



ABOUT THE DIARY

According to Miss Knubel's notes, on a slip of paper inserted before the first page of the diary, Anderson wrote a slightly different title: *Diarium Commentarium/ Vitæ/Alexandri Anderson/ Anno 1791/New York—Wall Street N^o 31/1791/Vigilia/Began 1784 (Natus April 21/1775)/ May 1, 1789 Began to study Physic with D^r Joseph Young*¹ “Vigilia,” watchfulness, the need in his life to be vigilant, and therefore, to identify and evaluate. Such was his definition of a diary's role. His use too of Latin marked his respect for learning, at the same time indicating his place in late eighteenth-century New York City. He criticized snobbery and pride—with those first words he wanted to show the importance of education and culture. His desire for knowledge and for refinement in manners—excluding fops—is evident in the Diary. Anderson's father was not a land owner and sold goods at auction on the Wall Street docks, but this didn't detract from either his or his family's worth. There were principles such as religious and republican values. Not to be forgotten were his passions, engraving, learning, and music.

Anderson talked too of copying much of this journal and of binding it. He valued what he'd written and wanted to record the past. Several times he crossed out words and substituted a better or what he thought was a more correct expression. He wanted to be able to write well. Keeping a diary was a common duty for those who were literate and educated. He sometimes showed his Diary to friends.

Later, before the first entry of 1794, Anderson placed this quotation from Knox's *Essays Moral and Literary*, which he had read several times in 1793 and in 1794:

Travellers have often been censured for enumerating what are call'd trifling occurrences. I think the Censure is unjust. Trifling occurrences are often very amusing. If indeed they were only amusing and took up the room of other valuable matter, the censure might be well founded, but they lead to very important speculations. They suggest hints, and hints to a fertile mind are more acceptable than formal discourses, because they leave the mind to exert its own activity.

He liked the line from Knox that talked of trifling occurrences being amusing and that they “suggest hints, and hints to a fertile mind are more acceptable than formal discourses, because they leave the mind to exert its own activity.” He was perhaps also justifying the need to write a detailed journal that recorded such “trifling occurrences.”

As might be expected, during the almost six years he kept the Diary, Anderson changed and matured. He was eighteen years old the first year and twenty-four at the last entry in June, 1799. By the end of the Diary, he had married, lived through the deaths of his wife and infant son and of all his family, and two of the city's yellow fever epidemics. The reader gets a sense of his gradual and growing confidence. He was a devout but unconventional member of his parents' Episcopal church, Trinity. His faith helped him not only to endure after what

he'd experienced, but allowed his spirit to survive and eventually to flourish. His parents had made their views known on everything from religious practices to social events and choice of career. Their sons were dutiful but spirited and didn't apologize for their preferences. Socially, as we might say, the Andersons were "on their way up," the elder son, John, had received his license to practice law, the younger, Alexander, was now a physician. They lived well enough on Wall Street, one of the most important streets in the city. Some symbols of affluence were talked of, Sarah's silver teapot and cups, a visit to the affluent rendez-vous at Belvedere House, but snobbery and flaunting airs were not acceptable, value resided elsewhere. They aimed at being responsible citizens—like others, Anderson would rush to help when a fire broke out in nearby streets, not to speak of his daily task of looking after his patients. Charity when criticizing, and helping others less fortunate played an important role in his parents' teaching. Anderson's mother's letters to him while he was serving at Bellevue Hospital during the yellow fever epidemic said repeatedly, despite her worry that he would be a victim, that she was consoled by knowing that he was helping the sick. And, not to be forgotten, the family didn't lack humor. Being woken on New Year's morning by Anderson and his brother with a concert of a comb and fiddle was part of family life.

From an early age Anderson had examined engraving and had done what he could to practice a mysterious and yet unknown skill. It was his passion, one that he began to use and learn in the first years of the Diary. These early published documents that he illustrated are listed in Chapter 10. Anderson, Engraver. Short Checklist. They are almost all derivative, copies of English engravings, everything from his first known signed cut in the 1791 Dilworth *Schoolmaster's Assistant* (item 1). What was needed was illustration—he was able to provide for a market that was beginning to flourish after the devastation of the Revolution and the birth of the new country. His cuts of the animals for a broadside for Gardiner Baker's American Museum (item 5) didn't reveal any future talent, but they were from his own design after going to the Museum in order to make drawings. His frontispiece for Gessner's *Death of Abel* (item 16) suggested a more assured and natural rendering of the figures; the treatment of the rock cliff and vegetation began to veer toward the Bewick's school white line work. Whether he was copying the design of an English work, which is likely, isn't known. His engravings after John Bewick's, the majority on boxwood for Berquin's *Looking-Glass for the Mind*, were a milestone in Anderson's career. The designs were appropriated from Bewick's but it allowed him to practice work on boxwood and it secured his name among contemporary publishers. His is the first documented proof in America of white line engraving on boxwood, a technique that would make possible the huge and economical growth in book illustration.

Notable in these Diary years were his *Anatomical Male Figure*, on copper, 1799, (item 52), after a plate by Gautier d'Agoty. It was a startling piece of work over forty inches high, removing any hesitation about Anderson's talent. A year earlier he had finished on wood, again almost forty inches high, a skeleton after Albinus (item 51), called the earliest anatomical figure of this size in American printmaking. His engraving of the Cur Fox after Thomas Bewick's in his *General History of Quadrupeds*, provided for John Stanford's *Christian's Pocket Library*, 1796 was the most accomplished relief engraving yet produced in America (item 41).

Before mentioning engravings that were more obviously of his own design, his nine copperplates for Perrault's fairy tales included some with his own touches (item 31). Little Thumb pulling off the Ogre's boot is similar to other children that would in the future be

engraved by Anderson; it was a sympathetic image of a child, large head, open expression, busy and intent as he dragged off the boot. It's been said that the illustrations are after a seventh edition published in The Hague or a 1764 London edition.

Anderson's bookplate for the New-York Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge and Piety is a roughly engraved copperplate whose intent was frank and touching (item 14). A poor man is standing, expressionless, holding his barefoot child by the hand outside his small house. He is receiving a Bible handed to him by a cleric who strides forward, pointing upward to a banner inscribed "The poor have the gospel preached to them." An angel is holding up the banner, while an Indian in the background is looking on, his hand on his chest, his tomahawk falling to the ground. However inexpert the execution—the design was suggested to him—the scene is spontaneous and emotional. It is an example of Anderson's ability in the future to portray meaning.

Closer to his intent is an engraving for his children's bookstore. It was a cut of his own design and the forerunner in style of dozens of images of children that he would provide for American bookmaking (item 44). He described in detail what he meant by the design: "Several children are represented playing and two of them in the act of quarelling—the Devil is preparing to claw them but is assailed by the spear of Minerva who is at the same time presenting a small book to the children" (September 2, 1797). The devil in black is crouching, shown with horns, a tail ending in an arrow, its clawlike hands out toward the children as though to grasp them. Two children are kneeling or seated below the devil, close to a circle where they are playing marbles. One child has his fist up, the other with his arms out. One boy standing beyond them has his hands raised as though to intervene, another seated child isn't part of the quarrel. Minerva, with helmet and wings, is standing facing the devil, outside the children, leaning toward the devil, a spear raised in her right hand, a book held out in her left. The cut was used to advertise Anderson's Liliputian [*sic*] Bookstore. It represents his thinking and beliefs. Education can banish strife and evil.

How overtly does an artist's background determine what he represents in his work? An artist represents and escapes boundaries because of his particular endowment and how he sees, transforms and develops what's before his eyes, (what interests and appeals to him), what he wants to say by visual means—thereby presenting a visual philosophy. Anderson was part of a new country: he came from a humble background, disliked grandeur, arrogance and pretension, at the same time strove for intellectual and technical sophistication. His large reading list shows his dedication to knowledge. He lived in the hub of the city where he could record in his diary and engravings what he saw around him, the poverty, crowded conditions, growing wealth, as well as intellectual aspirations. He didn't ignore those aspects, however close to his heart were scenes of joy and harmony. His loathing of drunkenness that caused gross behavior and cruelty are portrayed, especially in his earlier engravings. He was rightly known for his sympathetic portrayal of children, he knew them, he had six, and the many books, often chap- or toy books that he illustrated are part of his appeal. His sense of humor is often shown not only in his portrayal of children but of adults. His faith sometimes allowed saccharine depictions of gospel figures but they are rarely shown without emotion.

His many early unsophisticated and expressive cuts for Samuel Wood, a New York children's publisher, portrayed inhumane aspects of life as well as fun children enjoyed. While his diary is a record of daily occurrences, of patients that he did his best to help, of friends and walks in the city and time spent reading and playing his violin—he was also the at-

tendant physician at Bellevue Hospital in one of the city's two yellow fever epidemics, the second killing his family. His life during those six years shaped his work.

Anderson was a master of the balanced use of black and white, deep, strong patches of black set against white but integrated in such a way that the engraving provides a detailed world that doesn't fade off into a void. The engravings mentioned in his Diary are only from the beginning of his work, only a few of his almost ninety-five-year career. Given these early relief engravings that hardly hint at any talent, it's difficult to believe that he could have advanced to the production of some of the most accomplished and satisfying images in the history of wood engraving.

Books illustrated by Anderson, drawn from testimony in the Diary, are listed by an item number in Chapter 10. Anderson, Engraver. Short Checklist. Those shown Pomeroy with a number refer to entries in Jane R. Pomeroy, *Alexander Anderson (1775-1870). Wood Engraver and Illustrator*.

1. Microfilm of the original document, Alexander Anderson Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University, has been used. Volume one of the Diary covers 1793–94; volume two, 1795–98; volume three, 1799. Volume one is roughly bound, probably AA's work. Volumes two and three are in modern library bindings. The page sizes vary, none higher than about 8¼", most are about 6½". Anderson sometimes used decorative capital letters when he printed the titlepage of a new year of the Diary. His handwriting is very legible, there are few questionable words. The entries are not divided into easily identified paragraphs, sentences are separated by dashes. The same format has been kept in this transcription. Spelling is shown as was written.

A carbon typescript of the Diary, with omissions and errors, is in the same location. A handwritten copy is in the Alexander Anderson Papers, Manuscript Collection, NHi. It has not been checked for accuracy. Excerpts are found in Frederic Burr's biography and in [W.W. Pasko], *Old New York* 1, 2 (1889, 1890, 1891). A handwritten copy of medical interest is in the New York Academy of Medicine. According to a descendant, members of the family say that an earlier copy, since destroyed, described Washington's inauguration in New York in 1789. The extant first volume, 1793 to 1794, is bound with a leather spine and gray paper over boards. Anderson wrote that he had stitched his "Old journals in 2 vols." and that he got "some pieces of leather" to bind the two volumes. In February, 1799, before going to see his uncle in Saint Vincent in the Caribbean, he left his and his brother John's diaries with their aunt Jerusha Davenport in Stamford, Connecticut.