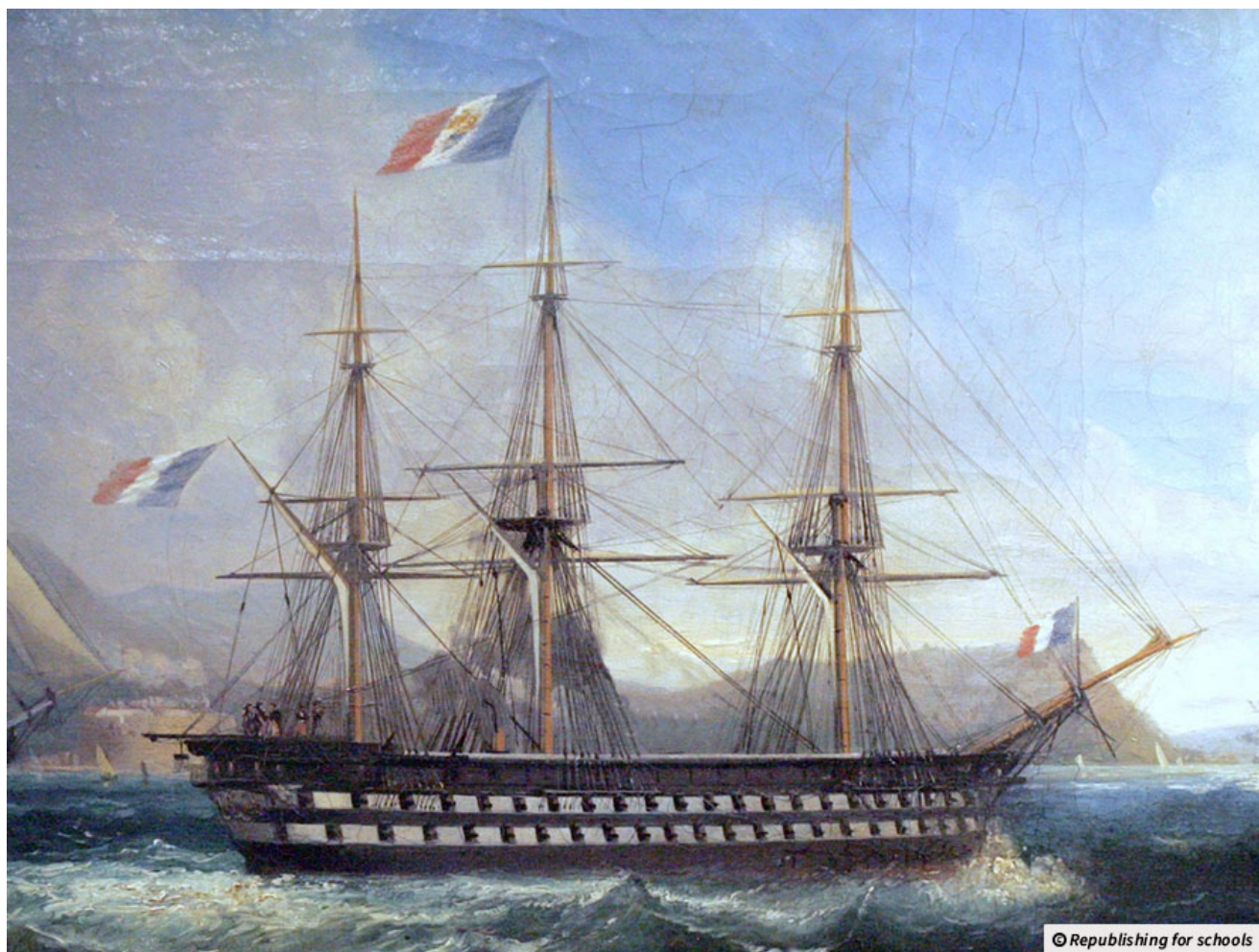


 theday.co.uk/18th-century-letters-reveal-agonies-of-love-3



Sailing failings: *The French navy was almost wiped out during the course of the war.*

Is human emotion unchanging? Over 100 letters which were sent to French prisoners during the Seven Years War, but which never reached them, have been opened for the first time.

History professor Renaud Morieux did not know what to expect when he opened the box. Inside were three piles of letters, held together by ribbon. “The letters were very small and were sealed,” he says.

“I realised I was the first person to read these very personal messages since they were written.”

The letters were sent during the **Seven Years War** to the crew of a warship called the *Galatée*. When it was captured, the French authorities sent the letters to the **Admiralty** in London for forwarding.

Renaud Morieux believes officials opened and read two of the letters, hoping for naval information. But as the letters seemed only to contain “family stuff”, they were put into storage. “It’s

agonising how close they got,” he says.

One letter was to the ship’s first **lieutenant**, Louis Chambrelan, from his wife Marie Dubosc.

“I could spend the night writing to you,” she wrote. “I am your forever faithful wife. Good night, my dear friend. It is midnight. I think it is time for me to rest.”

Several letters were written to Nicolas Quesnel, a young sailor from **Normandy**. They reflect tension in his family.

His mother tells him off for writing more to his fiancée than to her. She adds: “In your letters you never mention your father. This hurts me greatly.”

Morieux did some research and found that Nicolas's mother had remarried. So this "father" was in fact Nicolas's stepfather. The implication is that the two men did not get on.

"These letters are about universal human experiences," Morieux says. "They're not unique to France or the 18th Century. They reveal how we all cope with major life challenges.

"When we are separated from loved ones by events beyond our control, like the pandemic or wars, we have to work out how to stay in touch — how to reassure, care for people and keep the passion alive."

Is human emotion unchanging?

Enveloped hope

Yes: The letters show that love, anxiety, sorrow and anger were felt as strongly in the 18th Century as they are today — and that the things that aroused them were very much the same.

No: Our emotions are governed by the culture we live in. What some communities find frightening, others find exciting. Some languages have words for particular feelings that do not exist in others.

Or... It may not change, but our ability to express it does. The art of writing letters — particularly love letters — has largely disappeared, and text messages are a poor substitute.

Some people say

"To be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others."

Nelson Mandela (1918 – 2013), South African statesman

"Letters are among the most significant memorial a person can leave behind them."

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749 – 1832), German writer

Empty heading

What do you think?

Six steps to discovery

1. Wonder

What questions do you have? - For example: How old did you have to be to join the French navy? How many ships did it have?

2. Investigate

What are the facts? - The history of the Seven Years War was already well documented, and this adds to our knowledge of it. But why the letters were not forwarded to the prisoners is a matter of conjecture. Consider the difference.

3. Construct

What is your point of view? - You are asked if you would hate prison as much as an 18th Century sailor. Think about what you would say.

Glossary

Seven Years War - A global conflict that began in 1756.

Admiralty - In the past, the Admiralty was the UK government department that was responsible for the navy.

Lieutenant - An army officer of middle rank.

Normandy - A region of northern France.