



Meandering Among MINIATURES

Ann Nugent examines the Library's collection of miniature books

In the mid 1800s, the costume of a stylishly gowned English lady was said to be incomplete unless she carried one of the dainty little *Schloss Bijou* almanacs in her reticule.

Did the lady really need to have at her fingertips information on the phases of the moon, rates of postage, a table showing interest at 6 per cent payable on loans, or other miscellaneous facts of the kind commonly included in almanacs? Hardly, but then the almanac was as much a fashion statement, a talisman perhaps, as a book. An *English Bijou* almanac for 1839 held in the Library's collection, 'poetically illustrated by L.E.L.', features a tiny portrait of the young Queen Victoria. The leather-bound miniature book and slip cover are smaller than my thumb: in technical terms, a microminiature.

In contrast, the *Little Gazetteer* (c.1845), compiled by Samuel Maunder, weighs a ton. It measures 8.5 x 5 cm and is 3.5 cm thick. Maunder aimed to reproduce encyclopedic knowledge within the covers of a single book. His 'geographical dictionary in miniature' is without a single illustration or map. Compact dictionaries—and titles such as *Bijou Biography of the World: A Reference Book of the Names, Dates and Vocations of Distinguished Men and Women of Every Age and Nation, Including Celebrities* (John Gordon, 1881), or *Who's Who in Fiction: A Dictionary of Names in Novels, Tales, Romances, Poetry and Drama* (Helena Swan, 1906)—might have been handy (albeit idiosyncratic) sources of information to carry on one's person but, when the information was pressed into ever-smaller forms, for example an unreadable 1.9 x 1.6 cm *New Testament*, the 'book' shifts from usefulness to novelty.

above:

The delicate *Schloss's English Bijou Almanac for 1839* by Albert Schloss, illustrated by Letitia Elizabeth Landon (London: 'published by the proprietors', 1839), which is 2 x 1.5 cm

below:

A relatively huge (8.5 x 5 cm) *Little Gazetteer* by Samuel Maunder (London: Mason, c.1845) dwarfs *The New Testament of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (Glasgow: D. Bryce and Son, c.1868), which is 1.9 x 1.6 cm





above:
The New Testament of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (Glasgow: D. Bryce and son; London: H. Frowde, Oxford University Press, 1895), which is 2 cm x 1.7 cm, and its case with inbuilt magnifying glass

below:
The Smallest Book in the World by Josua Reichert (Berlin: Gestalten, 2002), which is 2.9 x 2.4 mm, reproduced from *A Banquet of Books* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2007)

The makers of miniature books might have started out to instruct, inform, edify, entertain or, more recently, to advertise, but along the way many publishers became obsessed with the very process of shrinking books. The Library holds one book titled *The Smallest Book in the World (Das Kleinste Buch der Welt)*. Produced in Leipzig in 2002, it measures a mere 2.9 x 2.4 mm—surely a novelty designed for collectors, not readers. The magnifying glass included in the box allowed me to identify the bread-crumbsized object as a 'book'. But it was, of course, impossible for my giant fingers to turn its 26 pages to read this ultraminiature text. The 'book' contains (we are told) an alphabet designed by the typographer Josua Reichert. A 'read-size' printed copy of Reichert's alphabet is included in the package.

The production of microminiatures (6 mm–2.2 cm in height) and ultraminiatures (less than 6 mm)



depends on technology. In 1819, French engineer Henri Didot created a 2.5-point type, to be eclipsed 50 years later by the Italian 2-point type called *occhio di mosca*, or 'fly's eye'. New processes of photo-reduction have further reduced the dimensions of books.

Miniature books claim a 4000-year lineage, dating back to small cuneiform tablets from Mesopotamia. The earliest miniature books in the Common Era were the sixteenth-century illuminated manuscripts (about 7 cm square) that could be dangled from the waist by a chain. The oldest miniature book in the National Library's collection is the 1775 *Holy Bible Abridged: Or The History of the Old and New Testament Illustrated with Notes, and Adorned with Cuts: For the Use of Children ...* This book measures 10 x 7 cm, a little larger than the conventional miniature book (defined as no more than 7.5 cm on either side). For the protection of its small books, the Library's collection actually includes items up to 10 cm high.

In the nineteenth century, small reading books were produced for the small hands of children. *The Infant's Library, Book 5* (6 x 4.5 cm), published by John Marshall of No. 4 Aldermary Church Yard, London, informs the young reader, 'The kangaroo is a curious animal brought from a foreign country, and may be seen in the King's garden at Richmond'. A 16-page American miniature book for children, *The Sailor Boy and Other Stories* (9 x 5.5 cm) advises, 'The Kangaroo is a native of New Holland ... The female carries its young in a kind of pouch, from which they jump when they want exercise and leap back in again on the slightest alarm'. Both books are held by the National Library. They are undated, but would probably have been printed in the first three decades of the nineteenth century.

The Library holds several copies of the *Book of Common Prayer, and Administration of the Sacraments, and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church ...* The appeal of the miniature format in this instance was practicality. One can easily imagine an Australian country clergyman travelling among the bush communities, his *Book of Common Prayer* deep in his pocket. Nineteenth-century readers of miniature books received exhortations to moral



improvement from a variety of sources. In *Casket of Pearls: Human and Divine*, M. Henry warns that 'Dissembled piety is double inequity; and if any place in hell be hotter than another, that will be the hypocrite's portion'. Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Character* gives a longer treatise on virtue.

Miniature books' titles indicate the leisure interests of readers in earlier times. Although not strictly a miniature book, Charles Lamb's *Essays of Elia* (15.5 x 10 cm) is an elegant example of a nineteenth-century pocket book. The Library also holds several abridged versions of Charles Dickens's novels in palm-sized, leather-bound volumes, any half-a-dozen of which would fit easily into a traveller's pocket. My favourite Dickens's miniature is the short story, *The Cricket on the Hearth* (10 x 7 cm), presented in a suede leather cover with gilt edging and containing eight illustrations. The Library also holds miniaturised copies of the popular Victorian title, the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, translated by Edward Fitzgerald.

The use of miniature books to advertise goods for sale became common in the twentieth century. An Australian 'flicker' book (8 x 5 cm) advertises Boomerang Whisky with successive images of an Aboriginal man throwing a boomerang. The caption on each page contains a subliminal printed message, 'Boomerang Whisky is good whisky'. Another set of 'flicker' books shows Don Bradman executing various cricket strokes, 'on drive and off drive',

'square cut and late cut', and lastly a 'leg glance and pull'. The Bradman flicker books advertised 'Slazengers for Lawn Tennis' and 'Gradidges for Cricket'.

In the second half of the twentieth century, miniature books became more colourful and more commercially oriented. The 'handbag books' of the 1950s were unequivocally 'how-to' volumes. Titles in this series include: *Tropical Fish*, *Slim Gym*, *Getting Married*, *Having a Baby* and *Check Your Calories*. The Library holds a copy of the last in this list.

Miniature books also became popular as commemorative or celebratory items. A 45-page (7.5 x 5 cm) miniature

above:
A nineteenth-century children's reader, *The Infant's Library*, Book 5 (London: John Marshall, c.1800)

below:
The Cricket on the Hearth: A Fairy Tale of Home by Charles Dickens (London: Henry Frowde, 1904)





reproduction of *The Mayflower Compact* was published to commemorate the 350th anniversary of the Pilgrims' arrival at Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1620. Postage stamps celebrating the same event are 'tipped in' to the small book. A gold-imprinted image of the *Mayflower* on the book's cover makes it an attractive memento. Books in a similar format commemorate the *Inaugural Address of Lyndon Baines Johnson, President of the United States,*

Still we sing, still
we hope, still we dream,
still we paint on walls
still we believe, still!

and:

The Petroleum flows
the jungle bleeds.

Miniatures from Ox Head Press are simply produced and understatedly stylish. Other Ox Head miniature chapbooks (9 x 6.5 cm) held by the Library are *Findings* by Ursula K. Le Guin and *Fishing* by native-American poet Joy Harjo. The Ox Head books are printed on a selection of fine papers and presented in slip covers. Editions run to 450.

Over 200 titles in the Library's collection are catalogued as 'rare miniature' books. While all these books are miniature, not all of them are actually rare. Several somewhat sentimental collections of the 'Little Book of Love' type, or 'how-to' titles (such as *My Little Book of Cocktails*) are mass-produced by publishing houses. Health education campaign books, the *HIV Drug Book* (9.5 x 9.5 cm and just 0.5 cm thick) and *Quit* books were also printed in bulk.

Also classified as rare miniature books are one-off productions typed or written by aspiring writers. In sorting through these, I was reminded that 'small' does not necessarily make the object either beautiful or useful—but a few stand out. The art book, *Good Babies, Bad Babies*, illustrated by John Lawrence, is a little gem. A mere 6 x 4.5 cm, it comes boxed and contains delightful black-and-white engravings.

Of all the miniature books I examined, I was particularly attracted by a gift book to Mrs St George, 'with best love from her affectionate brother, Charles Ayers, Edinburgh, August 27, 1886'. The volume, *The Lady of the Lake: A Poem in Six Cantos* by Sir Walter Scott rests beautifully in the hand. The book measures 8.5 x 6 cm and comprises 191 pages. Its polished cover carries an image of Stirling Castle, and on the frontispiece is an engraving of 'Ellen's Isle'—surely a book to treasure.

ANN NUGENT edits and publishes the Canberra-based literary magazine *Blast: poetry and other critical writing*, www.annsverandah.com/blast

Cover of *The Lady of the Lake: A Poem in Six Cantos* by Sir Walter Scott, which is 8.5 x 6 cm (Glasgow: D. Bryce, c.1880)

Delivered at the Capitol, Washington, January 20, 1965, and that of Richard Milhous Nixon, delivered 20 January 1969. Both miniatures (6.8 x 4.5 cm) are embossed with the United States coat-of-arms. About 2500 copies of the Johnson address were printed; possibly as tokens for dignitaries at the event.

An artefact of the Chinese Cultural Revolution also appears in the Library's miniature book collection. Bound in red plastic with an imprinted gold star, the *Constitution of the Communist Party of China / Adopted by the Eighth National Congress of the Communist Party of China on 14 April 1969*, enunciates the Party's program for 'the complete overthrow of the bourgeoisie and other exploiting classes'.

A book of very different appearance, but also of political intent, is a bibliophile edition of *Romanian Painting, 1921–1971* (9 x 7 cm and 1.5 cm thick). This volume celebrates 50 years of Romanian artistic production, a lovely gift book in itself, but the introduction by Nicolae Ceausescu (leader of Romania from 1965 until December 1989, when a revolution and coup removed him from power) brings art into service of the state. In contrast, the content of *Solution to the Crisis is Revolution / Graffiti from the Streets of Quito, Ecuador* (Ox Head Press, Minnesota, 1994) is a straight in-your-face riposte to state power: