

SCRAPS ON ALBUMS - NOTICES AND NEWS

Books, Scrapbooks and Albums

(Birkbeck Centre for Nineteenth-Century Studies at the Institute of English Studies,
Senate House, University of London, November 2006)

This one day workshop, organised by Luisa Calè, focused on the material and visual cultures of books and manipulative forms of book and paper collecting such as extra-illustration or grangerizing, scrap-booking and album-making. Lucy Peltz, from the National Portrait Gallery, gave a paper titled 'Hydra-Headed Monsters: portrait print collecting and the rise of extra-illustration in the late eighteenth century'; this was followed by Sarah Davison (Oxford), who spoke about Max Beerbohm's witty extra-illustrated books, and Vicky Mills (Birkbeck), who explored bibliomania and the male body in the late nineteenth century.

Before lunch, we donned white cotton gloves to peruse the album and the scrapbook made by Mrs Birkbeck, wife of the founder of the college, in the early nineteenth century. This handling session proved a great success, initiating much networking and exchanges of comments, information, and contacts between various people working on aspects of Victorian album culture. We must thank Philip Payne from Birkbeck Library for allowing us this privilege.

Mrs Birkbeck's album and scrapbook-making practices were contextualised by the afternoon speakers. Brian Maidment (Salford), focused on the supply of material for scrapbooks in his talk on 'Scraps and the Print Trade 1820-1840', while Patrizia Di Bello (Birkbeck) focused on the social role and the visual and tactile pleasures making and displaying scrapbooks and albums, as well as the issues of interdisciplinarity they raise as objects. Mike Baron, from Birkbeck, responded with a talk on manuscript albums of the 1820s, looking at them from a literary perspective, and focusing on how professional poets such as L.E.L. (Letitia Landon), 'performed' her poems according to slightly different script in the different albums, including Mrs Birkbeck's, in which she was asked to pen a contribution.

The day concluded with Esther Leslie (Birkbeck) taking a more sweeping chronological perspective in 'From Childhood to Hell: Image-Text in Blake, Benjamin, Alan Moore: Writing in Images'.

The workshops papers and discussions explored in their different ways the theme of books, scrapbooks and albums as collections or paper museums, with their specific visual and tactile dimension as objects and as the site of both bibliophilia and bibliomania.

After the workshop, the editor received the following e-mail from one of the participants:

Date: Mon 6 Nov 11:25:41 GMT 2006

From: "Morgan, Dr S.J."

Subject: Birkbeck Album

To: "p.dibello" <p.dibello@bbk.ac.uk>

Dear Patrizia,

Sorry I didn't have a chance to talk to you properly at the excellent workshop on Saturday.

One of the reasons for my interest in the Birkbeck album is because of my work for the Letters of Richard Cobden Project at UEA, where I was Research Officer for a number of years - I came across many autograph albums while working for the project.

While I didn't get to go through the whole album on Saturday, I am assuming there aren't any letters from Cobden in it - however, I did find a signature, dated 10 June 1854. Having just checked through Cobden's correspondence for that month, I discovered a letter to his wife Catherine, dated 12 June, recounting his encounter with the 'old lady', on a visit to Miss Birkbeck to discuss the qualities of a governess for Cobden's daughters.

The letter is in the Cobden Papers, West Sussex Record Office, Add.MS 6016, folios L143-145. Below is the relevant excerpt:

'On my way at 5 oclck I called on Miss Birkbeck but she was at Church. - I found myself however in the hands of the old lady who certainly is a very strange being. - She talked upon all sorts of things, & in the most incoherent way. - Amongst others, she went into particulars about the governess, but I could make neither beginning, end, nor middle, of what she said.'

Cobden dates his visit 11 June - I don't think the date next to the signature is in Cobden's hand, so it might have been added later and mis-remembered.

I just thought you may be interested - the possible mental infirmity Cobden hints at may throw some light on the degeneration of the album itself into a mere collection of signatures. Incidentally, do you know when Mrs Birkbeck died? The ODNB entry on her husband just says 'in or after 1851', which is ridiculously vague and clearly too early given Cobden's letter.

With best wishes,

Simon Morgan

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If any of the readers has any snippets of information concerning this or other album collections, please get in touch with the editor as we will be very happy to include them in future issues of 'scraps on the albums'.

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At the same workshop an extremely large and somewhat underused resource was brought to our attention, the Sir Harry Page Collection of Victorian Scrapbooks, Albums and Commonplace Books, purchased by Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) in 1987. Harry Page (1911-1985), City Treasurer to Manchester City Council, compiled the collection between 1953 and his death in 1985. The core collection consists of 276 bound albums and commonplace books created between 1752 and 1935, the majority being from the 19th century and emanating from families based in the North West of England. Page's stated focus was 'scrap-books, not too late, nor relying too much on the press', his objective being to collect "the kind of thing which young ladies wrote, and painted in, or decorated with prints and scraps." In reality the collection grew beyond Page's initial intentions to encompass travel diaries, sketch books of topographical and architectural drawings, school exercise books, albums of verse and of silhouettes. However, Page remained discriminating in the quality of the albums he collected and a distinct authorial sensibility can be detected in many of the albums.

Each of the 276 albums is a unique and eclectic compilation, combining manuscript material, drawings, paintings and printed material with fine examples of Victorian lithography, caricature and cartoons, postcards, greetings cards, photography and ephemera. Many of the albums have fine contemporary bindings.

In addition to the albums, Page himself compiled 95 scrap books, providing themed examples of Victorian printing, almanacs and calendars, caricatures and cartoons, greeting cards, postcards, scraps, prints, memorabilia of death, bookplates, examples of collage, etc.

The collection is open for private research by staff, students and external visitors. Details of its individual items are not available via the Library's catalogue but can be accessed from various guides. There is a handwritten guide to the Page Collection compiled by Sir Harry Page. An article by H.R. Page, 'Collecting Victoriana', was published in *The Manchester Review*, Summer 1958, pp. 161-179. *Sentimental souvenirs: Victorian scrap albums from the Sir Harry Page Collection* by Gaye Smith gives a flavour of the collection's scope.

Access to the collection is by appointment, on a weekday basis Monday–Friday 10am–4pm, for private research by staff, students and external visitors:

<http://www.specialcollections.mmu.ac.uk>

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