

Time-Management, Writing, and Accounting in the Eighteenth-Century English Trading Family: A Bourgeois Enlightenment

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It was the year 1759 and Philip Eliot, merchant and underwriter of London, lay dying. As the old man moved fitfully in and out of consciousness he dreamed a dream which struck his nephew (also a businessman) so forcefully that he wrote it down in his journal:

... a man came to arrest [my uncle] for debt and pushed him into a corner. "Wait" replied he, "I have money to pay you." "Oh" said the man "that is not the thing, this debt is not to be paid with Money." When he awoke he recounted this dream ... and said that he knew well that the person who had appeared to him was Death and that his time had come [13, p. 74].

The metaphors the unconscious reaches for in its hour of distress can be deeply revealing ones, and it is reasonable to assume that Philip Eliot's dream tells us as much about his preoccupations over the course of his lifetime as it does of his coming to terms with death. This paper explores some of the particular anxieties associated with living in and attempting to profit from a society which offered little structural support for capitalist endeavor. It seeks to describe the tight and often problematic interconnection of eighteenth-century family life with business risk. And finally it looks at time management, writing, and accounting as attempts to resolve some of the resulting stresses and tensions, and as fertile ground for the growth of new modes of thinking which bear on more than simply the sphere of business.

As is well known, the main method of accumulating investment capital in the eighteenth century was through personal connections, relatives, or close friends, rather than through relatively impersonal institutions like modern day banks or investment companies. The personal nature of capital formation was echoed in a legal system in which the distinction between business liability and personal and family liability was vague and sometimes nonexistent. Limited liability is a legal principle (really a heterogeneous aggregate of laws and business practices) which makes a sharp distinction between personal or private assets and liabilities and business assets and liabilities. One of its major functions is to shield the "domestic sphere" from the insecurities of business. The rise of limited liability thus bears a direct relationship to the emerging ideology of private domesticity, and like the latter it was introduced in the most piecemeal and uneven fashion, for the most part during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the period under discussion here, such practices as impounding household goods for the payment of business

debts and imprisoning people for insolvency were still a familiar feature of trading life [15, 23].

This meant that it was difficult for people with even peripheral involvements in trade to remain detached from the insecurities of commerce. Many individuals or families who were not themselves in trade had surplus funds tied up in relatives' enterprises. Often they also were bound as personal sureties for additional debts, for in the absence of other ways of securing loans creditors were relying upon the presumed strength of kin-ties to ensure payment. If catastrophe struck, the moral onus was on kin to try to stave off eviction or the seizure of their relatives' goods, or at the last resort to get the family out of debtor's prison. Early modern English business relied upon, indeed would have been inconceivable without trading families shouldering risks which most middle-class people today would view as totally unacceptable.

If such unsecured loans had been confined primarily to setting-up costs the situation would have been difficult enough. In fact, in the face of the persistent liquidity problems of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries an extremely high proportion of business transactions were carried out on the basis of credit secured only by the reputation of the debtor or the debtor's family, or worse, on nothing but the knowledge that the person demanding credit from you would only do business on those terms [5, 8, 9, 12, 15]. Entrepreneurship in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries involved risks that went well beyond what most people in the modern era would regard as either safe business practice or responsible family membership. And when failure came it struck right at the heart of family survival, depriving people of the basic necessities of life, sending men, women and children into the street or into debtor's prison, crushing the innocent and the charitable among one's kin as well as the extravagant or imprudent. Small wonder that a dying man would personify death as a man coming to seize him for a debt that could only be paid with his life.

Today the context within which the middle class invests its money is a very different one. A wide variety of safeguards (insurance, federally insured banks, credit bureaus, bankruptcy law, corporate structures) have been developed to separate business risk from the affective sphere, to, as it were, sanctify the middle-class family in financial as well as in ideological terms. Though some of these institutions already were being developed in the period under discussion they were fairly primitive in form and few people actually had access to them. This left eighteenth-century entrepreneurs in a quandary. To profit, to improve, required capital, and capital under ordinary seventeenth- and eighteenth-century conditions meant resort to those relatives who were willing or felt duty-bound to provide help. But to supply a loan or to be a signatory to a bond was to take on a portion of the risk at a time when business loss cut right to the heart of household viability. It was out of this conflict, essentially a conflict over the place of the family in a commercial society (or the place of commerce in a family-based, highly personalized society) that many of the most characteristic "bourgeois" ideals and practices were born.

Before examining a few of these it is necessary to look briefly at eighteenth-century people's own view of the causes of business failure. Up

through the seventeenth century it was still common to attribute business failure and other hazards besetting the world of commerce to a combination of divine wrath and individual imprudence. Fires, for example, were traditionally interpreted as a sign of God's displeasure at people who traded on the sabbath. But the trading classes were moving perceptibly toward the view that failure could be adequately explained in terms of proximate or immediate causes rather than remote, occult, or otherwise unknowable ones. By the late seventeenth century, if not before, most commentators thought failure came as a result of lack of industry and especially inattention to one's accounts, keeping bad company, lending to or otherwise supporting people who were untrustworthy or "in declining circumstances," drunkenness, illicit sexual activity, and domestic extravagance. What was unusual was not the vices themselves, which were quite traditional, but the fact that they now seemed in and of themselves to provide a sufficient explanation for the phenomenon of failure.

But a newly secular vision did not necessarily mean a more optimistic one, at least in the period before Adam Smith reinjected supernatural forces, in the form of the relatively beneficent "invisible hand," back into the workings of the market. In the eyes of most "improving folk" of the eighteenth century commerce was poised perpetually on the brink of chaos. George Boddington, a Levant Company merchant who flourished in the second half of the seventeenth and early eighteenth century is thoroughly typical in this respect. His commonplace book obsessively records the failures of those around him including the "breaking" of his own grandfather ("who wasted a good estate by gaming ..."), a son-in-law, and a brother [3]. For people like Boddington the world was a precarious place indeed, commerce a potentially deadly series of moral choices, in which at any moment the temptation to game, to embezzle, not to render accounts, to live extravagantly, to borrow with no prospect of ever having the money to repay the debt, could tip the mechanism over and plunge everyone in one's orbit into bankruptcy.

This intense moralism has implications for day-to-day economic thinking. It has been argued that as early as the seventeenth century some economic theorists were fully capable of abstracting the working of the market out from the human or social context [2, pp. 242-279]. There is little evidence, however, that the average man or woman engaged in trade during this period possessed such an ability. For most traders such underlying order as the market possessed derived not from the uniformity or predictability of self-interest or the balancing mechanisms of supply and demand but from the faith (or hope) that the penalty for individual moral transgressions such as not paying one's debts were so dire that people would go to almost inhuman lengths to avoid them. Commerce was not in any sense a free-standing edifice. Rather it was embedded in and inseparable from society, requiring the constant sanction not only of the law, but of families, clergymen, and community opinion to stay upright. What this philosophy lacked in theoretical depth and in its grasp of the larger forces at work in the market it made up for in its stress on the power of human action, human action conceived not simply in terms of individual self-mastery but as a force residing in communities and families. Let us turn then to some of the pedagogical

concerns which preoccupied bourgeois families in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, concerns which seemed to typify this newly aggressive stance on the part of both individual traders and trading families toward the stresses and insecurities of early modern commerce.

In the last fifteen years a series of important works have established the historicity of modern conceptions of time. For the most part these have focused on the imposition of clock time (factory time) on the laboring classes [17, 27]. Surprisingly little attention has been paid to the question of how the capital-investing classes internalized more rationalized conceptions of time and work. Advice to children to mind how they use their time becomes common in the family correspondence of trading folk from the late seventeenth century on, particularly in dissenting families, though there is evidence that merchants were noted for their strict attention to time as early as the late sixteenth century [29, 30]. By the early eighteenth century some quite humble members of the trading classes had begun to worry seriously and often about their use of time, and though this may or may not mean that they were actually using time more efficiently, it did presage a middle-class fascination with the relation between time and work which has been sustained right up to the present day. By the second half of the eighteenth century some women of the trading classes were writing out daily schedules for how to organize their household tasks, and when Benjamin Franklin assured his readers that time was money he was repeating something that had been a truism in bourgeois families for at least half a century.

The earliest and most consistent evidence of systematic attention to time discipline in the rearing of children does in fact come from trading families, and it tends to be linked to the quest for financial stability. Both the utilitarian character of this new ideal and its intrusive character are well-illustrated in the letters of an early eighteenth-century woman named Sarah Savage to her son who was destined for business. She is pleased, she writes in 1712, that her son's time is "... close filled up with wt is useful and profitable, [and] that there will not bee room for ... trivial diversions ..." A few months later she was advising him to rise early to do his studies for "ye manna ... was to be gathered only in the morning-afterwards it was melted and not to bee found" [11]. And a little after this "W[he]n ye schollr [scholars'] Bell rings [sic] this morn. I could not omit thinking of you - who I hope need no such Call among the rest of ye Childish things which you put off" [22].

The Savage correspondence and others like it show a style of childrearing which was highly systematized, future-oriented, and prudential. It aimed to inculcate sober-minded application to the task at hand and saw profitable and highly conscious use of time as part of this process. It made allusions to scripture, yet the ends were thoroughly secular and carefully oriented toward avoiding financial ruin. Instances of the latter form a major leitmotif in Sarah Savage's letters:

Poor Wid[ow] Leicestr is below wth sorrowf[ul] Complaints - her son-in-law & Dau[ght]er have [had] all seized for debt and will

be turn'd out a May - & she has not so much as [a] bed left ...
[22].

Seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century parents were keenly aware of the speed with which ruin could strike. But this was coupled with a considerable faith in the capacity of virtuous individuals to control that reality through conscious self-discipline and "rational" approaches to the use of time.

The ability to read and write, and especially to write a good hand, was also a matter of major import to trading parents. Reading represented the key not only to serious bible study but to a wealth of opportunities for self-improvement in areas as diverse as shorthand, foreign languages, the writing of model business letters, and the more abstruse realms of mathematics, to name only a few of the topics covered in some of the immensely popular self-help handbooks of the period. In many respects, however, writing was even more important. As society and business grew more complex in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there was less and less place for the illiterate person, however retentive or metaphorically ingenious he or she might be. Trading parents who wanted to see their children succeed not uncommonly insisted that they attain standards of competence in writing which far surpassed what had been required of them by their own parents. This is reflected over and over again in almost any letter collection spanning two or more generations in the late seventeenth century through the first half of the eighteenth century: older people from the trading classes generally display significantly worse spelling, syntax, and general legibility than do younger ones. Those apprentices or would-be apprentices so unlucky as to hail from families who failed to insist on a neat writing hand and exact mathematics tables were increasingly likely to find themselves without prospects, even seriously declassed. One Richard Maris of Worcester wrote his sister a pathetic letter in 1765 complaining that his children had had no schooling for the last seven years and betraying in his own eccentric orthography and syntax some of the disadvantages under which his children had labored:

[the boy] could have [wrote or wrighten(?)] well, and was very
Forward in Accounts and Now can do Neither, hes grone almost
a man and yeat fit for no maner of Bisnes what to do with him
I cant tell [7].

Other youths, even carefully reared and educated ones, failed to attain the standards of proficiency that business (and their parents or masters) now demanded of them. In the early 1770s the parents of Adam Prattinton briefly entertained hopes of educating him to one of the professions; they even considered investing in a living for him in case he pursued a clerical career. He turned out to be a young man without intellectual pretensions, which would not have been so bad except for the unfortunate fact that Adam showed little aptitude for business either. Sent to work in his father's shop when his schooling was finished he could not get along with his father's chief assistant and failed to display even the slightest talent for shopkeeping. Samuel Lowder sent along reproaches from a family friend, Colonel Holmes:

[He] expresses much concern at [Adam's] not attending to business and says if he does not leave off Childish amusements and stick to matters of more Importance, he shall take little notice of him.

Lowder himself advised having the youth set to "Copy Letters, to Examine and Copy bills of Parcels and invoices etc." as the best way of teaching him accounts. However, after only a few months of this, Adam developed "a weakness in his right hand" which at least temporarily incapacitated him for business [20].

Even more important to the education of trading youth than efficient management of time and a good writing hand was the ability to render accurate accounts. Double entry book-keeping had been brought over from Italy several hundred years before, but it was in the late seventeenth century that it seems to have become the centerpiece in the education of young men and women of the trading classes. "Know then that my Parents were very careful to cause me to learn writing and *Arithmetic*" wrote the anonymous female author of *Advice to the Women and Maidens of London ...* (1678) a passionate call for women to learn book-keeping,

... for without the knowledge of these I was told I should not be capable of Trade and Book-keeping and in these I found no discouragement[,] for though *Arithmetick* set my brains at work Yet there was much delight in seeing the end, and how each question produced a fair answer and informed me of things I knew not [1, p. 3].

Accounting involved "mak[ing] inspection into that, that is to keep me and mine from ruine and poverty." It was an art which allowed one to tell at any time where one's money was going and thus forecast potential disaster in time to avoid it. When one compares the regular keeping of accounts with other contemporary methods of predicting and hence controlling the future, one can begin to see why people waxed so enthusiastic about it. In the seventeenth century it was not uncommon to resort to magicians or charms to ward off creditors or divine the most propitious time to ask one's relatives for money [26, p. 231]. By contrast, the principles of bookkeeping were simple and accessible: they relied on no secret formulas, esoteric symbols, or charismatic practitioners. Compared with astrology, water divination, or efforts to influence the course of romantic love, accounting was dry and mundane. Yet what bookkeeping sacrificed in glamor it made up for in the uncontroversial character of its results and in the fact that anyone who could add and subtract with fair competence could learn it. A democratic mystery in the best Baconian tradition it promised its initiates an unprecedented sense of control over the ill-understood and terrifying universe of credit, debt, and cash-flows.

Surrounded by financial uncertainty, it is not surprising that traders and their families became obsessed with the keeping of accounts. The woman who wrote the accounting manual cited above was given the job of keeping household accounts by her father, who "made it my Office to call all persons

to an account every night what they laid out, and to reimburse it them, and set all down in a book" [1, p. 3]. George Boddington, looking back at the significant moments in his life, made a special note of the day and year when he first began to keep his own books: "... [on] 25 March 1664 [at the age of eighteen] though [I] was possessed but of a very small Sum wch had binn given me I begann a pare of Bookes for my selfe and bought a Small parcell of Cotton" [3]. The personal records of trading families repeatedly make note of such events, often dwelling on them with special care.

As commerce grew increasingly complex accounting became more and more indispensable, but it also took on a symbolic significance which far exceeded its actual utility. For many accounting came to be seen as what was most "rational" about the ways of commerce and commercial people. It is no coincidence that metaphors drawn from bookkeeping are ubiquitous in the religious writing, natural philosophy, and practical advice-giving of the day. Increasing vigilance and the ability to forecast one's present and future assets had become as critical and as morally obligatory for trading people as work itself, and it had done so not just because profits could be made that way, but because the risks of capitalist endeavor penetrated to the heart of what contemporaries believed society to be.

Mastery of time-discipline, writing, and accounting gave the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century trading classes a new confidence in their ability to comprehend and control the tumultuous world of commerce. Time-discipline encouraged a newly systematic and goal-oriented conception of work, indeed of life in general, which contrasted sharply with older rhythms of work and leisure. Writing, because it involved the systematic ordering of information on a page with a particular end in view, had a somewhat similar impact. The ability to arrange information in abstract patterns, to free oneself from lapses of memory, contextual interruptions, or intrusive mnemonic metaphors, had profound epistemological implications. It suggested a potential for both ordering and controlling knowledge that was quite new, at least for people of this class. Moreover, the heavy emphasis trading families laid on "good" handwriting reflected a yearning for standardization and conformity which stood in stark contrast to the diversity of practices which in fact characterized the contemporary marketplace. And accounting represented a way both to systematically analyze current assets and liabilities and to make reasoned predictions about future ones. Quite humble people could attain to a superior, even godlike, comprehension of their own small microcosm of trade, "... discover" as did that anonymous London woman of the trading classes "things I knew not," simply by attending carefully to their account books and making their business decisions on the basis of the "objective" information they found there rather than on more sentimental, subjective, or supernatural criteria.

Evidence of this sort might suggest the need for a fresh look at the connection between the skills and techniques of business and the rise of capitalism. Such a link was first postulated, unfortunately in a rather reductionist form and only with respect to accounting, by Werner Sombart [24, pp. 110-136], and it has been heavily debated since that time [4, pp. 572-578; 28, pp. 15-24; 30; 31]. Such a reconsideration, ideally one which looks both

at accounting and at other business-related techniques and practices, may be in order. What is of greater concern here, however, is less the contribution of accounting, writing, or time management to the growth of modern economic systems than the ways in which these techniques reflected or helped contribute to the *Zeitgeist* of the Enlightenment, what Peter Gay has called the eighteenth-century "recovery of nerve" [10, pp. 3-12].

In the last decade or so (and earlier in France) Enlightenment scholars' traditional focus on elite French, German, Scottish, or English *philosophes* and men of letters has been giving way to an emphasis on cultural history and the "history of *mentalités*," to a look at the poor, the laboring and trading classes, women, and the newly-literate. Historians continue to debate the degree to which elite ideas penetrated the classes below the aristocracy and gentry, but they also look for influences which run in the other direction. They look at low culture, "low-life," popular literature, popular clubs and societies, the diffusion of scientific ideas among the commercial classes, and the attempts of non-elite women to apply enlightenment ideas of liberty to their own lives [6, 11, 16, 18, 19]. The methods that early modern people up and down the social spectrum developed to understand and organize their world have moved into the center stage of historical inquiry.

Time management, writing, and accounting should be seen in this larger context [20; 23, p. 119]. They too represented non-elite attempts to comprehend complexity and control uncertainty. More than that they displayed recognizably "enlightened" characteristics: they were utilitarian, confident of the power of human action, largely independent of the direct intervention of God, mathematically inspired, bent on order and control, and suffused with an *esprit systématique*. Moreover, an issue of no small note, they developed authentically out of the world of the merchant, the shopkeeper, and the bureaucrat. In recent decades the view that the Enlightenment is a kind of philosophical complement to the putative "rise of the bourgeoisie" has been fairly thoroughly discredited, both because the idea of a bourgeois bloc or "middle class" poised to seize power seems to misrepresent the complexity of social relations in the period, and because the Enlightenment itself turns out to have been an extremely diverse, even contradictory, movement. However, it would be unfortunate if, in the zeal to reject the rough-hewn categories of an earlier generation of historians, we ended up concluding that commercial people had no connection to the Enlightenment at all. If the Enlightenment was not a bourgeois project, it is nonetheless clear that there was a bourgeois Enlightenment, one which was centered in the counting house, the school, and the private home rather than the aristocratic salon.

Commentators at the time were no more uniformly enthusiastic about the new caste of mind spreading among commercial people than they were about more familiar Enlightenment projects like Diderot's *Encyclopédie*. Poets and dramatists skewered the trading classes for their prudery, for their obsessive need for control, and for the blank conformity of spirit with which they bent, year after year, over their account-books [25, pp. 124-126]. The educator Vives struck deeper, complaining that there was a tendency in the study of numbers which "leads away from the things of life, and estranges men

from perception of what conduces to the common weal" [14, p. 5]. And theologians denounced the presumptuousness of merchants who relied more on their account books than on God [15, p. 64].

Many of the children of trading families proved as resistant to time-discipline as the early generations of factory workers: eighteenth-century letter collections are full of sons who could not or would not measure up to the exacting standards set by their parents or masters. Adam Prattinton, the adolescent who developed a weakness in his copying hand, was choosing a typical method of subverting his elders' ambitions. Others' hostility was more overt. Condemned from early ages to the soul-destroying monotony of endless copying and figuring (or so they often saw it) many youths from commercial families developed an intense animus against the world of business, which they bequeathed, among other places, to the fledgling Romantic movement. The project of inculcating these and other "commercial" skills and virtues into often unwilling subjects helped contribute to the middle-class interest in controlling school curricula. It also led to a new concern with parenting, and especially with mothering, which in the ensuing centuries did much to define (and confine) middle-class women *and* children (and ultimately women and children of other classes). But, for those who could enter into the pure rationality, the austere aesthetic, and the potential for control offered by time-management, writing, and accounting, they possessed a romance all their own.

The realm of commerce was an ill-understood and understandably fearful place to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century trading people, but it was also a fount of opportunity. During the one hundred years prior to the onset of the Industrial Revolution growing numbers of them came to terms with this new environment, developing new work values, new methods of childrearing, and new ways of thinking about and analyzing the world. The techniques they pioneered ended up changing both people's conceptions of themselves and their view of the market. As such they are of the most far-reaching significance for understanding the world we inhabit today.

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