

A LITTLE  
COMMON PLACE BOOK

CABINET BOOKS & PROTEOTYPES

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BROOKLYN

## Introduction

Word meanings migrate, and their trajectories trace contours in the topography of intellectual history. Take “commonplace,” for instance. The term now, for us, tends slightly to suggest a platitude or truism, whereas it once held pride of place in classical rhetoric, designating nothing less than the thematic centerpiece of an essay or argument. How low did the mighty fall! And the path of that long slide marks out several centuries of changing ideas about what knowledge is, how we get it, and what we are supposed to do with it. It is a path that carves from words to things, from erudition to experimentation, from libraries to laboratories. Along the way, the august traditions of Ciceronian rhetorical exposition came to look like same-old-same-old. Which is to say, the ancient wisdom began to look like so many tired clichés. There you go: from the *locus classicus* to the merely *commonplace*.

The book in your hand is perhaps best thought of as a quirky artifact of that larger revolution, a little missive picked up by the side of the trail—spoor, if you like. But handsome, winsome spoor. It hails from a world that still recognized “commonplace” as a common verb, and meant by it the act of reading for, pulling out, copying down, and endlessly managing the best bits of all one’s books. Commonplacing was a way of keeping track of the *theses*. This body of practices—techniques for indexing, strategies for note taking, mechanisms for the maintenance of prosthetic memories, all the stuff laid out in the pages that follow—amounted to an elaborate tactical convergence between the art of reading and the art of writing. The *commonplace book*, where one gathered and sorted one’s textual gleanings, was nothing if not a model of the well-organized mind.

So here is your chance to get your thinking in order, premodern style: on paper, analog, hardbound. Take a turn through this riff on John Locke’s tips—FileMaker for the quill-pen set—and then riffle the lovely blank pages that follow. How will you fill this timeless little metaphor?

A word about provenance. The present volume is a facsimile of an unused commonplace book in the collections of Princeton University. This edition appears to be unique, though versions of the introduction were printed several times in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The original, acquired in 1998, is housed in Rare Books at Firestone Library as PN6245.C65. Our thanks to them for sharing this material.

—D. Graham Burnett

COMMON  
PLACE BOOK,  
FORMED GENERALLY  
UPON THE PRINCIPLES

RECOMMENDED AND PRACTISED

BY

JOHN LOCKE, *Esquire,*

Author of an Essay on the Human Understanding, &c. &c

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