

‘A Storehouse of Past and Present Manners and Customs’: the Private Scrapbook becomes a Communal Record in the Journals of William Hone

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Scarcely an individual is without a scrap-book, or portfolio, or a collection of some sort; and whatever a kind-hearted reader may deem curious or interesting, and can conveniently spare, I earnestly hope and solicit to be favoured with, addressed to me at Messrs. Hunt and Clarke’s, Tavistock Street, who receive communications for the work, and publish it in weekly sheets [...]

William Hone, ‘Preface’ to *The Every-Day Book*, 1 (1826) ([see fig. 1](#)).

The popularity of scrap books and albums in the early nineteenth century owed much to the rapidly growing availability of cheap printed matter, and in particular of wood and steel engravings. In turn, the scrapbook format helped shape the family orientated ‘useful knowledge’ periodicals in the early Victorian period. William Hone (1789-1842) was a seminal if rarely acknowledged figure in this development from private collections to public print culture. He is best known for his Radical squibs against the establishment in the years immediately following Waterloo. These opened a new era in mass publication when his *The Political House that Jack Built* (1819), with woodcuts by George Cruikshank, gained unprecedented sales of 100,000 copies, and he sold some 250,000 copies of the series.¹

Hone innovated by looking backwards into the future. He had successfully defended himself in 1817 against government prosecution for ‘seditious blasphemy’ by turning to 1651, and the Leveller John Milburn’s defence against Cromwell. The startling designs of his Radical pamphlets were inspired by examples of early moveable-type black letter that an autodidact cobbler had lent him when a boy.² Now Hone saw increased literacy and cheap printed media as a way to the recovery of an earlier England whose pastoral customs and values were becoming destroyed by an industrial and urban age. Largely self-taught, Hone was a passionate advocate of adult education, and listed George Birkbeck’s stone-laying on the first Anniversary of the London Mechanic’s Institute in December 1824 among

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England's memorable dates.³ But unlike many educationists, he believed instruction should come not just from above, but also from the people themselves. So when he began his *Every-Day Book* in January 1825 (see [fig. 1](#); [fig. 2](#); [fig.3](#); [fig. 4](#); [fig. 5](#); [fig. 6](#); [fig.7](#); [fig. 8](#); [fig. 9](#); [fig. 10](#)), he saw this as an opportunity to draw on the great fund of common knowledge accessible through the spread of literacy.

To reach a wide audience, his publication was offered at a remarkably low price for the time, in particular as it was lavishly illustrated – there were 145 original wood engravings in the first volume alone. Weekly instalments of sixteen pages with closely printed double columns cost three pence, whilst monthly shilling issues and annual volumes with index sold for fourteen shillings. In format it tapped into old print traditions, in its organisation as the almanack, a basic genre of popular publication from the sixteenth century. Hone added antiquarian essays, and featured essays and wood engravings of contemporary practice alongside accounts of the old. So the issue for 1 April, 1825, had an article describing the practices of April Fool's Day from 1712 to 1818, with a lively woodcut of a contemporary London scene by George Cruikshank (see [fig. 11](#)).⁴ The detailed illustrations were an important feature of Hone's publication. They were never inserted as decoration, or for popular appeal, but they were primary material, offering visual evidence in support of the words. A letter from Hone to Cruikshank, who was a prolific contributor to the early numbers of the journal, urged the artist when making a print of Gog and Magog in the Guildhall, to 'go and look at them & do not leave a curl on the toenail or a single hair undefined'.⁵ These unremitting demands caused a breach with Cruikshank, which only ended on Hone's death-bed.

Hone, a self-effacing scholar, saw the periodical as an opportunity for the communal pooling of knowledge. He appealed to his readers:

It will be gratifying to everyone who peruses this work, and highly so to the editor, if he is obliged by letters from readers acquainted with customs in their own vicinity, similar to those that they are informed of in other counties, and particularly if they will take the trouble to describe them in every particular. By this means, the *Every-Day Book* will become what it was designed to be made, – a *storehouse of past and present manners and customs*.⁶

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Each issue was designed be read as if it were a miscellany gathered from the family's own library, collected

‘to please the young, and help divert the wise.’ Perhaps, if the good old window-seats had not gone out of fashion, it might be called a Parlour-window book – a good name for a volume of agreeable reading selected from the book-case, and left lying about, for the constant recreation of the family, and the casual amusement of visitors.⁷

Contributions from correspondents detailing local practices became a useful feature of the journal. Thus in the December 1826 issues, Hone published, alongside the regional items he himself had gathered from various books and journals, correspondents' letters about Christmas observances in Ramsgate and Maidstone in Kent, Hornchurch in Essex, Avingham near Newcastle-on-Tyne, and Whitehaven in Yorkshire.⁸ By this issue, however, the supply of information about seasonal festivals was slowing, and Hone announced the series would be continued as *The Table Book*, similar in size, price and format, but more loosely organised as a memorandum book of useful and entertaining information. Hone claimed this followed a tradition going back to Roman waxed tablets left in public places on which the public could inscribe, and to pre-Christian Judaic models. *The Table Book* continued, filling two six-month volumes, until January 8 1828 (see [fig. 12](#); [fig. 13](#); [fig. 14](#); [fig. 15](#); [fig. 16](#)).

Yet although Hone was an innovator, he was not a businessman. His insistence on original illustrations brought crippling expenses. Hone kept accounts for the cost of drawing and cutting the woodcuts, and noted that over the first fifteen months of *The Every-day Book*'s publication he spent £660 12 6d, besides £150 ‘out-pocket expenses’, including

[...] fees to Parish Clerks, Sextons and Porters; Gifts to Showmen; Civility money to persons exhibited, Gratuities for information and permission to sketch, and for Stage hire and other travelling expenses every week, to Islington, Canonbury, Hagbush Lane ... [to] Cross's menagerie, Bartholemew Fair, Charlton, and to other fairs, and different places in town and country; frequently accompanied by Artists, and always bearing their charges [...]⁹

His enthusiasm outpacing his strength, Hone's exertions threatened his precarious mental and physical health, and his struggle with mounting debts was compounded

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by surreptitious thefts by a Mr Percy, his accountant. Towards the end of its run Hone had sometimes to edit *The Table Book* from the King's Bench Prison, where he had been confined by debt. When the serial failed at the end of a year, Hone commented bitterly that it had offered 'things of higher reach, and more literary merit that usually fall to such a publication; it "flies over men's heads" – is a "little too much in advance of the march of intellect"'.¹⁰

Publishing in the Regency years of the 1820s, a decade before 'the March of the Intellect' became the catchphrase of the day, Hone had indeed been ahead of his time. This was true in other senses, too. He declared that his journal 'is possessed of thousands of families of all ranks', and his concern to cater for all its members, both young and old,¹¹ foreshadowed that of Victorian editors of 'periodicals of the hearth' in the decades to come. Without any 'side' of education or class Hone blew the dust off local history, writing in a lucid style accessible to the general reader. But most importantly, Hone, Romantic by instinct, remained focused on the real life of the common people, and his fascination with their infinite variety enabled him to move seamlessly from the curiosities of the past to the eccentricities of the present. In his journals the central impulse of the scrapbook collector became accessible to the new print culture. Hone was never a mere antiquarian. His vivid, entertaining essays on miscellaneous sights and customs presage the greater achievement of *Sketches by 'Boz'*.¹² In 1842, dying, Hone asked for two visitors. One was his estranged friend George Cruikshank. The other was Charles Dickens, who, as Dickens' letters show, knew Hone's work well. Both came together, and when Hone died a month later, attended his funeral, taking a lead in helping to raise funds for the distressed family of one to whom both had been indebted.¹³

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Fig. 3 'May', unattributed wood engraving, *The Every-Day Book*, vol 2, (1827), cols 567-8. Author's Collection.

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Endnotes:

Note: since the individual issues in *The Every-Day Book* and *The Table Book* are undated, references are made to page numbers in the collected volumes. As volumes were dated on completion, the year in the notes may post-date that of the weekly issue referred to.

¹ Circulation figures cited in Richard Altick, *The English Common Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 382. See also Frederick Wm. Hackwood, *William Hone. His Life and Times* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1912), pp. 194, 228. Edgell Rickwood publishes facsimiles of Hone's political parodies in *Radical Squibs and Loyal Ripostes* (Bath: Adams and Dart, 1971), pp. 35-58.

² Hackwood, (1912), pp. 40, 42-3.

³ *The Every-Day Book*, 1 (1826), cols 1547-1550.

⁴ *The Every-Day Book*, 1 (1826), cols 409-413.

⁵ Quoted by John Wardroper in *The World of William Hone* (London: Shelfmark Books, 1997), p. 9, from a letter from Hone to George Cruikshank dated 22 November 1822, 'now in the United States'. While the letter appears to be genuine and reflects Hone's concerns with visual accuracy, the date indicates an assignment earlier than *The Every-Day Book*, which contains no print of Gog and Magog.

⁶ William Hone, *The Every-Day Book*, 2 (1827), col. 74.

⁷ Hone, 'Preface', *The Table Book*, 2 (1827), [iv].

⁸ *The Every-Day Book*, 2 (1827), cols 1646-1659.

⁹ Quoted Frederick Wm. Hackwood, *William Hone. His Life and Times* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1912), p. 248.

¹⁰ 'Preface' to *The Table Book*, 2 (1828), [v].

¹¹ Hone includes a list of the different classes of family readers who would enjoy his journal. *The Every-Day Book*, 1 (1826), col. 1664.

¹² Wardroper's *The World of William Hone* prints a lively selection of these, together with the illustrations, however omitting to assign individual essays to their place in the journals themselves.

¹³ For Dickens' lively account of the visit to Hone's sick bed and funeral, see his letters to Forster, (5 October 1842), and to C. C. Felton, (2 March 1843), in Madeline House, Graham Storey and Kathleen Tillotson, eds, *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol. III, 1842-1843 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), pp. 337, 453-4.

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