

Papers, objects and Romantic science

Humphry Davy, most of whose papers are here in the Royal Institution, was not like Wordsworth's Newton, a voyager in strange seas of thought, alone. He was sociable, communicating research straight away in lectures and papers, sometimes researching in public in the downstairs laboratory which had a bank of seats. He saw the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* and Southey's *Thalaba* through the press, and himself wrote poems; and we have his lecture notes, laboratory notes, and the little notebooks in which he jotted down thoughts, commonplaces, and doodles. These papers, with the records of the RI, help us place him within the culture of the day. The piece of paper on which he untidily recorded the isolation of the extraordinary new metal potassium is printed on this sheet.

But papers are not all we have. Science is done on laboratories, designed for the purpose as here, or 'portable' so that they could be set up in the field by a mineralogist, in a school-room, or in the nursery as for Jane Marcet's Mrs B., Emily & Caroline in her *Conversations on Chemistry* (1806). Faraday's diagram shows what one might be like; and in the Science Museum they have an actual little box that he used. When Coleridge asked Davy for advice about setting up a laboratory in the Lake District he may have had such a thing in mind. Downstairs at the RI we can see the laboratory and its apparatus as it was in Faraday's time, and we might note that the RI also had a valuable collection of minerals.

There are more collections round the corner at the Linnean Society in Burlington House, where William Swainson's correspondence is preserved. He was a pioneer lithographer, a talented artist publishing works in parts by subscription. Pattern-plates show how the hand-colouring (probably by poorly-paid women) was kept supposedly uniform through the edition. He needed to support himself and his family (a scientific career was a dicey business in Regency Britain) and we also see his correspondence with Dionysius Lardner, editor of the *Cabinet Cyclopaedia*, and Longman the publisher of this series of cheap little books in some of the first hardback 'cased bindings', responding to the March of Intellect. Lardner was not known as 'the tyrant' for nothing; and Swainson found himself taking on an impossible load and falling far behind his deadlines. He made sense of zoology through the Quinary System of circles in threes, reproduced here, which went with his high-church Trinitarian beliefs, but failed to catch on: a would-be gentleman of quarrelsome disposition, he attributed his failure to land a job at the British Museum to the Archbishop of Canterbury. Actually this brings us back full circle, because the Trustee responsible was Davy, by then President of the Royal Society, whose friend J. G. Children was a banker and chemist who had fallen on hard times and needed to find congenial work.

These interrelated stories fit into the first quarter of the 19th century, involve not too big a cast, and will I hope be entertaining even to those who do not (yet) share enthusiasm for the Romantic/Regency period.

David Knight, Durham, July 2010