



BY ELLEN HILL

The lost art of letter writing

It's the 1920s. A traveller sits in the Carrington Hotel's lamp-lit lounge, pen in hand, writing on hotel stationery.

She writes swiftly, eager to share her day's adventures. In our era of instant emails and Snapchat, the moment feels distant.

1822: An epic in ink

Long before telegrams or texts, a British settler named Mrs Hawkins writes to her sister in England about the harrowing journey down the precipitous Mount York pass with her children and a female servant, carrying her infant son in the heat.

She marvels at Australia's strange beauty, noting the brilliant plumage of birds and the "horrid" laughter of kookaburras at sunset.

Her letter reveals the dangers and anxieties of a woman on the frontier.

"I should say there was never before such a party of females without any

protection... if any snakes attacked us, I fear we should have lost our lives, but none of us would have had the courage to kill them".

This single, long letter captures a slice of colonial life and the wild Blue Mountains landscape in cursive loops and ink blots.

1920s: Love and gossip by post

Leap forward a century, and the Blue Mountains is a famed leisure destination with luxury hotels and a postcard culture.

Ma Weston (as she was fondly known) is spending January 1922 at the Carrington in Katoomba to take the mountain air. She writes letters home every few days.

Lonely yet dutiful, Ma fills her letters with mundane hotel happenings and maternal affection, always signing off with "thousands of kisses" for her beloved granddaughter, Girlie.

When her adult daughter

goes on a mere 10-day honeymoon, Ma sends eight letters to the newlyweds, fretting "Is she okay?" and urging her daughter to "just let him do what he wants to do, darling, like I did".

Ma Weston's correspondence also paints a picture of 1920s Katoomba society, from grand New Year's balls to snide remarks about "misbehaving" younger women.

These faded pages speak volumes about her character and circumstances.

Through Ma's witty, worried letters, we glimpse a tender truth: in an age of elegant handwriting and "snail mail", a mother's love and local gossip travelled far.

Sometimes a single picture and a few scribbled lines say it all in any age.

Blue Mountains History Tours (Facebook [@bluemtnshistorytours](https://www.facebook.com/bluemtnshistorytours)) historian Paul Innes says postcards in the 20th

century were the Instagram posts of their day: concise, picturesque and cheerful.

"Having a glorious time in Sydney and Blue Mountains... The scenery is grand. Much love," reads one 1920s postcard, the cursive note penned over an image of a misty mountain vista.

Postcards might boast of blue skies and "wish you were here" sentiments, even if the reality was rain and tired feet, much like social media posts today.

The big difference is timing

You'd pick a card with a view (likely Echo Point or Govetts Leap), write a message and post it.

Weeks later, it would arrive carrying stamps and postmarks as souvenirs of its journey.

"It was a real sense of occasion to get a card from far away," Paul says.

Whether it's a thick letter in an envelope or a WhatsApp blip on a screen, the impulse of a message is the same.

But something important shifts when we move from pen to pixel.

Paul Innes has boxes of "lovely, long, descriptive letters" his mother and aunts sent him decades ago.

The modern email has taken up that role but "what you do miss, though, is the personal handwriting".

The swoop of a fountain pen and the idiosyncrasies of handwriting are personal fingerprints no emoji can replace.