PHILIP HENSHER

The Missing Ink

The Lost Art of Handwriting
(and Why it Still Matters)

MACMILLAN

1 ~ *Witness*

'No, I didn't learn handwriting. Well, in every lesson, with the letters, I suppose. Not handwriting as such. I'm seventy – I don't know how old I am. I can't remember. It's legible, my handwriting. Which is more than you can say for your father. It's not got a lot of style to it, my handwriting. It's most important that people can read your handwriting.

'My eldest sister is left-handed, so it always looks awkward, watching her write. I can't remember what my younger sister's handwriting was like. It's thirty years since she died. My father's writing was illegible. No form to the letters. My mother's was upright and round, a little bit like mine, I expect.

'I worked in an office in Wolverhampton, working in stock control, and you depended on people being able to read your handwriting, because they were sending orders out, so it was me who kept the records. Nothing was done on computers then. There were little coloured stickers – red meant re-order, and green, we've got plenty. I had a very nice boss in stock control. They couldn't have children, and they adopted a little girl, and I used to go and babysit for them, often.'

Interviewer: 'You'd have been what, seventeen?'

'Oh, I don't know – why does he want me to – it was the

year of the Suez crisis, when I learnt to drive. Because when the Suez crisis was on, you were allowed to drive without people sitting with you. And so if you got in a mess, you had to get yourself out of it. I remember my father standing at the window, watching me back out of the drive, and I drove straight into the stone gateposts. Bang.'

[Laughs.]

M.H., retired librarian, 75

2 ~ *Introduction*

About six months ago, I realized that I had no idea what the handwriting of a good friend of mine looked like. I had known him for over a decade, but somehow we had never communicated using handwritten notes. He had left messages for me, e-mailed me, sent text messages galore. But I don't think I had ever had a letter from him written by hand, a postcard from his holidays, a reminder of something pushed through my letterbox. I had no idea whether his handwriting was bold or crabbed, sloping or upright, italic or rounded, elegant or slapdash.

The odd thing is this. It had never struck me as strange before, and there was no particular reason why it had suddenly come to mind. We could have gone on like this forever, hardly noticing that we had no need of handwriting any more.

This book has been written at a moment when, it seems, handwriting is about to vanish from our lives altogether. Is anything going to be lost apart from the habit of writing with pen on paper? Will some part of our humanity, as we have always understood it, disappear as well? To answer these questions, I've gone back to look at some aspects of writing with a pen on paper. I'm going to talk about the pioneers who interested themselves in teaching handwriting,

and in particular styles: in the nineteenth century, the Americans Platt Rogers Spencer and A. N. Palmer, with their corporate copperplate, and the English inventor of efficient 'civil service' hand, Vere Foster. There are the revivers of the elegant italic style in the twentieth century, and the great proponent of child-centred art and writing, Marion Richardson, who transformed the study of handwriting in the 1930s. This book also talks about what handwriting has meant to us. And I'm going to talk about the sometimes-eccentric conclusions about personality, illness, psychosis and even suitability for employment which students of the pseudo-science of graphology have tried to draw from a close study of handwriting. We'll hear about writing implements, including both the nineteenth-century fountain pen, and that wonderful thing, the Bic Cristal ballpoint, and some varieties of ink. I wanted to convey a sense of how much handwriting can mean to any of us, and from time to time I set up a tape recorder in front of friends and family and asked them to talk about handwriting. Sometimes it gave a surprising insight into an individual life. And actually, writing this book has given me a surprising insight into my own life. I felt, after writing it, that some of my personal values had been clarified.

The book had better be written while it still makes some sense. At some point in recent years, handwriting has stopped being a necessary and inevitable intermediary between people – something by which individuals communicate with each other, putting a little bit of their personality into the form of their message as they press the ink-bearing point onto the paper. It has started to become an option, and often an unattractive, elaborate one. Before

handwriting goes altogether, we might look at what it has meant to us, and what we have put into it.

For each of us, the act of putting marks on paper with ink goes back as far as we can probably remember. At some point, somebody comes along and tells us that if you make a rounded shape and then join it to a straight vertical line, that means the letter 'a', just like the ones you see in the book. (But the ones in the book have a little umbrella over the top, don't they? Never mind that, for the moment: this is how we make them for ourselves.) If you make a different rounded shape, in the opposite direction, and a taller vertical line, then that means the letter 'b'. Do you see? And then a rounded shape, in the same direction as the first letter, but not joined to anything – that makes a c. And off you go.

Actually, I don't think I have any memory of this initial introduction to the art of writing letters on paper with a pen. It was just there, hovering before the limits of conscious memory, like the day on which the letters in the book swam out of incoherence and into sensible words. That day must have existed, and must have been momentous. I just don't remember it, and as far as I can tell from my memory, I've always been able to read and to write. When, as an adult, I went to Japan or to an Arabic-speaking country, and found myself functionally illiterate in the face of signs, it woke no deep memory in me of earliest childhood. It was just extremely strange.

But if I don't have any memory of that first instruction in writing, I have a clear memory of what followed: instructions in refinements, suggestions of how to purify the forms of your handwriting. There was the element of aspiration,

too. You longed to do 'joined-up writing', as we used to call the cursive hand when we were young. Instructed in print letters, I looked forward to the ability to join one letter to another as a mark of huge sophistication. Adult handwriting was unreadable, true, but perhaps that was its point. I saw the loops and impatient dashes of the adult hand as a secret and untrustworthy way of communicating that one day I would master. Unable to bear it any longer, I took a pen and covered a whole page of my school exercise book with grown-up writing, joined-up writing. There were no letters there to be read, still less words; just diagonal strokes linked each to the next in a bold series of gestures. That, I thought, was grown-up writing, if only it could be made to mean something, too.

There was, also, wanting to make your handwriting more like other people's. Often, this started with a single letter or figure. In the second year at school, our form teacher had a way of writing a 7 in the European way, with a cross-bar. A world of glamour and sophistication hung on that cross-bar; it might as well have had a beret on, be smoking Gitanes in the maths cupboard.* Later, there was rather a dubious fellow with queasy 'favourites' in the class: his face would shine as he drawled out the name of the class tart. He must have been removed from the teaching profession by the forces of law and order sometime in the 1980s; still, the uncial E's which have a knack of creep-

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* Alternatively, he might have been a foreign spy. In the Alberto Cavalcanti film *Went The Day Well?*, the innocent English villagers first suspect that the platoon foisted on them may actually be German Nazis when they notice that their notes on a poker game cross the 7's.

ing in and out of my adult handwriting were spurred by what then seemed supreme elegance.*

Your hand is formed by aspiration to others – by the beautiful strokes of an italic hand of a friend which seems altogether wasted on a mere postcard, or a note on your door reading 'Dropped by – will come back later'. It's formed, too, by anti-aspiration, the desire not to be like fat Denise in the desk behind who reads with her mouth open and whose similarly obese writing, all bulging m's and looping p's, contains the atrocity of a little circle on top of every i. Or still more horrible, on occasion, (usually when she signs her name) a heart.†

These are the things we remember: the attempts to modify ourselves through our handwriting, and not what came first. Our handwriting, like ourselves, seems always to have been there.

The rituals and pleasurable pieces of small behaviour attached to writing with a pen are the next thing we remember. On a finger of my right hand, just on the joint, there is a callus which has been there for forty years, where my pen rests. For some reason, I used to call it 'my carbuncle' when I thought of it – I discovered that a carbuncle is something different and more unpleasant, and I don't know who

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* Often these are termed 'Greek E's' – the ones with a crescent-shaped back – but uncial is a more accurate source. Uncial is the term for the rounded calligraphy characteristic of early mediaeval monasteries (see Chapter 7).

† There may be men in the world with a heart-shaped jot, as the dot over the i is called, but I have yet to meet one, or run a mile from them, rather.

taught me the lovely, but incorrect word. It has been there so long that I had it before I knew the difference between right and left, and used it to remind myself. 'Turn right' someone would say, and I would feel the hard little lump, like a leather pad, ink-stained, which showed what side that was on. And between words or sentences, to encourage thought, I might give it a small, comforting rub with my thumb.

In the same way, you could call up exactly the right word by pen chewing, an entertainment which every different pen contributed to in its own way. The clear-cased plastic ballpoint, the Bic Cristal, had a plug you could work free with your teeth and discard, or spit competitive distances. The casing was the perfect shape to turn into an Amazonian blowpipe for spitting wet paper at your enemies.* Or you would find that the plastic bit would quickly shatter with a light pressure of the pensive molars; first holding together, then splintering, leaving shards in the mouth and the ink-tube poking out in a foolish way. Pretty soon you would be attempting to write with only an inch of casing, stabbing painfully into the mound of your thumb. The green rollerballs and felt-tips, on the other hand, had a more resistant casing, and gratefully took the disgusting imprint of your teeth. They had a knack of leaking backwards, onto your tongue, to spectacular effect at break-time in the playground. I could write a whole book about ink-staining; the way, at the end of the morning, you

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* You remove the plug and ink reservoir, then apply the mouth to the writing end with the spit ball at the plug end, but you know that already.

went to the bathroom and, with that gritty coal-tar soap with the school-smell – you never saw it anywhere else – scrubbed the residue of the morning's labours from the entire outer ridge on the little finger of your right hand. Bliss.

There were other rituals. If you were allowed a fountain pen, the private joy of slotting in the ink reservoir: the small resistance, and then as the plastic broke, the reservoir settling into its secure place with a silent plop. The ink never flowed immediately, and there was the gesture of flicking downwards in the air above the desk or floor to pull it towards the nib. Somehow, it never occurred to you to cover the nib with a tissue or handkerchief; somehow, there was always a reason to go on flicking downwards even after the first sign of the appearance of ink, just to flick that satisfying spattering Jackson Pollock line of ink. And when the ink ran out or wouldn't flow, whether from ballpoint or nib, the series of solutions you attempted: the movement of the pen over the paper in loops and hooks, first patiently then with a frenzied scribble, like a mid-period Twombly. When it failed again, you might daringly take the pen in your mouth and suck – it worked better with a fountain pen than with a biro, but both were just as liable to stain your tongue black, and bring forward the sage observation from the boy sitting next to you that 'My aunty died of ink poisoning, it's deadly if you take enough of it inside you.'

Technologies are either warm or cold, either attached to us with their own personalities, or simple, dead, replaceable tools to be picked up and discarded. The pen has been with us for so many millennia that it seems not just warm

but almost alive, like another finger. These rituals are signs of the intimacy of that relationship. They seem like gestures of grooming or of small-scale playing rather than the mending or maintenance of a tool. Sometimes, the pen has actually been referred to as a 'finger', and everyone knows what is meant: 'The moving finger writes, and having writ, moves on,' Omar Khayyam writes in Edward Fitzgerald's translation. It has sometimes been considered improper, indecent, unhygienic to lend a pen. There is a nineteenth-century bon mot, which you will sometimes hear even now, that there are three things that a gentleman never lends, a wife, a pipe and a pen, rather like a lady never lending her hairbrush. Among other occupations, I teach creative writing at a university in the West of England, and my students know, to their cost, that the prejudice has its point. If I borrow a ballpoint from one of them, within half an hour it is apt to creep towards my mouth, and by the end of a two-hour seminar it is often not in a returnable condition.

When the machines first came into our lives, they probably seemed as warm and humane as any other way of writing. I can only explain this by reference to my own history of engagement with writing with machines. When I was a boy, people occasionally asked me 'What do you want to do, when you grow up?' I always took this question seriously. Like other remarks adults made to children – what year are you in at school? I've been hearing a lot about your new digital watch – this seemed to me a real remark which looked for a real answer.

My family had a great friend called Tony Peagam, who was the editor at various times of different magazines. One was the AA magazine – the Automobile Association, not

the twelve-step recovering pisshead one – and once he put my dad on the cover. It was in relation to a story about car insurance. It seemed extraordinary to me that our family name might appear in print on a bright-red cover. Afterwards, for years, when people asked me what I wanted to do when I grew up, I would say 'I want to be a freelance journalist'. (Where I got 'freelance' from, I don't know. But it was so.)

After hearing this for a few years, my mother said that, if I wanted to become a journalist, I should learn shorthand and learn to type. The shorthand could probably wait,* but for my thirteenth birthday, I had a typewriter: an orange portable Olivetti, with its own tightly fitting case, closing with a satisfying click. I sat and conscientiously learnt to type. At first, the knowledge of the alphabet and the arrangement of the keyboard meshed in an ugly way.† My fingers hovered over it as I searched for a letter – Q, so oddly positioned at the start of everything. But I persevered, and soon I knew where everything was, mastering those interestingly dull exercises – glad had fad sad had shall gad hall. There were, I know now, people advocating at the time that children should be taught to type in school, but it certainly never got as far as Tapton School in Sheffield. We had two blind children in our class whose Braille-printing machines made an unholy racket, so what

* It's still waiting.

† The familiar QWERTY arrangement of the keyboard was chosen, not for its efficiency, but the opposite. The first users of the typewriter needed an arrangement which would slow users down, in order that the levers would not jam.

twenty-five typewriters of the early 1980s would have done to the nerves of the poor teacher can perhaps explain why typewriting lessons in schools never took off. For me, certainly, learning to type was a home-time endeavour. I never quite learnt to touch-type, but I could soon type, after a fashion, with alacrity. Even now, the odd person will remark on what a fast typist I am. Perhaps less so, nowadays.

In the 1970s, the ability to type was a special skill, to be acquired for a particular purpose. But now everyone can type.

Think of the last thing you wrote. The odds are that you sent an SMS text on your mobile phone with your thumbs working like fury.* Or perhaps you sent an e-mail, or just typed something on your laptop. Now, there are computers activated by voice recognition, and subsequently a television you can shout at to change channels, thus saving you the massive labour of pressing a button on a remote control.† Soon, we may not need the keyboard, or, perhaps, our hands at all. But for the moment, it is the way we write. It is much less likely that, instead of SMS-ing, or e-mailing, or typing, you took a pen and wrote something on paper, with ink. The quick movement of thumbs over a miniature keypad, or of fingertips over a QWERTY keyboard, is the

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* Marx, who saw and foresaw most things, outdoes himself by remarking that the history of civilization is entirely down to human beings possessing opposable thumbs. It was impressive to guess that sooner or later men would invent a way of writing that required only the movement of the thumbs.

† But how will it know whether you're shouting at it or at your annoying little brother?

way that writing almost always begins now. This is quite a recent change. Until the year 1978, I never wrote anything other than with a pen and paper. For another ten years, I never wrote anything that counted in any other way. I can identify the exact moment of transition, when I submitted the first chapter of my PhD to my supervisor in Cambridge, in 1987. I had handwritten it, not affectedly, but just because that was how I had always written essays. He marked it, sighed, handed it back and said 'In future, could you just type your work?' I did so, with no real sense of how things were to be from then on.

The rituals and sensory engagement with the pen bind us to it. The other ways in which we write nowadays, however, don't bind us in the same way. Like everyone else, I write a lot on a computer, and have done for over twenty years. In all that time, I've evolved exactly two pieces of ancillary, grooming-type behaviour towards the thing. Every so often, I take one of those cloths that you clean your glasses with, and wipe the screen clean of dust. (Sometimes I spray the screen first with glass-cleaning fluid). And there's the quite enjoyable ritual of taking a sharp object and poking in the gaps between the keys, chasing the little balls of dust and crud and dropped crumbs of sandwiches eaten with one hand while typing with the other, out from where they have unhygienically lurked for weeks.*

That, really, is the extent of any auxiliary play-type behaviour induced by a computer, and it's no wonder if we

* I've just bought a new laptop, and this one has keys virtually flush with the casing, with nowhere for anything to fall. So that reduces the list to one computer-based ritual.

haven't yet evolved many warm sensations towards the object, being unable to suck it, enjoy the sensory quality of its minor operations, or regard it as a direct extension of our being. Those other writing apparatuses, mobile telephones, occupy a little bit more of the same psychological space as the pen. Ten years ago, people kept their mobile phone in their pockets. Now, they hold them permanently in their hand like a small angry animal, gazing crossly into our faces, in apparent need of constant placation. Clearly, people do regard their mobile phones as, in some degree, an extension of themselves. There is, for instance, an unwillingness to lend a mobile phone, a sense that a request to borrow one in other than the direst emergency is in some degree overstepping the mark; a sense that is not to do with the fear that the lender may take the opportunity to telephone his aunt in Peru. And yet we have not evolved any of those small, pleasurable pieces of behaviour towards it that seem so ordinary in the case of our pens. We text, and let it rest again in the palm of the hand, and don't quite know what to do with it: an extension of our being, but inert, meaningless, in no particular need of our ongoing attention. It doesn't need to be cleaned, or cared for, and if you saw someone sucking one while they thought of the next phrase to text, you would think them dangerously insane.

Probably at some point in the future, we will start thinking of our communication devices as warm, in the way that we think, or used to think, of our pens. But in the meantime, we have surrendered our handwriting for something more mechanical, less distinctively human, less telling about ourselves and less present in our moments of

the highest happiness and the deepest emotion. Ink runs in our veins, and shows the world what we are like.

This is a book about the disappearance of handwriting. We don't quite know what will take its place – the transmission of thought via a keyboard into words; the rendering of voice commands into action; the understanding by a piece of technology of a gesture or, conceivably, a thought. The shaping of thought and written language by a pen, moved by a hand to register marks of ink on paper has for centuries, millennia, been regarded as key to our existence as human beings. In the past, handwriting has been regarded as almost the most powerful sign of our individuality. In 1847, in an American case, a witness testified without hesitation that a signature was genuine, though he had not seen an example of the handwriting for sixty-three years: the court accepted his testimony.[1] Handwriting is what registers our individuality, and the mark which our culture has made on us. It has been regarded as the path to riches, merit, honour; it has been seen as the unknowing key to our souls and our innermost nature. It has been regarded as a sign of our health as a society, of our intelligence, and as an object of simplicity, grace, fantasy and beauty in its own right. At some point, the ordinary pleasures and dignity of handwriting are going to be replaced permanently. What is going to replace them is a man in a well-connected electric room, waving frantically at a screen and saying, to nobody in particular, 'Why won't this effing thing work?' Before that happens, perhaps we should take a look at what we're so rapidly doing away with.

3 ~ *There's Nothing Wrong with my Handwriting, They just Need to Pay Someone who Can Read it*

In 2012, a gentleman at Lancaster University decided to sue the institution after markers criticized the legibility of his handwriting. Comments on his exam scripts included 'I cannot read this' to simply 'cannot read'. The *Times Higher Education Supplement*, reporting on the case, observed with horror that 'One marker even commented: "Can you do anything about your handwriting?"' as if it were an obviously absurd or prejudicial thing to ask. Fatally, the institution sent an e-mail, in which somebody wrote: 'His handwriting is not particularly good, but it is no worse than some others who do not suffer from a disability.' The university had to apologize for ever criticizing the student's handwriting, despite the fact that nobody could read it. The student, who was dyslexic, said that he understood that his exam papers would be transcribed because of concerns about his handwriting. The university countered that after concerns about his handwriting were voiced, his papers were re-marked with no change to the final marks. At the time of writing, the student is suing the university for the return of all his fees.[1]

Our attitude to our own handwriting is a peculiar mixture of shame and defiance: ashamed that it's so bad and untutored, but defiant in our belief that it's not our fault. What shame and defiance have in common, of course, is the determination to leave the cause of the shame or defiance unaltered. The blithe assumption that bad handwriting doesn't matter, and shouldn't be improved by its perpetrator, may be on the increase inside and outside education. The view expressed as long ago as 1987 by the Regional Examinations Board, that there were competent candidates whose work was 'degraded by the technical accuracy'[2] is falling away. Instead, the view of the 1970s radical head teacher from Islington who told an inquiry into his teaching practice that he didn't teach the kids to read and write because 'it's all typewriting nowadays'[3] is, apparently, on the rise.

The question is: should we even care? Should we accept that handwriting is a skill whose time has now passed, or does it carry with it a value that can never truly be superseded by the typed word?

Sometimes, however, it does matter in the most brutal economic or human sense. This has been true even before the invention of the Internet transformed everything. American Demographics claimed that bad handwriting skills were costing American business $200m in 1994. Thirty-eight million unreadable letters couldn't be delivered. Kodak said that 400,000 rolls of films couldn't be returned because names and addresses were unreadable.[4]* Does it still matter now

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* Kodak would probably still be going if Americans learnt to write legibly, I dare say.

that there is no film industry any more and not so many hand-addressed envelopes to misread? Well, in 2000, a US court awarded $450,000 to the family of a Texas man who died after a pharmacist misread the doctor's handwritten prescription.[5] In a 2005 Scottish case, the handwriting of a staff nurse called Fiona Thomson in Airdrie, Lanarkshire was so appalling that a colleague misread an instruction to give 4 units of insulin for 40. The patient, Moira Pullar, died, and the nurses and hospital were savagely criticized by the judge at the inquest, Sheriff Dickson.[6]

Repeated anecdotal evidence suggests, however, that few people now believe that handwriting is something that ought to be improved in the interests of communication. What does it matter if your aunt's birthday card gets lost in the post? All these cases are arguments for the printed prescription, ordering everything over the Internet with typed details, never setting pen to paper. They don't seem to be arguments for improving competence in handwriting. But in a hurry, would a nurse making a note to a colleague always find a computer terminal? A lecturer called Tim Birkhead tells of an encounter with an undergraduate. 'While the essay was excellent, the handwriting was appalling, so I said that a bit more care with the handwriting wouldn't go amiss, particularly under exam conditions. Most undergraduates take such advice with a grateful smile. But not this one. After a moment's pause, he looked me straight in the eye and coolly said: "If you cannot read my handwriting, then the university ought to be employing someone who can." Then he left.'[7] Did not that undergraduate exhibit some failings that went beyond a mere inability to write well? Nor is this a purely British

phenomenon: we hear from an Australian academic* that 'Marking the final exam, it emerged that few could write neatly: from bold childlike printing to spidery scribblings in upper case, it is obvious that handwriting is a dying art.'[8] Some other elements of civilized life may die with this art, or skill, or habit.

If we want to understand why so many people now have very little command over their handwriting, and see no reason why they should ever make an effort in that direction, we ought to look at what their education has prepared them for. This is what is demanded of schoolchildren in the UK with regard to handwriting. At the earliest stage of the National Curriculum, which in the UK controls what is learnt and what may be taught from infant school onwards, the following is prescribed:

Handwriting and presentation

5. In order to develop a legible style, pupils should be taught:

Handwriting

a. how to hold a pencil/pen
b. to write from left to right and top to bottom of a page
c. to start and finish letters correctly
d. to form letters of regular size and shape
e. to put regular spaces between letters and words
f. how to form lower- and upper-case letters
g. how to join letters.

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* Who, I warn you, might say she regards handwriting and grammar as a lost art, but evidently knows eff-all about the dangling participle.

But that's only the beginning of a child's engagement with handwriting. Naturally, the government has decided that the child must progress. In the consolidated set of 'level descriptions' by which schoolchildren work their way through the education system, a series of demands with respect to handwriting is smuggled in. It goes like this:

> Level 1: Letters are usually clearly shaped and correctly orientated. Level 2: In handwriting, letters are accurately formed and consistent in size. Level 3: Handwriting is joined and legible. Level 4: Handwriting style is fluent, joined and legible. Level 5: Handwriting is joined, clear and fluent and, where appropriate, is adapted to a range of tasks. Level 6: Handwriting is neat and legible. Level 7: Work is legible and attractively presented.[9]

There are further stages, but by that point the teacher and the administrator have both grown bored with saying that handwriting should be legible and clear, and no further demands are made on the student. Clearly, nobody at any point has followed handwriting through the syllabus as a developing skill, or they would have noticed that 'legibility' is something to be attained newly at every age from eight to twelve. At the earliest stage, teachers are supposed to set children some very complex tasks, joining up letters and showing how to enter and leave letters correctly. After that, it looks as if they're on their own. A student who has attained the level required at Level 3, and certainly at Level 4, shouldn't really need much more instruction. How many students really do come up to the mark of writing fluent, joined, legible writing at Level 4 is another matter. What

happens if they don't? The teacher rolls his eyes and makes a small but devastating tutting noise, I expect.

In fact, a study in 2006, carried out by London University's Institute of Education, discovered that fewer than half of British primary schools set time aside in a week to teach handwriting. Despite widespread support for the value of handwriting – more than half of the teachers surveyed supported the idea of a nationally prescribed handwriting school – only a fifth of the teachers taught pupils how to write more quickly.[10] Familiarity is said to breed contempt, but in this corner of contemporary culture, what attracts contempt is what individuals cannot do, or have not been taught to do. The other half of teachers, or perhaps four-fifths, may be represented by the teacher who said 'In business, rarely, if ever, do you have anything handwritten. Nothing ever comes across my desk handwritten. Children do need to have a little more pride in their penmanship, but if you look down the road, will it make any difference when everything is typed?'[11] The Islington head teacher I earlier referred to as justifying the failure to teach the children to read or write was, in the 1970s, struck off. In the twenty-first century, a Scottish headmaster says 'The importance of perfect handwriting is overplayed [*sic*] . . . I am much more interested in what a child writes about than the quality of their [*sic*] handwriting. So much time can be spent in primary schools on the correct formation of letters that it impacts [*sic*] on the learning of other, perhaps more important, literacy skills [*sic*].'[12]*

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* Oh, crap. Seriously, what crap. When have handwriting lessons prevented children from learning to read and write, or 'literacy skills',

Of course, people have been complaining about bad handwriting in education for centuries. Lord Chesterfield in the eighteenth century was writing to his bastard that 'Your hand-writing is a very bad one, and would make a scurvy figure in an office-book of letters, or even in a lady's pocket-book. But that fault is easily cured by care, since every man who has the use of his eyes and of his right hand can write whatever hand he pleases.'[13] Lord Chesterfield's son, like many people of social standing before and since, had a hand which was 'neither a hand of business, nor of a gentleman; but the hand of a school-boy writing his exercise, which he hopes will never be read.' If he was alive today, he would probably feel free to tick off his father for being unable to read it, and probably sue him for being so insulting about something which wasn't his fault, too. What seems to be new is the attitude that bad handwriting is nothing to do with the writer's merits or application, and that people who can't read illegible and ill-formed handwriting ought to get over themselves, or pay somebody to read it instead. And if a student says 'It's not my fault', shouldn't we look at the methods through which handwriting is taught nowadays, and consider whether they might not have a point here?

What is driving the decline of handwriting? Why has it become, in some people's eyes, totally unnecessary? The

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in this moron's horrible jargon? How the effing eff could they? What likelihood is there that you're going to be allowed to introduce handwriting lessons to the extent of 'impacting' on anything at all in a twenty-first-century Scottish school? Is he seriously suggesting that children were less literate in an age when handwriting lessons lasted half an hour? Jesus, sometimes you really want to give up.

simple answer is the dominance of the keyboard. Many institutions are just giving up, in the face of an apparently hopeless situation. In April 2011, the Indiana Department of Education instructed its schools that only proficiency with a keyboard would be expected. 'They can continue to teach handwriting if they want'. The new common core standards in education, which at that point had been adopted by forty-two states, no longer require schools to teach a cursive hand. The *Daily Telegraph*, reporting on this story, interviewed a psychologist called Dr Scott Hamilton who said it made sense to only teach children how to sign their names in joined-up writing. "The time allocated for cursive instruction could then be devoted to learning keyboarding and typing skills. From an intuitive standpoint, this may make sense, based on the increasingly digital world into which this generation of children is growing up."'[14] God save us all from Dr Hamilton's intuitions, and from a brave new world in which the people of Indiana are unable to write anything but their own names.*

In this world, we understand that people will write exclusively on keyboards. When such people are forced, by rare circumstance, to write a letter by hand, do we forgive

* Here's a thing. You're driving down an Indiana track when out of nowhere comes a tractor into the side of your Subaru. How do you exchange details? Neither of you have ever been able to write anything but your own names. The farmhand don't be holding with them thar smart phones nor with that new-fangled Internet. (Or he does, but the battery on your smartphone has died a death – take your pick of disastrous scenarios). So there the two of you stand, helpless, in an Indiana field, trying to work out which way up to hold a pen and cursing the idiotic name of Dr Scott Hamilton who landed you in this mess.

the ugly confusion on paper made by those who have taken the decision, or had the decision forced on them, not to write by hand any more? Some recent public episodes suggest that this isn't yet the case. We seem to believe both that handwriting doesn't matter, since everyone types, and that when people do write a handwritten letter, it ought to be elegant, graceful, and well practised. In 2009, the war in Afghanistan was coming towards its eighth year. Like all wars in Afghanistan, it was proving much less easy than anyone had originally thought.* The Western public was getting restless, and a general belief was taking hold that the leaders of the willing actually didn't much care about the dead soldiers coming back from Afghanistan. To counter this impression, political leaders took to writing personal letters, by hand, to the families of the bereaved.

A grenadier guardsman, Jamie Janes, was killed in Afghanistan by a bomb on 5 October 2009. In the days following his death, the then Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, wrote to Jamie's mother. When Mrs Janes received the letter, she, horrified, took it straight to the newspapers. Brown had written the letter in his usual felt-tip pen. It was filled with spelling mistakes which gave the impression that it was dashed off in haste, without much care – 'Dear Mrs James, It is with the greatst of sadness that I write to offer you and you family my personal condolencs on the death of your son, Jamie. I hear from colleagus . . .' Perhaps still more frightening was Brown's handwriting, which not many people, probably, had seen. It leant backwards; it was

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* I wrote a book on the subject, *The Mulberry Empire*.

10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

THE PRIME MINISTER

Dear Mrs James

It is with the greatest of
sadness that I write to offer
you and your family my
personal condolences on the death
of your son, Jamie. I know
from colleagues that Jamie was
a brave, selfless and wholly
professional soldier who was held
in the highest esteem and
regard by all who worked
with him. I know that
words can offer little comfort
at a time of grief

Gordon Brown's handwriting.

printed and joined randomly; there were no real upstrokes or downstrokes. It was not, people said, the handwriting of an educated man.

This was deeply unfair. Brown, as was only half-known at the time and rarely alluded to, was not far from partially sighted. He clearly knew how ‘condolence’ and ‘colleague’ were spelled. This was the letter of someone who had great difficulty in writing by hand for good medical reasons. The poor man was obliged to phone the indignant mother, and turn the whole episode into a discussion of his near-blindness.

Nevertheless, the Brown episode shows that, sometimes, we expect people to write well. In certain circumstances, we deplore bad writing: the bad, ugly, illiterate, ill-formed writing of someone who has never practised writing, never considered that it might be a duty to write in ways which people can read and take some pleasure from. If we expect good writing on elevated occasions, is it not reasonable to expect people to write reasonably well all the time? It is not reasonable to think that people can write terribly, illegibly badly almost all the time and then elevate their handwriting for special purposes. Sometimes, it clearly matters a good deal.

There are, perhaps, some signs that handwriting is being maintained in education by a handful of believers. The fightback in parts of education continues. One American schoolteacher boldly said in 2001 that ‘about 50 per cent of kids have illegible handwriting’.[15] A UK 2010 survey by the pen manufacturers Berol found what they wanted to hear: 82 per cent of teachers said they had noticed a deterioration in recent years. The Confederation

of British Industry Scotland said that 'legibility of handwriting matters. There is a wide range of forms to be completed by hand in most organizations and in certain circumstances. Some of these are documents that may potentially be called in evidence in legal proceedings.'[16]

From 1984, a revival in handwriting tuition in schools started to be noticed. Often, a print hand was maintained alongside the old-fashioned cursive deriving from the nineteenth-century handwriting guru, A.N. Palmer.[17] (It's noticeable that many very well-educated Americans of forty and under do habitually write in a firm print hand, without any cursive joins at all.) Handwriting is still taught in pockets in the United States, despite resistance. 'We just had this discussion,' a Chicago teacher says, explaining how he came to teach handwriting again. 'They have to know this because they'll still need it. Not everyone has a computer. And for state testing, they have to physically print or do cursive.'[18] One perceived problem is that the national unity of style in America seems to be disappearing. This seems to be one area where diversity is perceived by Americans not as exciting, but as confusing and unnecessary. The *New York Times* observed in the 1990s that 'ethnic diversity has brought new lettering: Greek E's, for example, which look like backward 3's, and European 7's, which are written with a line across the staff.'[19] Is this a bad thing? Perhaps, to generations accustomed to imposing ways of outlining letters on sighing children, the excitement of seeing that you could choose, if you wished, to make your letters in another way seems intimidating.

In third grade in American schools – seven to eightish – now as it has been for decades, a cursive hand is

introduced. In 1984, the *New York Times* reported a recommendation by an emeritus professor of education from Buffalo, New York, that schools should 'devote about five to ten minutes to teaching handwriting two or three times a week in elementary school.'* They also managed to find that Houston did spend twenty minutes a day in teacher-directed handwriting instruction from first to sixth grade – this was in the early 1980s. In recent years, a programme called Handwriting Without Tears has encouraged teachers to devote ten to fifteen minutes a day on handwriting.[20] Other twenty-first-century initiatives included teaching American schoolchildren cursive from the start.[21] There seems no doubt that, here and there, there are many individual schoolteachers in America sufficiently convinced of the importance of handwriting lessons in their own education not only to reintroduce such lessons, but actually extend them downwards and upwards.

In England, on the other hand, in 1982, we are told that 'only 5 per cent of schools taught handwriting. By 1987, this had suddenly increased to about 60 per cent'.[22] The National Curriculum now stresses handwriting. 'The four criteria of the Sats level two handwriting test are legibility, consistent size and spacing of letters, flow and movement, and a confident personal style.'[23] But does anyone follow this? From time to time, you hear of an individual school

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* 'What does emeritus mean, Rupert?' Frank Giles asked Rupert Murdoch after being turned into Editor Emeritus of *The Times* after one egregious catastrophe under his editorial stewardship. 'It's Latin, Frank,' the proprietor said. 'The e- means you're out. The meritus means you deserve it.'

that decides to push it up the agenda – a school called Otford County Primary devised a unique strategy with the support of the great handwriting scholar Rosemary Sassoon (a bit like getting Richard Dawkins to plan your Year-2 Nature Studies, one might think). A primary school called Stonesfield introduced a proper cursive policy.[24] Walthamstow School for Girls, spectacularly, insisted that all work had to be done by pupils with fountain pens rather than ballpoints – the rule, of course, had to be imposed on staff, too. Lunchtime handwriting surgeries were introduced.[25]

This all sounds wonderful. Now for the bad news. After reading about these handwriting strategies in individual schools from fifteen years ago, I wrote to the headteachers of the schools asking what had happened since, and how they had developed these interesting policies. I am sorry to say that, when this book went to print, none of them had responded to me. When I telephoned the PA of one headteacher to ask if they had any intention of doing so, and if, for instance, they still taught handwriting, since they might be too busy to write a letter to me, she had no idea what I was talking about. Some schools may have handwriting policies, for all I know. They may spend their whole days doing nothing else. On the other hand, if they do maintain any interest in handwriting, they're in no great hurry to tell anyone about it. I suspect those who were briefly excited a decade or two ago are now about as much interested in handwriting these days as anyone else.