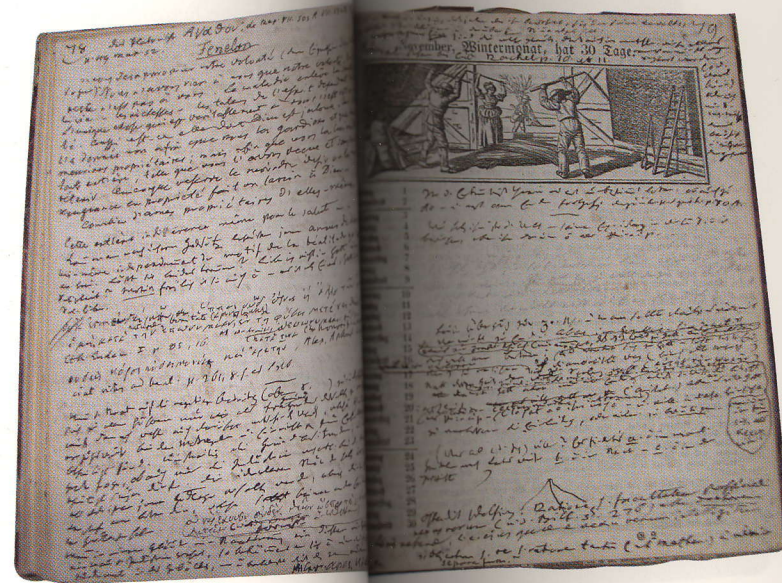


The Notebook: A Paper Technology

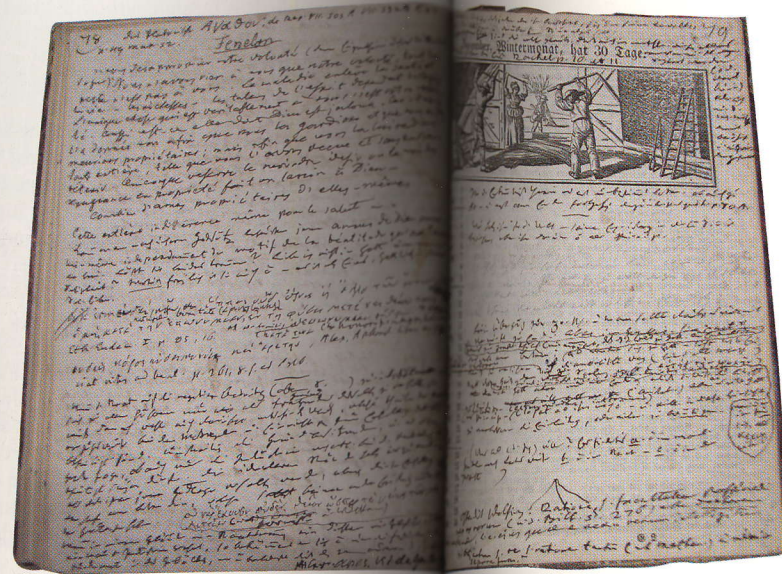
Anke te Heesen



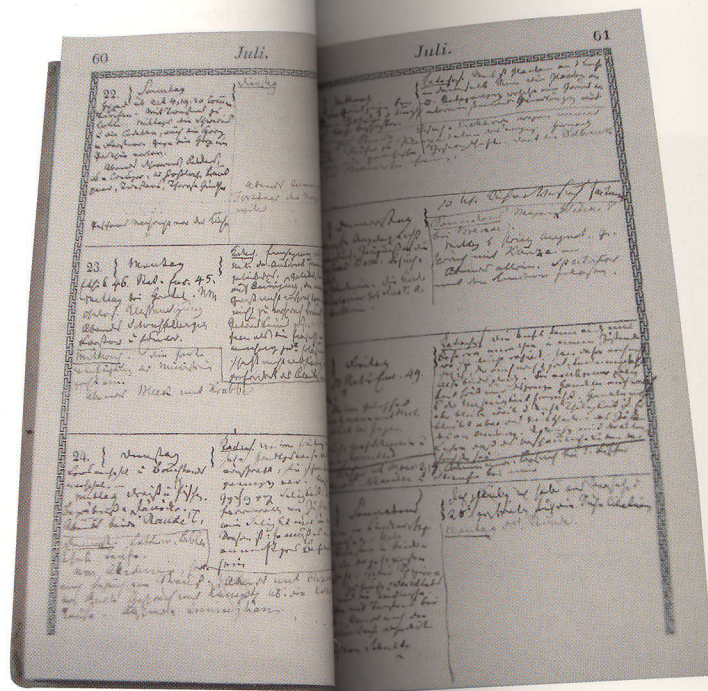
The book is black. It is available in various sizes, with lined or plain paper. Its distinguishing feature is its black cover, which is made of a vinyl-coated material that makes it very robust. In addition, it has an elastic band, which holds the pages together when the book is closed and also serves as a bookmark. Glued to the inside of the back cover is a folded paper pocket, in which one can collect notes, sugar wrappers, announcements or postcards; even a pen can be stowed away there easily. Since the early 1990s, Modo & Modo, an Italian company, has manufactured the so-called Moleskine Notebook. The name comes from the French word *moleskine* (also known as English leather), which in the nineteenth century described the sturdy cover of stationers' notebooks; it is now used by the Italian company as a trademark. Allegedly, its design was created by a small stationer in Tours, France, who discontinued production in the 1980s. According to Modo & Modo's advertisements, the design has had a remarkable history: Artists and writers such as Vincent van Gogh and Ernest Hemingway used this notebook for their sketches and ideas. "It is two centuries now that Moleskine has been the legendary notebook of European artists and intellectuals [...] Many are the sketches and notes, ideas and emotions that have been jotted down and harboured in this trustworthy pocket-size companion before being turned into famous pictures or the pages of beloved books."¹ (Actually, van Gogh did not purchase a Moleskine but used a sketchbook bound in black, which looked almost the same.) Since the nineteenth century such notebooks have existed in a variety of forms, until plastic-covered ones gradually replaced them after 1950. The climax of the story told by Modo & Modo concerns the late author Bruce Chatwin, who purchased a supply of



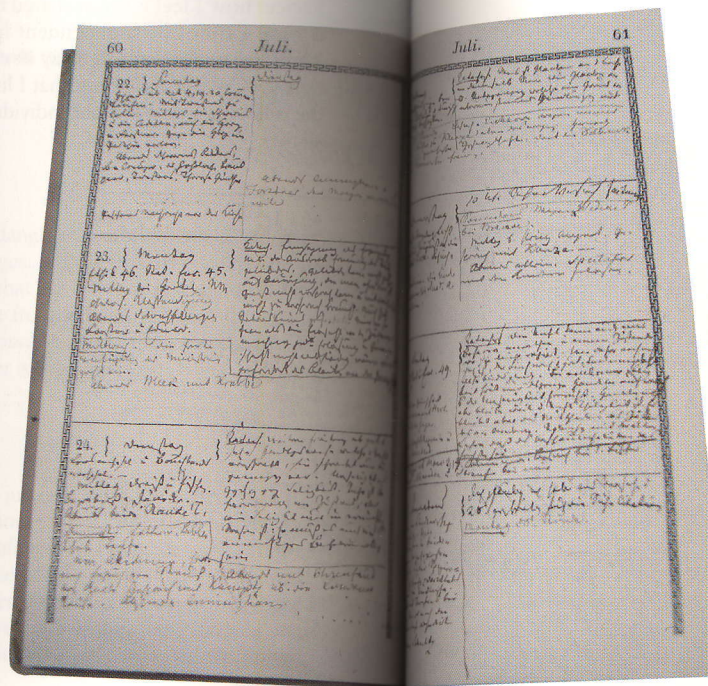
Friedrich Wilhelm von Schelling, Calendar, 1850, 23.5 x 38 cm, Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, archive, photo: Anke te Heesen



Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, Calendar, 1850, 23.5 x 38 cm, Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, archive, photo: Anke te Heesen



Friedrich Ernst Schleiermacher, Pocket diary with daily recordings, 1827, 17.3 x 22 cm, Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, archive, photo: Anke te Heesen



Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, Pocket diary with daily recordings, 1827, 17.3 x 22 cm, Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, archive, photo: Anke te Heesen

these notebooks to take with him on his travels, described them in his books and was alarmed when they were not available anymore. "*Le vrai moleskine n'est plus*, was the short and curt statement of the owner of the stationer's where Chatwin had ordered 100 before departing for Australia. Despite having literally swept up all the Moleskines he could find, they were not enough. Now, the Moleskine is back again."² So much for this successful legend, which since 2002 has again been marketed worldwide and is available in almost every bookstore and stationery shop.

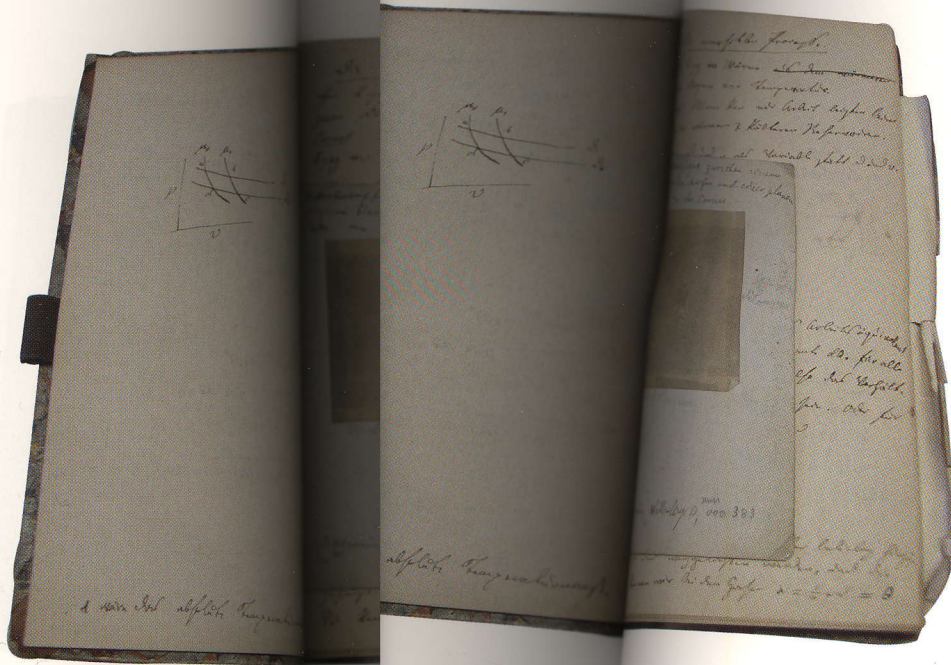
Around 1900, this little book had already become something of an anachronism because it retained the format of the writing-tablet, or slate, as well as a classic style, in a world that was increasingly industrialized and full of machines. In the nineteenth century, paper underwent many transformations: it was standardized, became interchangeable, and could be used for photocopying; even special furniture was designed for it.³ The mechanization of paper, the forms of organizing and storing it in offices and archives, instituted a flexibility that was directly connected to the new flexibility of humans and the places where they worked. One hundred years later, the next stage has been reached: Paper has disappeared completely from many places. The computer has rendered many modes of paper communication and filing superfluous; its storage capacity exceeds by far that of a filing cabinet, which takes up a lot of space. The laptop, the notebook and the Palm are gradually becoming portable offices, which can be used anywhere and which ensure that no time need be wasted waiting at airports and that boredom need never set in.

Yet the phenomenon of paper persists, as the little black book demonstrates. In spite of all the computers sitting on desks and organigrams of virtual filing systems, paper has proven stubborn and enduring although its capacities and speed are

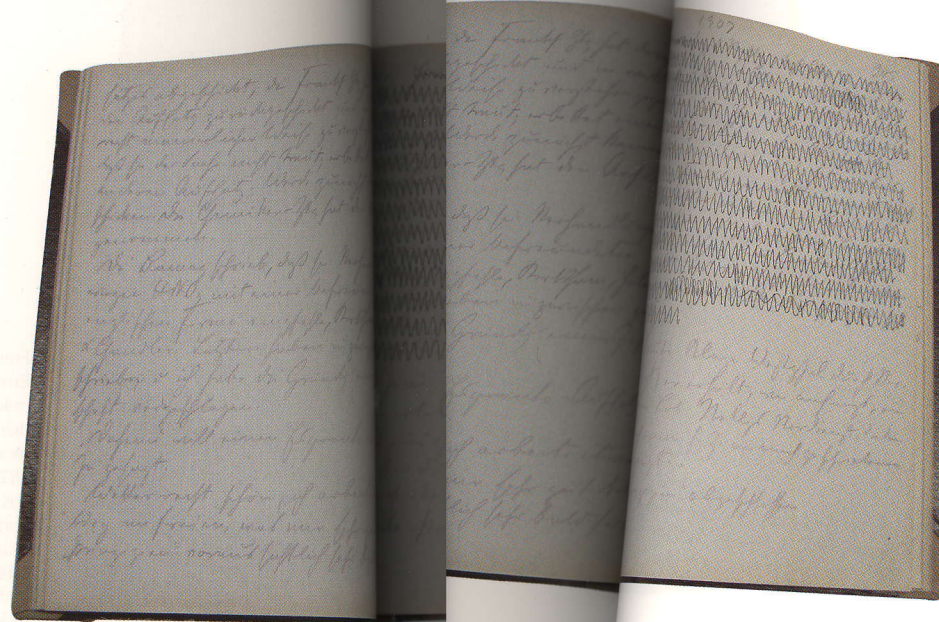
1 *The History of a Legendary Notebook*, see <http://www.moleskine.it/> (Sept. 2004).
2 *Ibid.*
3 On the DIN formats, see Walter Porstmann, *Papierformate. DIN-Buch 1*, Dinorm, Berlin, 1923; see also Ulrich Giersch, "Erster und letzter Arbeitsschritt – Fotokopieren im Büro. Zur Produktivkraft taktile Schnittstellen," in: *Work@Culture. Büro. Eine Inszenierung von Arbeit*, Herbert Lachmayer, Eleonora Louis (eds), exhib. cat., Oberösterreichisches Landesmuseum, Ritter, Klagenfurt, 1998, pp. 69-79. On specialized furniture systems, see Walter Porstmann, *Karteikunde. Das Handbuch der Karteitechnik*, Verlag für Wirtschaft und Verkehr, Stuttgart, 1928.

no match for electronic data processing. The imminent arrival of the paperless office has often been proclaimed but still does not exist; moreover, despite e-mail and the Internet paper consumption has gone up by more than 40 percent.⁴ This may be due to the generation that is used to paper and does not want to dispense with its help, or it may be due to the generation that is *not* used to paper and cannot judge its value or the prudent use of it. However, probably the most plausible reason is paper's material qualities, which the computer screen cannot (yet) simulate: One can fold paper, hold it, carry it around, write something in the margin; if bored, one can make paper airplanes of it. Additionally, paper is connected to special tools (pencils, paper clips, ink, pens) and techniques (folding, cutting, gluing) that are not easily replaced and lead people to gather around a piece of paper in a special way. Paper is mobile and has the property of accompanying but also of being passed on.⁵ One is a member of a paper-community, which has dedicated itself to formats and filing systems,⁶ where the organization of bound paper pages decides what will be written on them. When executed in public, this act of writing is encoded in such a way that anyone can follow and understand the *mise-en-scène* of work.

The black notebook also represents an element of a recording technique, which has been standardized and technicalized over the centuries. The notebook as a paper-machine consists of the functions *noting* and *storing of notes*. "To note" means first and foremost "to write down," from the Latin *notare*, with the connotations sign, mark and writing, or from *noscere*, which means "to get to know". "Note," from *notitia*, refers to this, namely, "to be known".⁷ Something is noted, generally by hand, and thus taken note of. Therefore, apart from the actual act of writing, noting also describes a particular kind of perception: *taking notice of something*. Etymologically, here writing and taking notice are contained in one procedure, which at the same time implies habitual forming of a person and results in a praxis with paper that requires certain gestures, performed acts, rituals and tools. This centuries-old, constantly changing praxis is still present today on computer screens, where unambiguous symbols substitute for it.⁸ The digital surface is presented as a two-dimen-



Hermann von Helmholtz, Notebook *Mechanische Wärmetheorie and Anatomie*, n.d., 17 x 23 cm, Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, archive, photo: Anke te Heesen



Wilhelm Ostwald, Diary of Wilhelm Ostwald, 1900-1909, 21 x 36 cm, Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, archive, photo: Anke te Heesen

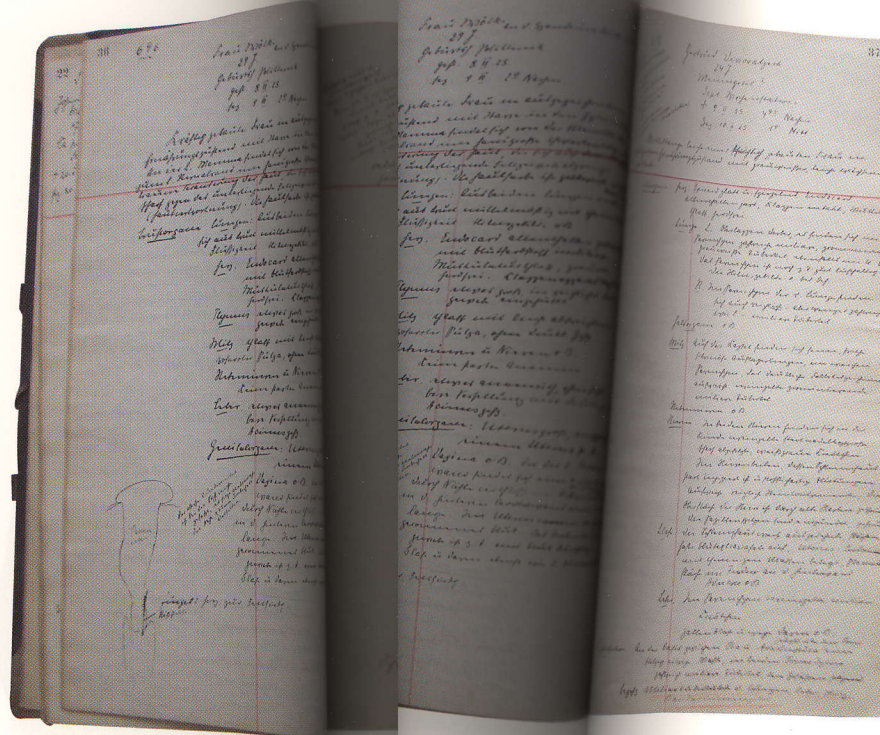
sional desktop, on which one sees the commonplace objects of work-with-paper (scissors, sheet of paper, folder, clipboard, text pages, pencil, book and so forth). From the sixteenth century on, bits of knowledge have been noted down in books with blank pages, stored in special boxes or placed in pigeonholes or compartments of bookshelves. In that era, the notes and small pieces of paper were the smallest material text-units of intellectual work. Organized note-taking was understood as a writing technique that could be learned, and it was one of the essential skills in the learned world.

Fixed ideas about how something should be written down on paper have existed for a long time. They were encountered most frequently in connection with accounting, archiving and the observing of nature.⁹ In 1556, the doctor of medicine and natural scientist Konrad Gesner wrote a letter to the botanist Leonhard Fuchs, in which he said that it was not prudent to behave like competitors. Rather, they should cooperate more, because "the number of plants is infinite and [...] one person [cannot] know them all in detail. However, if everyone presents their observations openly for the common good, one day a complete and comprehensive work can be completed from these preliminary studies."¹⁰ To this end, Gesner used to cut out the parts of letters received that he deemed relevant and add them to his collection of

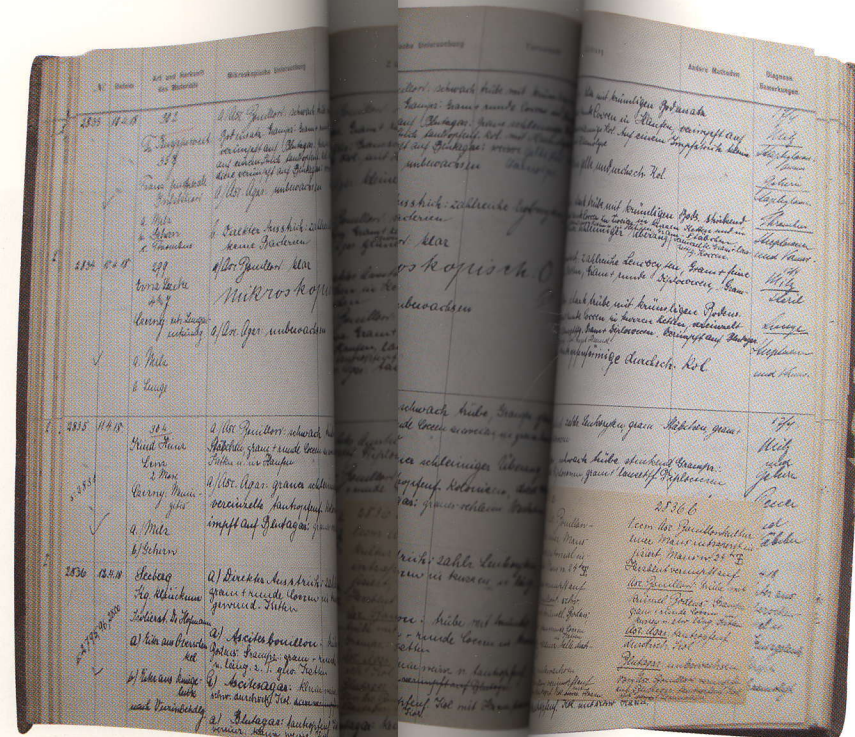
- 4 Abigail J. Sellen, Richard H. R. Harper, *The Myth of the Paperless Office*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2001.
- 5 Sellen and Harper (op. cit., pp. 107-137) describe the collecting "affordance" of paper; its possibilities for allowing things to be passed on, see Bruno Latour, *La clef de Berlin et autres leçons d'un amateur de science*, Edition La Découverte, Paris, 1993, chapter 11.
- 6 See, for example, the "personal organizer" of the English company filoFAX, or the yellow Post-it notes of the 3M company in the US that now dominate writing desks.
- 7 Friedrich Kluge, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*, de Gruyter, Berlin, 2002, p. 592.
- 8 Both the symbols and the command were developed at the Xerox Corporation's Palo Alto Research Center in the US (founded in 1970). They were taken over by Steve Jobs, one of the founders of Apple, and later developed further for the Macintosh computer; see Gloria Meynen, "Büroformate. Von DIN A4 zu Apollo 11," in: Lachmayer, Louis (eds), op. cit., pp. 80-88; Bruce Horn, *Xerox, Apple, and Progress*, www.mackido.com/Interface/ui_horn1.html (July 2002).
- 9 On accountancy and files and records, see Cornelia Visemann, *Akten. Medientechnik und Recht*, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt, 2001; also Jack Goody, *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986.
- 10 Cited in Willy Ley, *Konrad Gesner*, Verlag der Münchner Drucke, Munich, 1929, p. 105.

notes. In 1563, he informed his colleague Johann Bauhin that it was his habit to cut up the letters he had answered and sort them into his notes, which was why – regrettably – Bauhin’s letter could not be found.¹¹ “For the philosopher, that is, the researcher of man, it is important to have material at hand on all things and from all over. But of what use is this material, if it is not ordered and organized?”¹² The system of organizing paper, which Gesner developed, served him as the material expression of an undertaking that was both communal and ordering. The notebook was a unifying collecting-point.

Noting means paying attention, writing down and sticking in. Much care was lavished on laying out notebooks. Already in 1605, Francis Bacon recommends in *Advancement of Learning* the use of “commonplace books” for entering the fruits of reading, quotations and references: “I hold that the diligence, and pains in collecting common Places, is of great use in certainty and studying.” The philosopher John Locke, who influenced entire generations of English gentlemen with his instructions of how to make commonplace books, rendered the procedure methodical. In one of his texts published in 1706, he described how to keep such a notebook. The “Memory is the treasury or Storehouse,” he said, but one must provide memory with an orderly basis. “It would be just for all the World as serviceable as a great deal of Household-Stuff, when if we wanted any particular Thing we could not tell where to find it.”¹³ This organization begins with reading. One should first read a book but not write anything in the notebook. “The Places we design to extract from are to be marked upon a piece of Paper, that we may do it after we have read the Book out.” So after putting in all the bookmarks, one should read the book a second time and decide what is relevant enough to be written down in the notebook. “I take a White Paper Book of what Size I think fit; I divide the two first pages, which face one another, by parallel lines” and make an index. In so doing, one forms one’s own keywords. The commonplace book thus refers a quotation noted down to its original context (its origin, the book) and, at the same time, is a stock to draw on for the memory, the speech to be given or the text to be written. This detailed description illustrates clearly



Different individuals, X 1924 - II 1928, notebook of patient records, 42 x 53 cm, Berlin Medizin-historisches Museum der Charité, photo: Anke te Heesen



Different individuals, XIX Diagnosen Buch Path. Inst. Bakt. Abt., January 1918, notebook with records concerning bacterial surgery in the Charité, 36 x 46 cm, Berlin Medizin-historisches Museum der Charité, photo: Anke te Heesen

how the techniques Locke described pre-structure what was to be written or recited. Entire generations of intellectuals and young gentlemen were educated to practice this technique. The notebook was a technique in the service of discipline.

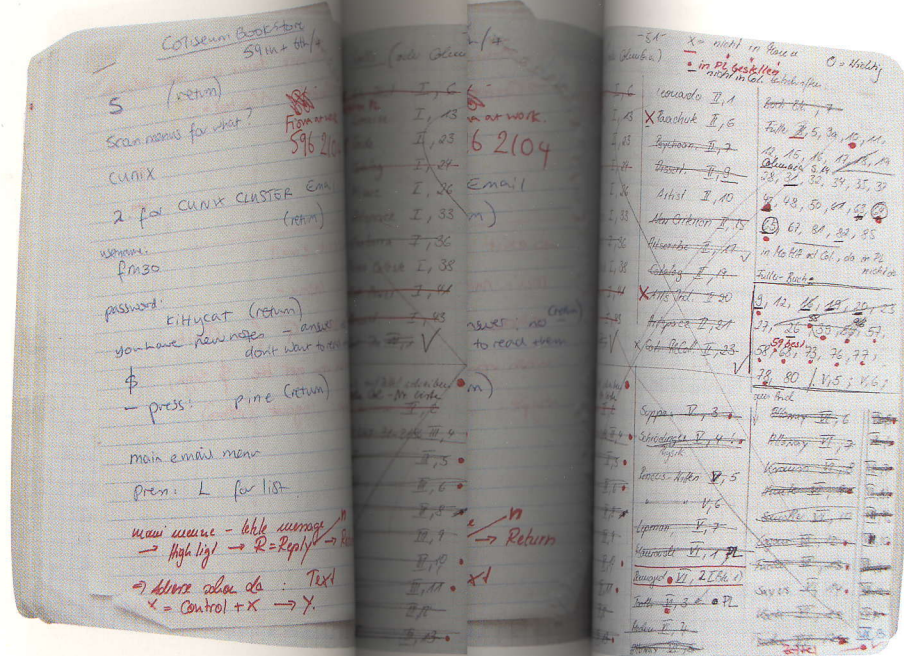
Since Bacon, increasingly personal observations of natural phenomena have appeared in the various systems and books for notes. In addition to relevant text passages and observations, noting down news and experiences came to play an important role. The physicist Robert Hooke was the experimental counterpart of John Locke, so to speak, for he described precisely how one should write down observations, for example, of how an experiment was done. Precise and concise observations should be written down on a small piece of very good quality paper, he believed. Additionally, it is “very convenient to have a large Book bound after the manner of those that are very usual for keeping Prints, Pictures, Drawings, etc. to preserve them smooth and in order: On the sides of which, in the same manner as those Pictures are kept, it would be convenient to stick on with Mouth Glew [...] But they may at any time, upon occasion, be presently remov’ed or alter’d in their Position or Order, that which was plac’d first may be plac’d middle most, or last.”¹⁴ The notebook served as a record, a protocol.

Many of these notebooks were the size of a folio; they certainly did not fit into any pocket and were impossible to take on walks or fieldwork. Thus, different-sized notebooks were introduced, for example, by Daniel Gottlob Messerschmidt, a German scholar employed in Russia. During his

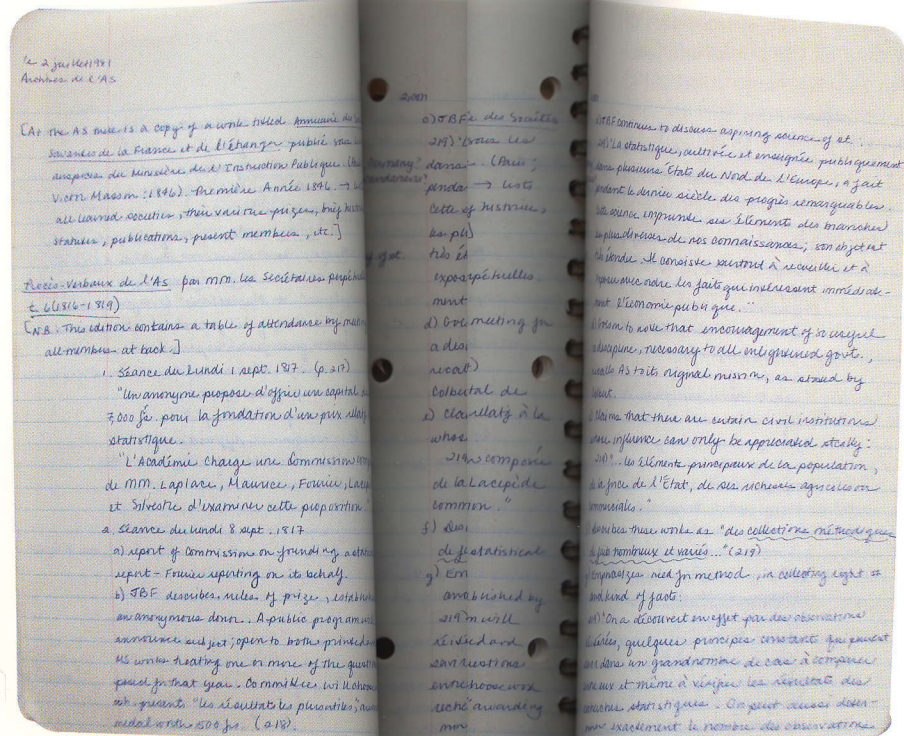
¹¹ Cf. Brian Ogilvie, *Observation and Experience in Early Modern Natural History*, Doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago, 1997, pp. 273f.
¹² Helmut Zedelmaier, *Bibliotheca Universalis und Bibliotheca Selecta. Das Problem der Ordnung des gelehrten Wissens in der frühen Neuzeit*, Böhlau, Cologne, 1992, p. 91. On note-boxes and card indexes and their organization, see Hans Petschar et al. (eds), *Der Katalog. Ein Historisches System geistiger Ordnung*, exhib. cat., MAK, Springer Verlag, Vienna, New York, 1999; Markus Krajewski, *Zettelwirtschaft. Die Geburt der Kartei aus dem Geiste der Bibliothek*, Kadmos-Verlag, Berlin, 2002.
¹³ John Locke, *New Method of Making Common Place-Books*, J. Greenwood, London, 1706, p. ii; following quotations pp. v and 4. In this context, see Lucia Dacome, *Policing Bodies and Balancing Minds: Self and Representation in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Doctoral dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2000.
¹⁴ Robert Hooke, *The Posthumous Works of Robert Hooke*, Richard Waller (ed.), S. Smith and B. Walford, London, 1705, p. 64.

expedition to Siberia in the early eighteenth century, he used up many notebooks, which he had made himself. His observations and notes were recorded in three steps; first, in a small book for noting observations on a daily basis; second, in a diary, which detailed these observations, and third, in various thick notebooks, each devoted to a specific theme, such as botany or zoology, which recorded all the details again. The notebook was proof of having been in a particular place, it was evidence.¹⁵

Notebooks were a material unit of people's mobility and a chronological companion. This might be for strictly personal purposes, (like a diary), for records, (such as ships' logbooks) or as a system for protocolling an experiment. Entries could be written by one or more people and extracts from other documents glued in. Notebooks were a place for collecting things, a technique for discipline, chronological recording and evidence. Such a book with its blank or gradually filling pages was a paper-machine, which took in what one fed it but at the same time directed the entries. It was subject to certain formalization processes, both with regard to the technique of what was entered and the material form of what this was entered in. From the beginning, this paper technology adhered to certain rules: The entries had to be written in a straight line, and no blots or spots should mar the paper. A margin, which in the earliest years was often signaled by a fold in the paper, provided space for notes and commentaries and played a significant role in administrative forms of writing (files). Corrector's marks, which were standardized, formed the uniform language of the educated world. The way in which pages should be filled with letters, symbols and sketches possessed, as today, its own aesthetics of clean and clear linear writing. The folio format was suggestive of more authority than a portable quarto-format, which was filled up more rapidly. Over time, special pre-printed books were produced with special lines and tables. Standardized page formats were probably first used for accounting purposes; today, the record books of public institutions or the medical records of hospitals are reminiscent of accountancy and are unthinkable without pre-printed spatial division of pages. It was these standardized formats



Elke Bippus, notebook of an expedition to New York, 1994, 39 x 25 cm, courtesy Elke Bippus, Hamburg, photo: Anke te Heesen



Excerpt book of a private person, 1981, 24.3 x 31.6 cm, courtesy of a private note-taker, photo: Anke te Heesen

that first made possible space-saving storage. The influence of this paper technology continues to the present day. The majority of people will continue to share in it until if and when electronic surfaces make paper redundant. At present, however, communicative processes involving oneself or others that are fixed on paper demonstrate a fascination for the stuff, which always presupposes an addressee who will understand what is written on the pages. The Moleskine is part of this paper-machine, and it preserves all the techniques of recent centuries: the first page with the author's name and address, the hand-written entry, linearity of the writing, neat insertion of notes on the white page, ease of finding one's place with the bookmark, space for collecting various things at the back, and also the possibility of gluing things in, thanks to the robust paper quality. In addition to the pragmatic considerations for buying a Moleskine, this demonstrates that its symbolic value is very prominent. The notebook's appearance and the manufacturer's advertisements evoke specifically modern artists and the early twentieth century. Purchasing such a book allows the buyer to participate in this legendary creativity. A hand-written entry attests to originality and the act of contemplation. The *mise-en-scène* for this paper-machine is that center of urban mobility that still exists – the café. Sudden flashes of inspiration need this setting as well as the classic stimulants, caffeine and nicotine.

Although the Moleskine, and with it hand-written entries in a notebook, may appear simply as a brief renaissance of an old medium, it does underline the need to share a common surface, however mobile and solitary the individual may be. Moleskines are used for different purposes and uses, and their format determines what they are used for. The notebook is a cultural technique, an encoded implementation of paper that does not belong exclusively to the private or the public sphere, to leisure or to work, to contemplation or communication. This object (medium) operates between these spheres and arouses notice and interest. The notebook collects people.

Translated from the German by Gloria Custance

¹⁵ Cf. Anke te Heesen, "Die doppelte Verzeichnung. Schriftliche und räumliche Aneignungsweisen von Natur im 18. Jahrhundert," in: *Gebäude der Mnemosyne. Architektur als Schriftform der Erinnerung*, Harald Tausch (ed.), Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 2003, pp. 263-286.