

A Commonplace Book — or period scrapbooking for the SCA

A commonplace book is what a provident poet cannot subsist without, for this proverbial reason, that “great wits have short memories;” and whereas, on the other hand, poets, being liars by profession, ought to have god memories; to reconcile these, a book of this sort is in the nature of a supplemented memory, or a record of what occurs remarkable in every day’s reading or conversation. There you enter not only your own original thoughts (which, a hundred to one, are few and insignificant), but such of other men’s as you think properly fit to make your own, by entering them there. For, take this for a rule, when an author is in your books, you have the same demand upon him for his wit as a merchant has for your money when you are in his.

Jonathan Swift, *A Letter of Advice to a Young Poet* (1721)

Commonplace books were compendiums of knowledge, typically filled with notes on a huge variety of topics: quotes, poems, recipes, lists, laws, prayers, proverbs, jokes, heraldic blazons, predictions, mathematical tables, astronomical/astrological lore and so on, representing whatever interests the writer had. Think of the modern penchant for scrapbooking or blogging.

During the earlier part of the Renaissance, they were handwritten journals, often used by students for compiling notes, by legal folk for tracking laws and judgements, or by scholars keen to take note of especially relevant bon mots. The term “commonplace” implies passages collected under common headings with the intention of remembering or referring to them. The term was first used to refer to such collections in 1578 (*Oxford Dictionary*), although the practice was known to the Greeks of the 5th century BC.

The common theme quickly broadened and commonplace books came to be filled with all manner of information. This followed on from popular collections of broad-based knowledge, such as Caxton’s *Polychronicon* printed in 1477 based on a variety of collected material and, later, segued out into the popular Tottel’s *Miscellany* of songs and sonnets and other material.

Commonplacing really took off in England from the 1400s, aided by the provision of cheap paper and a growing interest in scholarship. By the time of Tudor England, commonplace books had become a part of everyday life:

Boys ... had to keep notebooks or commonplace books in which to record, and then learn, idioms, quotations, or figures useful in composition or declamation. Not a little of that wide learning and impressive range of quotation adorning Elizabethan literature comes from these commonplace books.

Thompson, pg 16

The British Library collection of 50 or so such books dating from 1550 to 1700 includes the “Waferer” versions which has verses by Essex, Raleigh and Shakespeare, as well as medical recipes, lists of books, and notes; and one attributed to Thomas Harriot which contains the earliest known quotation from Shakespeare’s *Henry IV Part 1*.

When used in an organised fashion, commonplace books could be structured to encourage the user to cover a set course of study, or to arrange their collection of excerpts in an orderly fashion to support a particular discipline. Erasmus and other humanist scholars were at the forefront of promoting this approach. On occasion, commonplace books were divided into appropriately contemplatory topics such as virtues and vices (Moss, v).

With the development of the printing industry, such books were produced with a selection of pre-printed headings and decorative borders as blank journals; John Foxe, best known for his *Book of Martyrs*, printed a popular version. However, the British Library collection shows that some users ran out of steam and left much of their preprinted pages blank. For less-driven folk “who did not have the patience or the resources to gather their own entries” there was the option of buying a version with suitably worthy quotations already printed or written in (Sherman).

As commonplace books became more common, so did their usage, with books broadening out to compilations of non-scholarly information such as business accounts, correspondence archives, diaries, catalogues of possessions, travel itineraries and sketches. The British Library collection shows commonplace books passing through a number of owners, each with different interests demonstrated by their inclusions:

It is not at all unusual to find a collection of legal records or historical notes written around an earlier compilation of philosophy or poetry, written sideways or upside-down in any available space.

Sherman

It should be noted that combinations of written and printed material in a single volume were, well, commonplace. One particularly extensive example is the 1,200-page, 60-year production of Sir Julius Caesar (1558-1636), held by the British Library. His book began as one of Foxe's blank commonplace texts (*Pandecte Locorum Communium*, printed in 1572), which included "a printed title-page, address to the reader, subject headings, and alphabetical index, with the pages below the headings left blank for the reader to fill in". Caesar also added his own headings and an index, along with a vast compilation of notes, lists and other material that piqued his interest over the decades. Other authors, such as the Venetian Bernard Bembo (1433-1519) used alphabetical tabs, marginal notes and even "elaborate pointing fingers" to navigate around the stuffed journals (Sherman).

The books themselves varied considerably, with many having different sized pages as a result of insertions or rebinding. Examples of sizes include 312 x 200mm and 207 x 140mm. The pages were usually of paper, with vellum commonly used as a cover, tied with silk ties. At least one of the British Library examples shows the book in a leather wallet binding, closed with a strap and buckle.

My Commonplace Book

Bearing in mind the examples of this type of production, I decided to produce a commonplace book that would provide period instructional material, useful information for the SCAdian, and blank spaces for the user to add their own material under a variety of suitable headings (eg addresses, poetry, recipes, songs etc).

At 75 x 100mm, the size is significantly smaller than most of the commonplace books extant, but this was deliberately chosen as I wanted this book to be readily transportable in a pouch to provide greatest utility. It is comparable in size to the penny chapbook. The bulk of the books I have made have a book vinyl cover comparable to limp vellum, used primarily for economic reasons and as a reasonable approximation of a period style. I'm still tracking full provenance for the sewing method, but Master Crispin Sexi has described seeing examples of this through-the-spine approach cited in *The Archeology of Medieval Bookbinding* by J. A. Szirmai.

In a *New York Review* article, Robert Darnton opined that commonplacing had "disappeared long before the advent of the sound bite". Clearly I must be a throw-back as, between the ages of 8 and 18, I had written a commonplace book without ever realising its historical precedents....or perhaps it would be better to quote Sherman's view when he referred to the "variety, brilliance, and quirkiness of the intellectual habits [these books] document".

Major References

- Banister, Manly; *The Craft of Bookbinding*; Dover Publications, 1975
- Blair, Ann; "Humanist Methods in Natural Philosophy: The Commonplace Book." *Journal of the History of Ideas*. 53(4), 541-551, 1992.
- Darnton, "Extraordinary Commonplaces," *The New York Review of Books*, December 21, 2000
- Havens, Earle; *Commonplace Books: A History of Manuscripts and Printed Books from Antiquity to the Twentieth Century*; University Press of New England, 2001
- Folger Shakespeare Library: Technologies of Writing in the Age of Print
<http://www.folger.edu/template.cfm?cid=2314>; Cited December 2007
- Moss, Ann; *Printed Commonplace-Books and the Structuring of Renaissance Thought*; Clarendon Press, 1996
- Oxford English Dictionary; Oxford University Press, 1971
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- Sherman, Dr William; Editorial Introduction to Renaissance Commonplace Books from the Huntington Library
http://www.adam-matthew-publications.co.uk/collections_az/RenCpBksHunt/editorial-introduction.aspx; Cited December 2007
- Thompson, Craig; *Schools in Tudor England*; Folger Shakespeare Library, 1958
- Yale Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library; Commonplace Books Collections Then and Now
July 26, 2001 - September 29, 2001; <http://www.library.yale.edu/beinecke/compb.htm>
- Watt, Tessa; *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550-1640*; *Cambridge Studies in Early Modern British History*; . (edited by Fletcher, Guy and Morril); Cambridge University Press, 1991

Content References

Examples of topics from the British Library collection of commonplace books:

poetry, historical notes, medical recipes, coats of arms, lute music in tablature, extracts from medieval deeds, genealogies, shipping lists, mathematical notes, client lists and charges, political prophecies, diary of public events, notes on common liveries at court, catalogue of nobilities, recipes for raspberry wine, Queen Elizabeth's oration at Parliament.

The following list provides notes for the sources of the material used in my commonplace book, all Web citations were valid as of December 2007. Many of the illustrations are unattributed as they have been collected from a huge range of sources over a period of a dozen years or more. Most of them are 14-16th century in origin. Some of the textual material is also unattributed due to having been collected over a similar period without adequate referencing.

Particular thanks must go to Duke Siegfried von Hoflichskait, Baron Giles Leabrook and Finn of St Kessog for their generosity in allowing me to abridge their longer works to permit inclusion, and I urge you to seek out the original material.

katherine kerr's Commonplace Book:

Title Page	Woodcut borders and printer's mark
2. To The Reader	Period-style salutation, quoting Erasmus
3. Index	
4-7. Addresses	How to address the nobility (kk), woodcut, blank spaces for the user to add addresses
8-10. Advyse	Good Husband/Wife: Mediaeval Lore from Bartholomew Anglicus; http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/medlore.htm#ch01
	Monies
	That same man: Erasmus
	da Vinci: <i>The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci</i> , ed E. MacCurdy; Konecky & Konecky, originally 1906
11. Armour	The naming of parts (kk)
12-13. Arms	Blazoning and space for personal use
14-15. Bestiary	Pelican: Physiologus; http://gateway.uvic.ca/spcoll/physiologum/animal/pelican.htm Whale: Anglicus Bonasus: The Medieval Bestiary, from Pliny's Natural History; http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beast80.htm Mandrake: Isidore of Seville [7th century CE] (Etymologies, Book 12, 3:7) Hedgehog: Isidore of Seville Elephant: Pliny, http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beast77.htm
16-17. Cartography	Kingdom map by Benedict Stonhewr of Askerigg, updated by Ronan mac Brian
18-29. Daies	January: Diocletian, Saints List, http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/golden000.htm February: woodcut, Boke of Gode Cookery Medieval Woodcuts Collection http://www.godecookery.com/clipart/clart.htm March: Woodcut: The Fool 15th century German; Lorica of St Patrick, aka St. Patrick's Breastplate April: Richard III, Act V, Scene III. Shakespeare; St George illumination May: Woodcut of Royal feasters June: John was a tyrant: Hugh Chesterman Magna Carta: http://www.historyplace.com/specials/calendar/docs-pix/june-magna-carta.htm July: St Benedict, from Book Two, Chapter Two of the Dialogues of Gregory the Great http://www.osb.org/gen/greg/ August: St Bartholomew's Fair: Keutzner, 1598, quoted in the Book of Days http://www.thebookofdays.com/months/aug/24.htm#BARTHOLOMEW_FAIR September: Princess Elizabeth to King Edward VI, c.1550 Chamberlin, <i>The Sayings of Queen Elizabeth</i> (1923), ch. 1. October: Henry V, Act IV, scene 3 Shakespeare November: St Katherine; Saints List http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/golden000.htm December: William the Marshal, by Duke Cariadoc of the Bow translation from http://www.chronique.com/Chronique/chrniq09.htm
30-31. Medical Lore	Madness: Mediaeval Lore from Bartholomew Anglicus; http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/medlore.htm#ch01 Lemon Sage Overdrinking: Erasmus To the Kyng: 1439 Petition from Commons, An anthology of Chancery English: http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/AnoChan.html

- 32-34. Mores
 Clov'd Lemon (kk)
 Characters of Nations: 14C MS. 139, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge
<http://www.dac.neu.edu/english/kakelly/med/beyond.html>
 Gifts from a Lover: Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*
 Crossley-Holland; *The Medieval Book of Days*; Colour Library Books, 1996
 Monstrous Hose: Statutes of Apparel; Westminster, 6 May 1562, 4 Elizabeth I
<http://elizabethan.org/sumptuary/ruffs-hose-swords.html>
 Steward Duties: Lord Montague's Book of Rules and Orders of 1595
<http://elizabethan.org/compendium/69.html>
- 35-39. Poetry
 Shakespeare's Sonnet XXIX
 Love; Chretien de Troyes
 A Squire's Training: John Harding, 17 THE BLACK PRINCE, R.P. Dunn-Pattison, 1910.
<http://www.chronique.com/Library/Knights/harding.htm>
 Woodcut: Death and the Knight, Holbein
- 40-41. Prayers
 Ave Maria, Pater Noster
42. Prognostacaycons
A Wonderful Astrological Prognostication, in ridicule of the almanac-makers,
 allegedly penned by Adam Foulweather, commonly attributed to Thomas Nashe.
 Rabelais's *Pantagruelian Prognostications* (Chapter 25 of the Third Book of Pantagruel; 1532)
 wood engraving from Camille Flammarion's *L'atmosphère: météorologie populaire* (1888),
 commonly misattributed to 16th century German due to similar images in Munster's *Cosmographia* of 1544
43. Prose
 Courtesy: various attributions inside and outside SCA
 All Steel: A Discourse Upon Coins by Bernardo Davanzati, 1588;
<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/econ/coins.htm>
 Expectate: from sig of Bantiarna Mór inghean Chathail
 A room without: Peter of Celle, On Affliction and Reading ca 1160
44. Proverbs
 Concealed talent: Erasmus
 A woman fit: Compendium of Common Knowledge; <http://elizabethan.org/compendium/53.html>
 Three may keep counsel: Erasmus
 Germans woo: Compendium of Common Knowledge; <http://elizabethan.org/compendium/53.html>
 King woodcut: 15th century German playing card
45. Prose
 Blank for owner's additions
- 46-47. Recipes
 Icelandic Chickern: Cariodoc of the Bow by way of Maddog Mattson many years ago
 Ypocras: Heiatt, Constance B. & Butler, Sharon; Curye on English:
 English Culinary Manuscripts of the Fourteenth-Century; OUP, 1985
 Senkanjabin: rough approximation of what has been used for many years in Southron Gaard
 Beneath Southern Skies, drapa by Finn of St Kessog, heavily abridged.
- 48-50
 51. Riddles
 A prickly house: Symphosius: The *Ænigmata* (or Riddles)
<http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Symphosius/home.html>
 I am a wonderful help to women: Exeter Book of Riddles
 What we caught: the riddle put to Homer by fishermen of Ios, said to have caused his death
 Long and thin am I: Symphosius
- 52-53. Royal Line
 The Lochac Saga by Giles Leabrook, abridged
 Full version: <http://kas.griffin-dor.org/LochacSaga/Lochacsagacover.htm>
- 54-55. Rules
 Rules of the List, Duke Siegfried von Hoflichskheit Fall Coronet ASXX, abridged
 Full version: <http://history.westkingdom.org/Bardic/Siegfried/RulesOfTheLists.htm>
- 56-61. Song & Dance
 Alle Psallite: 13th century
 Coventry Carol: 1591, words attributed to Robert Croo, 1534
 Pastime with Good Company: attributed to Henry VIII
 Southron Gaard Anthem, Crispin Sexi, commissioned by Southron Gaard
 Blank for owner's additions
 Single Bransle: Arbeau
 Horses Bransle: Arbeau
 Official Bransle: Arbeau
 Lorayne Alman: Inns of Court
 Earl of Essex Alman: Inns of Court
 Heart's Ease: Playford
 Known World Pavane: SCA Invention, danced to Belle Qui
- 62-63
 64. Colophon
 Blank for owner's additions
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