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Printing, Publishing and Pocketbook Compiling: Ann Fisher's Hidden Labour in the Newcastle Book Trade

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I Introduction

The role of women in the eighteenth-century book trade has only recently begun to garner real scholarly attention. Inevitably, much of that attention has been directed toward printers' widows, women whose names survive in colophons. As a result, it seems as if printers' wives had no knowledge of or hand in the business for the whole duration of their marriages, when many of them would have been living in the same building as the print shop, and that they learned how to print, produce and distribute books only in a period of mourning. As Helen Smith and Paula McDowell have complained, the historical evidence that survives is 'misleading to the extent that it suggests that women were only involved in trade during their widowhood'.¹ But eighteenth-century books were products of the interwoven sectors of domesticity and trade, as exemplified by McDowell's reference to the home workshop and Smith's study of guild practice. Despite the Stationer's Company's growing reluctance across the seventeenth century to recognise the role of women within the guild, women nevertheless owned businesses, managed apprentices and bought and exchanged copy throughout that period and beyond.² But ownership, apprenticing and purchasing are the acts that leave historical traces. Women played a significant role in the production and distribution of print throughout the eighteenth century, but it remains difficult to place them within the printing house, doing the mechanical work of printmaking.³ Perhaps inevitably, then, scholarship on women in print tends to prioritise literary and editorial endeavour over the more practical inky business, or accounts and distribution, for which little evidence survives.⁴ What of the women co-working with their spouses in print shops and publishing

¹ Helen Smith, *Grossly Material Things: Woman and Book Production in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 2012), p. 190. See also Paula McDowell, *The Women of Grub Street: Press, Politics, and Gender in the London Literary Marketplace 1678-1730* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), p. 33; 37.

² Smith, *Grossly Material Things: Woman and Book Production in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 2012), p. 14; 94; 14

³ Smith p. 96; McDowell, p. 17.

⁴ The Women's Print History Project 1750-1836, led by Michelle Levy, is a project actively working to redress this balance.

businesses before widowhood? They often remain invisible to historians, and it is difficult to credit them with their labour retrospectively. Even more difficult is determining how much, and what kinds of, labour those who predeceased their husbands performed without credit.⁵

Provincial women printers and publishers have been doubly overlooked in favour of men and the metropolis, or at least in favour of major publishing centres like Oxford and Cambridge. This neglect is partly due to a dearth of surviving evidence and their apparent rarity; as John Feather has noted, 'the heart of the provincial book trade has always been in distribution rather than production'.⁶ But the history of Newcastle upon Tyne is an exception to this general tendency for provincial towns to distribute rather than to produce books. After the lapse of the licensing act in 1694, Newcastle became a 'hotbed' of intellectual activity, with over 60 printers, publishers and booksellers for a population of around 26,000.⁷ Despite its geographical distance from the metropolis, Newcastle's key position between two capital cities allowed its printers to develop profitable connections in each direction along the London-Edinburgh road. It is unsurprising then, as Feather notes, that this city is 'an extreme example of a phenomenon which has emerged from a number of studies of the trade over the last twenty years or so: local and regional networks'.⁸

This essay recovers the working practice of a Newcastle woman known for writing and editing but not currently recognised as a printer-publisher: Ann Fisher. Fisher is less well-known by her married name, Slack, through her marriage to Thomas Slack, the printer-bookseller. For the purposes of this essay I will call Ann by her professional name, with which she signed her works as author, 'Fisher', and her husband Thomas by his surname, 'Slack'. This study draws upon manuscript archives in the British Library and Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums holding Fisher's correspondence. As Peter Isaac has briefly stated in his *ODNB* entry on Fisher, 'These letters [...] show not only that she took an active part in the management of her husband's business, especially when he was absent from Newcastle, but also that she understood the technical requirements of book production.'⁹ Fisher's business activity has not been explored at any length by scholars, and in the first part of this essay, I would suggest that upon closer analysis, the correspondence reveals not only that Fisher 'played an active part' in the business known as 'Slack and Co.', but that analysing her knowledge of the 'technical requirements of book production' shows the extent to which she was a practicing printer and print shop manager. In all but name on the title-page, she published and printed literary works, two of

⁵ McDowell, pp. 34-35.

⁶ Smith pp. 153-54; John Feather, 'Provincial Book Trade' in *Light on the English Book Trade: Essays in Honour of Peter Isaac*, ed. by Barry McKay, John Hinks and Maureen Bell (New Castle: Oak Knoll, 2004), pp. 1-12, p. 2.

⁷ Jeffrey Smith, 'Books and Culture', in *The Moving Market: Continuity and Change in the English Book Trade*, ed. by Peter Isaac and Barry McKay (New Castle: Oak Knoll, 2001), p. 1. McDowell also notes that the lapse of the Licensing Act also became a huge opportunity for female would-be printers.

⁸ Feather, p. 3.

⁹ Isaac, 'Ann Fisher', *ODNB*.

which I will focus on in this essay, John Cunningham's *Poems, Chiefly Pastoral* (1766 and 1772) and the *Ladies' Own Memorandum* pocketbook (1765-1778). Fisher was, in large part, the 'Co.' in 'Slack and Co'.

The Ladies' Own Memorandum was a duodecimo pocket journal or pocket book, one of many such annual publications from the period which 'uniquely blend the characteristics of the account book, diary, and eighteenth-century ladies' magazine'.¹⁰ Being, to borrow Jennie Batchelor's term, a 'generic hybrid',¹¹ they are exactly the kind of publication which McDowell recognises as having been overlooked, when she opened her 1998 study of *The Women of Grub Street* complaining that 'feminist critics have concentrated not only on women writers to the exclusion of other printworkers, but also on those women writers who are most easily incorporated into current literary critical traditions of intelligibility and value'.¹² Amanda Vickery's work on elite women's lives in the eighteenth century pioneered the reclamation of pocketbooks as important historical artefacts, and Rebecca Connor went on to read them against eighteenth-century fiction as an indicator of feminine economics in narrative of the period.¹³ Connor opened her study of *Women, Accounting and Narrative: Keeping Books in Eighteenth-Century England* (2004) with a close reading of the 1775 issue of Fisher's *Ladies' Own Memorandum*, which she suggests is 'typical of the many almanacs and manuals for women printed in the mid to late eighteenth century'.¹⁴ But Vickery and Connor do not analyse the printed matter of these diaries, reading them as receptacles for elite women's manuscript life-writing rather than as communities of printed poetry, say, or as the literary, editorial, and hands-on printing endeavour of women in the book trade. With Batchelor's work, along with that of Stephen Colclough and Sandro Jung, pocketbooks are slowly beginning to be considered for what they tell us about the eighteenth-century print market.

The Ladies' Own Memorandum is unique in being the only book of its kind produced by a woman in this period. For the first time, this essay gathers together all known issues of the *Ladies' Own Memorandum* during Fisher's editorship, before the role passed to her daughter, Sarah Hodgson, on her death in May 1778. Gathering Fisher's pocketbooks has been difficult, because so few copies survive, an issue compounded by the fact that the run of pocketbooks for 1771 to 1779 preserved by the British Library has been mislaid. The earliest known issue is for 1766, held at Columbia University

¹⁰ Jennie Batchelor, 'Fashion and Frugality: Eighteenth-Century Pocket Books for Women', *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 32 (2003), pp. 1-18: pp. 1-2.

¹¹ Batchelor, p. 5.

¹² McDowell, p. 15.

¹³ Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven: Yale, 1998); Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England* (New Haven: Yale, 2009); Rebecca Connor, *Women, Accounting and Narrative: Keeping Books in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Routledge, 2004).

¹⁴ Connor, p. 5

Library.¹⁵ After the 1766 issue, I have had no option but to skip over the next two issues to collect those surviving from 1769 to 1779 (the year following Fisher's death). They have been gathered from the following archives: the British Library (1769, 1771-72); the John Rylands Library, Manchester (1773); Médiathèque Valais, Switzerland (1770-74); Burke Library, Hamilton College (1775); the Cadbury Library, Birmingham (1776); the Bodleian Library, Oxford (1777-78); and the National Library of Wales (1778). Viewing the pocketbook in this way, as a run of annual publications is, of course, an artificial construct, complicating any reading of the manuscript content of these works, which would be better understood in their home contexts as runs of diaries not all of them necessarily of the same brand. But it has the singular benefit for my purpose, in the second part of this essay, of piecing together the print history of Fisher's pocketbook. When presented in order, we can see Fisher adapting the content of the journal to suit her readership, a readership actively in correspondence with her, in a work which, I will argue in the final, third, section, became a mouthpiece for transmitting her concerns about the book trade to a growing national audience. These self-reflexive insights into her experience as a professional in the print market are particularly revealing. When read alongside her correspondence, where she comments at length on business matters, and against the *Newcastle Chronicle*, the newspaper she co-edited with Slack (and to which she frequently refers as 'our Paper'),¹⁶ this evidence provides a rare insight into the professional practice of a printer and publisher not currently recognised as such because she was a woman.

II Publishing *Poems, Chiefly Pastoral*

As the first female dictionary compiler and author of the hugely influential 'bad exercises in English', as well as numerous language text books, Ann Fisher has rightly claimed a place in the canon of English grammarians.¹⁷ But the scholarship on Fisher as printer-publisher, aside from Isaac's *ODNB* entry, has all been framed through facts surviving about the career of her husband. Isaac's short biography of Slack reveals that he had initially worked for Quaker printer Isaac Thompson, proprietor of the *Newcastle Journal*. Slack published the *Newcastle Memorandum-Book*, printed by Thompson, which continued to be successful from its initiation in 1756 through to 1893. The Slacks had been publishing books throughout the 1750s, including numerous editions of Fisher's *A New Grammar* (1750), and

¹⁵ Colclough refers the first 1765 issue which has never surfaced but is known from advertisements to have carried a cut of Queen Charlotte and the two princes.

¹⁶ Fisher to Cunningham, 24 June 1769, Hodgson Papers vol. 5 Add. MS. 50244.1.

¹⁷ Alicia Rodríguez-Álvarez and María Esther Rodríguez Gil, 'John Entick's and Ann Fisher's Dictionaries: An Eighteenth-Century Case of (Cons)Piracy?', *International Journal of Lexicography*, Vol. 19 No. 3, 287-319; Rodríguez Gil, 'Ann Fisher's A New Grammar: Or was it Daniel Fisher's Work?', in *Grammars, Grammarians and Grammar-Writing in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. by Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), 149-176. Karen Cajka 'Ann Fisher: Reforming Education for "the mere English Scholar"', *European Romantic Review*, 22:5 (2011), 581-600.

they clearly considered it more cost effective to establish their own printing house than to go on hiring Thompson's. In 1763, in what seems to have been a fairly disagreeable split from his co-worker, Slack opened 'The Printing Office' in Newcastle, from which he also continued to be a bookseller. He established the *Newcastle Chronicle* (which survived until 1953), in direct competition with Thompson. By the time Fisher died, there were four printing offices in Newcastle, all ran by men called Thomas: Saint, Angus, Robson, and Slack. Saint was the only other bookseller-printer, and he did both activities from his printshop. The firm of the Slacks was certainly the largest outfit, with two premises: the 'Printing Press', the earliest of their establishments, was opened in Middle Street in 1763, whilst by 1778 they were simultaneously running a bookshop-cum-stationers on Union Street, where they sold lottery tickets and insured against fire.¹⁸ They were also known for selling medicines from 1751-1784.¹⁹ Their friend, the poet Robert Carr, managed one of the shops. Ann Fisher managed the other with her husband.

Fisher's correspondence to Cunningham is rich in encapsulating her many varied roles within the 'Slack and Co.' business. Take the following example from 17 September 1771, when she was in the midst of finalising the *Ladies' Own Memorandum* for the following year whilst also publishing a second edition of *Cunningham's Poems, Chiefly Pastoral*:

Mr Slack is at London & has been for some Time on which Account I have been too much hurried with Business to be so punctual in my Correspondances as I cou'd have wished, we shall dry your Title Sheets directly, & to be ready to send a few of Books to you in a weeks Time if you choose It, & advise how we are to send them &c?²⁰

In excusing her delay in replying to Cunningham as arising from running the printing house in her husband's absence, Fisher reveals her role as manager, 'on which Account I have been too much hurried with Business'. As Isaac has informed us, we can see in this letter that 'she understood the technical requirements of book production', but her use of the first person plural when describing drying the sheets of *Cunningham's Poems, Chiefly Pastoral* explicitly involves her in the manual labour of that process, a sense compounded by her update in a later letter that 'Your book is all off now; but not dry enough to bind'.²¹ This is a rare insight into the daily life of a female printer in her own words and should be recognised as much more than simply 'understanding', and 'management in absence'. The 'we' in 'we shall dry your sheets' could be read in two ways, as 'we' the institution of 'Slack & Co.', which only abstractly involves her in the manual labour of hanging the damp, freshly-inked paper in

¹⁸ *Newcastle Courant*, 30 April 1763; William Whitehead, *The First Newcastle Directory* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Mawson, Swan, and Morgan, 1889), esp. p. 38.

¹⁹ BBTI.

²⁰ Fisher to Cunningham, 17 September 1771, Hodgson Papers vol. 5 Add. MS. 50244.9.

²¹ Fisher to Cunningham, 4 September 1771, Hodgson Papers vol. 5 Add. MS. 50244.4.

the print shop, in a management capacity. However, Fisher continues to handle Cunningham's books, in both senses of the word, as she routinely checks how dry they are and updates him on the process when 'they are not sufficiently hardened for binding' in time for the spa season.²² She demonstrates her experience and expertise in this area when she says 'ye longer Time they have to dry before bound the better', whilst assuring her friend that 'Tis very elegantly printed depend of it'.²³ The regularity of these updates and the fact that their accuracy depended on her manual handling of inked paper suggests that in producing Cunningham's poetry Fisher took a leading, practical, role.

In publishing this second edition of Cunningham's poetry, Fisher takes responsibility for distributing his volumes, repeatedly requesting that the poet 'advise how we are to send them &c'. Her most frequent mode of describing distribution is in a collective sense, but she also tells of her hands-on involvement in the business of distributing Cunningham's volumes when managing an order for 24 copies: 'I received yours of the 22d inst. & forwarded you. two dozen of your books today by ye York carrier, directed for you as this letter. I hope you'll get them safe tho' I'm afraid tis a cross road'.²⁴ Fisher had initially advised Cunningham to dedicate his poetry to her friend, bluestocking Elizabeth Montagu, who spent part of her time managing her husband's coal mines in Newcastle. A longstanding fan of David Garrick, however, Cunningham opted to dedicate his poetry to him, but desired Fisher's approval before publication, writing to Carr to state 'I shall thank Mrs Slack, I hope, in person; & would consult her & you, & everybody, whether I should continue Mr Garrick in the class we have placed him'.²⁵ Fisher relays to Cunningham the business decision – a group decision – that despite not hearing from Garrick, 'We all thought it best to continue with ye old Dedication'.²⁶ It is Fisher who takes care that Cunningham's patrons have their books bound to the appropriate standard. Hodgson remembers that when Garrick received the books, he 'did condescend to turn over the leaves & look at the binding', which she describes as 'very elegantly bound'. But Cunningham was eager to please Fisher by also offering a similar set to Montagu: 'What do you think, Mrs. Slack, of sending her a book, in the manner of those I sent Mr. Garrick, and presenting it as my first-offering? The fly took up Mr. Garrick's'.²⁷ Within three days of Cunningham's proposing such an idea, Fisher promises 'I shall get

²² Fisher, 17 September 1771.

²³ Fisher to Cunningham, 5 November 1771, Hodgson Papers vol. 5 Add. MS. 50244.10.

²⁴ Fisher to Cunningham, 25 October 1771, Hodgson Papers vol. 5 Add. MS. 50244.8.

²⁵ Cunningham to Carr, 15 May 1771, Hodgson Papers, 50249.184.

²⁶ Fisher, 4 September 1771. Sarah Hodgson relates the widely circulated rumour that Garrick was belittling in return, giving him a coin and a maxim – 'poets and players are always poor'. Some printed accounts record Fisher giving him a box on the ear when he returned to Newcastle to relate the sorry tale. The article in *Fraser's Magazine* proves this to be merely rumour.

²⁷ Cunningham to Fisher, 22 October 1771, 'Life of a Strolling Player', *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country*, 201 (September 1846), pp. 253-261, p. 260. This letter is described as having been 'long in the possession of Charles Mathews, the actor and [...] here presented for the first time'.

Mrs Montague's books bound & sent soon'; 'I have two binding in the most elegant taste for Mrs Montague which I shall take an opportunity to send by some passengers going in the fly'.²⁸

Fisher and Cunningham's friendship is striking in these letters. She takes care of him, sending him money and supplies when he frequently runs short, and cajoles him over his low spirits in a way which must have appealed to the ailing comedian's sensibilities. 'Now Mr Cunningham', she teases, 'you talk of stringing up your Muse; but we never hear a single Twang of her: pray Sir set to work in good Earnest or yr second Vol will be in the *Posthumus* way.'²⁹ It is clear that Cunningham's poetry was initially self-published not because Slack & Co. did not believe in it, but on the contrary, because they wanted him to earn as much money by it as possible.³⁰ For the second edition, published by the Slacks, the copyright agreement states that they paid him an enormous £76.³¹ Rather than Cunningham pay them for production, as he would have done when first published his poems by subscription, they paid him for the second edition up front, in advance of sale, whether the copies sold or not. Fisher warns him,

Now you'll mind not to give any books away; but remember that you have received more money than all ye edition will come to, which may not be all sold off this many years, many of the damaged ones never at all perhaps.³²

Fisher recommends to Cunningham a date for publication, 'a month or two later of ye season is ye proper season for publishing you may depend of it',³³ Spring being the best season for poetry,³⁴ and she excuses poor sales of his poetry by blaming book format, telling him 'we have writ to London to urge it and propose to sale half those they have upon hand', which were octavo, and offers 'to have them at once into a better selling size',³⁵ duodecimo:

²⁸ Fisher, 25 October 1771; Fisher, 5 November 1771.

²⁹ Fisher to Cunningham, 10 April 1771, Hodgson Papers vol. 10, Add. MS. 50249.188.

³⁰ 'I shall forget everything sooner than the great obligations we stand under to Mr Cunningham since the first commencement of the Chronicle, & in return will ever be his friend in the best sense of the word, tho' it may not always be consistent with your sense of it nor does Mr Slack wish, I am sure, to make any advantages of you without adequate returns; he wants you to be careful for your own sake, yt you may have money in bank when all's done'. Fisher, 25 October 1771.

³¹ Cunningham, Memorandum witnessed by Robert Carr, 27 February 1772, Hodgson Papers vol. 10 Add. MS. 50249.189.

³² Fisher to Cunningham, 3 March 1772, Hodgson Papers vol. 5 Add. MS. 50244.12.

³³ Fisher, 4 September 1771.

³⁴ 25 October 1771; Fisher to Cunningham, 10 April 1771, Hodgson Papers vol. 10, Add. MS. 50249.188.

³⁵ Fisher to Cunningham, 'To Mr Cunningham at the Theatre Whitby a Book', undated, Hodgson Papers vol. 5 Add. MS. 50244.3.

I shall give you many a Puff in advertising the Ladies Book, respecting your songs & do not doubt but this Edition of your Poems being a right portable size will go off like smoak & to print you another Edition of them against the next spaw season.³⁶

The new duodecimo format meant that the plate facing the frontispiece, originally designed for a larger book, ended up sitting awkwardly within the volume.³⁷ Fisher was conscious of this oversight, 'I here send you four books & four cuts, the latter of which I am at a loss to contrive what you'll make of: as to the plate being a different size from the book, it must be replaced with a new one whoever lives to print another edition'.³⁸

These letters do not represent a unique or unusual moment between the correspondents, which we might expect were Fisher simply managing the business during Slack's London trip, when Cunningham's poetry might have been the main job on hand. The common thread and main focus of Fisher's letters to Cunningham is the printing, publication, binding and dissemination of his book. Moreover, the letters, from the date of Fisher's bantering note to Cunningham for his second volume in April 1771, to her sending Montagu's volumes in the fly in March 1772, cover the production of this work from drafting to marketing, representing as a slice of life, or a year in the career, of an eighteenth-century printer-publisher. This archive testifies to Fisher's position as printer-publisher and the labour which is evidenced here--printing, publishing, and distribution--has all been done, so far, without credit. Nowhere on its title-page is it apparent that Fisher was, as her archive demonstrates, the driving force behind the production, publication and dissemination of *Poems, Chiefly Pastoral*.

III Making the *Memorandum*

The title-page of Fisher's memorandum book, on the other hand, at least hinted at some of the gendered labour that produced it: 'By A Lady'. This was a clever marketing strategy. As the most 'commonly consulted printed objects of the eighteenth-century', pocketbooks were stocked by every bookseller and widely advertised in local and national press, so this note of gendered production set it apart from the competition.³⁹ The Slack and Co. bookshop had been stocking almanacs for years, including Slack's own *Newcastle Memorandum*, when Fisher announced her pocketbook for ladies (for 1765) at the end of 1764. It emerged from the printing house she co-ran with her husband before it was distributed in the city and surrounding counties.⁴⁰ From the beginning, it was advertised as serving

³⁶ Fisher, 17 September 1771.

³⁷ Fisher, 4 September 1771.

³⁸ Fisher, 3 March 1772.

³⁹ Colclough, pp. 176-77.

⁴⁰ *Newcastle Chronicle*, 3 November 1764: 'Newcastle: Printed by T. Slack, and sold by the Booksellers in Newcastle, and those in the adjacent Counties.' No copies of the 1765 issue are currently known to survive.

the purposes of business as well as amusement and promised to include 'Many instructive, useful, and entertaining Articles'. Fisher's pocketbook included a wide range of materials aimed at the respectable, cultured women she imagined as her readers. Unfortunately, no copies of the first issue are currently known to survive, but from the advertisements we can get a sense of its appearance and content. It cost a shilling, was 'Printed a small Size, on a good Paper and new Letter, with a Frontispiece of a Lady, dressed in the Fashion of the present Year; also an elegant Print of Queen Charlotte, and the two young Princes, done by one of the best Masters'. The *Memorandum* included pocketbook staples: a guide on how to use the book, moveable feasts, a lunar calendar, a marketing table, an interest table, lists of Kings and Potentates (and their ages) and of Arch-bishops and Bishops ('with the Value of their Sees'), and (what serves now as a reminder of Newcastle's colonial past) the current Portuguese exchange rate. A more unusual element of the book was its prices for chairmen in Newcastle.⁴¹ The articles covered painting, drawing, taking prints, and art criticism, 'Maxims, or Rules of Life, for the Ladies', two verse fables, favourite songs and country dances of 1764. These were areas in which Fisher had considerable expertise or networks. From running her own school in the 1740s she was well equipped to provide young women with lessons on life and accomplishments and through her work in the printing office she could well describe that practice. Her longstanding friendship with Cunningham and James Thompson, theatre-manager, meant that she had a range of songs and dances to hand, as well as pastoral poetry by Cunningham and her poet-print manager, Carr. This combination of contents was an instant success, and by the following year, the diary had gone national, when 'King of Booksellers', George Robinson, picked it up and published it under his brand, Robinson and Roberts.⁴²

Fisher experimented with content. Between 1766 and 1768, the pocketbook was 'the only Book of the kind that contains Bills of Fare for each Month in the Year, by an eminent Cook'.⁴³ But then they were gone. The change in emphasis from bills of fare to literary puzzles was an ingenious design for the pocketbook, which emerged from Fisher's role as co-producer of the *Newcastle Chronicle*, for which she found she had a surplus of material. In the newspaper, she wrote, '—Several Rebusses and Enigmas are lately come to Hand, but looking upon them as Articles unfit for the Paper, after inserting one already promised, we shall take the Liberty to reserve any ingenious ones we have been favoured with for the Ladies Memorandum-Book, which we publish annually, and without acknowledging any more of that Species of writing for the Chronicle.'⁴⁴ The 1769 volume of the *Memorandum* was advertised accordingly, '** In this Year's Book is given a Half-Sheet extraordinary,

⁴¹ 'Not in any other Book of the Kind', *St. James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post*, 23 December 1766.

⁴² William West, *Fifty Years' Recollections of an Old Bookseller* (London: West, 1837), p. 92.

⁴³ *St. James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post*, 4 February 1768.

⁴⁴ *Newcastle Chronicle*, 3 May 1766.

consisting of a great Number new Enigmas, Paradoxes, and Conundrums'.⁴⁵ In this issue, Fisher announced that due to a growing number of poetry submissions, the diary would be less practical and more literary:

The purchasers of this little book will readily excuse the omission of the bills of fare this year, as they could not be admitted on account of the great number of Enigmas, and other original pieces which I have experienced to be far more acceptable to the ladies, to whose taste I will ever submit the effort of my abilities, so powerfully aided by those of my ingenious correspondents, whose literary productions continued must necessarily confer on The Ladies Own Memorandum Book, a superiority in materials to any other work or publication of the like kind.⁴⁶

Many of the poems Fisher published in the pocketbook were puzzles: enigmas, conundrums, anagrams, and the like, and her readers responded by writing verse answers to be published in the next issue. Fisher incentivized submissions by entering all correspondents into a raffle for copies of the diary: 'Whoever sends us the best answers to the foregoing *Enigmas*, &c. before *May-day* next, will have a chance by lot, for six, four, and two *Ladies' Own Memorandum-Books*.'⁴⁷ The new arrangement seemed to suit the correspondents of the *Chronicle* as well as the readers of the *Memorandum*. Fisher also began including rebuses in her memorandum book from 1771, at a time when they were much more common in literary jest books than in almanacs. Such puzzles became synonymous with ladies' pocketbooks; from 1779, Reuben Burrows began publishing a 'Companion' to his Stationer's Company-authorized almanac, the *Ladies' and Gentleman's Diary* (later known simply as the *Ladies' Diary*), where he could include more 'aenigmas, rebusses, mathematical essays, questions and solutions, &c'.⁴⁸ In the back of the volumes, and increasingly in the front too, Fisher published work by a growing number of poets who usually wrote under pseudonyms. Carr was one, who wrote under the pseudonym 'Primrose'; Robertson wrote under 'J.R.'. Fisher would later complain to Cunningham that since Carr had won the lottery he had left off submitting his contributions to the *Ladies' Own Memorandum*, forgetting, she wryly noted, that it was her who had sold him the winning ticket: 'like ye overfed Goose he has turn'd useless since his Lottery Ticket & forgot who gave it him; and for my own Part Dame Care has defray'd my Fancy with all the Poetical Talents I was ever Mistress of'.⁴⁹ In the same breath she hints that she had in the past published her own poetry in the *Memorandum*. The pocketbook anthologised amateur contributions for the enjoyment of individual readers who could see their work in print, and in the process of publishing

⁴⁵ *Newcastle Chronicle*, 12 November 1768.

⁴⁶ Fisher, *Ladies Own Memorandum* (1769).

⁴⁷ Fisher, *Ladies Own Memorandum* (1769).

⁴⁸ Title-page (London: Carnan, 1780).

⁴⁹ Fisher, 4 September 1771.

them in the *Memorandum*, together with the poetry of Fisher's circle, contributors were able to join a community of authors with impressive cultural capital.

The national advertising campaign for the book exploited the image of a woman writing and compiling reading material for other women. From the 1766 (the first London) issue, the metropolitan press had marketed the *Ladies' Own Memorandum* as the only pocketbook edited by a woman. In these adverts, Fisher appeals to female consumers in the third person: 'As this is the only Pocket Book which is the genuine production of a Female, the Compiler hopes the Ladies will pay a particular regard to the hour of their own sex, and extend the sale of this work among their friends; especially if, upon a candid perusal, it shall be found not unworthy of their patronage'.⁵⁰ In the *Memorandum* and the advertisements for it Fisher had created a unique identity as pocketbook compiler and publisher of an annual literary text which meant that any such call for solidarity would read as personal and compelling.

From its first issue Fisher was keen to stress that the *Ladies' Own Memorandum* might appeal to everyone, not just women, and to young people in particular. It was 'Earnestly recommended to all young Ladies at Boarding-schools, for Reasons assigned in the Preface; and the Title of the Book only excepted, 'tis equally as proper for young Gentlemen as Ladies'⁵¹:

I think myself particularly honoured this year, by the correspondence of two or three gentlemen, who have hitherto write in the *Ladies Diary*, with so much credit to themselves; and am particularly pleased that they have fallen into such good company (i.e.) that the merits of the ladies exhibitions herein, are by no means inferior to their own.

Here, in 1769, men are actively encouraged to contribute to, read and use the pocketbook. Burrows' dropping of 'Gentlemen' from the title of his own diary suggests that such an omission would not endanger sales. Given that, initially, this was a locally produced and distributed work, the pocketbook's wholesome image would have been supported by Fisher's reputation as a pedagogue. This reputation was alluded to in 1767 to encourage readers to purchase her work rather than other diaries aimed at women: 'Be careful to ask for the Ladies own Memorandum Book, so much preferred by the Ladies, on Account of the Author's constant Attention to the Improvement of her own Sex'.⁵² Though the *Memorandum* was still officially anonymous after being taken up by Robinson and Roberts, this advertisement suggests that Fisher's authorship was not a closely-guarded secret; she would later estimate that half of its national readership would not be able to identify her, leaving a

⁵⁰ *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, 18 November 1765.

⁵¹ *Newcastle Chronicle*, 29 December 1764.

⁵² *St. James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post*, 15 November 1766.

good number who could.⁵³ A ladies' diary produced by the Slack establishment would have been easy to attribute to Fisher, especially after an extended advertisement appeared in the winter of 1766 which promoted both the *Memorandum* and 'a New and correct EDITION, enlarged and improved, with New Mottos in Verse' of Fisher's *Pleasing Instructor* (1756).⁵⁴ The *Pleasing Instructor*, an anthology of moral literature for children, was hugely popular and went through numerous editions throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It included Fisher's 'Thoughts on Education, by way of introduction', which she personally signed to protect her copyright. Every copy of the *Ladies' Own Memorandum* from at least 1769 had included a sample table of memoranda 'By way of Exemplifying the Book', one entry for which was 'SATURDAY [...] To buy the *Pleasing Instructor*; or *Entertaining Moralist*, at my booksellers, for cousin Ann's new year's gift'.⁵⁵ The italicised reference to 'Ann' seems like an excellent joke for those in the know. When the 1774 edition of the *Memorandum* carried a full facing-page advertisement of the *Spelling Dictionary and Expositor of the English Language* 'by A. Fisher', the book gave a strong impression of shared production by Ann Fisher, grammarian and pedagogue.

After producing only two issues of the *Ladies' Own Memorandum*, Fisher's success was such that the pocketbook was advertised as sold by 'all the Booksellers in Town and Country'.⁵⁶ She wrote to the readers of the *Newcastle Chronicle* in November 1766 to thank them for their support:

The general and candid Reception which the Ladies Own Memorandum-Book has successively met with, merits the sincerest Thanks of the Editor, whilst it indicates the greatest Regularity and Generosity of the Purchasers: For, whether the Ladies have preferred it on Account of the Superiority of its Plan, the ruled Part, (which is confessedly allowed to be better contrived for keeping Accounts, Memorandums &c. than any Book of the Kind extant) or, which is equally meritorious, they have manifested their Partiality for an annual Effort of one of their own Sex to entertain the whole, the Choice will be equally a Proof of their Liberality of Heart and Rectitude of Judgment, indisputably falsifying the injurious Censure so commonly passed upon them, that "A Spirit of Envy and Detraction is the general Characteristic of the Sex."⁵⁷

Fisher called upon her female readers to be loyal to the brand. She wrote in the preface to the 1769 issue, 'I look upon the very great success which my annual effort has met with, as an eminent proof that I have not laboured in vain for the approbation of the ladies'.⁵⁸ This boast of the superiority of the *Ladies' Own Memorandum* corroborates statistics for the pocket book, which was rumoured to

⁵³ 'one half of ye Purchasers of which [the *Ladies' Own Memorandum*], cannot possibly, even suspect that she wrote grammatical works. 'Fisher to to Cunningham, 14 November 1769, Hodgson Papers vol. 5 Add. MS. 50244.2.

⁵⁴ *Newcastle Chronicle*, 5 January 1765.

⁵⁵ *Ladies' Own Memorandum* (London: Robinson and Roberts, 1769).

⁵⁶ *St. James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post*, 4 February 1768.

⁵⁷ *Newcastle Chronicle*, 26 December 1767.

⁵⁸ Fisher, *Ladies Own Memorandum* (1769),

reach upwards of 1000 readers each year,⁵⁹ and attracted users not just in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, where it was printed and co-published, but also across the country. When, in her address to her readers, she stated that she had ‘not laboured in vain’, many would have taken that to mean the literary or curatorial element of compiling a memorandum book, she was no doubt referring to many different kinds of labour in the production of this pocketbook, for which she seems to have been entirely responsible. Her letters to Cunningham record her collection of material: ‘Now we are agoing on with the Ladies Memorandum Book & I hope to be favour’d with a Pastoral, a song or some recommendations Article from Mr Cunningham or we shall loss Ground with it’.⁶⁰ In writing that ‘We are now sending them off with ye Memorandums’, she tells Cunningham to expect pocket books with his copies of Poems, Chiefly Pastora, distributed together and sent by Fisher to the theatre in Scarborough.⁶¹ She also acknowledges her receipt of ‘two excellent songs for which I heartily thank you – they have quite set me up’.⁶² Manuscript copies survive of ‘The Consent: A Song’ and ‘The Winter of Life: A Pastoral Song’, sent separately to Fisher but printed together in the issue for 1772, and ‘Take me Jenny’ from the *Memorandum* for 1773.⁶³ When preparing materials for the 1774 issue, Fisher composes the introductory article with a mind for its typesetting, marking the manuscript ‘If this makes 4 pages stop here’.⁶⁴ She is exactly correct, as the manuscript note coincides with the page break in the final printed copy.

In some letters surviving from Edinburgh bookseller Charles Elliot, it is clear that Fisher was the primary manager of the distribution of the *Ladies’ Own Memorandum*, and perhaps, too, for the accounts. This is clear from the fact that Elliot addresses his letters to Fisher when arranging sales. Elliott proposes that he advertise it and that his shop be the sole outlet in Edinburgh; he has no doubt that, in these circumstances, he would sell 100 or 200 copies. The account at the head of the paper reads ‘50 Ladies Own Mem: Books for 1777 with Quarter Copies @ 9/ £1.16’; Below this is a later interpolation ‘12 N’Castle Mem Books’. As Peter Isaac notes, these figures allow us to assume that ‘each *Ladies Own Memorandum* book was charged at 9d, with an extra book for each ‘quire’ of 24; “Quarter”, in this annotation, is half of the quire of 25’.⁶⁵ When Fisher was slow to send the books –

⁵⁹ J. Hodgson, ‘Thomas Slack of Newcastle, Printer, 1723-1784, Founder of the Newcastle Chronicle’, *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 17 (1920), 179-82.

⁶⁰ Fisher, 4 September 1771.

⁶¹ Fisher, 5 November 1771.

⁶² Fisher, 17 September 1771.

⁶³ Cunningham to Fisher, Scarborough, 13 September 1771, ‘The Winter of Life: A Pastoral Song’, Hodgson Papers vol. 10, Add. MS. 50249.185; Cunningham to Fisher, n.d., ‘The Consent: A Song’, Hodgson Papers vol. 10, Add. MS. 50249.191; 195 (‘Tis yours & for no hands but your own’). Cunningham to Fisher, 7 November 1772, ‘Take me Jenny’, Hodgson Papers vol. 10, Add. MS. 50249.196.

⁶⁴ ‘Continued from last year’s Book’, Hodgson Papers vol. 5 Add. MS. 50244.45.

⁶⁵ Isaac, “Charles Elliot and the English Provincial Book Trade,” in *The Human Face of the Book Trade: Print Culture and its Creators*, ed. by Isaac and Barry McKay (New Castle: Oak Knoll, 1999), 97–116, p. 112 n. 31.

she sent them by sea from London to Leith, which Isaac suggests was cheaper than by wagon from Newcastle to Edinburgh – Elliott contacted Slack to complain.⁶⁶ From this complaint letter we learn that Fisher also arranged for Elliott to advertise the *Memorandum* in the London press.⁶⁷

Fisher took particular pride in the diary's appearance, attributing its success partly to the spacious memorandum pages she designed.⁶⁸ As pocket book sales in general increased, she spent some of the profits on setting her work apart from the competition by improving the typesetting, which the London advertisements claim was only possible due to 'the very favourable encouragement this book has met with'.⁶⁹ This investment in production had a double benefit. First, it may have increased the resources of the Slack print house. The 1771 and 1772 issues boasted investment in letterpress and copperplates and in larger ruled pages from 1771. If the book was still printed in Newcastle at Slack's establishment at this point, this may have taken the form of a new fount of type or print furniture, or perhaps staff time for typesetting. Secondly, the strategy enabled Fisher to market her book as smartly printed with a fresh, contemporary design, and to reach out personally to new and existing readers to encourage their patronage: 'Gratitude for the generous and powerful patronage of the ladies, demands not only the best thanks of the proprietors, but their greatest attention to the execution of the copperplates and letterpress of this useful book'.⁷⁰ Fisher's attention to content and letterpress quality meant that her 1772 issue was marketed as a Christmas or New Year's gift in the newspapers.⁷¹ It is probably for that reason that, when reflecting on her progress in compiling that year's *Memorandum*, Fisher informs Cunningham that 'they [Robinson and Roberts] do not think proper to publish in London till near Christmas with ye Memorandum Books'.⁷² These were seasonal books, marketed in the London book trade to maximise their timeliness. No doubt the investment in typesetting, the commission of fine prints, and the growing volume of poetry helped promote the luxury, giftable, status of the *Memorandum* diary.

IV Conclusion

Through consideration of the surviving issues of Fisher's *Ladies' Own Memorandum* alongside her manuscript remains, we can see Fisher industriously collaborating with a metropolitan network of

⁶⁶ Isaac, 'Charles Elliott', p. 112 n. 30.

⁶⁷ Elliott to Slack, 5 Dec 1776, 'I wrote Mrs Slack [...] in Which I desired 50 of the Pocket book be sent to me and to which I Refer—I am very much surprised you have not send them long er[e] this since the Article I then mentioned were advertised the first of Nov at London on the cover of the Mag.' Isaac, 'Charles Elliott', p. 104.

⁶⁸ In the *Newcastle Chronicle* for 26 December 1767, she writes that readers might have been purchasing it on account of 'the ruled Part, (which is confessedly allowed to be better contrived for keeping Accounts, Memorandums &c. than any Book of the Kind extant)'.

⁶⁹ *General Evening Post*, 1 January 1771.

⁷⁰ *London Evening Post*, 28 December 1771.

⁷¹ *General Evening Post*, 2 January 1772; *London Evening Post*, 28 December 1771.

⁷² Cunningham to Fisher, 25 October 1771, Hodgson Papers Add. MS. 50244.8.

publishers. Her skilled management of regional and national networks enabled her pocketbook brand to develop its distinctive reputation for literary credibility and for it to survive well beyond her death in 1778, when her daughter, Sarah Hodgson, would go on collaborating with Robinson and Roberts on its publication and distribution. Authors, printers, and publishers alike addressed professional correspondence to Fisher, suggesting that she managed the shop, the 'Printing Press', and certainly led the production of specific titles like Cunningham's *Poems, Chiefly Pastoral* and the *Ladies' Own Memorandum*. The business which traded in her husband's name, 'T. Slack & Co.', was a brand which, to many working in the local and national book trades, was as dependent upon the efforts of Slack and Carr as it was upon Ann Fisher. Fisher predeceased her husband, and for that reason, has attracted even less attention than might otherwise be the case. Her correspondence and surviving work provides a rare qualitative insight into the detail of a female printer-publisher's labour which troubles a London-centric reading of the trade as purely distributive in the North and of women in print as being widows. Fisher is just one example of the many still unrecovered female workers in the eighteenth-century book trade.