),²⁵ assembled primarily from the 16 volumes of Bacon manuscript letters that Birch located in the Library at Lambeth Palace.²⁶ In the summer of 1750, Birch was permitted by the archbishop to borrow the volumes, one by one, to make relevant transcripts.²⁷ These papers were central to two publications: his *Historical View of the Negotiations between England, France and Brussels* (1749), and his two-volume *Memoirs of the Reign of Queen Elizabeth* in 1754.²⁸ In the course of this work, Birch acquired or transcribed a series of letters and papers on state affairs, related to Bacon, now in the Birch collection in the British Library. Additional Manuscript 4125 includes, for example, several series of manuscript newsletters: two French 'nouvelles' from 1586 and 1588; 62 bifolium weekly newsletters in Italian in a variety of hands relating news of events in Venice, Rome and Antwerp from January 1593 to February 1594; and another series of 53 newsletters from April 1597 to March 1598.²⁹ The same volume also contains a newsletter from France from 1657, detailing the movements of Charles Stuart (Charles II) and the conflicts between the king of France and the *parlement*.³⁰ Another collection of 17th-century newsletters assembled by Birch is found in Additional Manuscript 4182, described in the catalogue as a 'Collection of Newsletters 1665–1746', including both printed and manuscript news. These manuscript newsletters include, for example, a continuous series in one hand describing domestic and foreign events from January to November 1665; and another series, dated from London, addressed to John Ellis, secretary of the revenue in Ireland, records domestic English occasional news from 9 September 1684 to 17 February 1695.³¹ No record of the provenance

²⁴A *Collection of the State Papers of John Thurloe, Esq; Secretary, First, to the Council of State, and Afterwards to the Two Protectors, Oliver and Richard Cromwell. In Seven Volumes. Containing Authentic Memorials of the English Affairs from the Year 1638, to the Restoration of King Charles II. Published from the Originals [...] The Whole Digested into an Exact Order of Time. To which is Prefixed, the Life of Mr. Thurloe: with a Complete Index to Each Volume* (1742), p. v.

²⁵BL, Add. MS 4125, f. 11: Newsletter from Narbonne, 12 Nov. 1586; ff. 17, 21: From France, 24 Dec. 1590, 15 June 1591; ff. 24–37b: From Venice, 1 Jan.– 19 Feb. 1593/4; ff. 44–359b: From Antwerp, Rome, Venice, 27 June 1593–28 Feb. 1598. The origin of these newsletters is not clear.

²⁶*Index to the Papers of Anthony Bacon (1558–1601) in Lambeth Palace Library (Mss. 647–662)* (Lambeth Palace Library, 1974).

²⁷BL, Add. MS 35397, f. 249: Birch to Yorke, London, 23 June 1750.

²⁸*An Historical View of the Negotiations between the Courts of England, France, and Brussels, from the Year 1592 to 1617. Extracted Chiefly from the MS. State-Papers of Sir Thomas Edmondson, Knt. Ambassador in France, and at Brussels, [...] and of Anthony Bacon, Esq; [...] Never before Printed* (1749); *Memoirs of the Reign of Queen Elizabeth, from the Year 1581 till Her Death. In which the Secret Intrigues of Her Court, and the Conduct of Her Favourite, Robert Earl of Essex, both at Home and Abroad, are Particularly Illustrated. From the Original Papers of His Intimate Friend, Anthony Bacon, Esquire, And Other Manuscripts never before Published*, (2 vols, 1754).

²⁹BL, Add. MS 4125, ff. 11–12: 'nouvelles' from Narbonne; ff. 24–37, 44–156: Newsletters from Venice etc., 1593–4 series; ff. 180–305: 1597–8 series [interspersed with other items].

³⁰BL, Add. MS 4125, ff. 385–6.

³¹BL, Add. MS 4182, ff. 1–56: 1665 newsletter; ff. 57–81b: Ellis newsletter 1684–94. There are further series: Add. MS 4182, ff. 93–5, 97–8: Affairs in parliament, 29 May 1646–11 Feb. 1647; and Add. MS 4182, ff. 99–110: another set of newsletters from Paris, Rome and Vienna, 1654–8.

of these collections of newsletters has yet been located, and of course, their primary utility, for Birch as for now, is as historical sources relevant and interesting to the diverse historical periods of their production. But it is also relevant to note that their acquisition, collection, organisation and preservation in Birch's archive testifies to Birch's intense interest in original documents in the writing (or compilation) of history, including those by unlettered Grub Street newsmongers.

Christopher Reid has recently shown, in relation to newsletter reports of the proceedings of the house of commons, the extensive network of correspondents Yorke assembled to give him accounts of proceedings of the House in the 1760s and 1770s.³² Yorke, while the member of parliament for Reigate (1741–64), had maintained a parliamentary journal for the sessions 1743–4 and 1744–5.³³ He also occasionally solicited reports on parliamentary debates when he was not able to attend himself. Birch's Weekly Letter included reports of parliamentary gossip whenever available. When Yorke was elevated to the Lords on the death of his father in 1764, Reid demonstrates how he made a 'more organised and sustained effort to establish a reporting network'.³⁴ For example, he received 135 letters reporting proceedings in the Commons in the 1768–74 parliament alone. Correspondents in his network included family members: his brother John Yorke (member of parliament); his nephew Philip Yorke (member of parliament); his cousin Charles Cocks (member of parliament); his son-in-law Thomas Robinson, 2nd Baron Grantham; and his second cousin Philip Yorke of Erthig (member of parliament). But he also requested and commanded parliamentary news from others, including the members of parliament Soame Jenyns and Sir John Hynde Cotton, and his exchequer clerks, E. Langton and Samuel Wilde.³⁵ Reid describes how Yorke could be a demanding master to his newsletter writers, even though it is not always clear what he did with the intelligence, as his own political career was nugatory. But for Yorke, the medium of the newsletter was itself of considerable value, not only for its historical resonances, but for the aura of private and inside knowledge it gave him. As a case study of Yorke's enthusiasm for scribal newsletters, this article will now turn to Yorke's efforts to establish and maintain a foreign correspondence in the form of a *nouvelle à la main* from Paris in the early 1750s. This was Yorke's first attempt to subscribe to (or perhaps establish) a newsletter on a commercial and contractual footing: in that sense it was a precursor to, or trial run for, the later more successful and sustained networks described in Reid's work, focused on parliamentary reporting in the period from the late 1760s to the late 1780s.

4. Yorke's Paris Alamains: A Case Study in Hardwicke Newsletter Culture

Yorke's 'Paris alainain' was a *nouvelle à la main*: a handwritten newsletter, distributed privately using the postal system, to a limited set of subscribers.³⁶ The context for it was established

³²Reid, 'Reporting by Letter', 239–54.

³³BL, Add. MS 35337: parliamentary journal of the Hon. Philip Yorke, M.P. for Reigate, for the sessions 1743–4 and 1744–5.

³⁴Reid, 'Reporting by Letter', 243.

³⁵E. Langton's first name is not known.

³⁶In this article, I refer to Yorke's newsletter from France, which he conceived in 1749 and received in sporadic series from 1751 to 1755, as his 'alainain' or 'Paris alainain', retaining the spelling he used, so as to distinguish it from wider discussion of the *nouvelle à la main*.

in 1749, when Yorke undertook a visit to Holland and France, his first to the continent. His immediate impetus was the appointment in 1749 of his younger brother, Lieutenant-Colonel Joseph Yorke (1724–92), to the post of ‘secretary of embassy’ to the new British ambassador to Paris, William Anne Keppel, 2nd earl of Albemarle (1702–54). While Yorke was away in Europe, travelling first in Holland, and then via Ghent and Lille to Paris, Birch sent him three Weekly Letters, care of Joseph Yorke at the Hôtel Anspach in Rue Jacob, and received three replies, two from Paris and one on Yorke’s return, sent from Wrest. In addition, Birch maintained the regular flow of the Weekly Letter to Wrest, addressed to Jemima, Lady Grey, so that the Wrest file would be a complete record of the political and literary events in London while Yorke was away. Yorke complimented him on his diligence, noting that ‘My Lady writes me word that you have shewn your regard to the Paper Office at Wrest by continuing the Lines of your *Avisi* through her hands.’³⁷ In order to meet these competing requirements, on two occasions Birch sent one letter to Yorke in Paris, and another to Lady Grey at Wrest for the library file. (The two versions have numerous points of similarity, although they are different).³⁸ On Yorke’s return to London on or before 21 October, he complimented Birch on his faithful weekly newsletter: ‘You have taken care to continue the History of the Times in your Letters to my Wife, she will be as good as her word, & paste them into the bound Collection—’.³⁹ The bound collection of the Weekly Letter was kept in Yorke’s study at Wrest, where it could be consulted not only by Yorke but by other visiting literati.

In Paris, where he was staying in the Rue de Colombiers, Faubourg St Germain, Yorke undertook the kind of activities appropriate to a man curious in natural philosophy and *belles lettres*, supplemented by a busy round of social engagements facilitated by the embassy. He complained to Birch that this left little time for correspondence: ‘Between the hurry of travelling & the dissipated Life one leads here, I have had but little time for keeping up even the most necessary Correspondences’.⁴⁰ In fact, Yorke’s letter writing home to the friends in his coterie adopted a more expansively descriptive style, distinct from the usual mode he adopted in his replies to Birch, in which he made brief observations and responses. Yorke’s travel letters may also have been informed by the style of the *nouvelle à la main* he encountered in Paris in the embassy, with paragraphs addressing politics, natural philosophy, literature and social events (in that order), embedded within the framing structures of gentlemanly sociability and intellectual equality of Enlightenment correspondence. An example of this newsletter mode is found in a letter he wrote to Daniel Wray FRS from Paris dated 1 September (old style) and 12 September (new style) 1749, which is notable for its description of his visits to French scientific and literary institutions.⁴¹ Wray was a member of Yorke’s intellectual coterie, a good friend and a regular guest at Wrest: his blend of

³⁷BL, Add. MS 35397, ff. 206–8: Yorke to Birch, Paris, 29 Aug./9 Sept. 1749.

³⁸Birch wrote three letters to Yorke in Paris in 1749: BL, Add. MS 35397, ff. 211–12: 8 Sept. 1749; ff. 217–18: 21 Sept. 1749; ff. 225–6: 2 Oct. 1749. Birch’s news and commentary contained in the first two of these was replicated in the Weekly Letter sent to Jemima, Marchioness Grey at Wrest: Add. MS 35397, ff. 213–14: 9 Sept. 1749; ff. 219–20: 23 Sept. 1749.

³⁹BL, Add. MS 35397, ff. 233–4: Yorke to Birch, Wrest, 2 Nov. 1749.

⁴⁰BL, Add. MS 35397, ff. 206–8: Yorke to Birch, Paris, 29 Aug./9 Sept. 1749.

⁴¹BL, Add. MS 35401, ff. 117–20: Yorke to Wray, Paris, 1/12 Sept. 1749. The letter is printed in: P.Y. and J.J. Champenois, ‘A Visit to Paris in 1749’, *The Modern Language Review*, ix (1914), 514–16, erroneously referencing a copy at BL, Sloane MS 4325, ff. 10–12.

intellectual curiosity and witty good humour endeared him to both Yorke and Lady Grey. Yorke's letter begins with a section praising Wray's own letters ('choise Closet Pieces') and his intellectual activities ('your Literary Repasts in Kew Lane'), which Wray had humbly disavowed in his own letter.⁴²

In his letter, Yorke describes to Wray his visit to the Abbé Sallier (Claude Sallier, 1685–1761) at the Bibliothèque Royale, an institution which he praises for its noble foundation, the large number of volumes in its collection, and the 'great method' with which most were ordered (all aspects of the library of the British Museum project in which the Hardwicke circle took a leading role in the following decade).⁴³ He also describes a visit to the Collection of Prints in the Hôtel de Nevers in Rue de Richelieu, where again he is most impressed by the large folio catalogue, but was unable to see the Cabinet of Medals, as the 'keeper', Claude Gros de Boze (1680–1753) was 'out of Town'. He visited Réaumur and his collection, although with such a large group that he expresses a wish to visit again alone 'en philosophe'. And he visits Fontenelle and the Académie Royale, presenting him with a letter of introduction from Martin Folkes, president of the Royal Society in London. Although Fontenelle is gracious and welcoming, speaking to him with 'great Politeness' and 'very Honourably of the English & their productions', Yorke is also mortified to hear that Folkes has failed to reply to one of Fontenelle's letters: in doing so, he has broken the gentlemanly gift exchange code of correspondence. Yorke after this reports on a meeting of the Academy of Belles Lettres, where he heard two papers, neither of which he thought merited publication.

In Paris, Yorke was also acquiring materials and curiosities for his own collections: 'I am picking up Books, Prints, & maps as well as I can, I wish you would enquire about the best way of sending them over'.⁴⁴ He sent Birch requests for copies of recent Birch publications to make use of in gift exchanges with French philosophes. He reported encountering what he called a 'Cologne Alamain', which contained diverse information, including news of a rebellion in the Dutch East Indies colony of Java, which had been suppressed by Baron Gustaaf Willem van Imhoff, governor of Batavia.⁴⁵ Yorke describes to Wray some recent literary publications, albeit noting that as he is visiting in the 'dead season' of summer, there are not many publications — 'even Novels and Plays' are kept back until 'the Town is fuller'.⁴⁶ The letter ends with a rather racy anecdote about Lord Londonderry, seen leaving the opera with three women in his chaise, evidently courtesans of the demi-monde — an anecdote that he is unlikely to have included in a letter to the Reverend Birch.⁴⁷ Yorke's Paris newsletter is a very good example of a *nouvelle à la main*, mixing gossip and ironised gentlemanly politeness with notices of intellectual endeavour, and literary production and critical remarks. In relation to scientific endeavours, Yorke is, as ever, light on detail

⁴²Wray's house, Mount Ararat Lodge, was in Kew Lane, Richmond.

⁴³Yorke asked Birch to send Sallier 'in sheets the 10th Volume of ye General Dictionary; I will be responsible for the money' (BL, Add. MS 35397, f. 207v: Yorke to Birch, Paris, 29 Aug./9 Sept. 1749).

⁴⁴BL, Add. MS 35397, ff. 223–4: Yorke to Birch, Paris, 19/30 Sept. 1749.

⁴⁵BL, Add. MS 35397, ff. 211–12: Birch to Yorke, London, 8 Sept. 1749.

⁴⁶Yorke describes a work in preparation by Voltaire (*Catiline*, published later in 1749), and notes that Voltaire's *Nannine* (1749), though based on Richardson's *Pamela* (1742), has not met with the same success. He further assesses the performance of comedies by Dumenil and Gaussin, finding them inferior to Garrick.

⁴⁷Champenois, 'Visit to Paris in 1749', 514–16. Lord Londonderry was the Irish peer, Ridgeway Pitt, 3rd earl of Londonderry (1722–1765), member for Camelford in Cornwall (1747–54).

of the actual natural philosophy, and more interested in administrative method, especially catalogues.

After his return to England in 1749, Yorke retained his curiosity about news from Paris, as is shown in the Weekly Letter correspondence. In May 1750, having read in the London press of strange ‘Tumults and commotions’ in Paris, Yorke pressed Birch for any news he could obtain about these events.⁴⁸ Birch replied with a juicy detail not contained in the newspaper reports, gleaned, he said, from a personal letter from an unnamed old friend who was resident there: the tumults had been occasioned by a ‘popular Notion, that certain children had been seiz’d, in order to the making of a Bath with their Blood for the Cure *d’un Prince Cadre*’.⁴⁹ Yorke requested a copy of the letter in his next reply.⁵⁰ Birch returned to the spectacle of popular unrest in Paris in November 1750, the source for which he ascribes to ‘A Letter from Paris’, without specifying further the correspondent.⁵¹

It is in this period that Yorke conceived of the idea of commissioning or subscribing to a regular newsletter, a *nouvelle à la main*, from Paris. The occasion to do this occurred in September 1751, when his brother Joseph was promoted to the post of minister-plenipotentiary at The Hague, a post which he held until 1780. Although this promotion meant that the supply of Paris news from his brother would end, nonetheless, Yorke saw an opportunity in the change of personnel in Paris. As a consequence of Joseph’s move, Yorke announced to Birch that Mr Shalkin was to be ‘succeeded by the Abbé Jeffreys as his library Chargé’, noting that ‘I am very clear that I shall be no loser by the exchange’.⁵² Birch may have been acquainted already with Rev. John Jeffreys (1718–98), who had been appointed rector of a City church, St Nicholas, Cole Abbey, London in 1746, and moved in some of the same circles. Jeffreys had been educated at Westminster and Christ Church, Oxford, graduating MA in 1746. He was appointed chaplain to Lord Albemarle’s embassy, and resided in Paris from 1752 to 1755, until the time at which the embassy was withdrawn. Yorke’s term ‘library Chargé’ is typically ambiguous and allusive, but suggests that Shalkin had been asked to perform various bibliographic tasks for Yorke, such as buying and transmitting French books for Yorke’s library. Shalkin (perhaps under Joseph Yorke’s direction) had supplied Yorke with a Paris *alamain*, in a run of 34 letters dated from 15 December 1750 (NS) to 25 May 1751 (NS), in French, now in the Hardwicke Papers in the British Library (Additional Manuscript 35445). It contained political information and ‘news’ collected from correspondents in a wide range of European states, some of which may have been gleaned from newsletters or printed newsheets received by the embassy.⁵³

⁴⁸BL, Add. MS 35397, ff. 243–4: Yorke to Birch, Wrest, 31 May 1750. ‘Tumults and commotions’ in Paris were reported in the *General Advertiser*, 23 May 1750. In 1752, Yorke reported that ‘M. Gragny’s account of the Tumults at Paris in 1750 is the best I had seen of them, & is writ with spirit, I have ventured to copy what relates to that affair, & have enclosed the original.’ (Add. MS 35397, ff. 100–101: Yorke to Birch, Wimpole, 4 Oct. 1752, the quotation at f. 100.) The enclosure has not been located.

⁴⁹BL, Add. MS 35397, ff. 245–6: Birch to Yorke, London, 2 June 1750.

⁵⁰BL, Add. MS 35397, ff. 247–8: Yorke to Birch, Wrest, 17 June 1750. The letter in question is not included in the Weekly Letter volume.

⁵¹BL, Add. MS 35397, ff. 320–1: Birch to Yorke, London, 17 Nov. 1750.

⁵²BL, Add. 35398, ff. 28–30: Yorke to Birch, Wimpole, 20 Sept. 1751. The identity of ‘Mr Shalkin’ and his place in the embassy remain unknown, although the context here suggests he was a clerk of some kind.

⁵³BL, Add. MS 35445, ff. 1–66: 15 Dec. 1750 (NS) – 25 May 1751 (NS).

While Yorke was frustrated by Shalkin, he held Jeffreys in higher esteem. Jeffreys was the key to the supply of Yorke's Paris almain over the next three years. This amounted to 213 newsletters, sent from 30 May 1751 (NS) to 8 April 1754 (NS), with a significant interruption from 9 November 1752 (NS) to 22 June 1753 (NS). The almain was sent twice a week, following an irregular pattern (there are eight or nine in most months, and fewer in some, although some almain may be missing from Add. MS 35445). Two postscript notes added by Jeffreys give evidence that the almain was sent to him at the embassy and redirected from there to Yorke in London, perhaps by the diplomatic post.⁵⁴ The Paris almain contained anecdotes and gossip in French about the French court and Parisian society, mixed with information about the literary and artistic world in Paris, such as notices of new books, anecdotes about writers and their compositions, and transcriptions of verses, songs and epigrams by French poets.

Yorke's *nouvelle à la main* from Paris was an orthodox example of the product: a bifolium manuscript letter, covering news and gossip not otherwise recorded in the published press, copied in significant numbers and sent by post to a range of subscribers. As Yorke was aware, the information environment for news in France was very different from that in Britain. In France the state authorised a small number of print newspapers, which by and large filtered out domestic news that was not authorised. The demand for additional domestic political information was catered for by private *nouvelles à la main*.⁵⁵ As their distribution was not authorised, *nouvellistes* could be prosecuted, and their *nouvelles à la main* suppressed, at any time. While at some periods in the 18th century they were tolerated, at others they were more rigorously suppressed: in 1745, for example the parlement de Paris determined to suppress them altogether.⁵⁶ They had a reputation for gossip and rumour, reflecting their status outside authorised information, and their writers were considered as scandal mongers and hacks.

Yorke seems to have set considerable value on his Paris almain, but at the same time, was frustrated by its frequent interruptions and its vapid contents. This is not necessarily a contradiction, as the conditions of production for a *nouvelle à la main* were trying. The long interruption in service between December 1752 and July 1753, noted above, was explained by Jeffreys on 14 November 1752, that the *nouvelliste* had been arrested. Jeffreys explained:

I am sorry to tell you they will probably be the last you will receive, at least from the same Author: the poor fellow was last week sent to the Bastille [sic] and all his papers seized. He has lately made too free with certain persons about the Court, and not a fortnight ago I advised him to be more prudent or he would certainly meet with his present fate.⁵⁷

⁵⁴BL, Add. MS 35445, ff. 68–527: 30 May, 1751–8 Apr. 1754. Jeffreys's brief postscripts are appended to f. 256v and 296v.

⁵⁵François Moureau, 'Les nouvelles à la main dans le système d'information de l'Ancien Régime', in *De Bonne Main*, ed. Moreau, 117–34.

⁵⁶Christopher Todd, *Political Bias, Censorship, and the Dissolution of the 'Official' Press in Eighteenth-century France* (Lewiston, NY, 1991), 158–61. See also Gilles Feyel, *L'Annonce et la Nouvelle: La presse d'information en France sous l'Ancien Régime (1630–1788)* (Oxford, 2000).

⁵⁷Jeffreys to Yorke, Paris, 14 Nov. 1752, quoted L.L. Bongie, 'Les nouvelles à la main: la perspective du client', in *De Bonne Main*, ed. Moureau, 138. Jeffreys's letters to Yorke are BL, Add. MS 35630.

After this interruption, Yorke pressed Jeffreys to secure another writer. In December, Jeffreys wrote that he too hoped 'to be able to get you another *à la main* soon, for since the suppression of the last I am ignorant of the common occurrences of Paris'.⁵⁸ In July 1753, Yorke reported to Birch that:

The Abbé Jefferys [sic] has at last procured me an Alamain, & I judge from the hand, the style, & the matter that it comes from my Bastile Friend, who if he cannot get bread by his pen, might as well dine upon the King's Allowance in the Bastile.⁵⁹

Yorke's response to his *nouvelliste's* incarceration is rather insouciant, indicating that to his mind, the world of the Paris *nouvellistes* was closer to that of the Grub Street hacks that Birch and Yorke studiously avoided in London, with their penchant for rumour, gossip and scandal.⁶⁰ By August 1753, Yorke had reconsidered, and had decided that his new *nouvelliste* was in fact a different correspondent.

My A la mains come regularly, I think the Writer of them is more prudent with regard to Perfidy than the last, & gives much the same Account of Parliamentary matters.⁶¹

Yorke had recognised by this time that his *nouvelliste* had changed, and was less prepared to record scandal, or was perhaps just more prudent with regard to persecution by the police. Eventually this reluctance to write about the more contentious news cost the *nouvelliste* his employment. The final alamain in Yorke's collection is dated 8 April 1754. In May 1754, Jeffreys assured Yorke that he had 'frequently told my mind very freely to the Author and my utmost endeavours have not been wanting to procure you another'.⁶² In October 1754, Yorke recorded that Jeffreys has ended the contract with the alamain writer: 'I have not heard from Jeffreys these 3 weeks, He has dismissed the A la Main writer, whom he thought not worthy of the hire'.⁶³ To some extent Yorke's response inscribes the *nouvelliste's* double bind of gossip and scandal, the inclusion of which was commercially valuable, but also legally risky and morally demeaning.

Although the writer of Yorke's Paris alamain remains unknown, Laurence Bongie has argued that it was François Jérôme Bosquet (or Bousquet) de Colomiers, a former lawyer and *subdélégué* at the Parlement de Toulouse. Bosquet had left his wife and family in Toulouse in the 1730s for the urban excitements of Paris, where he became a *nouvelliste*. Bosquet's *nouvelle à la main* was a well-known information product, whose subscribers included prominent members of Toulouse society, including the presidente Riquet and the archbishop of Narbonne, and also the ambassadors of Britain and Holland. But life as a *nouvelliste* was risky, and in late 1752, Bosquet was imprisoned in the Bastille. The Paris police were aware of Bosquet's activities as a *nouvelliste*, and had tolerated his *à la main* as long as it remained at the level of social and literary gossip. Bosquet's clients, however, valued his coverage of

⁵⁸Jeffreys to Yorke, Paris, 5 Dec. 1752, quoted in Bongie, 'Les nouvelles', 139.

⁵⁹BL, Add. MS 35398, ff. 130–1: Yorke to Birch, Wrest, 12 July 1753.

⁶⁰L.L. Bongie, *From Rogue to Everyman: A Foundling's Journey to the Bastille* (Montreal, 2004), 155.

⁶¹BL, Add. MS 35398, ff. 149–50: Yorke to Birch, Wrest, 23 Aug. 1753.

⁶²Jeffreys to Yorke, Paris, 29 May 1754, quoted in Bongie, 'Les nouvelles', 140.

⁶³BL, Add. MS 35398, ff. 240–1, 241v: Yorke to Birch, Wrest, 30 Oct. 1754.

'les affaires du temps', which is to say political controversies and scandals.⁶⁴ On 9 December 1752, Bosquet, despite being warned by a collaborator in the police, was arrested as a *nouvelliste*, and incarcerated in the Bastille. After his release, Bosquet was exiled to Toulouse, where his life as a *nouvelliste* was over. It is Bosquet's arrest that ties his story to Yorke. Bongie's attribution rests on the near coincidence of Bosquet's arrest as a *nouvelliste*, and the subsequent period of interruption to the *alamain*.⁶⁵ But although Jeffreys confirmed to Yorke in November that his *nouvelliste* had been 'sent to the Bastile', Yorke himself believed for some time that his *alamain* was written by the same hand, before and after the interruption caused by Bosquet's arrest.⁶⁶ So although the attribution remains conjectural, Bongie's account of Bosquet's career as a *nouvelliste* sheds relevant light on Yorke's commercial newsletter correspondent.

Yorke's consumption of his Paris *alamain* was enthusiastic, but undertaken with a kind of weary irony about its limitations. He took note of, and followed closely, some of the political information it contained. Among 'les affaires du temps' covered was an account of the struggle between the French King Louis XV and the parlement de Rouen over the imposition of an income tax to the clergy. The *alamain* gave reports of speeches to the parlement, and the various proceedings, remonstrances and registers, of this controversy in 1752–4, including several transcribed in extended enclosures.⁶⁷ Yorke's response to this news is explored in detail below. It also included gossipy anecdotes about the court of the Young Pretender, Charles Edward Stuart, then at Paris. One such was the story of the marriage of the 'Princesse Radzivil' to 'Prince Edward' — a story that rehearsed a rumour first heard in 1749, that Charles Edward Stuart had married his cousin, the Princess Teofila Konstancia (1738–80), daughter of Michal Kazimierz Radziwill, prince of Lithuania, and they had borne a son.⁶⁸ Another was the report of the death aged 80 years in Paris in November 1753 of Charlotte O'Brien, widow of Charles, self-styled Viscount Clare, an Irish officer in the service of the French army.⁶⁹ At the end of the same year, on 31 December 1753 (NS), the *alamain* noted the death of Voltaire, to which Jeffreys added a postscript on first page: 'The Report of Voltaire's death is contradicted'.⁷⁰

Light and occasional verses by court poets and satirists also filled Yorke's Paris *alamains*. The *nouvelliste* transcribed verses by and about Pierre–Charles Roy (1683–1764) and Michel de Bonneval (*d.*1766), best known as librettists for the spectacular French operas of the period. As a courtier in charge of masquerades and other large scale public entertainments at

⁶⁴Bongie, 'Les nouvelles', 135–42; Bongie, *From Rogue to Everyman*, 188–9.

⁶⁵Bongie, 'Les nouvelles', 137–40.

⁶⁶Furthermore, Robert Dawson reports that the copies of Bosquet's *à la main* in the Arsenal Library bear a stamped heading 'Le courrier de Paris', whereas Yorke's copies do not (Paris, Arsenal Library MS 7082, f. 33), quoted in Robert Dawson, 'The *Mélange De Poésies Diverses* (1781) and the Diffusion of Manuscript Pornography in Eighteenth-Century France', in *'Tis Nature's Fault: Unauthorized Sexuality during the Enlightenment*, ed. Robert Maccubbin (Cambridge, 1988), 229–43, at 240n. John Register also cast some doubt on Bongie's attribution to Bosquet, in *Louis XV and the Parlement of Paris, 1737–1755* (Cambridge, 1995), 267.

⁶⁷BL, Add. MS 35445, ff. 220, 237, 345–61.

⁶⁸BL, Add. MS 35445, f. 98. The rumour had been reported, for example, in a letter from Sir Horace Mann to Horace Walpole, Florence, 21 Mar. 1749 NS: *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W.S. Lewis (48 vols, New Haven, CT, 1937–83), xx, 35.

⁶⁹BL, Add. MS 35445, f. 453b.

⁷⁰BL: Add MS 35445, f. 481.

Versailles, Bonneval had access to the gossip of the French court.⁷¹ The *nouvelliste* transcribed a verse satire on the *Encyclopédie* entitled ‘Dialogue entre M. Diderot, un Libraire, et un Colporteur’.⁷² Verses, satires, songs and epigrams by a range of minor poets were transcribed: Pedro Clemente de Arostegui, bishop of Osma in Spain (1692–1760),⁷³ Charles Marie de La Condamine (1701–74),⁷⁴ Abbé François Joachim de Pierre de Bernis (1715–94).⁷⁵ These writers include some figures already known to Yorke and Birch, as in the case of the traveller and natural philosopher La Condamine, who had been elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in December 1748. There is however little evidence that Yorke found these literary offerings interesting, as he never commented on them to Birch. It was as if he considered them little more than filler in the space of the almain.

It is in this way difficult to measure how useful or entertaining Yorke found the Paris almain. His commentary on it in his letters to Birch in the period suggests that although he received it regularly, it only occasionally intruded into his reflections. One recurring topic that he found relevant was evidence of domestic unrest, political dissension or internal fiscal deficiency in the French state — all elements that played into the ‘Great Power’ rivalry of the early 1750s. Yorke’s curiosity was piqued sufficiently by the *vingtième* crisis in the period 1750–5 to mention it to Birch repeatedly. As Yorke said in October 1752,

My Paris almain has not of late contained any material Advices, the Parliament’s being adjourned puts a stop to the Church Controversy, the Court seems to have now declared in favor of the Clergy, & it is supposed that the Controller intends to squeeze a large free Gift from them, as an Equivalent for this step.⁷⁶

The *vingtième* was a form of income tax, levied at the rate of five per cent of income (or one twentieth, a *vingtième*), proposed by the minister of finance, Jean-Baptiste de Machault, comte d’Arnouville, in 1749, in order to repay the national debt incurred by the War of the Austrian Succession. The crisis was of interest to Yorke because it arguably gave some evidence of fiscal weakness in the French state. But he may also have enjoyed the spectacle, in this letter to Birch, of the role of the clergy in resisting the tax.⁷⁷

Throughout the summer in 1753, Yorke continued to make reference to the information in the almain on these domestic troubles in France. In July 1753, he reported to Birch:

The King lately sent the Declaration to the Grand Chamber at the Pontoise, & it passed by a majority of 24 voices against 18, that they would not deliberate upon it, without & the sense of their exiled Brethren, the *Enquete & Requete*.⁷⁸ It is thought this will greatly

⁷¹BL, Add. MS 35445, ff. 119b, 141, 163; Pierre Charles Roy; ff. 111, 141, 144, 145, 179b, 185, 189b, 214, 287, 309, 321, 323; Michel de Bonneval.

⁷²BL, Add MS 35445, ff. 121–2.

⁷³BL, Add. MS 35445, ff. 193, 202, 269, 277, 293, 301, 303, 307, 317.

⁷⁴BL, Add. MS 35445, f. 303.

⁷⁵BL, Add. MS 35445, f. 333.

⁷⁶BL, Add. MS 35398, ff. 100–1; Yorke to Birch, Wimpole, 4 Oct. 1752.

⁷⁷See Julian Swann, *Politics and the Parlement of Paris under Louis XV, 1754–1774* (Cambridge, 1995).

⁷⁸The Chambre des Enquêtes (‘inquiries’) and the Chambre des Requetes (‘petitions’) were courts of the parlement of Paris in the 1750s, subservient to the Grand Chamber. See Swann, *Politics*, 5–7. The Arrêts were the final decisions of these or other courts.

incense the Court. The Parliament of Rouen have so far given way to the Kings Order, that they have by 47 Voices agst 22 suspended all Proceedings agst the Comte & Vicars of Verneuil, but at the same time, they appointed a Committee to frame Remonstrances to the King agst the Tone of the Arrets of Council which he had just sent them, annulling their Decrees, upon the Complaint of some of the Parliament of Verneuil.⁷⁹

But although Yorke's observations on the alamaïn in his reply to Birch's Weekly Letter indicates he found the question of French state finances relevant, it hardly suggests that he had a firm grip of the problem. He concluded 'You may judge from these Particulars, how well funded the Nation is, wch is got into our News-Papers, that the Court & the Parliament are very near an Accommodation'.⁸⁰ In August 1753, when Yorke also received from Jeffreys a copy of a recent letter from Voltaire detailing his fall from grace at the Prussian court, his report on the alamaïn to Birch remained focused on the contentions between king and the Parlement de Rouen.⁸¹

The Disputes between the King & the Parliament of Rouen run high, & it is thought will come to Extremities. Their Registry have been cancelled by Order of the Court, under the eyes of a Lieutenant General, & their Remonstrances wch are very strong, verge on the point of being presented. There seems no Probability of an Accommodation between the K. & the Parliament of Paris. They are determined not to take any steps for that purpose without the Return of their exiled Brethren of the other Chamber, & have rejected every Article of the Agreement proposed by the Pr. of Conti. One was that they shd register a Declaration of the King's concerning the Schism; & 2d, that they should resume their ordinary Functions; 3d, that they should depute to the King for the recalling of their exiled Brethren; & 4th that they shd register only provisionally the Declaration above mentioned.⁸²

In September, having complained to Birch about the lack of news in London, Yorke reflected further on French domestic politics mentioned in the alamaïn:

The Deputies at the Parliament of Rouen were sent back with a pretty smart answer to the Remonstrances & Court being apprehensive that they wd not register it, has prorogued their meetings till they become more tractable. The Deputys were expressly forbid to take Pontoise in their Way.⁸³

Yorke added further, in a postscript addendum to the opening page of his letter: 'Not having the Alamaïn by me, I mistook the purpose of Mr Fouger's Orders, wch were not to suffer the Parlmt to adjourn till they had registered the King's Answer etc.' He also noted that 'My alamaïn tells me that Mr Boze is dead, who is a great loss to the Fr. Academy of

⁷⁹BL, Add. MS 35398, ff. 130–1: Yorke to Birch, Wrest, 12 July 1753.

⁸⁰BL, Add. MS 35398, ff. 130–1: Yorke to Birch, Wrest, 12 July 1753.

⁸¹Voltaire, *Babouc; or, the World as it Goes. By Monsieur de Voltaire. To which are Added, Letters Concerning His Disgrace at the Prussian Court: With His Letter to His Niece on that Occasion. Also, The Force of Friendship, or, Innocence Distress'd. A Novel* (1754).

⁸²BL, Add. MS 35398, ff. 149–50: Yorke to Birch, Wrest, 23 Aug. 1753.

⁸³BL, Add. MS 35398, ff. 161–2: Yorke to Birch, Wimpole, 20 Sept. 1753.

Belles Lettres'.⁸⁴ De Boze, of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-lettres, was one of the philosophes he had visited in Paris in 1749. By October 1753, Yorke reported the *vingtième* crisis was still not resolved.

The A la Main informs me that the King's letters Patents have been registered at the Chatelet in a pretty extraordinary manner, viz – in the presence of a Deputation from the new Chamber of Vacations, attended by a Detachment of Archers wth their Muskets shouldered. I suppose after this step, the Chatelet will look upon its self no longer in a situation of acting.⁸⁵

As his summary to Birch suggests, Yorke maintained a kind of tactical interest in French domestic politics. He summarised for Birch a complicated dispute, whose relevance to British interests he had trouble determining, beyond his desire for evidence of French military and fiscal fragility.

In 1754, the French king's continuing dispute with the clergy was joined in the almain by a more ominous story recording the French view of a series of minor disputes and conflicts between French and British forces in India, the Caribbean and North America. Yorke wrote to Birch:

I had lately a letter from Mr Jeffreys, wch brings but little News. Moderate Men (He says) wish some peaceable End may be put to our E & W Indian Disputes, but of that there seems no Possibility at present. I do not find, that these Church Disputes in France make so much noise as they did, but till the Parliament resumes its sittings after the Vacation, we shall not be able to form any Judgment about it. The Fr. King's Answer to the Clergy when they attended him with some Remonstrances agst his Edict was sharper than usual.⁸⁶

Yorke's observations in his letters to Birch, about the French news in the almain in 1754 show that they gave him some insight into the worsening relations between France and Britain in the period. 'The French are eternally giving us fresh Provocations in all parts of the World'.⁸⁷ These conflicts were focused on colonial rivalries unresolved by the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle (1748) that had brought an end to the War of Austrian Succession. These tensions were particularly acute in North America, where British forces clashed with French militia and First Nation warriors in the disputed Ohio Country. General Edward Braddock's attempt to seize the French position at Fort Duquesne (now Pittsburgh) in the summer of 1755 ended with a disastrous defeat at the Battle of the Monongahela on 9 July 1755.⁸⁸ But while Yorke's private almain touch on these international affairs, they failed to give him any unique insight into the coming global conflict, the war now known as the Seven Years War (1756–63), of which these disputes were the immediate precursor. In July 1755, in a sign of the increasing tension between Britain and France, Jeffreys and

⁸⁴BL, Add. MS 35398, ff. 161–2: Yorke to Birch, Wimpole, 20 Sept. 1753.

⁸⁵BL, Add. MS 35398, ff. 174–5: Yorke to Birch, Wrest, 18 Oct. 1753.

⁸⁶BL, Add. MS 35398, ff. 226–7: Yorke to Birch, Wrest, 15 Oct. 1754.

⁸⁷BL, Add. MS 35398, ff. 161–2: Yorke to Birch, Wimpole, 20 Sept. 1753.

⁸⁸T.C. Pease, *Anglo-French Boundary Disputes in the West, 1749–1763* (Springfield, IL, 1936), xx–lxi.

the embassy returned to London. The ambassador (Albemarle), had died suddenly on 22 December 1754, and the embassy was left in the hands of Ruvigny Du Cosné, who was appointed chargé, and recalled on 22 July 1755. The embassy's final months were consumed by the negotiations caused by the disaster of the Braddock expedition. Yorke reported that though he was 'impatient for the Events of such Great Transactions as are now depending' he 'valued the quiet days we have enjoyed since the last Peace'.⁸⁹

Yorke was also concerned about continued flow of French news after Jeffreys was recalled. When Jeffreys dismissed the *nouvelliste* in 1754, news from Paris became much less regular. Birch included a report from Du Cosné of his treatment in Paris before his recall in the Weekly Letter of 9 August 1755.⁹⁰ Yorke asked Birch to contact Jeffreys to ensure at least continued access to copies of *Le Mercure de France*, the long-running and authorised printed record of literary events in Paris.

I desire my Compliments to Abbé Jeffreys, & wish you wd ask him if I can still have the Mercurus sent over, if that is not practicable, our friend Sir Daniel will be deprived of his favourite Lecture.⁹¹

However, even this proved impossible, especially after the opening of hostilities between France and Britain in 1756, initiated by the French descent on Fort St Philip in Minorca in April 1756.⁹² But by then the Paris almain was long finished. It seems somehow appropriate that Yorke chose this moment to repurpose the term almain, using it in 1755 to refer to Birch's Weekly Letter: at the beginning of the season, he commented that 'My chief Intent in writing to you now is to desire you would begin your usual *A La Mains* forthwith, for I am almost famish'd for want of Intelligence'.⁹³

5. Conclusion

Yorke's experiment with the Paris almain was inspired by the pleasure he derived from Birch's Weekly Letter, his own newsletter writing experiments and his historical interests in scribal news. As he perhaps discovered on his visit to Paris in 1749, Birch's account of the literary and political news of London was a distinctly superior entity to the scandalous information product of the *nouvelliste à la main*. Nonetheless, the idea of a foreign correspondence, undertaken in private, with access to secret knowledge, appealed to his sense of himself as a significant actor in British politics, even though this appears overestimated.

⁸⁹BL, Add. MS 35398, ff. 276–8, 277v: Yorke to Birch, Taymouth, 20 Aug. 1755.

⁹⁰BL, Add. MS 35398, ff. 271–2: Birch to Yorke, London, 9 Aug. 1755.

⁹¹BL, Add. MS 35398, ff. 276–8, 277v: Yorke to Birch, Taymouth, 20 Aug. 1755. 'Sir Daniel' is perhaps an ironic reference to Wray, who was not a baronet.

⁹²Birch's accounts in the Weekly Letter in 1755 of the rivalry between British and French over their colonial possessions in North America were not based on the Paris almain, but rather, British news outlets. In June 1755, for example, Birch noted that he had read an 'article' in the 'Book at Lloyd's Coffee House', that contained conflicting information about an encounter between the French and British fleet, under Admiral Boscawen, off the coast of Newfoundland, which, in Birch's description, 'heightens the Impatience of our Curiosity of knowing more'. (BL, Add. MS 35398, ff. 246–9: Birch to Yorke, London 21 June 1755.) See also Alan Houston, 'Benjamin Franklin and the "Wagon Affair" of 1755', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser, lxvi (2009), 235–86.

⁹³BL, Add. MS 35398, ff. 256–7: Yorke to Birch, Berwick, 15 July 1755.

The information Yorke gathered from the Paris *alamain* was curious enough to mention to Birch in his letters, but never seems to have had more significant influence on Yorke or his wider circles. Although Yorke may have been piqued to know that the *alamain* was private, secret and illegal in France, the information it contained was not espionage. Yorke did not gain any unique or valuable insight from the Paris *alamain* into French politics, such as might have been useful in the run up to the most significant war with France for decades, the Seven Years War. Instead of intelligence, the Paris *alamain* delivered its paragraphs of literary and intellectual gossip, its transcripts of occasional verses and minor satires, and a modicum of social scandal — a mode as typical of a Paris *nouveliste* as it was atypical of Birch.