

Book Notes #89

February 2022

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

*From Roman Fertility Ritual to Hallmark Moment:
A Brief History of Valentine's Day &
Valentine Verse (Part Two)*



In last week's **Book Notes**, which can be found [here](#), we discovered that our modern Valentine's Day evolved from the early Christian church's attempts to suppress a revival of a Roman pagan fertility ritual – the Festival of the Lupercalia. In the process, we learned that there were at least two Saint Valentines, that it is possible they were one and the same person, and, perhaps, that neither existed resulting in the Roman Catholic Church's removing them from the Calendar of Saints.

In addition, although there were always hints of romance associated with it, after almost a thousand years during which St. Valentine's Day was a religious feast day, we found that in the 14th century the great English poet Geoffrey Chaucer linked St. Valentine's Day to the custom of choosing one's mate in his poem **Parlement of Foules**. In doing so he also linked St. Valentine's Day to the medieval notion of courtly love, which some say Chaucer was attempting to

satirize.

Regardless, as attested to over the next several centuries by innumerable love poems and other cultural practices, St. Valentine's Day became the locus of a notion of love characterized by highly charged emotional, romantic, and sexual yearnings. Among the cultural practices were the common folks' rural revelries in which pairs of lovers were chosen by lot before a day and night of raucous partying; at the other end of the social scale, the aristocracy transformed the day into one of courtly seduction and elaborate gift giving.

As a result, St. Valentine's Day lost its saintly character and became a harbinger of the changing meaning of the word *secular*, which originally meant a member of the clergy not living in a monastery and therefore not bound by religious rule. As a holiday of romantic and sexual hijinks, feasting and gift giving, Valentine's Day pointed in the direction of "secular's" evolving meaning "denoting attitudes, activities, or other things that have no religious or spiritual basis" and leading to a "doctrine that morality should be based on the well-being of man (*sic*) in the present life, without regard to religious belief or a hereafter." [1]

It was no longer St. Valentine's Day, but simply Valentine's Day. The meaning of the word itself had changed from identifying a Christian saint to referring to the romantic object of one's affections; in short, its focus changed from saint to lover. And then, we'll shortly see, it changed again in the 19th century to mean a postcard or greeting card sent to a person for whom one had affection and respect, like teachers, moms, children, wives, and lovers.

Today we'll explore how that last change occurred leading to our current notion of Valentine's Day: the gifting of 36 million heart shaped boxes of chocolate, the global sending of more than a billion Valentine's Day cards – *Valentines*, and Americans spending almost \$20 billion on gifts, cards, and flowers.

That transformation began in the 18th century with the rise of *sentimentalism*. Emerging in England in the mid-to-late 18th century as a reaction against the Enlightenment's prioritizing of reason and rationalism above all other ways of knowing, literary sentimentalism or "sensibility" prioritized feeling. Sentimentalism gave priority of place to expressions appealing to sentiment, especially "the tender emotions and feelings, as of love, pity, or nostalgia." [2] Philosophically, it was a precursor of the Romantic Movement's rejection of rationalism in favor of other more intuitive and emotional ways of furthering human understanding of God, nature, and human moral behavior.

Early examples of sentimental writing were Samuel Richardson's novel *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*. Sometimes called the first English novel, *Pamela* tells the story of a servant girl and the man who tries to seduce her, who, failing that, marries her. More pointedly, sentimentalism found its triumphant emergence in Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* which recalls the various adventures, usually amorous, of its narrator the Rev. Mr. Yorick as he travels through France and Italy. Rather than the usual travel writing stress on classical learning and objective description of local curiosities, Sterne focused on his personal feelings and emotions. Sterne made his subjective reaction to what he experienced the focal point of his novel. It was not what he thought that mattered, but what he felt – "sensibility" counted more than "sense."

In the Anglo-American experience, no author more fully expressed the triumph of

this philosophy than Jane Austen. Her novels *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, *Northanger Abbey*, and *Emma* epitomized compassion and feeling as desirable character traits in the newly emerging middle-class. But Austen, whose novels seethe with a suppressed sexuality, knew that feeling had to be tempered with rational calculation, for in a world in which women's only economic opportunity was marrying well, the choice of a marriage partner was too critical to leave to emotion alone. In her *Sense and Sensibility*, the Dashwood sisters Elinor and Marianne learn to balance their temperaments – Elinor the rationalist (“sense”) learns to trust her feelings and Marianne the Romantic (“sensibility”) learns to tame her emotions with a tinge of prudence. In so balancing, Austen provided the stage for Valentine's Day's next iteration as a holiday of domestic love.

By Austen's time and the torturously oblique courtships she describes, there was a well-established tradition of sending homemade Valentine “cards” to a lover or to someone whom one was courting, such as this example:



But there was a problem. Frequently, the sender did not know what to say or how to say what they wanted to say. Into this breach stepped enterprising scribblers and publishers who produced works such as the *Gentlemen's Valentine Writer* or the *Bower of Cupid*. They were pamphlets with readymade verses for the tongue-tied. Such as this verse from *The Young Man's Gentlemen Writer*:

Since on this ever happy day,
All nature's full of love and play
yet harmless still if my design,
'tis but to be your valentine.

My dear heart which you behold
Will break when you the same unfold
Even so my heart with love sick pain
Sure wounded is and break in twain. [3]

So, in Jane Austen's world Valentine's Day became domesticated. It was evolving into a decorous, socially acceptable holiday in the middle-class courtship ritual. “Valentine” was again changing its meaning from lover or beloved to meaning a card or message sent to a lover or beloved. The cards were homemade; the sentiments sometimes homemade, but often copied from a book or pamphlet of verses sold for the occasion. It remained a handcraft home hobby until a revolution occurred in Great Britain in the 1840s.



The revolution was both a media and a cultural revolution. Its effects were also unintended. It was Sir Rowland Hill's postal reform act of 1840. Hill thought that if the cost of sending a letter was reduced, the volume of letters sent would increase thereby increasing revenue to the national treasury. In effect, he invented the modern postal service. [4] He was right. What he didn't see is that in the process he would create a cultural revolution and re-invent Valentine's Day (among other holidays and cultural customs). When the one-penny Penny Black postage stamp was issued in 1840, Hill set in motion a cultural shift in communications and social behavior that reverberates down to today.

Its impact on how Valentine's Day was celebrated was immediate and vast. In 1835 there were an estimated 60,000 Valentine cards mailed in Great Britain; in 1841, 400,000; and, by 1871, approximately 1.2 million – in 30 years an increase by a factor of 19 or not quite 2,000 percent! [5] In addition to the postal deluge, Hill inadvertently created a new industry – the greeting card industry, which sprang into existence to fulfill the new and crushing demand for Valentine's cards. London stationers quickly capitalized on the new demand for Valentine cards. They created a craft industry in which scores of women created handmade cards in their factories and shops. Charles Dickens called these factories "Cupid's manufactory." [6]

The new custom of exchanging Valentine's cards quickly crossed the Atlantic to the new American republic in which there were few holidays. In the early 19th century, the only generally celebrated American holidays were the Fourth of July, Washington's Birthday, New Year's Day and an erratically celebrated Christmas and Thanksgiving. Americans seized on the new holiday with a "general mania for Valentines" being reported at Yale University in 1840. The mania was for Valentine cards, the undergrads sending them to one another and their significant others in town and at home. [7] The Valentine cards, however, were either hastily homemade efforts with a few lines scribbled on a piece of paper or poor-quality manufactured cards. When Esther Howland of Worcester, Massachusetts received a Valentine's card from one of her father's colleagues, she thought to herself "I can do better than this." [8]

She did.

Howland was a member of an old New England family. An ancestor was on the Mayflower. Her mother, also named Esther Howland, wrote *The New England Economical Housekeeper and Family Receipt Book* (a cookbook); her father, Southworth Howland, owned a stationer's shop in Worcester and sold his goods throughout New England. Esther herself was one of the first American women to graduate from college. She graduated from Mount Holyoke Women's Seminary, now Mount Holyoke College, in 1847.

When she received that mediocre Valentine card, Esther had an idea. Familiar with the fancy, handcrafted and lacey cards imported from England, she conceived the notion of creating an American card to compete with the imports. She convinced her father to buy her supplies, she made a dozen samples which she convinced her salesman brother, who worked for their father, to take with him on his next sales trip. She hoped for a small return of maybe \$200 in orders, but when she received over \$5,000 in orders, she knew she was in business. First on the third floor of the family home, then in a building she bought in town, Esther employed local women to work for her in the assembly line business she created. Howland would create the prototype card, then the women meticulously copied each by hand. She hired other women to help with packaging and distribution. She incorporated herself as the New England Valentine Company. She extended her line of cards to include other holidays. Howland became the “*Mother of the American Valentine*” and eventually the American greeting card industry.

Howland’s Valentines were works of art. Today the largest collections are at the Hallmark Museum in Kansas City and at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Here are three examples of Howland Valentines:



While Howland’s cards dominated in the upscale portion of the Valentine card market, other 19th century Valentine card types included penny postcards, which fueled mass consumption and made the holiday accessible to all. An example is “Cupid,” a two-card set in which in the first card of a man and woman in formal dress sit discreetly apart on a sofa while Cupid whispers in the man’s ear “Do it now” and in the second card the couple embrace in a long kiss as Cupid slinks away smirking a grin of triumph.

There were also satiric cards called “Vinegar Valentines” in which lovers were jilted, henpecked husbands berated, and other annoying people given their comeuppance. A sample includes a card in which a woman hands a man a lemon inscribed “To My Valentine.” The rest of the copy says:

Tis a lemon that I hand you
And bid you now ‘skiddoo’
Because I love another –
There is no chance for you. [9]

Or another, in which a be-aproned “Henpecked Husband” is scolded:

The way you brag in the saloons
You’d think you were the boss in the house,

But in the house you wash the dishes
And keep as quiet as a mouse. [10]

And there were racy, slyly suggestive Valentines, which by 21st century standards are very tame. A brief sample includes “The Way to Kiss” in which a Victorian gentleman leans over a chaise to kiss a reclining woman in her nightdress as she lifts her head to meet his kiss; or another in which a perky young girl sits alone upon a two-seat sofa as the cutline reads, “Parking permitted evenings by appointment”; or yet another in which a couple ride in an early model automobile, the bug-eyed male driving, the eagerly smiling woman’s arm draped around his shoulder as the tagline reads: “You can go as far as you like with me.”

But Valentine cards, whether high art, like Esther Howland’s, or penny postcards playing cute variations on Cupid and boy-meets-girl, or vinegar cards taunting jilted lovers, grouchy spouses and others with various shortcomings, or racy cards with slyly sexual insinuations, were not the most important cultural shifting impact Valentine’s Day had on 19th century America. As Leigh Eric Schmidt details at some length that the most important impact may have been on consumer culture and America’s shopping habits. [11] Prior to Valentine’s Day’s ascendance in the middle of the 19th century, there had not been a nationally recognized gift giving day. Christmas in any approximation of the way 21st century Americans know it did not develop in America until the early and middle 20th century. While Americans had exchanged minor gifts on Christmas, in the 19th century the major gift giving day was either New Year’s Day or more personal observances such as birthdays and anniversaries.

Beginning in the 1840s and 1850s, Valentine’s Day changed that as it became America’s gift giving day. Although on a much more limited basis, that we still exchange gifts on Valentine’s Day is an echo of that older custom. It can be argued, as Schmidt does, that Valentine’s Day created the American custom of exchanging gifts on holidays. It also changed the way Americans shopped. Beginning with T.W. Strong Publisher and Engraver in New York City and Turner and Fisher’s Emporium in Boston, Valentine’s Day gift giving did three things: 1) it created the notion of gift giving as an integral part of the holiday; 2) it created the concept of the department store and mass display advertising to stimulate consumption and 3) it made shopping a woman’s province.

Prior to the 1840s and the 1850s, most gifts were handmade objects or consumables made at home; after that period, they were manufactured items purchased in stores. Stores evolved from comparatively simple “notions” stores selling cards, personal grooming items, and small gifts to large department stores selling elaborate items for personal consumption. This change was driven by the consumer demand created by mass advertising in the newly emerging mass distribution newspapers. Gifts evolved from something very personal to tokens of style signifying that both the purchaser and the recipient were attuned to the *au courant* trends of the day. And, lastly, and perhaps most importantly, holiday gift shopping became the domain of women, who could now shop unattended in the previously all-male environment of the city’s commercial emporiums, an old-fashioned word for department store.

In short, the new American holiday of Valentine’s Day driven by the combination of shrewd retailers, the new industry of persuasive advertising in newspapers (the penny press), “flyers” (cheap, throwaway handbills) and large-scale billboards created American consumer culture. And, in the process, began American

women's liberation from the confinement of home and hearth.

How did chocolate become associated with love and romance? Who originated heart-shaped boxes of chocolate candies as a Valentine's Day gift?

According to legend, which modern chemists have debunked, chocolate is an aphrodisiac. Nonetheless, popular culture and consumer buying habits persist in thinking chocolate the perfect confection to offer one's beloved. Its erotic overtones are ancient, but they might have reached their peak, so to speak, with Madame du Barry, the 18th century French courtesan and mistress of King Louis XV. Du Barry began each morning with a cup of cocoa. [12] Presumably not at breakfast, she is alleged to have offered her lovers cocoa mixed with amber to increase both their ardor and their stamina. In American popular culture, a box of chocolate's erotic overtones was most memorably portrayed in the 1934 film *Dinner at Eight* in which screen siren Jean Harlow, bedecked in silk lingerie while lounging in an oversized bed, salaciously eats chocolate while teasing her just off-screen lover. [13]

Heart-shaped boxes of chocolate have a bit more prosaic origin. In 1824, John Cadbury founded Cadbury Chocolates in Birmingham, England. His son Richard Cadbury introduced heart-shaped boxes of chocolate as Valentine's gifts in 1868. [14] Russell Stover Chocolates started in Denver in 1923 with homemade heart-shaped boxes of chocolate. [15] From these rather humble origins, Valentine's Day chocolate sales have soared to 58 million pounds of chocolate, 36 million heart-shaped boxes of chocolate and total sales of about \$1.7 billion dollars spent on Valentine's chocolate! [16]

The complete domestication of Valentine's Day as an American holiday occurred in the early 20th century with the rise of Joyce C. Hall and his brothers who founded Halls Department Store in Kansas City in 1913. [17] One might more accurately say, Joyce C. Hall began the "Hallmarkization" of American holidays with he and his brothers' Valentine cards. Hall allegedly said, "it's the sentiment that counts" and with that philosophy plus an unrelenting quest for excellence, he and his brothers built a greeting card colossus and then an entertainment empire.

Hall, who preferred to be called J.C. rather than Joyce, was the son of an itinerant Methodist preacher who abandoned his family. J.C. Hall became a peddler at the age of nine hustling temperance handbills, then proceeded to door-to-door selling offering women's perfume. In 1905, he began selling postcards linked to holidays and by 1910 had moved to Kansas City and began selling Valentines. He and his brothers opened a small stationery store, but when in 1915 the store burned and they realized they made more money from selling greeting cards, in particular Valentines, they bought a small engraving business and began printing their own cards. And, as the saying goes, the rest is history.

They didn't use the Hallmark brand until the late 1920s. J.C. Hall noted how medieval jewelers branded their work with a "mark"; he conceived of the "*Hallmark*" brand and began using it in 1928. He solidified his company's position in American folklore in 1944 when Hallmark began using one of the most famous slogans in American advertising history, "*When you care enough to send the very best.*" With Hallmark's focus on sentiment, family, and home, the Hallmark approach redefined Valentine's Day as a domestic holiday of family, friends, and others deserving of appreciation and care – most famously teachers. In so doing, Valentine's Day morphed yet again from a romantic holiday to a more

general holiday of goodwill joining Thanksgiving and Christmas as America's "feel good" trinity of holidays.

Although it is not the original Hallmark Valentine card, this one dates from the 1910s:



And with that, we end where we began in [Part One](#) of this two part **Book Notes** on the history of Valentine's Day celebrating a holiday that no longer honors a saint, still has more than a tinge of romance about it, but now is a domestic consumer celebration in which Americans will send 36 million heart-shaped boxes of chocolate, spend almost \$20 billion on gifts, candy, flowers, wine, and fine dining, and send more than 145 million Valentine cards.

It's a long way from Lupercalia!

Still, it's a holiday based on romance and how better to express romance than through poetry. Frequently cited among the world's greatest love poems, Shakespeare's Sonnet #116 – "Let me not to the marriage of true minds ..." – might, in fact, be misread. Helen Vendler, in her ***The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets***, argues that it is a rejoinder to a previous utterance and not necessarily the ultimate definition of true love. [18]

She might be right, to which I reply, "So what?" Authorial intention is interesting, but not in itself definitive.

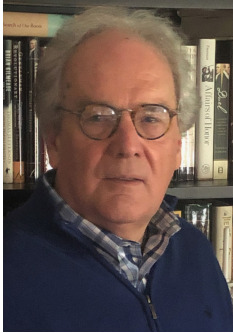
For almost half a millennium, readers have found it love's consummate expression. So, concluding our tour of Valentine's Day's history, here is Shakespeare's last word on the subject:

Sonnet #116

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments; love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O no, it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;

Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved. [19]

For a more complete Valentine experience, replete with numerous photos and a bit of romantic music, check out the [Jefferson Educational Society's Facebook page](#) for my *American Holidays* series [Valentine's Day: A Not So Short History](#).



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"Do I Have a Ghost of a Chance..." [This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY](#)
18th Century Homemade Valentine Card at Julie Ratcliffe available [here](#) accessed February 5, 2022.
The Gentlemen's Valentine Writer at **GardenBite.com** available [here](#) accessed February 5, 2022.
Penny Black postage stamp [This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-NC](#)
Green Howland Valentine at **The Met** available [here](#) accessed February 5, 2022.
Dual Howland Valentine card at **Portable Press** available [here](#) accessed February 5, 2022.
"This Heart of Mine..." at **Hallmark.com** available [here](#) accessed February 6, 2022.

End Notes

1. For a discussion of the evolving meaning of *secular*, see "*Secular*" at **Google Dictionary** available [here](#). Also, see "*Secular (adj.)*" at **Online Etymology Dictionary** available [here](#) both accessed February 2, 2022.
2. For a more elaborate discussion of *sentimentalism* see "*Sentimentalism*" at **Encyclopedia.com** available [here](#) and "*Moral Sentimentalism*" in the **Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy** available [here](#) both accessed February 5, 2022.
3. "*Since on this ever happy day*" at **Julie Ratcliffe** available [here](#) accessed February 5, 2022.
4. "*Sir Rowland Hill*" in the **Encyclopedia Britannica** available [here](#) accessed February 5, 2022.
5. "*Valentine's Day*" in **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** available [here](#) accessed February 5, 2022.
6. Wild, Wolfgang. "*13 wonderfully weird vintage Valentine's Day cards*" at **Considerable** available [here](#) accessed February 5, 2022. See also **Dickens' Journals Online** [here](#) accessed February 5, 2022.
7. Schmidt, Leigh Eric. **Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays** (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 50.
8. Following discussion of Esther Howland drawn from Brown, Adam, "*Cupid's Capitalist: Meet Esther Howland, Creator of the Modern Valentine*," **Forbes** available [here](#) accessed February 5, 2022; "*Esther Howland*," in **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** available [here](#) accessed February 5, 2022; and "*Esther Howland, Worcester's Valentine Queen*" at **The New England Historical Society** available [here](#) accessed February 5, 2022.
9. Corrigan, Maya, *Lemon to My Valentine* in "*When Valentines Were Vicious: A Brief History of the Vinegar Valentine*" in **CrimeReads** available [here](#) accessed February 5, 2022.
10. *Henpecked Husband Valentine* at **HipMamaJenn**, "**A Cruel Tradition of 1850s, Vinegar Valentines aka: Penny Dreadfuls**" available [here](#) accessed February 5, 2022.
11. Cf. Leigh Eric Schmidt, "*St. Valentine's Day Greeting*" in **Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays**. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 38-105.
12. "*Seductive Facts About Madame DuBarry, The Last Royal Mistress of France*," at **Factinate** available [here](#) accessed February 6, 2022.
13. "*Dinner at Eight*" at **TCM Turner Classic Movies** available [here](#) accessed February 6, 2022.
14. "*Cadbury*" in **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** [here](#) accessed February 6, 2022.
15. "*Russell Stover Candies*" in **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** available [here](#) accessed February 6,

- 2022.
16. Oliver, Rae. "Valentine's Day Gifts 2022: How Much Will We Spend on the Day of Love?" at **Truly Blog Beyond Ordinary** (January 28, 2022) available [here](#) accessed February 6, 2022.
 17. This discussion of the rise of Joyce C. Hall and the Hallmark Greeting Card company's impact on Valentine's Day borrows from "History" at **Hallmark Inc.** available [here](#); "J.C. Hall" at **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** available [here](#); "Joyce. C. Hall" at **The History Nut of Missouri** available [here](#); "Hall, J.C." at **Encyclopedia.com** available [here](#), all accessed February 6, 2022; and Leigh Eric Schmidt, "St. Valentine's Day Greeting" in **Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays**. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 94-102.
 18. Vendler, Helen. **The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets**. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 487-493.
 19. Shakespeare, William. "Sonnet #116" in Helen Vender's **The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets**. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 487.

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