

## Commonplace Books, Scrapbooks and Other Albums

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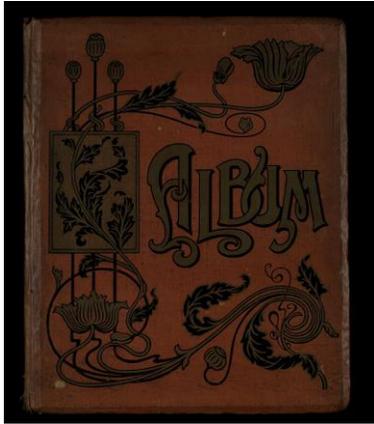
What is a friendship album? A scrapbook? A memory book? How do they serve not only as records of the past, but as sources to explore how people used materials to create stories pregnant with meaning? Are they windows onto the intellectual and emotional worlds of album creators, or do they have a more social origins and purposes that we can explore? Why do they survive to us in such fragmentary ways? These are the questions that lie at the heart of my research. An unusual set of records led me to them. The initial research programme began by exploring many examples of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century hotel visitors' books. It treated these books within the frameworks of historical geography and economic and social history—as troves of nominal records. They could be used to explore the tourist market of particular hostelryes, and perhaps to develop a typology of various forms of commercial accommodation, based in part on the names and pieces of information attached to them: geographic origins, gender, and sometimes occupation. As I discovered, far more could be done, too.

As the research progressed, close analysis of the material and textual properties of the books, and of the extensive contemporary writing *about* them, led to new research questions that explored the physical forms and literary properties of the volumes—and to treat them more as *books*. To what extent were they once understood as a species of album? What united them with, and distinguished them

from, other nineteenth-century manuscript albums? As it turns out, visitors' books often recorded more than names and places of residence. They were sites of extensive and diverse inscription: sketches, including caricatures, portraits, and landscapes; poetry, including doggerel and collaborative versifying; asynchronous dialogue, often in the form of playful, and occasionally caustic, banter between guests; and extensive and quite flamboyant prose praising host, hotel, and fare. Certainly, many contemporary readers inspecting their eclectic contents declared visitors' books to be albums—a genre that might be described as a codex comprising 'empty' pages designed to be filled (some album historians went much farther this this, including windows and walls in their definitions!). How did inscribers and readers *use* visitors' books as albums? To answer this question, a much better and broader understanding of albums is required. St Andrews University's Special Collections boasts a uniquely broad collection of them, many focussed on the people and institutions in the town and county of Fife. A quick glance through some examples underscores how valuable they are to the study of manuscript culture, compilation, and creation practices, and the history of the book in that era.

The nineteenth century witnessed a surge of interest in albums—it has sometimes been characterised as the age of the 'album craze'. Technologies of paper and book production played critical roles the popularisation of the album—not only through new forms of industrial binding, but also with the advent of the the steam-press, which multiplied the output of materials that were incorporated

within albums—press clippings, for instance. Eventually, new technologies also gave us photography, and furnished material that was to become an album



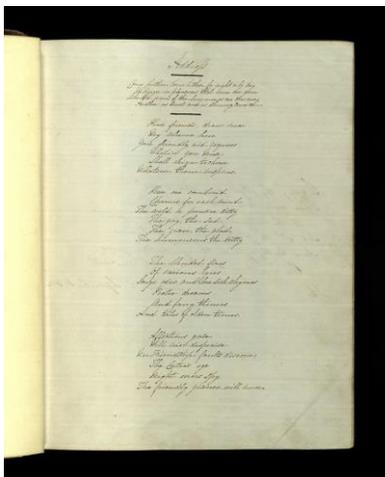
Front Cover of James Wilkie, *Commonplace book* 1883 onwards (ms37039).

mainstay. With new forms of production and new, cheaper material, industrially designed and manufactured albums became more widely available. Originally often little more than small notebooks (or large folio books), by mid-century stationers sold a wide variety of albums, the most elaborate embossed with titles or decorated in ways that declared their designated functions (such as ‘Autograph Book’ or ‘News Clippings’). Some boasted covers in sumptuous and expensive leather, others in much more modest cloth.

How did people fill the pages between these covers? Acts of album creation (a preferable term, I think, to ‘compilation’, as album-making was a creative endeavour) were sometimes solitary, as individuals selected the format and form, and then filled it with chosen materials. An album could also be a social creation (as visitors’ books were): people collaborated on producing family albums, or solicited autographs and inscriptions from friends and acquaintances to fill their sentiment albums. Institutions crafted their own ‘narratives of self’ through the medium of the scrapbook. While their materials could be eclectic, it would be wrong to dismiss them as ‘miscellaneous’: even if they contained many different

items within them, there was order and thematic unity within the books—even when it was sometimes evident only to album creators.

Far from compendia of fripperies that drew disparaging remarks from the album's rather snobbish critics in the nineteenth century, albums had very important public purposes—in building social networks, for instance, and in codifying expressions of affect through the transmission of particular forms of inscription. Through acts of memorisation and transcription, they often enabled the migration of words from album to album, across regions and borders. Through these developments, a broad album discourse evolved spanning oceans. The same aphorisms might appear in manuscript in several albums in distant places, and in print: indeed, sometimes published works supplied album entries, for the weary, hurried, or uninspired inscriber pressed into writing in a sentiment album.



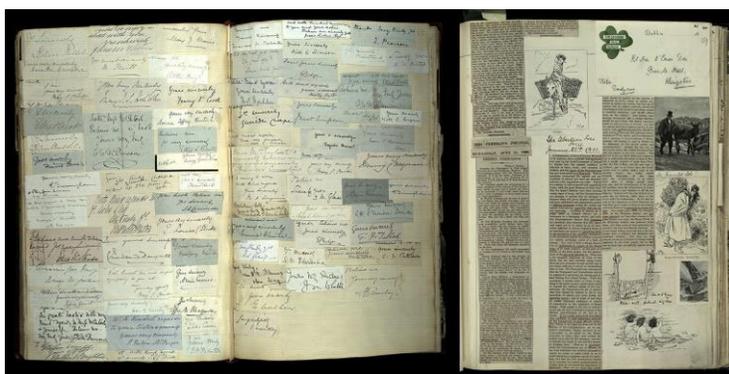
Poem at the outset of *Commonplace book of Mrs. Mary Ann Arnot, 1841* (ms30354).

It was clear to contemporaries, as it is to modern scholars, that there was often a gendered inflection to album creating. Sometimes this was a way of drawing a somewhat crude and often depreciating distinction between serious, masculine practices and youthful and effeminate fads.

Often, however, the production of albums was more complex, involving collaboration between the sexes.

Agnes McIntosh, the sister of Prof. W.C. McIntosh, Professor of Natural History

at St Andrews, was an inveterate album-maker. She meticulously documented her brother's life in several volumes, each commemorating a phase of his career. As an illustration of how some album-creators had a fondness for particular materials, Agnes McIntosh's later volumes are filled with signatures of correspondents whose autographs she excised and pasted in folios she lovingly created as homages to her brother.



Left: McIntosh Album 6 (ms37102/6). Right: McIntosh Album 5 (ms37102/5).

Not all album-creators shared Agnes McIntosh's intimate connection to the subject of her album, or her predilection to excise signatures. In fact, the choices of the kind and extent of textual material that were incorporated within an album, and each album's structuring principles, reflect the intersections of the creator(s) prioritisation of themes and material; the textual conventions of the album genre; the species of album in creation; and the material affordances set by the book itself—its size, shape, and structure. This is not to suggest, however, that creators and/or inscribers did not enjoy great latitude in creating their own structures within the volumes. They left pages blank. They inserted dried flowers and other material loosely between pages. They cut pages to suit their own needs. So doing, they

demonstrated the creativity that is the hallmark of dynamic album-making—a process that could span a few weeks, or several years, or even a lifetime.

For many, history provided a template to follow. Indeed tradition weighed heavily on some album-creators and influenced their choice of content and form. Many nineteenth-century albums hewed closely in content and textual organisation to culturally esteemed practices of commonplacing—the extraction and indexing of material from printed texts that had been codified in the early modern period. As an example, take the album of the distinguished lexicographer and philologist Sir William Alexander Craigie, a scholar with a strong interest in Scandinavian languages who served as co-editor of the *New English Dictionary*. His commonplace book, begun at St Andrews, resembled many volumes created in preceding centuries.

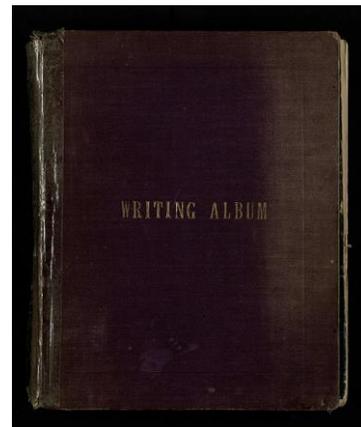


Page from the Commonplace book of William Alexander Craigie, begun at St Andrews, continued to 1892 (ms36922).

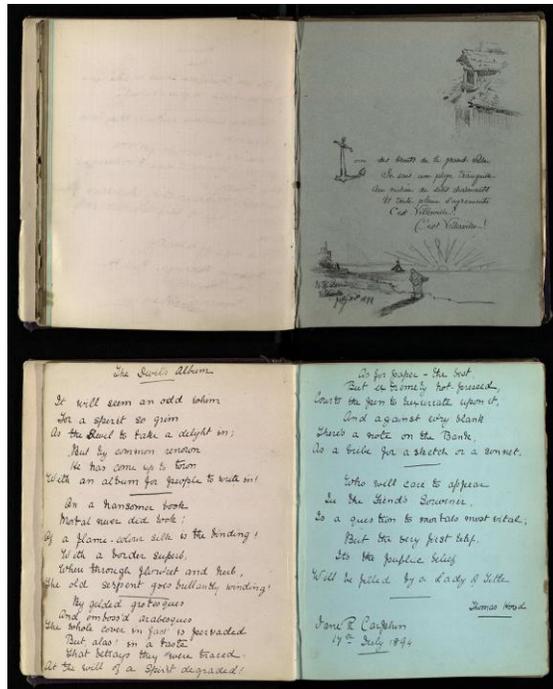
Craigie's album, for instance, follows a sequential alphabetic organisation and focuses on such themes as Scottish history; monarchs; Bible passages; and various languages, alphabets, and translations, including Gaelic, Hebrew, old English, Arabic, Anglo-Saxon, Latin,

Greek, Scots, and Slavonic. It is a testament to a particular form of knowledge organisation and transfer—and illustrates that commonplacing, broadly speaking, was not extinguished by the ‘album craze’.

Craigie’s album reveals how conventions inspired by the early-modern scholastic humanist album persisted. A volume from the same era displays the kind of whimsical material and loose structure that characterised many Victorian albums. These properties drew a great deal of disapproval in the nineteenth century. When compared with the high-mindedness of the commonplace tradition, the allegedly sentimental focus of their contents—and putatively insipid inscriptions departing from the inspired forms and styles of Romantic era—and their association with youthful, feminine leisure led to nineteenth-century album being deprecated as an object of ephemeral fashion. The book belonging to Ethel Palmer exemplifies many features of popular manuscript albums from this period: filled with inscriptions, including one in French, it reveals the broader unease with the genre, expressed in comical verses written by the celebrated Victorian poet Thomas Hood, entitled ‘The Devil’s Album’, which is transcribed here.



Front cover of *Commonplace book of Ethel Palmer, 1894-1915 (ms38882)*.



Top: Inscription in French. Bottom: Transcription of Thomas Hood's 'The Devil's Album', both from the Commonplace book of Ethel Palmer (ms38882).

St Andrews' Library Special Collections holds a remarkable, imaginative, and



Photograph of 'W.T. Linskill' from Women's Golf Scrapbook by Mary Simson, 1887-1890 (ms30354/3).

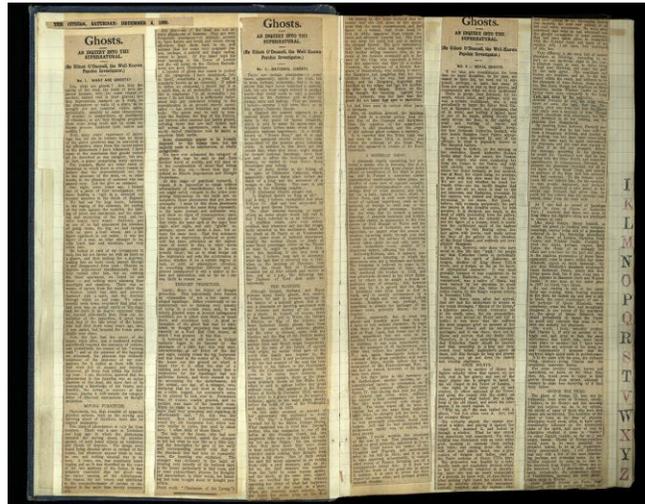
entertaining scrapbook created by another woman: Mary Simson. Simson, who belonged to a prominent Fife family, created an amalgam of textual material in a

large, folio-sized album with no

consistently appearing pagination or evident chronological organisation. But it has a tight thematic focus—on golf. Her album includes humorous sketches and a photograph of 'W.T. Linskill'.

The temptation is to see Simson's album as a product of leisure—a less taxing undertaking than Craig's book—signalled, for instance, by the absence of a formal indexical apparatus. But this album, and others like it, were nuanced creations, impressively executed as their creators incorporated a range of textual material to produce narratives of people (whether themselves or others), institutions, places, and other subjects. The photograph of W.T. Linskill in the Simson album reveals the interpolation and interposition of album narratives from the town and county within Special Collections. It is perhaps inevitable, given the mandate of the collections, that certain themes will predominate: the Fife landscape, the university, and of course, golf. In fact, Linskill's own albums are held here, as are those of the St Andrews Antiquarian Society, of which he was a prominent member. Compiled by one of the most prominent citizens of the town, they share the Simson album's strong focus on golf. They also reveal that this Dean of Guild (a prominent civic title Linskill held later in life) was very prominent in the wider life of the town. Even so, at first glance, the contents of one of the volumes may lead the reader to conclude that it is no more than a hodge-podge of miscellaneous material. Until, that is, a closer examination of the individual textual materials, such as newspaper clippings (many penned by Linskill) reveals clear relationships between them. These albums tell many stories: indeed each may be read as containing discrete, overlapping narratives, of Linskill's dogged search for the labyrinthal 'underground' St Andrews for interest;

of his interest in local ‘ghosts’; and of the theatricals of which he was such a keen supporter. They also tell broader stories of the man, the university, the town, the evolution of its antiquarian bodies, and yes, of course, of golf.



Press-cuttings from the Scrapbook of W.T Linskill (ms38078/1).

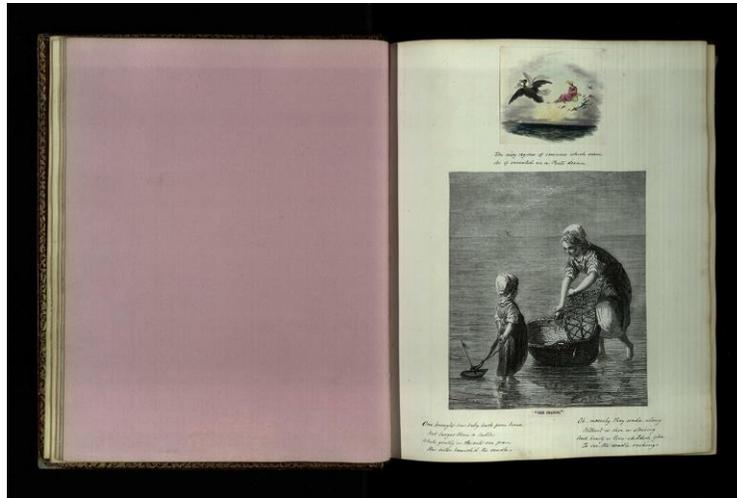
W.T. Linskill’s albums demonstrate how creators foreswore many of the ‘built-in’ features of mass-produced folio albums in favour of their own indexing and organising principles. The printer supplied an alphabetic index at the front of one book. Linskill didn’t use it. If one consequence of eschewing indexical structures adopted in commonplace books was that albums appeared to readers as a form of *bricolage*, on closer investigation most books reveal a high level of internal organisation, very often with a reader other than the creator in mind. In fact, some have argued, controversially, that the fundamental distinction between an album and a diary or journal is the social purpose and life of the album—as opposed to the private ends of the diary. It is difficult to establish more precise generic features, in part because the blank pages afforded textual and even material

flexibility. Evidence from several books in St Andrews Special Collections, including W.T. Linskill's, suggest that people adapted book structures to their own purposes and priorities. Physical affordances sometimes required album creators to fit newspaper clippings to pages, by cutting or folding. But the volumes bought at stationers were adapted more than they were adopted: ruled lines, indexes, and other properties were not necessary impositions on the creator: they could be cleverly got around, used for other purposes, or ignored altogether, as Linskill apparently chose to do.

Despite the apparent social purpose of albums, many of which were not only the products of many hands, but which were designed to be shared with many readers, some that survive to us today have a much more curious origins: what were they meant to document? Were they primarily created as private mnemonic tools for the album-maker and his or her intimates, surviving now as closed doors to distant, irretrievable affective and cognitive realms? One example of this particular elusiveness is the scrapbook featuring newspaper cuttings, cards, photographs, prints, and postcards, probably collected by Mabel Beaumont. This album is a volume of brown pages with many colourful images, artistically arranged. It includes sketches, many lithographs, material excerpted from other sources (usually organised on each page around a large image), a few photographs, and many aphorisms. Without pagination and with no obvious thematic organisation, it leads us to ask what united this disparate material, and what strategies Beaumont followed in creating it. What was the story she was telling



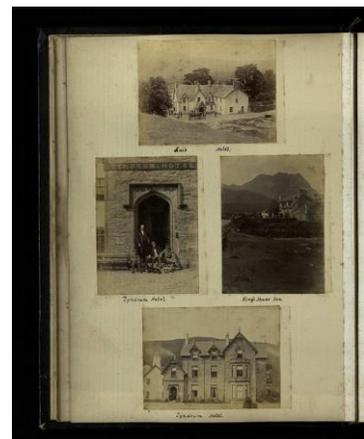
interspersed with images or writing that bears no obvious relation to surrounding text.



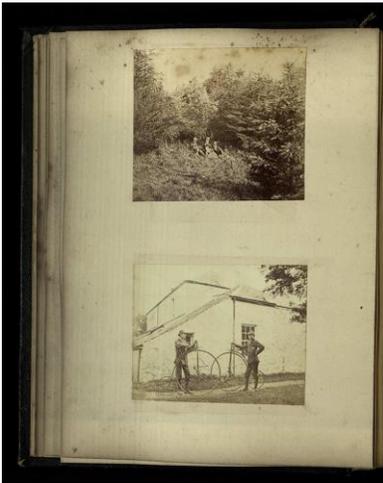
Page from the Commonplace Book and Scrapbook of E.H. Craven (ms38885).

The Craven album also testifies to the ways in which the unity of textual material can erode over time: many original materials appear to be missing, especially images that were once apparently mounted, perhaps precariously. It is critical to consider how books once seen as ephemeral even in their day, and certainly by many since, have physically deteriorated over time, shaping the transmission of the album to posterity. It is a timely reminder, too, that any album is a collection of carefully selected material, chosen in relation to each other. In the absence of even one piece of text, the narrative they create can change in innumerable ways, just as the page missing from a novel can alter the meaning of surrounding pages, and of the book itself.

In addition to types which may be described as commonplace, sentiment or autograph books and scrapbooks, Special Collections boasts an exceptional array of albums that contain photographs. One album in particular, created by the local doctor Leonard Bryson, boasts a particularly intriguing compendium of materials, including many photographs, but also figures into the analysis of album culture, text and travel in thought-provoking ways. In some respects it is the quintessential multi-textual album, replete with all materials that the nineteenth century genre furnished: *bon mots*, aphorisms and other literary material, as well as photographs and sketches. Elements of it seem to document travel. Indeed, for centuries, that has been a central preoccupation of album-makers, whether they were taking tours of the continent and transcribing material from other in hostelries, monasteries, and great houses abroad; sketching famous landscapes; visiting friends and soliciting their autographs; or capturing peregrinations in photographs. The album is a powerful tool of personal recollection and social invention and the photographic image has been a key element in these acts, and the creator drew on it in this case—but not exclusively. For an historian of travel, and of the hotel in particular, Bryson’s album offers a peculiar record of commercial accommodation: in several photographs hostelries constitute not the background to travel images: *they* are the focal point of the landscape.



Page from the Anderson Album  
(ms38633, crate 20, box1).



Page from the Anderson Album (ms38633, crate 20, box 1).

The album kindles interest in the extent to which it was inspired by other, more clearly defined types, because it boasts features that figure prominently in hotel visitors' books of the same era—a photograph of a penny-farthing and many light-hearted sketches such as male portraits—that often found its way into hotel albums at the end of dinner, when well-sated guests retired to the common rooms of the hostelry

and, perhaps in a sign of loosening inhibitions, took pen to paper.



Page from the Anderson Album (ms38633, crate 20, box 1).

Despite these familiar, whimsical elements, there are also very *personal* components to this album, which suggest that it was not produced solely in and for the public realm, following the well-established conventions of albums such as hotel visitors' books—see, for instance, the curious figure who adorns its first

page, adds a touch of the macabre, but also of the personal, to this volume. The comingling of styles and materials in this eclectic book illustrates a remarkable textual *and* typological hybridity.



Page from the Anderson Album (ms38633, crate 20, box 1).

One of the enriching features of Special Collections is that we are able to explore albums in the context of other records (typically generated by the same institution, person, or family). We can draw valuable comparisons across these collections, time, and genres. If the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries marked a turning-point in the gendering of album culture, heralding an ‘album craze’ whose exemplars were alleged to be inferior to dignified, masculine album forms, we find impressive and abundant evidence of the durability and adaptability of the very album type—the commonplace—that was said to be in firm eclipse. And if some nineteenth-century commentators wrote of the album as a collection of insipidities, few such generalisations withstand scrutiny when we inspect the

range of textually varied, imaginatively fashioned volumes. Albums were complex books- and narratives-in-creation from the moment they received their first signature, inscription, news-clipping, photograph, or pressed flower. They were at once deeply personal and highly social tools of commemoration, recollection, and literary transmission. They were painstakingly produced. They were invested with value by their creators, and many others who read them and inscribed in them, too. To historians, albums are material and textual artefacts that testify to prevailing literary styles; they are embedded within technological, social, commercial, and cultural developments: mass production; expanding systems of retail; the dissemination of new print materials; rising literacy; gendered, age- and class-inflected social and literary practices. An album tells many stories, and a varied collection reveals even more. I hope that this brief excursion through the albums of Special Collections at St Andrews University Library has conveyed the unique richness of the collection, and the textual complexity of the genre in its many nineteenth-century forms.