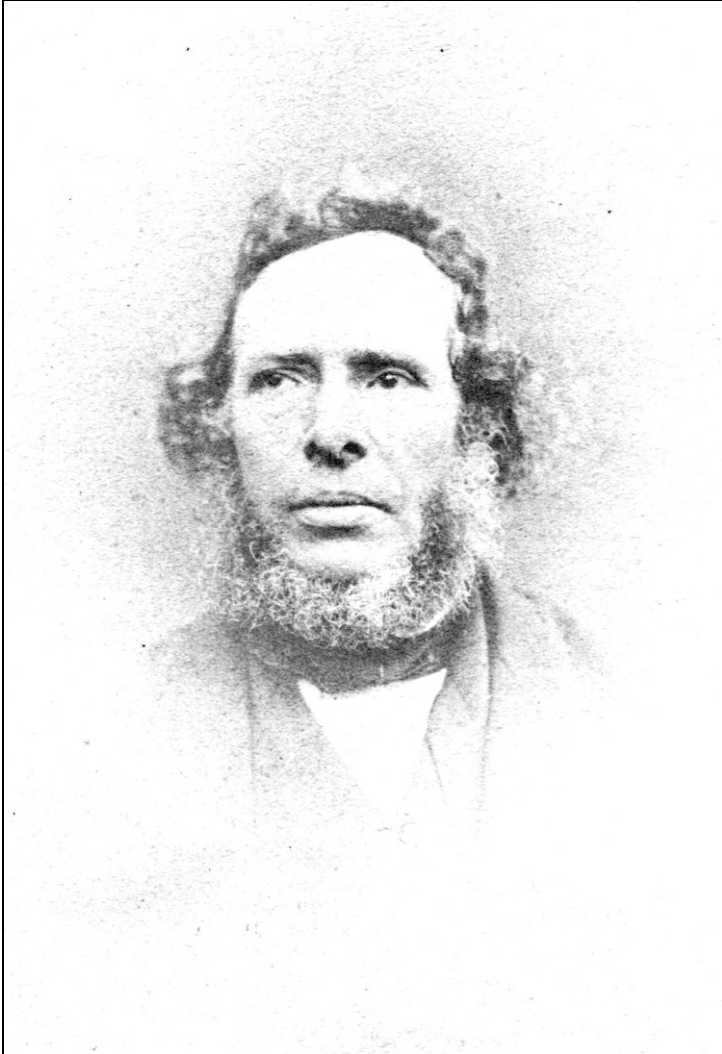


Wheels
of
Providence



John Cox Bayliss (1812-1866), Photograph, c. 1860 (pasted in the journal)

Wheels
of
Providence

Over the Ironbridge
in the Victorian Journal
of John Cox Bayliss

~

Mike Fraser

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Another week gone. Another month. What have I done? Is it of any consequence what? Can my doings affect any good or evil in the great chain of transactions turned up by the wheels of providence?

John Cox Bayliss, September 1st 1838

Map of Ironbridge and Environs on the Severn

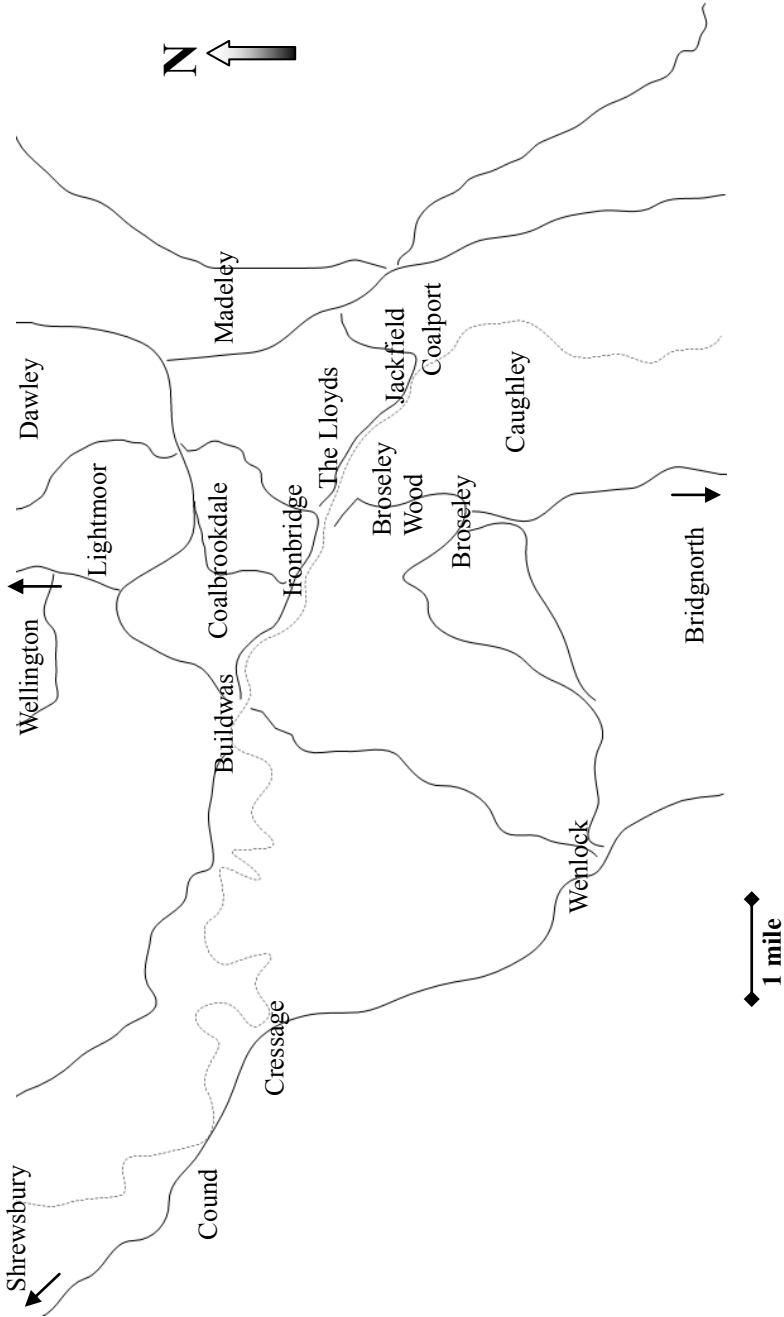


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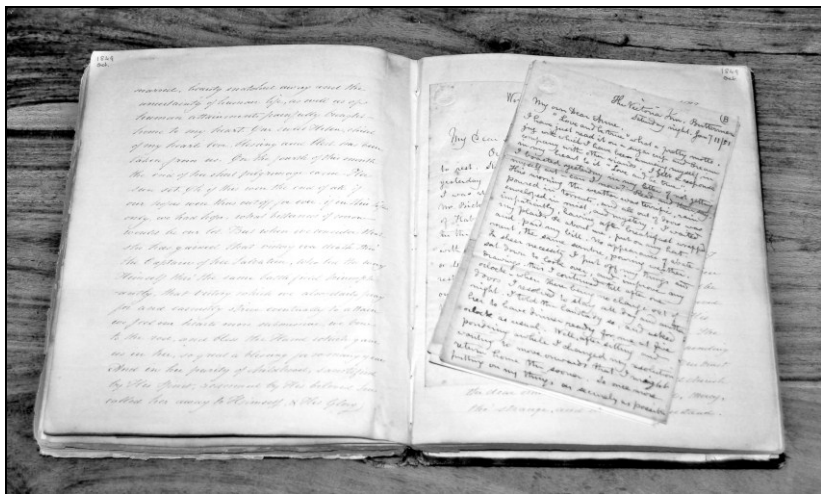
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Introduction

In 2010 my parents handed me a box of materials relating to the artist Sir Wyke Bayliss (1835-1906), which had been kindly given to them by my father's cousin Peter Oliver on a visit to him while on holiday in Brittany. The box included a number of Sir Wyke's published works and sketch books, and a journal which turned out to be that of his father John Cox Bayliss (1812-1866). The journal is roughly bound in green cloth, and includes letters loosely inserted in glued-in envelopes, as well as the diary itself written intermittently between 1830 and 1866. The journal appears to be a copy rather than the original: it is written in a different hand to the inserted letters signed by John. A brief diary of comments from 1850 to 1866 by his wife Anne née Wyke (1810-1876), is also written at the end in the same hand. A handwriting comparison with the inserted letters also suggests Anne's hand in the transcription. The letters are principally written from John to Anne, but there are a number of letters to and from other family members, including their children Eliza, William, Helen and Wyke. Anne was my own great great great grandmother, and I hope to have lived up in some measure to her efforts by transcribing the work a further time.



The original bound journal, with inserted letters

The journal itself begins with John's marriage to Anne in 1830, moving to their new home at Harris' Green, Broseley. The story then traces the fortunes of family life, at first through John's career as a painter and school master in Broseley and Ironbridge, and later as a teacher of drawing and painting in London.

John was born in Madeley, Shropshire, the son of William Bayliss and Ann Cox. His wider family were engaged in the manufacturing industries, successful in a number of ventures later in the Victorian period, including the silver smith company of Marston & Bayliss, the cast iron manufactory Bayliss, Jones

& Bayliss, and the Sunbeam Motor car company. Sir William Maddock Bayliss, the eminent physiologist, was also descended from these relations. Anne Wyke's father was Dr Abraham Wyke of Shrewsbury, whose family had lived in Shropshire for a very long time, and was of an educated class. He is described in Wyke Bayliss' 1906 autobiography as "the Tutor of Darwin", although Darwin himself never ascribed great credit to his early education. Her mother was Elizabeth née Turner, sister of Thomas Turner who had run the Caughley China Works nearby with much success in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and is often credited with the introduction of the pervasive Willow Pattern to English porcelain. Appendices contain more details of relations and descendants.

This transcription divides the work into two volumes of approximately equal length, the natural split occasioned by the family's move from parochial to metropolitan life, and also reflecting the stylistic differences in the journal between these phases. Volume I explores the world of an educated Shropshire family in the early Victorian era. It is very personal at times, yet comprehensive and articulate with extensive passages on the events of the day. Volume II follows the family's move to London to pursue ambitions and the subsequent challenges of failing health and failed expectations. The story here is much more fragmented, and requires the reader to piece together John's brief journal entries with inserted events from numerous letters and Anne's notes. The letters detail John's painting expeditions, as well as wider social and cultural landscapes in which the family was situated, as well as some references back to the Ironbridge community.

Despite the natural split in their lives and in the styles of their telling, there are a number of themes which run throughout the journal, and these may have relevance for wider interest and reflection on John's life as a document of its time beyond an individual's circumstances. In particular, the journal provides situated perspectives on industrial, educational, artistic, medical and religious life that may be of interest to a wider readership concerned with Victorian activities, lifestyles and values.

Most importantly, the journal provides a unique perspective on the Ironbridge Gorge, an environment central to our understanding of the industrial revolution of the time. Narratives which emphasise the wholly industrial nature of the potteries and manufacturing industries of this environment are rife, yet from within this environment John's journal presents us with an alternate view of its inhabitants. Of course, the industries are pervasive, yet the social and educational perspectives which John and many of his acquaintances adopt emphasise the picturesque natural environment, and the importance of local communities lived through churches and schools. This is not to say John is not engaged with the industrial milieu, for example there are many instances in which the potteries are discussed in relation to the family's employment, and indeed John's drawing of the Ironbridge itself is used by the Coalport factory as an illustration on some of its wares.



Coalport transferware mug, with a view of Ironbridge by John Cox Bayliss (Iron-bridge Gorge Museum Trust)

However, the journal emphasises that purely focusing on the industrial could obscure a society which remains highly socially stratified, in which aspirations were strongly religious, aesthetic and educational. Even in John's acquaintances with the Darby family themselves, icons of the industrial revolution, they principally shared interests in art and theatre. In later times, John himself became involved in drawing for the great railway boom of the 1840s and suffered a disastrous sequence of events aligned with the 1847 commercial collapse of the railways. He returned to art and education to sustain his family and the journal reminds us again that the industrial and economic were often context for life rather than its topic.

The journal provides important perspectives on the role and value of education in the early Victorian period. John and Anne's own work in setting up and running schools illustrates the prevailing importance of private enterprise in the education system, and there are fascinating details on the relationships between boarding and day pupils, behaviour and expulsion, the curriculum

itself and the methods of delivering it. A comparison between this schooling and John's later teaching in London is also relevant, contrasting his initial comprehensive educational plans with his eventual specialism as a teacher of drawing. In Wyke Bayliss' autobiography he notes of his father's tutoring that he "became one of the most successful teachers of military and mathematical drawing. Year by year he sent up to Woolwich or Sandhurst or Addiscombe the men who proved first in the examinations". John's own plans centred strongly on an ambitious programme of self-improvement, not just in his practicing art, but in literature, languages and the sciences as well. While there is the odd blip in the knowledge of the day, for example when "'electric fluid' fell on a house in Broseley", his lament at being unable to afford undertaking a degree himself is ultimately offset by his son William's attendance at Cambridge, emphasising the changing times that the family lived through.

Although an educator by profession, drawing and painting were clearly John's principal passion, and the journal provides examples of the issues facing provincial and metropolitan artists and painters of the day. With a focus on picturesque landscapes, which some might call derivative of earlier movements in art, it would be easy to dismiss John's work as lacking the foresight to capture in detail the character of the contemporary industrial landscape as it changed around him. However, such a criticism would be to ignore the character of his work which is strongly influenced by his desire to paint the sublime beauty of natural landscapes wherever they might occur, leading to his trips to Wales, the Lake District, Switzerland and so on. Indeed, as well as distant Birmingham and London exhibitions attended where possible, his contact with contemporary landscape art and artists through local collections such as that of Francis Darby cannot have persuaded him that such artistic interests were outdated – mentioned here are Thomas Sidney Cooper and Charlotte Naysmith, and Francis was a known correspondent of John Constable. Financial demands are also placed on his work to supplement income from the school with commissions, which seems to have been typically through portraiture. Nonetheless, the results of his technique are clearly of finesse beyond those of a hobbyist, and as many examples as it has been possible to collect are illustrated throughout. It speaks volumes that these techniques which he passed on to his son Wyke allowed him in turn to reach the highest echelons of society in the late Victorian art world, despite having minimal formal training. As we find in the latter stages of the journal, in his own career Wyke Bayliss also began to travel often and successfully to the continent to undertake sketching, a skill he attributed to his father, albeit that his resulting cathedral paintings are at the vanguard of the contemporary Victorian revival of gothic architecture rather than directly related to John's concerns with the sublime and picturesque in natural scenery. Wyke's autobiography reveals "The only real training I ever received was in my father's study ... I listened to the lectures at the Academy, and attended the School of Design, held then at Somerset House. But there was nothing to help me there. My father had taught me more perspective when I was twelve years old than was known by the twelve professors in the schools

all put together". In amongst travels for art's sake, the journal also shows broader glimpses of a broader geography in India and Australia, and cameo appearances of Royal christenings and weddings.

A sobering picture of health and medical issues of the time is presented, with the early years showing the prevalence of infant and child mortality, both in John and Anne's own family and in the school and pupils that they care for. Adults are also besieged by health challenges, from the Cholera epidemic sweeping the nation to the effects of the atmospheric pollution which derive from industry, and seemingly continual respiratory difficulties and headaches. John also faces less routine health challenges deriving from artists' materials, on one occasion an extended painting session leading to 'weak eyes' and 'rheumatic face pain.' Primitive medicines mentioned include blue mass to prepare for exertion on a sketching trip, a substance which often contained highly poisonous mercury, and a formula for an infant that often contained opium. In later years John's bronchitis and other lung problems became a significant issue, and treatments included ice, brandy and trips away from London for clean air. In passing we discover that he continued to smoke which does not seem to have been recognised as an aspect of the cause. Throughout the later phases of the journal, deaths and burials are repeatedly noted, and a sense of the routine of death is almost chilling.

Aligned with the stark presence of mortality is the expression of religion, and John seems in this respect strongly concerned with how his God perceives him in life and in the journal. While religion is ever present within and at the heart of the communities they live in, both in Ironbridge and London, it is also clear that John individually attaches great importance to his thoughts and behaviour in the sight of God, and he presents a number of hints that he is conflicted between his strong beliefs in the desire for eternal life on the one hand, and his earthly wants, desires and especially ambitions on the other hand. For this reason I chose from John's writing the phrase "Wheels of Providence" for the title of the work. This phrase characterises his eloquent writing, but also sums up the values, emotions, and struggles that he conveys as important in his life. The overarching concern of the journal seems to be a sense of whether and how it is possible to control fate, and to overcome one's own limitations. Despite the great cultural and temporal distances between us, making a mark on the world through great efforts to steer the wheels of providence is a universal desire and challenge that speaks across the years.

A final note on the methods I have used to transcribe this work as it is not a literal copy of the journal as presented. There is little of the formatting preserved, although many journal entries do in fact start on their own line preceded by the date I have kept the date format consistent where it is haphazard in the original. The majority of words I have kept identical, including the preservation of some spellings which would be considered to be 'American' spelling variants (eg color, labor), but on a few occasions where a word was clearly misspelt I have corrected the spelling for readability. While letters have been

inserted at the time they were written as best can be determined (aside from the two exceptions at the end of Volume I and the beginning of Volume 2), this does not reflect their organisation in the journal in which they were grouped together in four separate pasted-in envelopes. I have also labelled each letter and formatted them with a border shadow to differentiate from the journal text. Anne's brief notes towards the end of the journal I have again inserted in date order rather than as presented at the end in the original, and have used greyed-out text to identify the entries which are hers in Volume II. Finally, I have also excluded a small amount of material written by Anne at the end of the journal which substantially overlapped with John's entries, and in a couple of instances I have excluded letters written between John and Anne's children after their parents' deaths, because they contained little of relevance to John's story.

Mike Fraser, 25th April 2014