

Mary Anning's Commonplace Book

By Thomas W. Goodhue

Although Mary Anning found fossils that have graced natural history museums in many nations and fueled the growth of the new science of palaeontology, little of her writing survives. About one hundred of her letters have been identified but most remain unpublished. Her “Fourth Notebook” provides some rare glimpses into her thoughts late in life.¹

William St. Clair points out that such commonplace books, which later would later be called albums, became so popular during the Romantic Era that they constitute a revived literary form of the manuscript miscellanies of the 16th and 17th centuries. There were few published anthologies in this time and books were too expensive for most readers to collect many of them: “If you love a poem, there is no substitute for having your own copy, even if you have to do the copying yourself.” Most of these notebooks, apart from those kept by naval officers on long voyages, were kept by women.²

In selecting the material she copied, Anning made it her own. As Judith Pascoe observes, “By choosing Byron’s poem out of all the poems she might have copied into her commonplace book, Anning made that poem her own, imbuing it with a significance that was unique to her own circumstances.”³

As Martha Sherwood has remarked, “Educated, intellectually curious people of modest means compensated for lack of wherewithal to assemble a library by copying their favorite texts into a ‘Commonplace Book.’ . . . The beauty of a commonplace book is that one can be certain

¹Anning’s “Fourth Notebook” was given by one of Mary’s friends to Richard Owen and catalogued as NHMS XXXVII/2--Hugh S. Torrens, “Mary Anning (1799-1847) of Lyme; ‘the greatest fossilist the world ever knew,’” (Presidential Address) *British Journal for the History of Science* 28 (1995), 278. After the Natural History department of the British Museum moved to the new Museum of Natural History in South Kensington, Charles Davies Sherborn saw no reason to keep it, even though the museum proudly displayed her specimens, and offered it to the British Museum, whose curators rejected the gift as “scarcely appropriate” for preservation--W. H. Edwards letter to W. D. Lang, 30 April 1947, NHMS XXXVII/2/b, now at the Dorset County Museum. W.D.Lang ensured its preservation among his papers at the Dorset County Museum. It is scheduled to go on extended display in the new Mary Anning Wing of the Lyme Regis Museum in June 2017. It can be downloaded from www.lymeregismuseum.co.uk/lrm/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Mary-Annings-Commonplace-Book.pdf

None of the sources identified for the material in this notebook is earlier than the 1820s, providing few clues as to when she may have copied them. Her previous three notebooks, sadly, have not been found.

² St. Clair, 1990, 9; 2004, 227.

³ Pascoe, 159-160

that the person who compiled it valued the information highly, unlike, say, the stuff I have xeroxed and put in my filing cabinet, which cost me so little in money and effort that there is no way of telling how much I valued it.”⁴ We can be fairly certain that Mary reflected long and hard on any essay or poem she put in her commonplace book--or invited a friend to write down there, as was often done--and that she herself prayed at least once any prayer she took the time to copy. “Although these books cannot give us a window into the minds of the compilers,” St. Clair argues, “they do offer a more personal glimpse of the literary reading that occurred. . .”⁵

She began this “Fourth Notebook” with a poem by Henry Kirke White (1785-1806) that spoke of going through life as if sailing through a storm and then finding the star of Bethlehem:

“It bade my dark forebodings cease
And through the storm of danger's thrall,
It led me to the port of peace.”⁶

The next page begins with a sad excerpt from “Elegy Written in an Country Churchyard” by Thomas Gray (1716-1771), perhaps reflecting her own sense of being unloved and underappreciated:

“How many a gem of purest ray serene
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear!
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness in the desert air!” (Stanza 14)

This was followed by three three pages of hymns and poems on death and the hope of being reunited with lost loved ones in heaven. The excerpts from “Lines Written in Wilford Churchyard, on Recovery from Illness” by Henry Kike White, (who unfortunately, like Richard Anning, never fully recovered from “consumption”) contains wistful hopes to be remembered after death:

“Yet may not undistinguished be my grave,
But there at eve may some congenial soul
Duly resort, and shed a pious tear. . .”⁷

⁴Sherwood, January 29, 1999, H-Net List for British and Irish History (H-ALBION@H-NET.MSU.EDU).

⁵ St. Clair, 2004, 229.

⁶White, 123-124.

The next two pages of her notebook deal with loneliness in this life, a theme that must have touched Mary when, after her mother's death in 1842, she found herself living alone for the first time. Her brother Joseph, like her, remained in Lyme his entire life, and she had friends such as the Philpot sisters nearby, but she rattled around the house alone in an era that increasingly idealized the family as the center of a woman's life.⁸ She copied Kirke White's poem "Solitude":

"It is not grief that bids me moan,
It is that I am all alone. . . .
Yet in my dreams a form I view
That thinks on me and loves me, too;
I start and when the vision's flown,
I weep that I am all alone."⁹

What she chose next, however, was a response by the Congregationalist editor Josiah Conder (1789-1855), who insisted that even when alone, we have an "Almighty Friend":

"But art thou thus indeed 'alone'?
Quite unbefriended--all unknown?
And has thou thus his name forgot
Who formed thy frame and fixed thy lot? . . .
Each fluttering hope--each anxious fear--
Each lonely sigh--each silent tear--
To thine Almighty Friend are known
And say'st thou, thou art all alone?"¹⁰

Next, Anning copied three pages from Ambrose and Eleanor on an entirely different topic, astronomy.¹¹ Then she returned to more somber themes with a few lines from "To a Bride" by James F. Montgomery (1771-1850), a noted poet, hymnist, abolitionist, and radical

⁷ The hymn "One Family, We Dwell in Him" appeared with the same text in *The Christian Library* 3 (1835), 199, and is attributed by Thomas Raffles to Kelly in *Memoir of the Life and Ministry of the Late Rev. Thomas Spencer of Liverpool* (Boston: R. P. & C. Williams, 1814, 24-25).

The hymn "Through Christ when We Together Came" was published by the Rev. William Jay in *A Selection of Hymns of Peculiar Metre for the Use of the Congregation Meeting in Argyle Chapel* (Bath: Samuel Hazard, 1797) #26, pp. 41-42.

Henry Kirke White's "Lines Written in Wilford Churchyard, on Recovery from Illness" appeared in "Memoirs of Henry Kirke White" in *The Universal Magazine* new series 9 (1808), 111-112.

⁸ Houghton, 341-353.

⁹ White, 128.

¹⁰ Josiah Conder, published in White, 207.

¹¹ The excerpt on astronomy is from *Ambrose and Eleanor, or The Adventures of Two Children Deserted on an Uninhabited Island*, Lucy Peacock's English adaptation of Francois Ducray-Duminiel's children's book *Lolette et Fanfan*.

journalist, lamenting how love "ebbs and languishes and dies away."¹² Outside her commonplace book, Mary jotted down similar thoughts of her own, adding an excerpt from another Byron poem, "To a Youthful Friend":

“. . . and those who have loved the most
too soon forget they loved at all.
And such the change the heart displays
So frail is early friendship's reign. . .”¹³

Next we find an upbeat song "Yes, Thou Art Changed Since First We Met" by Amelia Alderson Opie (1769-1853), the prominent Quaker, Abolitionist, popular novelist and poet, celebrating those who remain faithful in illness.¹⁴ Then she copied a passage from a letter Anna Seward (1742-1809) sent to William Hayley:

“Nothing but a considerable independent fortune can enable an amiable female to look down, without misery, upon the censures of the many and even in that situation their arrows have power to wound. . .”¹⁵

Lacking an independent fortune, she had once hoped that marriage would provide affection and security, only to be disappointed in love. Perhaps taking solace in the woes of others, she next added to her commonplace book the beginning of Montgomery’s poem “To a Bride”:

“The more divinely beautiful thou art
Lady! of Love's inconstancy beware.”

Next she copied “January 22nd 1824. Messalonghi. On this day I complete my thirty sixth year,” written by Byron when he was humiliated by his wife leaving him and his unrequited love for a 15-year-old page, as he prepared to fight and die for Greek independence:

“’Tis time this heart should be unmoved
Since others it hath ceased to move,
Yet though I cannot be beloved,
Still let me love.”

¹² This poem appeared in Montgomery’s *The World Before the Flood* in 1813 (London: Longman & Co., 1813) and his *Poetical Works* in 1820 (London: Longman, Rees, Orne, Brown, and Green, and Longmans, 225).

¹³ Woodward Collection, Blacker-Wood Library, McGill University, Montreal.

¹⁴ James F. Montgomery, *The World Before the Flood* in 1813 (London: Longman & Co., 1813); Amelia Alderson Opie, *The Warrior's Return and Other Poems*, London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1808, 87-88.

¹⁵ *The Letters of Anna Seward, Written Between the Years 1784 and 1807*, Edinburgh: George Ramsey and Co., 1811, 317.

Byron's poetry was a staple of women's commonplace books during the Romantic era. St. Clair reports, "I do not think I have seen a single album of the 1810s or 1820s which does not contain some Byron, and most contain a great deal," but this particular poem was seldom included in such books, at least not during the decades St. Clair surveyed.¹⁶ As Judith Pascoe notes, "The poems she preserved there hint at an Anning who was interested in the self-mythologizing of Byron, who saw her collecting practice as a means of exalting herself and of pushing the boundaries of female experience."¹⁷

In the tales she told about her own near-misses with crashing carts, collapsing cliffs, and surging waves, Anning was doing her own self-mythologizing. As Pascoe writes,

"By the time Mary Anning transcribed the poem, Byron's reputation as a poet of lost love and swashbuckling romance was well established. . . . Anning, too had a penchant for bold endeavors, and she, too, was interested in her public reputation. She may have felt a particular affinity for Byron's poetry as she fashioned herself as a death-defying adventurer."¹⁸

Both Byron and Kirke White died young, Pascoe notes, and their deaths enhanced their celebrity, which "may have inspired Mary Anning's self-mythologizing tendencies, her construction of herself as a risk-defying adventurer who braved storm and tide in pursuit of fossils."¹⁹

The next two pages of her notebook are taken up by "The Magdalene," whose author has recently been identified as Richard Huie (1795-1867), a prominent Scottish poet-physician involved in efforts to assist women lured into prostitution. In contrast with the judgmental piety of the time, this poem condemned attitudes of moral superiority:

"O turn not such a withering look
on one who still can feel
Now by a cold and hard rebuke
an outcast's missionary zeal!"²⁰

¹⁶ St. Clair, 1990, 10-11; 2004, 224-229.

¹⁷ Pascoe, 142-143.

¹⁸ Pascoe, 151.

¹⁹ Pascoe, 159.

²⁰"The Magdalene" appeared in the *Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle* new series 6 (1828), 434-435, and *The Religious Magazine* 3 (1829), 148, with the author identified only as "H.E." It was reprinted over his name in the *Episcopal Watchman* 3 (1830), 76, and Huie included it in his *Sacred Lyrics*, Edinburgh: John Johnstone, 1843, 123. His efforts to aid prostitutes are described in Ralph Wardlaw's *Lectures on Magdalenism: Its Nature, Effects, Guilt, Causes, and Remedy*, New York: J. S. Redfield, 1843, 10-11,

Next, she copied an essay titled “Woman!” whose author has not yet been identified. Half a century before the first feminist movement, this proto-feminist polemic rejected any use of the Bible to suppress women:

“And what is a woman? Was she not made of the same flesh and blood as lordly Man?

“Yes, and was destined doubtless, to become his friend, his helpmate on his pilgrimage but surely not his slave, for is not reason hers? Are not her claims ‘To share redeeming love’ as great? . . . Woman seems throughout the sacred scripture . . . more than even man the object of this pure benevolence. And woman (when his own disciples fled and left him dared attend his cross; they were his constant followers.

“And women, too, were honor'd with the message given by the bright ambassadors of Heaven, for in the hallowed tomb, the angel spake and bade them hear the wondrous news to Peter and the rest of the Apostles, the tidings of the Resurrection! Say then shall woman sink beneath the scorn of haughty man? No, let her claim, the hand of fellowship. . .”

Next we find a series of short poetry excerpts from widely varied sources. “The Art of Preserving Health” by the physician John Armstrong (1709-1779) advises:

“The praise that’s worth ambition, is attain’d
By sense alone, and dignity of mind.”²¹

A brief passage from “Ode to Independence” by the Scottish poet Tobias Smollett (1720-1771) portrays Liberty as a guardian who teaches youth to despise “Pomp’s tinsel livery.”²²

Four lines from “Florio: A Tale” by Hannah More (1734-1833), one of the most influential authors of her day, claimed that the model daughter was “Led by simplicity . . . and never tried to shine,”²³ advice Mary hardly followed herself: lacking a fortune and tinsel livery herself, Anning managed to shine, despite the limitations placed on her because of her class gender.

Next we find four lines from Robert Bloomfield’s “The Miller’s Maid” that seem to return to the pangs of lost love: “Health’s foe, Suspense, so irksome to be borne,”²⁴

Near the end of her notebook, Anning copied thirty-five pages of prayers by Thomas Wilson (1663-1755), Bishop of Sodor and Man and a writer of continuing influence. Much of the inspirational literature of this era was pious drivel, as is much of it today, but Mary chose devotions with depth. Perhaps already stricken with cancer, Mary copied his “Prayer for a Sick Person,” which asked God to “relieve me in mercy or enable me to bear this trial with patience.” His “Prayer under Lingerin g Illness” spoke of being “acquainted with grief,” as Mary was

²¹ *The Art of Preserving Health: A Poem*, London: A Millar, 1744, Book IV, lines 283-284, p.120.

²² *Monthly Review or Literary Journal* 49 (December 1773), 501.

²³ *Florio: A Tale for Fine Gentlemen and Fine Ladies*, Dublin: Colles, White, Byrne, 1786.

²⁴ *Rural Tales, Ballads, and Songs*, London: Vernor and Hood and Longman and Rees, 1802, 45, line 237

herself, and longing “to see love as well as justice in all thy dealing. . . . Make me so sensible of thy kindness and love that I may not only be contented but thankful under thy hand.”

Anning recorded and must have prayed herself his “Prayer for Sunday,” which included a supplication appropriate for a scientific pioneer: “Almighty God, by whom all things were made and preserved, make us truly thankful for the wonderful works of Creation.”

Some of Wilson's petitions sound morbid to our ears today, such as “Fill my heart with the dread of the punishments prepared for impenitent sinners” or “Make me truly sensible of the weakness and corruption of my nature.” Others, though, suggest Mary tried to greet each day with eagerness and gratitude:

“What shall I render unto the Lord for his mercies received unto me every morning? I will offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving and pay my vows unto the Most Highest. And may God accept my most hearty thanks for my preservation and refreshment, for all the blessings of the night past and of my life past.”

Anning wanted thankfulness to spill over into kindness toward others: “Give me a tender compassion for the worries and miseries of my neighbor,” she prayed, “that Thou may'st have compassion upon me.” Many in Lyme recalled how she visited the sick, provided employment to those who had little work, and showed charity toward those in need.

Mary, perhaps in a melancholy mood, ended her commonplace book with the poem “The Exile,” whose author has not been identified, and the novelist Clara Reeves’ paraphrase of a French song, “Shall I All the Truth Discover,” which ends with lines that must have been painful to read--and copy--as she lived alone:

“But the best, the dearest treasure
Is the heart of him I love.”²⁵

For more about Anning, see:

Goodhue, Thomas W. *Curious Bones: Mary Anning and the Birth of Paleontology*, Greensboro, NC: Morgan Reynolds, 2002, named “One of the Best Books for the Teenage Years” by the New York Public Library. Available as an e-book.

--*Fossil Hunter: The Life & Times of Mary Anning*, Bethesda, MD: Academica Press, 2004.

--“The Faith of a Fossilist,” *Anglican & Episcopal History* 70 (March 2001), 80-100.

--“Mary Anning: The Fossilist as Exegete,” *Endeavour* March 2005

--“The Other Anning House,” *All Over the Town* (The Lyme Regis Society) Spring 2015, 6-10.

²⁵ *The Lady's Magazine* 1773 559, 567.

Pascoe, Judith. *The Hummingbird Cabinet: a Rare and Curious History of Romantic Collectors*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006, chapter 5.

Torrens, Hugh S. "Mary Anning (1799-1847) of Lyme; 'the greatest fossilist the world ever knew,'" (Presidential Address) *British Journal for the History of Science* 28 (1995), 257-284.