

The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister: Arranged for Readers' Chorus

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5 readers stand in a single file line, one person behind the next, so that only one person is visible to the audience. Each person reads a different, single page of diary entries. The first person at the front of the line conducts the other four readers when to begin reading. All readers begin reading when the person at the front of the line starts reading. The reading voice is neutral (not theatrical) and not loud, as though one were reading aloud one's own diary to oneself. Read slowly and do not rush; it should take approximately five minutes to read aloud a single page of text. The reader at the front of the line moves to the back of the line when they reach the conclusion of a diary entry. The reading and rotating to the back of the line continues until each person has reached the end of their page of text. If a reader has finished their page of text before others then they are to remain at the back of the line. Once every person has finished reading, the piece has ended.

*Anne Lister (1791-1840) of Shibden Hall was a wealthy landowner who wrote a four million word diary in a secret code, documenting daily life, including her lesbian relationships. The diaries were not translated until 1984 by historian and author Helena Whitbread.

2 April 1817

Began this morning to sit, before breakfast, in my drawers put on with gentlemen's braces I bought for 2/6 on 27 March 1809 & my old black waistcoat & dressing-gown.

26 April 1817

Had a letter from M-, Lawton. All going on swimmingly as yet. C- all attention. Gives her all her strengthening medicines & washes her back with cold water every morning, in spite of home concerns, going to the sea for two months. All this in hopes of a son & heir.

5 May 1817

After supper, firing off the pistol, that had been heavily charged above 3 weeks out of my room window. The report was tremendous. It bounded out of my hand, forced itself thro' the window, & broke the lead & 2 panes of glass. My hand felt stunned for some time.

28 May 1817

I begin to despair that M- & I will ever get together. Besides I sometimes fancy she will be worn out in the don's service & perhaps I may do better.

11 July 1817

As I was getting into bed I began thinking how little confidence I had in M- & how little likely it was that we should ever get together. I was very low. I felt that my happiness depended on having some female companion whom I could love & depend upon & my thoughts naturally turned to Isabella. I got out her picture & looked at it for ten minutes with considerable emotion. I almost wished to persuade myself I could manage her temper as to be happy with her.

5 March 1818

Left my letter to M- at Northgate for Thomas to put into the post office. Mrs Bagnold, the postmistress, had bailiffs in her house again yesterday & consequently, changed her abode.

10 May 1818

Had tea at ½ past 5 & my aunt & I walked to the lecture at the old church...Mrs Browne & her daughters & her visitors, the Misses Kelly from Glasgow, were there. My aunt & I waited for them as they went out, for her to get a peep at Miss Browne, who looked very interesting. Fair as a lily, with the loveliest rose upon her cheek.

12 May 1818

In the afternoon, walked with my aunt to Halifax. We went to the library. Miss Browne & her friend, Miss Kelly, came in...Talked to them a few minutes (till 5) & then walked with them as far as Barum Top, making myself very agreeable. Miss Browne evidently pleased & flattered. When I met her at Cross-hills she said she never went to the library...They inquired for the 5th canto of 'Childe Harold'. It is not in the library & I have been thinking ever since (for, somehow or other, this girl haunts my thoughts like some genius of fairy lore) how to get it & offer it for her reading.

13 May 1818

Slept very ill last night. Did nothing but dream of Miss Browne; of being at their house; hearing her play on the piano & witnessing the vulgarity of her mother. I wish I could get the girl out of my head. However, there is one comfort; let me think or scheme what I may, I shall never allow myself to do anything beyond the folly of talking to, & perhaps walking a little way with her now, now & then when I happen to meet her.

23 May 1818

Went to Mr Knight's & sat ½ hour. Mentioning my despair of getting on with my studies, he proposed my giving up altogether the thought of pursuing them. This, I did not think it necessary to dissemble, I scouted entirely.

14 June 1818

My aunt & I went to morning church. She rode the young black mare (that was Uncle Joseph's) for the 1st time...Had tea at 5 for me to get to the lecture...Walked from church with Miss Browne...Offered Miss Browne (Kallista, as I shall call her) my arm at the bottom of Horton Street and we two walked together by the side of one division of their party...Having the two keys in my hand belonging to the seat [in church] I smiled and told Kallista if they were the keys of heaven I would let her in. She made no reply. I observed she never does to anything the least bordering on a compliment. She told me she walked a great deal in the garden and she liked it by the moonlight for it made her melancholy. She owned to being a little romantic and said a very sensible woman had once told me she thought a slight tincture of romance made a character more amiable...She wished she might ever meet me at church. I had looked into her prayer-book & excused the impertinence by saying I wished to find a name, as I had often inquired hers. She told me Elizabeth & thanked me for the interest I had taken in doing so. She goes to the baths, Dr Paley having ordered her not go to church. I think Miss Isabella did not mean to look coolly last Sunday...I asked Miss Browne if she had been to see Shibden valley. She said they had been to see Scout Hall but meant to come again to see more of the valley and asked me what way they should go. In explaining I said I should have been most happy to see them at Shibden but that my uncle & aunt visited so little, I feared so large a party would look alarming. She seemed to think this a thing of course with elderly people but was certainly pleased I had made the speech. Perhaps she may, in her own mind, give this reason for my not calling on her.

13 January 1819

How frail is nature. How weak are all our purposes. 'Twas only last night, just before going to sleep, that I prayed fervently for God's assistance in all things. Oh, what a falling-off in me this morning. I have no confidence in myself, no strength to help myself — but I will not despair. I will yet pray & try, I hope with better success, to amend. Lord have mercy on me, a sinner.

17 February 1819

Met the Misses Caroline & Margaret Greenwood (Crosshills) 1/2 way between Westfield & King Cross. They did not seem inclined to stop, therefore just spoke in passing. I think I shall have no more notes from Miss Caroline Greenwood. I shall probably owe this good thing to the shew of my preference for Miss Browne. She came out to meet me - took 2 or 3 turns with her up & down 'Kallista' Lane...said she would meet me tomorrow at the library or in passing their house.

19 February 1819

I am resolved not to let my life pass without some private memorial that I may hereafter read, perhaps with a smile, when Time has frozen up the channel of those sentiments which flow so freely now.

26 June 1819

In the afternoon at 4, took Isabel down the old bank with me to the library. Staid till 5. Tib's manner there fidgety & a little impatient. Would try to kiss me. She shall not go with me often again.

27 June 1819

A letter from M-. She could not write on Thursday, unhinged by a letter telling her Isabel was to be here on that day. Cannot bear the thought of her being here. This looks like jealousy & as if she loved me.

16 August 1819

Isabella, much to my annoyance, mentioned my keeping a journal & setting down everyone's conversation in my peculiar handwriting (what I call crypthand). I mentioned the almost impossibility of its being deciphered & the facility with which I wrote & not at all shewing my vexation at Isabella's folly in naming the thing.

16 September 1819

Busy all the day about getting my things ready. Mending, & in the afternoon & evening, making a lining for my basket. Came upstairs at 10¹/₂. Counted over my money, etc. Began packing about 12 & had all quite done at 3¹/₂... Dawdled so long that I was not in bed till 5.

29 November 1819

Halifax letter, just opened it, beginning, 'As I understand you advertised in the *Leeds Mercury* for a husband...' Saw no more but reclosed, three drops of sealing-wax & sent it back to the post office. I begin to care not much about these impertinent insults. Their intended shafts of annoyance fall harmless & I shall never read them. What the eye will see not, the heart will grieve not.

17 February 1820

In the evening...would not have the girls in our room & had a comfortable, cosy conversation. M- loves me. Certainly her heart is wholly mine. If I could not have allowed her twenty or thirty pounds a year in addition to what she had, she certainly would not have married. But what could she do on her allowance of only thirty pounds a year? Passed an affectionate hour or two.

3 April 1820

M- said, very sweetly & with tears at the bare thought, she could never bear me to do anything wrong with...anyone in my own rank of life. She could bear it better with an inferior, where the danger of her being supplanted could not be so great. But to get into any scrape would make her pine away. She thought she could not bear it. I never before believed she loved me so dearly & fondly. She has more romance than I could have thought & I am satisfied...I thought of its being my birthday, but let it pass without notice. How time steals away! What will the next year bring to pass? May I improve it more than the last!

27 April 1820

I am pleased that I have kept my accounts so correctly. It is a real satisfaction to me & must be the best safeguard against extravagance ... I will always make my income suffice my expenses & something more.

3 September 1820

From two till four, trying things on — my old pelisse, a spencer & waist. Studying how to improve my chest by stuffing, etc.

29 January 1821

Burnt all Caroline Greenwood's foolish notes & Mr Montagu's farewell verses that no trace of any man's admiration may remain. It is not meet for me. I love & only love the fairer sex & thus beloved by them in turn, my heart revolts from any other love than theirs.

22 June 1821

I owe a good deal to this journal. By unburdening my mind on paper I feel, as it were, to get rid of it; it seems made over to a friend that hears it patiently, keeps it faithfully, and by never forgetting anything, is always ready to compare the past & present & thus to cheer & edify the future.

8 August 1821

My own room very comfortable. The new bed & window curtains put up & as soon as I am settled here, got all my letters written, etc., I shall resume my studies & enjoy myself.

20 August 1821

George having to go for the lotion tomorrow, my aunt asked so many questions she almost posed me. I said it was to soften my hands. I believe she suspects something, for she said, 'Well, you're a queer one & I'll ask no more.'

19 August 1822

Off at 6 in the gig...to call at Crownest & Cliff-hill...Met Mrs Walker at Cliff-hill. Only the 2 young ladies at home at Crownest & deadly stupid this evening. Of course, I talked for them all, but such almost threw me into the vapours. Foolishly took a glass of ginger wine at Cliff-hill which has rather disagreed with me.

2 September 1822

Extracting some memoranda from a little red morocco pocket case with asses' skin leaves that was Eliza Raine's, previous to rubbing out all the writing & using the case in common for memoranda notes made on the spot for my journal. This plan will save me much trouble & I shall always be sure as I travel along that my observations, when made at the instant, are correct, at least as far as they can be so.

16 November 1822

Letter from Isabella Norcliffe (Langton)... 'The new Dean has already given great offence by not remaining there above one day & only staying ten minutes in the Minster. His great desire was to know everything about the fines & releases. I hear his health is so bad that he is obliged to reside ½ the year in Devonshire & that his wife is very high & mighty. He has 3 or 4 sons.' So much for Dr Cockburn & his wife, the sister of Mr secretary Peel.

26 November 1822

Out with Isabella about planting laurel & spruce firs near the house ... In the morning & evening talking about housekeeping. Mrs Norcliffe has twenty-one hundred a year. All her taxes, one hundred & fifty. Uses not quite three bushels of wheat, & nine & a half stones of all sorts of Shambles meat, per week.

27 November 1822

Walked around the garden & looked at the laurels & the newly planted shrubs...Isabella & I sat up talking in my room till 12.20. She takes much less wine now, for economy's sake. Only four glasses a day...Told her how much she was improved. We talked about M-. She likes her as much as ever. Nothing can ever make her dislike her again. If she lived with me, Tib would come & see us &, tho' M- slept with me, Tib would not dislike her.

14 December 1822

I had a very good kiss last night. Tib had not a very good one...I have been perpetually in horrors for fear of infecting Tib. I wonder whether the discharge is at all venereal or not?

15 February 1823

Letter from M- ... I know not how it is. I am beginning (to have) not sufficient interest in her letters. Perhaps I am best satisfied to think little upon the subject & certainly she is not constantly in my mind. How will this all end? Were I to meet with anyone who thoroughly suited me, I believe I should regret being at all tied...Oh, that this were not so. How will it all end?

12 July 1823

Could not sleep last night. Dozing, hot & disturbed...a violent longing for a female companion came over me. Never remember feeling it so painfully before...It was absolute pain to me.

1 August 1823

She was the character I had long wished to meet with, to clear up my doubts whether such a one existed nowadays.

20 August 1823

I know my own heart & I know men. I am not made like any other I have seen. I dare believe myself to be different from any others who exist. Love scorned to leave the ruin desolate; & Time & he have shaded it so sweetly, my heart still lingers in its old abiding place.

30 August 1823

But I mean to amend at five & thirty & retire with credit. I shall have a good fling before then. Four years. And in the meantime I shall make my avenae communes, my wild oats common. I shall domiciliate then.

16 September 1823

Writing my journal has amused & done me good. I seemed to have opened my heart to an old friend. I can tell my journal what I can tell none else.

21 October 1823

How shockingly foolish I am. I really will amend. I now begin to feel I owe it to M-.

28 October 1823

Sat up talking over M-'s affairs; C-'s insuring his life, etc. She at last proposed insuring my life at twenty pounds a year for eight hundred at my death. This seemed to satisfy her as providing for the only contingency that can leave her destitute. She is, she says, sure of a home if I live, but life is uncertain & she would provide against my death. We got ourselves into a grave humour, unfit for a kiss.

20 November 1823

Looking over & arranging my box of oldest letters & papers. Burnt several letters...Perhaps if I had waited I should not have made up my mind to part with them. Time, with me, is such a sanctifier of everything. It is a noble effort thus to make room in my writing desk at present & resolve never to cram it in future. It is a prudent effort. Now that I have begun the good fight I hope I shall go on & destroy my letters as soon as answered.

31 January 1824

Letter from M- ...going to have the house full of company again. Has given up all thought of having a masquerade; that at Alderley 'does not seem to have given general satisfaction. Much party spirit appears to have prevailed, & the opportunity was taken to say many ill-natured things.

25 March 1824

It was my journal that frightened people. She had made up her mind not to open her lips before me. Mrs Rawson, at the Saltmarshes', had abused my poor journal—wished I would destroy it—it reminded me of a great deal I had better forget. Sat down to my journal...the last 2½ hours, I have gradually written myself from moody melancholy to cheerful contentedness.

31 May 1824

I spoke against a classical education for ladies in general. It did no good if not pursued & if it was undrew a curtain better for them not to peep behind.

20 September 1824

I said, how it was all nature. Had it not been genuine the thing would have been different. I said I had thought much, studied anatomy, etc., but could not find it out. Could not understand myself. It was the effect of the mind. No exterior formation accounted for it.

20 September 1824

In the evening I sat about an hour with Mrs Barlow. Her eyes sparkled when she saw me & she was evidently afraid lest anyone else was coming. She surely wishes to have me tête-à-tête. She rather flatters me on my talents & agreeableness & I gently flatter her on being ladylike & pretty. She asked me if I had any male correspondents. I said one, between seventy & eighty, mentioning Mr. Duffin & said I was no believer in platonic attachments. Preferred ladies' company to gentlemen's. Did many things ladies in general could not do, but did them quietly. My education had been different from the common rule. I was suited to my circumstances. On my uncle's death should come in for my uncle's estate, at my own disposal. He had no high opinion of ladies- was not fond of leaving estates to female. Were I other than I am, would not leave his to me.

13 November 1824

I am very low. The tears gush as I write but, thank God, I generally feel relief from thus unburdening my mind on paper... Oh, how my heart longs after a companion & how I often wish for an establishment of my own, but I may then be too old to attach anyone & my life shall have passed in that dreary solitude I so ill endure.