Papers of John Churton Collins

Finding number: US7

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University of Birmingham Staff Papers: Papers of John Churton Collins

Four notebooks, c1863-1887, which cover the time Collins spent at school and University, and the beginning of his career. One volume (US7/1) is a diary written in 1863, when Collins was at school [King Edward the Sixth] in Birmingham. Two of the volumes (US7/2 and US7/3) are commonplace books containing Collins' notes and observations on his reading. These are undated but appear to derive from a similar period to the school diary. US7/4 contains notes from Collins' time at university in Oxford, c1871-1872, with intermittent diary entries from 1871-1872 and 1884-1887.

Much of the content of the notebooks concerns Collins' literary interests and activities; the commonplace books and notes made at Oxford document the thoughts and reading habits of an aspiring writer and literary scholar, and the diary entries often focus on Collins' progress with his studies and writing. The diaries also provide information about Collins' emotional life and state of mind. The early diary entries reflect his enthusiasm for poetry and commitment to literary study, as well as giving an insight into his interactions with tutors and other pupils. In the few diary entries written at Oxford Collins records events of personal significance, such as finishing his degree. The sporadic entries from the 1880s document Collins' struggle with depression.

Administrative history: John Churton Collins (1848-1908) author and professor of English was educated at the Grammar School of King Edward the Sixth (Birmingham, England), and Balliol College, Oxford where he obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1872. Collins was greatly interested in literature in his youth; he coached London candidates for civil service examinations from 1873, and wrote for the press and magazines; made friends with Swinburne, edited Cyril Tourneur's works, 1878; and Lord Herbert of Cherbury's poems, 1881. He was a contributor to the Quarterly Review from October 1878, and many of his articles there were republished independently. Collins
was a successful lecturer for Oxford and London university extension from 1880. He long agitated with good ultimate effect for academic recognition of English literature at Oxford; urged his views in The Study of English Literature, 1891 and in periodicals, an outspoken critic of current literature in Saturday Review, 1894-1906; collected essays in Ephemera Critica, 1901, Studies in Shakespeare, 1904, Studies in Poetry and Criticism, 1905, and Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Rousseau in England, 1905. Collins was professor of English at University of Birmingham, 1904-1908. He received an honorary Litt.D. from Durham University in 1905; was a zealous amateur student of criminology; and a brilliant conversationalist. He drowned at Oulton Broad near Lowestoft, Suffolk.


For further reading about the University of Birmingham see: Eric Ives, Diane Drummond, Leonard Schwarz The First Civic University: Birmingham 1880-1980 An Introductory History (The University of Birmingham Press. 2000).

4 volumes

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Language: EnglishLatinGreek

Related material: Cadbury Research Library also holds:
Several letters relating to Collins in a large artificial collection of correspondence entitled Letters Additional (see finding numbers: LAdd/27, LAdd/30-LAdd/33, LAdd/3082-3087, LAdd/5476, LAdd/6395, and LAdd/6403). The collection also includes a translation from Virgil's Georgics attributed to Collins (LAdd/199).

Commonplace book belonging to Collins' wife, Pauline Strangways (finding number: MS495).

Archives of the University of Birmingham and archives of other former staff, officials and students.

**US7/1**

Diary of John Churton Collins

Lined notebook with ‘Poems by J. Churton Collins Vol.1’ written on the flyleaf. The volume contains diary entries dated 24 September to 11 December under the heading ‘Common Place Book 1863’. Collins mainly writes about school and his studies, but he also mentions social engagements, attending church, and his health.

Collins' daily routine usually involves reading before breakfast, attending school [King Edward the Sixth in Birmingham], going on a 'book ramble' or reading during lunch time, visiting friends or studying in Miss Mansfield's room in the afternoon, homework, and reading late into the evening. When writing about school Collins records his position in class and gives brief descriptions of the lessons he has been set to complete in the evening. The diary gives an insight into Collins' relationships with his peers, particularly a boy named Mason, whom he dislikes and accuses of bullying, but later befriends over a shared interest in poetry. On 14 October Collins complains about the unkindness of boys at his school, writing that they are not gentlemen by birth, and goes on to say that he pities a boy whose parents are Unitarians and read novels on Sundays. Collins expresses a low opinion of the King Edward's Magazine (2 October) and is disparaging of other boy's attempts to write poetry. On 20 October, when dining at the house of his schoolmate, Campbell, Collins' main concern is to engage Mr Campbell in conversation and to borrow his copy of Carruthers' 'Life of Pope'.

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Collins is committed to reading and studying in his free time and does not like to be distracted by the other boys; in October he writes: ‘Had to "lick" Armstrong for knocking a book out of my hand' and on 26 November: ‘wasted some time in telling tales to the boys for they forc'd me to do it'. On a number of occasions he writes that he has been on a 'book ramble' [in Birmingham city centre]; he mentions visiting an 'old book stall', shops in Union Passage, and Cadly and Hobson [booksellers in Birmingham]. In the afternoons he often visits Mr and Mrs Auster to read and talk, and goes walking with friends including Pickering, Gregory, Frank Hornblower, Miss Hornblower, and Richard Austin. On Sundays he attends church and comments on Dr Miller's sermons. There are a few Birmingham locations and landmarks that Collins mentions in passing: Harbourne [Harborne], the reservoir, Hagley Road, Paradise Street, the library, the Town Hall and New Street.

Collins' literary interests and aspirations are reflected in his enthusiasm for reading, writing and translating in his free time: ‘Read a little Pope (yesterday I read a little Dryden) Lucretius, and Thomson, the latter is a very fine poet, of all his works Winter is decidedly the most powerfully painted, adorned with accurate description, it is sublime!’ He comments on what he has been reading each day, mentioning many authors including Pope, Horace, Celsus, Byron, Virgil, Swift, Lucretius, Lucan, Dryden, Young, Darwin, Akenside, Junius, Spenser, Juvenal, Shenstone, Cowper, Addison, Kirke White, Cowley, Tacitus, Denham, Laman Blanchard, Tennyson and Savage. Collins also mentions reading the Bible, Boswell's Johnson and Porson's Life. On 2 November he determines to translate 100 lines of Virgil every night before going to sleep, and his tutor Mr Waddle encourages him in his translation of Horace. On 9 December he writes that he is concentrating his time on studying Latin and English poets and writing poetry, stating: ‘Oh! how I thirst to be a Poet'. Throughout the diary Collins refers to writing a poem on 'Ellesmere' and another entitled 'Confidence in Deo'. One of the school teachers, Mr Richard, compliments
his poetry, and on a number of occasions he says that he has read his poems to others without revealing their author, always with a positive result. At the end of the diary is a draft verse of his poem 'Confidence in Deo', and two pages headed 'For Latin Prose'. In the back of the volume Collins has copied out 'Martial's Epigrams' and 'Resignation' by J. Chatterton.

1 volume

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Notebook of John Churton Collins
c mid 1860s

Volume in which Collins has transcribed poems, passages from biographies or works of literary criticism, and made notes on the lives and works of various authors and the history of poetry. In some cases Collins gives a brief opinion on what he has read or transcribed. The entries are undated and not always clearly attributed.


1 volume
Access: Open

US7/3 Notebook of John Churton Collins c mid 1860s

Volume in which Collins has transcribed poems and passages from critical works, made notes on writers' lives and works, and made notes on Latin. In some cases Collins gives a brief opinion on what he has read or transcribed. The entries are brief and undated, and not always clearly attributed. The volume also contains two epigrams on his maths teacher.

Collins' transcriptions include verses from the 'Arundines Cami', Dr Byrom's 'Pond', verses of [George] Buchanan, and 'Auld Robin Gray' by Lady Anne Lindsay. He copies several Latin poets' descriptions of storms and spring, epithets for the wind from Virgil, and descriptions of the morning from Silius Italicus, Lucan, and Statius. In other instances he copies out examples where different poets have used similar phrases to one another. Collins makes a note of unusual words or grammatical constructions found in Latin poetry, and on one page copies different passages where the word 'purpureus' occurs in Virgil, concluding that its meaning is closer to 'brightly coloured' than 'purple'. Collins quotes from a wide range of critical writers including [Isaac] D'Israeli, Bacon's Essays, [Henry] Hallam, and [William Young] Sellar's 'Roman Poets'. He often copies material which reflects on the writer's life or give advice on writing, for example 'Southey's routine as described by himself' and anecdotes such as: 'Lipsius was so learned in Tacitus the he offer'd to repeat any passage with a dagger at his heart, to be us'd against him on a failure of memory. He flourish'd in the 16th century'.

The volume also includes a copy of a letter of advice from General Lee to his son, a list of early editions of the ancient classics, and notes on libraries of Alexandria and the first English library. There is also one page of notes on 'Napoleon's loss in Russia' and another on the history of the English Parliament.

1 volume
The first part of the notebook contains Collins' notes on literature, history, politics, law and theology, with a few entries about events in his personal life. This section of the notebook appears to date from c1871-1872 when Collins was studying at Oxford. He makes notes on numerous figures including Lord Bolingbroke, [Charles James] Fox, Lord North, Lord Chatham, [George] Canning, Henry Fox, and writers including Bembo, William Chamberlayne, Richard Lovelave, John Cleveland, Peter Antony Motteux, Mrs [Susanna] Centlivre, Mrs [Delarivier] Manley, Aphra Behn and [Charles] Johnstone. Some of the topics he mentions are Roman Law, Civil Law, the differences between Greek and Latin Christianity, early English literature, and historical subjects such as the Wars of the Roses, the history of the Byzantine era, and the reign of Richard II. The personal events that Collins records are a meeting with Dr Newman at the Oratory in Birmingham, which he does not describe but says will be preserved in his memory (26 June 1871), receiving his first regular literary fee as a member of staff of The Globe (3 August 1872), and a meeting with Robert Browning (11 July 1872). He also describes his last days at Oxford: on 1 July 1872 he writes that he went to the Bodleian, St Mary's Church, the Cathedral at Christ Church, and to his favourite spot on the Iffley Meadows to think and smoke a pipe. He writes: 'Tomorrow I start for London - an adventurer. What will happen????????????? Here I am a B.A. about to begin life. God be with us.'

Following this are intermittent diary entries dated from 2 August 1884 to 3 October 1885 under the heading 'Personal Diary'. During this period it seems Collins is lecturing during the day and writing an article on Shakespeare's predecessors during the evening. The entries focus on Collins' struggle to write the article and his feelings of depression, hopelessness and frustration. He is often unable to write more than a few sentences and finds his efforts feeble and
inadequate. He describes being in a state of 'absolutely frightful depression so that I almost began to doubt whether my mind was sane' (26 April 1885) and makes reference to thoughts of death. Collins gives few details about his 'ordinary work' or family life, although he does mention that his wife, Pauline, called a doctor about his depression (7 August 1884), and alludes to the impact his depression is having on his personal life: 'My mind is I know in a fearfully morbid state & as I was told today I am a burden to everybody as well as to myself' (26 April 1885). On a couple of occasions he mentions his regret at not having reconciled with his Uncle John before his death and on 28 May 1885 he also notes that he did not get the Merton Professorship. However on 2 and 3 October 1885 he happily records finishing the article and receiving compliments from Dr Smith, Murray, and Fisher. There is a later annotation next to this entry: 'Read this Diary at my lodgings Hagley Grove Nov. 23rd 1907 - dear old chap what you have gone through! & how good God has been'.

In the back of the volume are loose sheets of paper containing diary entries 25 May to 23 June 1887. Collins writes that he is severely depressed but hopes the diary will help him to 'grasp the rail of duty'. He is lecturing during the day and writing an article on Donne for the Quarterly Review. He also mentions writing a letter to The Times on 'The Universities and National Education' but says it did not get the notice he hoped. On 20 June he writes that the Council of the University Extension are meeting to consider his petition: 'my last stand against the Philologists'.

1 volume

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