A book about Staughton September 2019

The Great Staughton Commonplace Book of 1800

In 1971 Rev. David Fleming, vicar of St Andrew's church, Great Staughton, deposited with the Huntingdon Records Office an impressive, weighty volume, measuring 13" by 8", containing 566 pages of text, written in an elegant, cursive script. The Compiler of the volume has thoughtfully included a substantial, ten-page index, which, although somewhat wayward alphabetically speaking, provides an invaluable indication of the Book's subject matter. The volume has plain cardboard covers and a lightly decorated spine with the word MISCELLANIES inscribed at the top. The purchaser of the volume could have intended it as a journal or a diary, but instead it became the Great Staughton Commonplace Book, which lay undiscovered and unread in the church for one hundred and seventy years. When the book is opened, a loose slip of paper (undated) falls out, bearing the words: 'This book I found in the Sunday school cupboard much exposed to damp. I could ascertain nothing as to its history.' It is signed C McN Rushforth, who became vicar of St Andrew's in 1909, following the retirement of Rev. HG Watson, author of the first history of the village.

The 566 pages contain 436 separate items; the largest category by far in the Commonplace Book is poetry, of which there are eighty-four examples, many celebrating Nature in all its aspects. Nature and natural history provide twenty-nine items. There are thirty-nine anecdotes, some of a humorous character, others with a moral message. Smaller but important categories are paraphrases of biblical passages and a lengthy exposition of the true meaning of the Lord's Prayer. Forty-seven of the items in the book are pieces devoted directly or indirectly to the situation of women. There are other smaller categories such as geography, religion, history and historical characters, and classical writers. Ninety-six of the items consist of what might be called reflections or meditations on religious or moral themes.

Here's a sample of the contents:

Page 1, under the title, begins with an article which combines two of the themes described above; nature and Providence. *'The Wisdom and Goodness of God Display'd in several curious Observations on Fishes and Birds,*' which poses the question; *'What abundance of Fish do the waters produce of every size? But as they devour one another, how can these watry [sic] inhabitants subsist?*' The answer is immediately given: *'God has provided for it, by multiplying them in a prodigious manner, and making the weak race swifter in their course than the others*.' The author of the piece aligns the behaviour of the fish with God's commanding purpose. Thus, shoals of fish which are enjoyed by humans congregate near the shore so that they may be easily netted by fishermen. Other fish which are useless for human nutrition on the other hand live in remote seas. *'And what hand conducts them with so much care and goodness towards man*?' It is the same for birds; *'What architect has taught them' to build their elaborate nests?*' This lengthy extract concludes by celebrating the wonders of nature and the power of the Almighty, *'O Lord, how manifold are thy works, in wisdom hast thou made them all*.'

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