

The Diary of William Fletcher

On February 25 1860 William Fletcher had his “likeness” taken at Whitlock’s photographic studio in New Street, Birmingham. The sitter did not, it seems, have the word “photograph” in his armoury. It was a likeness, like the likenesses of the last generation - silhouettes and sketches - a mere shadow of reality.

The double portrait of William and his mother cost £2 7s (£2 35p), she sitting, he standing proprietorially.

Had William Fletcher’s photo survived - as far as we know it has not - it would surely grace the cover of Jane Killick’s little book, *Talking with Past Hours*, published by Moonrise Press in 2009.

I happened upon the volume at Waterstone’s in Gower Street in London a couple of weeks ago. Such is the unpredictable fate of the local history publication: to slip out like a thief in the night and end up who knows where.

We may not have William Fletcher’s likeness, but we do have his thoughts and his actions, that is, as near as history allows us, we have his life. For William kept a diary, or, at least, he kept one for two years from June 1858 to March 1860. Jane Killick has transcribed and annotated the manuscript, which is held in the Special Collections at the University of Birmingham.

The reader might wish that William had been a lion tamer, or a soldier in the Foreign Legion, or a master criminal. But, no, William was a banker, living not in a busy metropolis, but in the little town of Bridgnorth. The bank he worked at, on the corner of Listley Street and High Street, just down from the Market Hall, is still there, though now part of the mighty HSBC. William was a young man - just 18 years old when he began his diary - but he was a young man with prospects.

William Fletcher’s life was circumscribed within narrow limits - the bank in Bridgnorth and another in Much Wenlock - though there were occasional forays to Wolverhampton, where his aunt lived, and to Birmingham, when he wanted medical advice. As his diary regularly shows, William was troubled with a cough, and we know what that meant in the 19th Century.

When he put down his pen in March 1860 it was at Sidmouth in Devon, whither William and his mother had gone to seek warmer weather to aid his recovery:

Doctor said I must take plenty of oil and avail myself of my employer’s kindness and go into the south of England to escape the March winds. He prescribed some pills for me to give me an appetite to strengthen me.

But it availed him not, and William died of TB just three years later at the age of 23 years.

All diarists die, of course, and rarely do they record it in their journal. At the time he was writing it, William was alive and kicking and enjoying life. And as young men of

William's age are wont to do, William's thoughts turned to young ladies.

If we think of the 19th Century as a slower age than ours, William Fletcher's diary presents the contrary view. Perhaps William's cough made him act more quickly. On July 19 1858 he meets Miss Marianne Jones, the daughter of another bank clerk in the town - "particularly agreeable" is how he describes her - and by August he is in love.

Miss Jones, however, is rather less precipitate: "I don't wish to engage myself as I am so young." There is an exchange of letters, and a declaration of affection, and misunderstandings and recriminations, and the affair is over and done with by July of the following year. "I have no doubt she will repent having let me slip," writes William pompously, "but there's no remedy now." He asks for the return of his letters.

But if William Fletcher's journal is made up of such parochial comings and goings, the wider world is not absent from the scene. "The houses in New Town," writes William in April 1859, "are fast licking the dust to make way for the Railway." The excitement of this brave new world is palpable, and William joins the crowds to watch the navvies wielding their sledgehammers. It's ironic that the Severn Valley Railway now appeals for exactly the opposite of reasons.

And there is war in Europe to concern him, and talk of invasion. "I practise most days with my pistol," William writes in December 1859. "If the French come (and it is not improbable), why I hope to be able to take my part in driving them home."

For William, a devout member of the Catholic Apostolic Church in West Castle Street, such an invasion might usher in the end of days, "as the apostle says".

Many people keep a diary - less so, perhaps, than once did - but many more do not. We might finally ask why William Fletcher chose to chronicle a couple of years his life in this way. It was an article in a London weekly - *Cassell's Illustrated Family Paper* - in June 1858 that prompted him. How useful is a diary, says the journalist, for the keeper of it may go in search of lost times.

"From the faded ink come forth old faces, old familiar scenes, old hopes, old fears; he talks with his past hours; he overleaps all intervening time; he hears old voices, and his tears leap unbidden to his eyes."

Time did not grant William Fletcher of Bridgnorth such an opportunity; we can do so in his stead.