Call Me Mister

In which the author laments the demise of formal address and other useful ceremonial distinctions.

by George Watson

Some years ago, when T. S. Eliot was the grand old man of English letters, a younger poet, Kathleen Raine, wrote a letter to a newspaper complaining about the growing lack of formality in London literary life.

She had just had a letter from an aspiring young poet she hardly knew addressing her as "Dear Katherine." So the offense was double. Her name was Kathleen, after all, and in any case they were not on first-name terms. Worse still, the letter writer was asking her to show his poems to someone he called Tom Eliot, whom he had never met. It was all going too far, said Miss Raine, too far and too fast, and unless someone protested it would all go further still.

Which it did. But the rot had set in much earlier. On November 12, 1940, as the danger of a Nazi invasion receded, Winston Churchill issued a memo from 10 Downing Street condemning the use of first names. "The Prime Minister has noticed that the habit of Private Secretaries and others addressing each other by their Christian names about matters of an official character is increasing, and ought to be stopped." First names should only be used in brief notes, he went on, or in "personal and private" communications. That shows how soon the decline started. Churchill, who was by then in his sixties, already belonged to another age. The last British prime minister to enter the House of Commons during the reign of Queen Victoria, who died in 1901, Churchill seems also to have been the first whom his sovereign addressed in letters by his first name. During the war, King George VI often wrote to him affectionately as "My dear Winston." There is no reason to suppose Churchill resented it. But then, his objection to informality among officials had a practical motive: "It is hard enough to fol-

low people by their surnames."

By the end of Churchill's century, however, informality had gone much further, and it is no longer realistic to expect to be addressed by a last name at all, with or without a Mister. It is first names all the way. Perhaps that helps to explain the vast popularity of costume dramas based on classic novels such as Jane Austen's or E. M. Forster's. The appeal of such films is anthropological, among other things, since they tell of a world of manners in the last century, or early in this, hardly less remote than that of the Trobriand Islands. In *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, the Bennets, who have been married for years and have several daughters of marriageable age, address each other with evident affection as Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Bennet. That probably leaves a young audience gasping in wonder. Why did people ever behave like that? Many who watch such films, it seems clear, have not just forgotten formality but the whole case for formality, which goes far wider than forms of address. So perhaps this is the moment to make that case.

Formality and informality are contrastive systems, and the one exists only by virtue of the other. If you abolish formality, then you abolish informality too. Those who say they like things to be informal should consider that argument closely. It is not only forms that are lost when they are forgotten. It is intimacy too. That is why, if you totally abandon conventions in favor of social simplicity, you find conventions re-entering the back door. In the 40 years I have known the United States, as a British visitor, I have watched middle-class America pass through several such changes. In the 1950s, as if conscious that the new simplicity was making life dull, which it was, the American middle class dedicated itself briefly to the interesting task of recomplicating it, and a visitor could find life in the United States something of a social minefield. Alistair Cooke used to call it "Galloping Gentility." Then it turned simple again in the 1960s, as a dogmatic protest against a repressive society; then more formal again. That may surprise Americans who usually think of their social life as rootedly simple, compared with that of Europe, but a British visitor can find its minor ceremonials exacting, and had better get them right. Decorum is a matter of little things, and little things can mean a lot.

The British, for example, do not necessarily shake hands with a host on leaving a party; in America the gesture is obligatory, and its omission can be resented. Nor do the British repeat a name on being introduced, which to that small extent makes life simpler in the United Kingdom, where the name is in any case often inaudible and one is not necessarily supposed to care. If Americans think their social life informal, they should think again. It has plenty of rules, along with its own characteristic table manners. Some of them are nationally distinctive, and strangers had better try to observe them or at least take note of them. But then it is a law of existence that one only notices a rule when it is unfamiliar. Rules you already know, such as saying please and thank-you or knowing how to use a knife and fork, are obeyed without thinking, and cease to exist, in the mind, as rules at all.

Some issues are subtler than shaking hands. The trouble with being told, "You don't have to worry, we are all quite informal here," is that the statement can easily mask a silent certitude that rules will in fact be observed. A visitor to an East Coast university was once assured at a faculty party, where first names were universal, that everybody was treated equally—no nonsense, for example, about the college president arriving last, as royalty does, or leaving first. There was a good deal of happy laughter, in which the president joined, at the thought of institutions where such rules are kept. Then the visitor noticed that the president had arrived last, and, incidentally, left first.

Another aspect to the cult of the informal in America is its myth of youth, which Bernard Shaw once remarked was

among its oldest traditions. There is a tendency to think that the United States is a recent institution. The myth may have weakened lately, but it is still there, and you can still astonish people by telling them that the United States has the oldest constitution in the world or, to drop a real bombshell, that the White House, which was rebuilt after Washington, D.C. was burned in 1814, is older than Buckingham Palace. The earliest surviving portions of Buckingham Palace, which are invisible from the street, date only from the 1820s, and what you see from the outside, if you are prepared to crowd in among all those Japanese tourists, dates from around 1913, including its famous balcony. That is a truth that goes against the grain, and if you have come to England to see old things, that is not what you want to be told.

In Europe, Old World courtesy can be sadly lacking, and the decay of formal address is only part of a wider pattern. E. M. Forster, shortly before he died in 1970, remarked that he had stopped writing fiction because he did not understand modern manners. In his Cambridge youth, young men had walked arm in arm and addressed each other by their last names; now they did not walk arm in arm, and addressed each other by their first names. That must have made him feel he wanted to retire. But if the formal and the informal depend on each other, then first names have by now lost their power to make any point at all. Once upon a time their initial use felt like ice breaking, especially between a man and a woman. In *The Eustace Diamonds* (1873), Anthony Trollope tells how, when Frank Greystock proposes marriage to Lucy Morris, who already loves him, she begins her letter of acceptance with "Dear Mr. Greystock," and it was a matter of great consideration for her, Trollope remarks, to get even as far as that.

> But after biting her pen for ten minutes, during which she pictured to herself how pleasant it would be to call him Frank when he should have told her so, and had found, upon repeated whispered trials, that of all names it was the pleasantest to pronounce, she decided upon refraining from writing it now.

No doubt she did manage it in the end, after they were safely married—the world had moved on from Jane Austen's time—and there are other trials of courage the heroines of English fiction have never had to face at all. Pronouns, for example. English is the only European language with only one pronoun of address, which is "you." On the continent of Europe, where there are two, there are tough decisions to be taken every day, and you had better get them right. In northern India, there are three pronouns of address, which occasionally baffles even Indians. But one can always walk around a pitfall. One solution, a student at the University of Delhi once told me, is to address a total stranger in English.

First names were once a shock, though sometimes a pleasant one. Virginia Woolf, in a letter to Siegfried Sassoon in which she first called him Siegfried, calls it uncompromisingly "the horrid plunge," which amounts to asking him to forgive her, as he did. In English boys' schools down to the Second World War, last names were in universal use, and even to know the first name of another boy could feel like acquiring a guilty secret that could one day be used to mock him. But then a lot of English first names from the 19th century, such as Archibald and Marmaduke, suddenly looked ridiculous in the 20th, for unknown reasons, which perhaps explains the sudden fashion among authors for initials on title pages:

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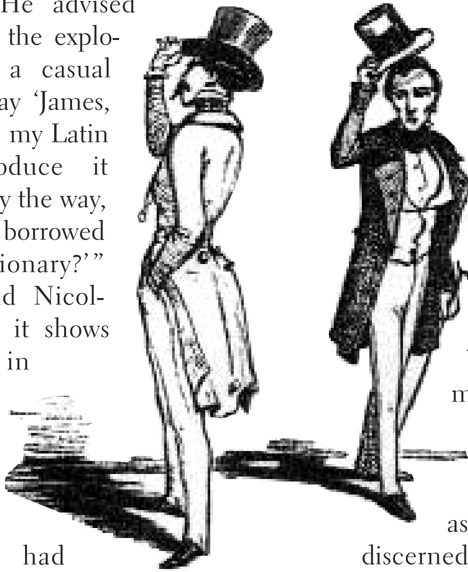
P. G. Wodehouse, I. A. Richards, C. S. Lewis. I only once heard Lewis called Clive, which was indeed his baptismal name, and that was by a colleague who was his contemporary. In practice he expected to be called Jack.

On the other hand, the "horrid plunge" sometimes had to be taken. The question was how. When Harold Nicolson's son Nigel was a schoolboy at Eton in the 1930s, he wrote to his father asking how he could most tactfully switch to calling his best friend James. Harold Nicolson, a helpful and loving father, had an answer to that. He advised Nigel to "smother the explosive word" with a casual phrase. "Do not say 'James, have you borrowed my Latin dictionary?' Introduce it more gently: 'Oh by the way, James, have you borrowed my Latin dictionary?'" That is in Harold Nicolson's diaries, and it shows that even if in English there is only one pronoun of address, subtle problems still remain. But then Harold Nicolson had been a diplomat, and for subtle problems he had subtle solutions.



Where do we go next? Some would say that formal address is now forever dead and buried, that we should accept it by shifting to other ceremonial distinctions such as wearing neckties for dinner, if not always for lunch, opening doors for ladies and older men, and deferring to the opinions of social superiors. Manners change, but remain manners. The dogs bark and the caravan moves on. Nobody bows anymore, for example, though it was common in Europe down to the 19th century and one of the reasons, as the poet Keats tells in a letter of May 1818, why his brother George emigrated to farm in the United States. He disliked bowing, or rather the obligation to bow, and "I would sooner he should till the ground than bow to a customer." The curtsey seems to have gone the same way as the bow—gone with the wind—though it was once customary in the Old South.

All this once seemed of enormous importance, and perhaps was. When Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in the 1830s and wrote a famous book called *Democracy in America*, the country did not yet have universal adult, or indeed male, suffrage, even in the northern states. But then by democracy Tocqueville meant the abolition of hereditary rank and the manners that habitually accompanied it, and he saw America as a land where differences of rank no longer counted, as he believed, and had not yet been replaced by the majesty of the law. The natural fear of such a society was anarchy. The more realistic fear, as Tocqueville perceptively discerned, was an excess of social conformity. Leveling could make for a dull, uncreative land.

Perhaps he was right to be worried. Americans still do not sense the majesty of law, though they take prudent care to stay out of its way, and formal address has mostly gone the way of the curtsey and the bow. Social conformity, many would say, is here to stay, and I no longer confidently expect to be addressed as Mister, on either side of the Atlantic, though I am not against it. But though much is lost, much remains, and other formalities expressive of social distance are still firmly in place and likely to remain so. I hope in my time to take advantage of all of them. I wear a tie for dinner, if not for lunch, expect younger men to open doors for me, and above all I expect them to defer to my opinions.

"Shall the people rule?" was Bryan's slogan in his third presidential campaign in 1908.