I wish to thank Gary Schneider for his thoughtful review of my book. It gives me the opportunity to extend the important debate about the impact of English epistolary culture in the long 18th century. *The Pen and the People* is the culmination of two decades of thought and published work about a wide range of epistolary topics. My goal was to set the democratisation of letter-writing against the backdrop of broader developments: the expansion of postal services, the rise of literacy and educational opportunities, shifts in literary culture, improvements in communications, and economic growth. The book looks at a wide array of letter-writers, observes their practices in the context of social and economic developments, and shows how all three were interconnected in webs of epistolary networks. I believe that it answers three basic questions that I asked of 63 hitherto, unknown family archives: why did people write letters, for what purposes were they used, and what impact did they have on individuals, their families, and the wider society?

The answers to these questions enabled me to uncover the hidden, personal worlds of middling and lower-sort men and women who have been excluded from previous epistolary studies. I did not think this would be possible when I started work on my book ten years ago. Like other scholars, I assumed that large archives of letters written by people below the rank of gentry simply did not exist. I decided to challenge this myth by searching the underused resources of local record offices. Much to my surprise, I found a feast of neglected manuscript sources that allowed me to radically extend the evidence of letter-writing into the middling and lower classes. *The Pen and the People* grew out of these new-found riches. It contains case studies of letter-writers from different regions with diverse occupations, religious beliefs, and social status. Archives in the north of England were particularly rich and implied the widespread availability of informal schooling that accompanied the region’s industrial development.

The book itself builds sequentially from an overview of the material conditions that enabled letter-writing, to an examination of labouring and middling-sort writers, and finally to a study of the relationship of letters to the development of 18th-century literary culture. Each chapter moves chronologically and traces the rise of a popular epistolary tradition. As Betty Schellenberg has noted: ‘This tradition in turn parallels – indeed, enables – the first stages in the emergence of a middle-class culture defined by well-developed literacy and self-consciousness about personal identity and class affiliation’. Thus the scope of the sources matched the breadth of the topics covered and allowed me to enter a number of significant debates.

To achieve transparency and to make my arguments explicit for readers, I carefully laid out my research methodology in Appendix I (pp. 232–5). Readers can see how I selected my sample, and why I focused on in-depth case studies, rather than a kaleidoscope of thematic fragments. I am delighted that Gary Schneider found them ‘compelling’, and that he focused on my mini-biographies of letter-writers and their relation to the analysis of letters, letter-writing and epistolary literacy – a new cultural category that I discuss below. In fact the inter-connections between these elements is exactly what I set out to demonstrate.

Naturally, the gender, rank, occupation, location, and faith of letter-writers had a major impact on the types of letters they composed and the patterns of letter-writing practices that they adopted or resisted. Unfortunately, most epistolary studies lack the sources needed to describe the personal lives and relationships of specific letter-writers. This can become a problem when scholars use letters in their work, and many researchers have discussed the problems of interpreting them with me. It is natural to become overwhelmed by the detail and fragmentary nature of information found in letters. Likewise, anyone can use a letter to extract topical quotations or defend an argument about letter writing. But this usually shows what
the passage means to the historian, not what it meant to a particular writer at a specific time and place. The magic genie that makes insightful interpretation possible is, of course, deep contextual knowledge of the lives and writings of both correspondents. Then, the social relationships between them can be insightfully described. Only with this data in hand, can scholars determine why letters were written, for what purposes, and with what impacts on society.

Thus I chose to work only on archives that contained data necessary for such an analysis. My letter collections lay sheltered inside a supportive web of other types of documents over several generations (a requirement for my using them as case studies): birth and death records, marriage settlements, wills, genealogical sources, account books, diaries, journals, school books, copy books, writing exercises, reading records, and original stories and poetry. They show that letter-writing was but one of many interconnected acts of writing with common language, sources, and compositional patterns. This interweaving of sources enabled me to show that after 1750, there was an epistolary moment when real letters and literature became closely intertwined. The presence of these documents also made my mini-biographies possible. More important, when the lives of real people are linked to long runs of letters and replies, case studies become not just examples, but develop into experiments. As Filippo de Vivo notes: ‘Examples confirm a hypothesis through accumulation … Experiments allow us to change a particular interpretation’. (2)

This passage allows me to enter a recent debate initiated by John Brewer about the uses of micro-history to gain new points of view through a commitment to a realism that lies beyond the confines of positivism. Brewer shows the close perspective, space, and historical distance of micro-histories and their potential to shed light on larger topics. (3) My deployment of micro-history to discuss ‘macro’ themes expresses my theoretical perspective about how to write history at a time when grand narratives have been found wanting. The book’s biographical narratives and descriptions of processes like letter-writing reflect my judgment that the most effective use of intimate letters is from an experiential point of view. Of course, different sources are most appropriate for different methods; nor is micro-history limited to discussion of the ‘small’. As de Vivo contends: ‘To identify micro-history with the size of its object is a common misconception … What is small is the metaphorical distance between subject and object arising from close observation’. In practice, sharp focus can be combined with long-range vision. (4) Like Brewer, I believe that micro-history ‘is best understood as the commitment to a humanist agenda which places agency and historical meaning in the realm of day-to-day transactions, and which sees their recuperation as the proper task of the historian’. (5)

The fruits of this methodology may be seen in my arguments about two important topics: the development of the post office and the rise of popular literacy. I thank History Today and the BBC for recognizing the importance of my work on the history of the post office – especially concerning the neglected 18th century. Indeed, how can one understand the topic of letter-writing without knowing how letters were sent? Personal comments about the post office, often deleted in printed letter collections, show that the Royal Mail had altered the rhythms of daily life long before the 19th century. By 1800, a service created to censor mail had become a private necessity and a public right, extending across the nation and enhancing independent opinions of all strata of society. In this new context, as Anthony Fletcher notes, Jane Fairfax’s remark in Emma about the wonders of the post office, finally makes sense. (6) The development of the Royal Mail made the democratisation of letter-writing possible by the end of the 18th century.

The spread of letter-writing or ‘epistolary literacy’ to middling and lower-sort writers is perhaps the most important finding of the book. This new cultural category allowed me to approach the measurement of literacy in a way other than name signing. Using epistolary literacy as a framework for the book, I was able to qualitatively measure and compare the basic skills of different letter-writers. The results of these assessments forced me to reconsider the prevailing orthodoxy that there was little growth in popular literacy after 1750 – a period of surging economic growth and proto-industrialization.

I hope that my work will stimulate a new interest in the study of literacy, which was incredibly productive in the 1980s, but lay relatively dormant thereafter. In the last two decades, literacy percentages of 60 per cent for men and 40 per cent for women have been automatically repeated in secondary works. It is time to reconsider these numbers in light of new studies of the letters of paupers and prisoners, and my own masses
of family correspondence written by people in villages without schools. *The Pen and the People* explains how basic literacy was developed through a wide range of makeshift strategies, intermittent, informal schooling, and support from community and kin.

It is my hope that readers of this review will consider and discuss these findings. They paint a new picture of popular culture and suggest that epistolary literacy had economic, social, and political impacts on society. My work also maintains that a deeply embedded epistolary ethos contributed to the shape of a literary culture marked by the cult of sensibility, use of literary reviews, and the rise of the novel. My next project will extend the subject of popular literacy into the nineteenth century and analyse its relationship to the history of schooling and self-education, as well as social mobility and class formation.

I also invite readers of this review to examine the tables in Appendices II–VI (pp. 236–53), which list locations, call numbers and contents of archives used to write the book. Other tables give biographical information about letter-writers, and list the letter types, social relationships, and uses of letters by different families. Finally, the principal subjects that people wrote about are noted for each collection. My hope is that researchers will use these tables to locate correspondence that will be useful to their work. Scholars of class, religion, and gender will find a great deal of helpful material. There are many more books to be written by using documents in these archives. I look forward to their appearance, and I appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this online forum.

**Notes**

2. Filippo de Vivo, ‘Prospect or refuge? Microhistory, history on the large scale: a response’, *Cultural and Social History*, 7, 3 (September 2010), 387–97, 392. Back to (2)
4. de Vivo, 387. Back to (4)
5. Brewer, 87. Back to (5)
6. Anthony Fletcher, ‘Review’, *History* (forthcoming). I thank Fletcher for sharing this with me. Back to (6)

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