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Miniature Books at Maxwell Library

Marcia Dinneen

For centuries, people have been fascinated by miniature books. Some have collected them; others have written about them; still more have simply enjoyed them. What many people do not know is that the Maxwell Library has its own collection of miniature books. Housed in Special Collections, these tiny treasures are rare in several aspects. The most obvious of these is their size. The standard definition for a miniature book as set by collector Percy Spielmann and by Julian Edison, editor of *Miniature Book News*, is three inches in height—up to four inches “if the intent is miniature.” By this measure, the BSU collection has 78 miniature books,

including Bibles, religious books, novels, poems, hymnals and children’s books. The collection also includes 19 books published by Achille J. St. Onge (1913–1978) of Worcester, Massachusetts, whose publications are regarded as among the best-produced miniature books in America.

The origin of miniature books actually precedes the invention of printing. The earliest miniature “book” is a tiny cuneiform clay tablet produced by the Sumerians and containing government records. Miniatures were developed in manuscript form and only later as printed books. The first printed miniature book, according to historian Douglas McMurtrie, was the *Diurnale Moguntinum*, produced about 1468 by German printer Peter Schoeffer, who apprenticed with Johann Gutenberg. Early miniature books are rare. By the sixteenth century, miniatures were produced more frequently, and there are many examples that can be seen in such repositories as the British Library and the Library of Congress. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,

Thumb Bibles were particularly popular, as were Almanacs. By the nineteenth century, technological advances in typography and photography enabled the creation of the smallest books. “The 19th century,” Louis Bondy wrote in his *Miniature Books: Their History from Beginnings to the Present* (1981), was “the supreme age of the miniature book.” In that century, several London publishers developed complete libraries for children that were housed in specially designed bookcases, and religious tract societies produced huge numbers of tiny books, which they often distributed for free. Since then, miniature books have conveyed many types of knowledge, from dictionary entries to poems.

Fine workmanship is the hallmark of miniature books. Care is needed to cut and cast type, develop ink that will not clog the tiny type, select appropriate paper, and bind the minute volumes. Miniature books are works of art, but they are also useful. Because of their size, they have been easy to carry and, when necessary, to hide.

In 1832 Doctor Charles Knowlton (1800–1850) wrote a manual on the then-taboo subject of birth control, and published it under the innocuous title *The Fruits of Philosophy, or the Private Companion of Young Married People*. The book measures 2 $\frac{7}{8}$ by 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches and was easy to conceal. In 1862, the *Emancipation Proclamation* was printed in miniature book form by abolitionist John Murray Forbes of Boston. Copies were given to Union soldiers to carry and to distribute in southern states. On his travels in Africa, British explorer David Livingstone carried with him a miniature book of the poems of Robert Burns, and T. E. Lawrence gave miniature copies of the *Koran* to his Muslim soldiers as a battle talisman. Adolf Hitler used miniatures for propaganda, issuing cheaply printed biographies of Nazi officers, folk songs, and praise for himself. One miniature book, *The Autobiography of Robert Hutchings Goddard, Father of the Space Age*, published by St. Onge, was aboard the *Apollo 11* mission to the Moon in 1969.

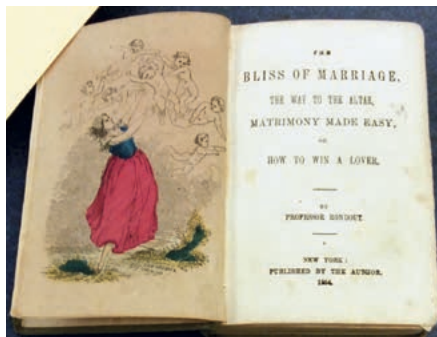


Although miniature books were largely the creatures of publishers, some authors wrote their works in miniature. The Brontë sisters and brother Bramwell created their worlds of Angria and Gondal in tiny manuscripts. They replicated published print in careful calligraphy and used a variety of materials (including a flour sack, a sheet of music, or a wallpaper scrap) for each “volume.” As described by Kate E. Brown in her 1998 essay “Beloved Objects,” Charlotte Brontë’s *Never-Ending Story* (1826–29) is less than three inches tall, as is Bramwell’s *History of the Young Men* (1830).

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Miniature books have great appeal to the avid collector. In his book *The Savage Mind* (1962), anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss called the miniature book the “masterpiece of the journeyman.” Some are driven to collecting miniatures because they can amass a great many of them in a small space. Empress Eugenie, wife of Napoleon III, had a collection estimated at between 1800 to 2000 volumes; sadly, it was wholly lost during the 1871 burning of the Tuileries Palace. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt collected more than 750 miniatures. Among the many libraries that collect miniature books are the Henry E. Huntington Library, the Boston Public Library, the Library of Congress, the American Antiquarian Society (which has 100 examples of American editions of Thumb Bibles dating from 1765) and the New York Public Library (which has a copy of the first miniature book printed in America, William Secker’s *A Wedding Ring for the Finger, or the Salve of Divinity on the Sore of Humanity* [Boston, 1695]).

Bridgewater State University’s own collection of miniature books ranges from literature to religion, from instructive manuals to biographies. The books are bound in cloth, paper, and various types of leather. Most of the books are children’s literature, 30 of them in all. Twenty-two books are of a religious nature, ranging from prayer books to books of Bible verses for each day. There are 13 Bibles. Sixteen books fall into the category of literature—novels and poems including some by recognized authors, such as Robert



Frost. There are also inaugural presidential addresses: Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon. Some of the books at Maxwell are in poor shape and some of them are missing pages. The majority of the books are written in English. Some of the “books” are actually pamphlets and two are Christmas ornaments, complete with string, to hang on the tree.

Perhaps most interesting among the miniature books in the BSU collection, however, are a series of 19 miniature books (all of them in fine shape) published by St. Onge. He started publishing miniatures in 1935 with *Noel*, by Robert K. Shaw. His early books were printed in this country, but later he had his books printed abroad using, for example, the Enschede Press of Haarlem, Holland (the one that also prints money for the country). St. Onge’s *Inaugural Address of John F. Kennedy* was in such demand after Kennedy’s death in 1963 that the 1000 original copies quickly sold out, and the book had to be reprinted. Within the year following Kennedy’s death, 7000 copies had been sold. The Robert H. Goddard Museum at Clark University

in Worcester holds all 49 miniature books published by St. Onge.

In addition to the St. Onge collection, BSU collection contains other intriguing little books. There is the 1828 three-volume set of the gothic romance *Children of the Abbey*, along with books published by the American Tract Society, such as *Daily Food for Christians* (1880). One fascinating book is *The Bliss of Marriage, The Way to the Altar, Matrimony Made Easy, or How to Win a Lover* (1854). The book is included in *Humbug. A Look at Some Popular Impositions* (1859) as an example of a famous hoax, purportedly offering advice for a happy marriage, but in reality selling various nostrums.

Among the miniature children’s books are stories and poems difficult to locate elsewhere, such as Frank L. Baum’s short piece “The Christmas Stocking,” published in the Christmas Stocking Series. Other important titles in the collection include *The Ladies Almanac*, published in 1856, which includes an informative article on women’s medical colleges.

Although housing and displaying a collection of miniature books can be challenging, having it is an asset to Bridgewater State. Many of the titles are valuable because they point to our history and reflect aspects of a forgotten past. Students, scholars and others fascinated by the riches inside these tiny books would do well to set aside some time to spend with them by visiting our Special Collections, on the third floor of Maxwell Library.



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