

The John Lane Albums (NC Archives PA/LAN 1-4)

In 1983 the eminent surgeon Sir John Nicholson (who matriculated from New College in 1923) gave us four albums of letters and photographs compiled by the Victorian lithographer and sculptor Richard James Lane (1800-1872) and his daughter Emily. The albums had been given by Emily and her sister to Sir John Nicholson's father, the architect Sir Charles Nicholson (matriculated 1886), and uncle, the organist Sir Sydney Nicholson (matriculated 1893). Thus their link with New College is via the donors rather than the creators or subjects of the albums.



Richard Lane in 1857 — PA/LAN 4, p. 6
New College Archives, Oxford



Miss Emily Lane — PA/LAN 2, p. 2
New College Archives, Oxford

Richard Lane compiled two of the albums (LAN 1 & 2) for 'Private and valuable letters ... arranged and secured' by himself in 1864, from papers already in his possession. He compiled the third volume (LAN 3) at much the same time as a gift for his daughter Laura, born in 1841; and the fourth was compiled by her bookish sister Emily (LAN 4).

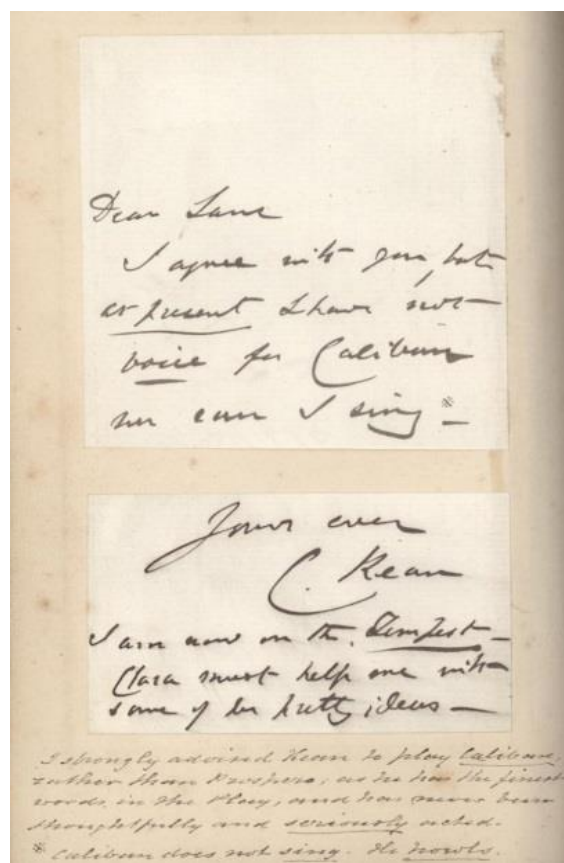


Inside the albums, family letters jostle for place beside letters and photographs from those of Richard Lane's large circle of clients who became friends of the family. They include several leading writers, actors and artists of the day: Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, William Macready, Charles and Fanny Kemble, Charles Kean (the actor-manager of the Princess's Theatre in London's Oxford Street, and son of the actor Edmund Kean), Edwin Landseer, William Holman Hunt, and others all feature in the albums. Their letters, being personal to the Lane family, by definition are unique; the photographs they sent however tend to be the standard images produced by Victorian photographic studios and, with a few exceptions, also exist elsewhere.

The actor William McCready at his retirement from the stage in 1851
to (reluctantly) make way for his arch-rival Charles Kean
New College Archives, Oxford, PA/LAN 1, p. 17

Lane's relations with theatre people are of particular interest, as they throw light on acting practices of the time. He seems to have won the confidence of the actor Charles Kean well enough to have advised him how to play Caliban in *The Tempest*, which premiered at the Princess's Theatre, London, in July 1857: Kean was extremely nervous of the part, writing to Lane that 'at present I have no voice for Caliban—nor can I sing', to which Lane has added the comment 'I strongly advised Kean to play Caliban rather than Prospero; as he has the finest words in the play, and has never been thoughtfully and seriously acted', and he picks up Kean's qualms about singing by adding 'Caliban does not sing. He howls.'¹ The advice was valuable, for Kean's *Tempest* ran for eighty-seven performances that season.

The actor Charles Kemble wrote several times in the mid-1840s to Richard Lane as 'my very dear friend', but less happy were Lane's subsequent relations with Kemble's actress-daughter Fanny. Lane had edited and published the speeches of Charles Kemble from his own set of the relevant plays, which he had lent to the actor only to find when they were returned after Kemble's death that Fanny had edited and marked up the text to better reflect the delivery of the lines on stage. 'I have cut all the plays which he read', she wrote blithely to Lane in 1854, 'according to his patterns—Do you not remember that you were kind enough to lend me his books for this express purpose? ... The plays which my Father read I have of course cut precisely as he read them, for many which he did not read & which I do, I have been obliged to depend upon my own judgement in preparing them for the public.' Resenting such mutilation of the books, Lane's eldest daughter Clara noted in the album in later years that 'Mrs [sic] Kemble marked the books severely... They are given to Mrs Arthur Lewes [Ellen Terry's sister Kate], being reduced to a Theatrical state by pencilling!² Worse was to come, for in 1863 Fanny was coming to the end of her own very successful second career as a solo reader of Shakespeare plays, having grown too stout to be convincing as a heroine on stage any longer, and she asked to have the books again so that she could 'cut' yet more of their contents for her own use. This led to another indignant annotation by Clara: 'They were never C. Kemble's books—my Father used to *lend* them to him. He finally gave the set to Mrs Arthur Lewis who probably gave them to Sir Henry Irving'.²



Charles Kean's agonising over the role of Caliban, 1857 and Lane's advice

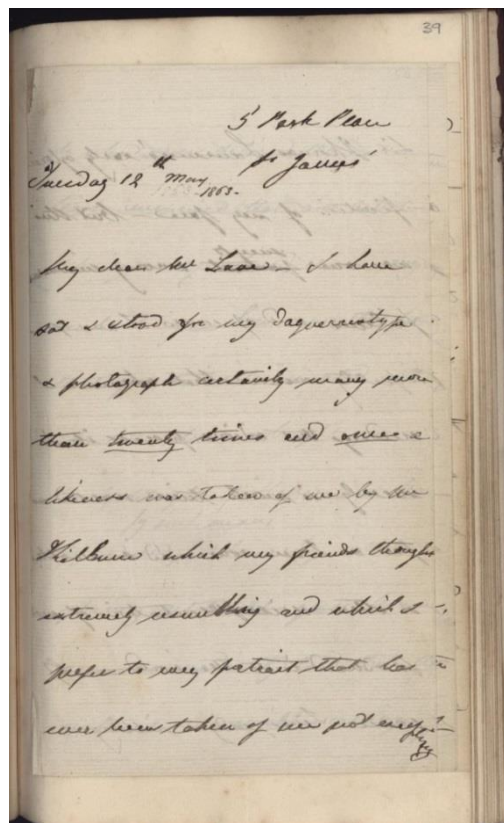
New College Archives, Oxford, PA/LAN 1, p. 46

¹ New College Archives, Oxford, PA/LAN 1, p. 46.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 33, 36.



One of the 'failures' — PA/LAN 1, p. 38
New College Archives, Oxford



Fanny Kemble's letter of 1863 — PA/LAN 1, p. 39
New College Archives, Oxford

But Richard Lane had already effected his own quiet revenge, by placing in the album not only a letter from Fanny Kemble, dated 12 May 1863, bewailing that she had 'sat and stood for my Daguerrotype & photograph certainly many more than twenty times and once a likeness was taken of me ... but this was one success among innumerable failures', but also placing opposite it one of the 'failures'.³

Wilkie Collins was similarly averse to having his photograph taken, which posed problems for Lane who often did his preliminary work on sculptures or lithographs from photographs of his sitters. Collins complained in a letter to Lane in December 1861⁴ that 'I have looked on my own face in the light of an enemy, ever since seventy negatives were taken of me to supply portraits enough for the cheap edition of "The Woman in White". From that time (excepting one special case) I have been resolutely insensible to all photographic advances'; but he now makes an exception for Richard Lane's request that he might sit for John Watkins so that Lane could work from the resulting photographs, if they were successful. But the photograph of Collins which Lane pasted onto the opposite page of the album was the well-known one by Cundall Downes & Co., so perhaps Watkins's photograph was not successful.

³ New College Archives, Oxford, PA/LAN 1, pp. 38-39.

⁴ New College Archives, Oxford, PA/LAN 2, p. 7.



Emily Lane's pictogram to 'Deer Land-seer'
(1856) — PA/LAN 4, p. 41
New College Archives, Oxford

Sir Edwin Landseer became a good friend of the Lane family, exchanging gifts and jokes. In February 1856 he teased Emily Lane about the aesthetic shortcomings of wearing plaid during a Scottish holiday, and received a pictogram letter from her in reply.⁵

Over a year later, in December 1857 and after receiving a Christmas present of a sadly damaged photograph of Richard Lane, he wrote: 'Dearest Lane! Pity me! ... Your brains are savagely knocked out by the pitiful post! All the bones in your (gold) frame are broken!'⁶

Miss Emily Lane seems have made an impression as hostess to her father's artist friends during the 1850s and '60s, although not a good enough impression to ensure that they always turned up when invited to events she had organised. William Holman Hunt wrote to her in 1862 that he would have taken up her kind invitation to a private concert given by her friends had it not been, first, for 'the spiritual presence of an indignant publisher who haunts my house at night time, of late always with a look of reproachful patience except when I am settled down to a drawing for a book which I believe has been announced and ought to have been published by him months ago', and second, because he had already committed himself to dining with 'a corporeal party-

giving lady in this neighbourhood'. The letter continues in similar vein, as the 'indignant spirit' followed him to the lady's party and glared at him until he came home again 'and scraped and scribbled away at the drawing'.⁷

Despite their essentially ephemeral nature, the Lane albums give us an interesting insight to the career of Richard Lane and his circle of friends and acquaintances. More generally they also give insights to the sort of social world in which some of our own college members moved during the nineteenth century and is represented in the contributions to the albums. A near-contemporary of Charles Nicholson, Sir Henry Irving's son Henry Brodribb Irving, came here from 1888 to 1891, to read History and get side-tracked by the activities of the college's Cretan Club and Shakespeare Society. Many of our members would have seen Macready and Kemble on stage, listened to public readings by Dickens or the redoubtable Fanny Kemble, or read the works of Thackeray, Collins and Trollope. They would have seen works of art by Holman Hunt, Edward Millais and Thomas Lawrence in public exhibitions; and some would have seen the watercolour (of Sydney Smith) by Landseer which ended up here in our own SCR. Despite the absence of any direct connection between Lane and this college, the albums open up a world that some of our own members would have recognised with ease.

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⁵ PA/LAN 4, p. 41.

⁶ PA/LAN 1, p. 77.

⁷ PA/LAN 4, pp. 24-25.