

## Pen and Ink

Even with the books he had been given or acquired, Edwards's "study" at the inception of his professional life in 1720 was eminently movable, probably in a small trunk or package. Edwards's first years were peripatetic, involving brief pastoral appointments in New York City and Bolton, Connecticut, and a stint as tutor at Yale College during which he also served as a supply preacher in Glastonbury, Connecticut. If he had a desk to use during this period, it was probably his father's when he visited home in East Windsor; otherwise, it was doubtless any convenient table. Still, he carefully composed sermons in homemade, stitched sermon booklets and began his "Miscellanies" theological notebook. The essential materials of studying and writing were, of course, the writing equipment and paper, but even that material support was not so casually supplied as we might assume today.<sup>1</sup>

The popular image of Edwards coming home from a ride or walk in the woods with scraps of paper fluttering on his coat is striking, but he also used more conventional and practical ways of note taking. For example, early in his life, when he was doing a great deal of moving from place to place, he puzzled over ways to "improve" or maximize time when in transit. His solution is found in his diary for August 28, 1723: "Remember as soon as I can, to get a piece of slate, or something, whereon I can make short memorandums while traveling"—something that may have resembled the hornbooks or tablets that children used in schools to cipher.<sup>2</sup>

While Edwards must have used a slate pencil or a piece of chalk—something erasable—for his slate tablet, his main writing implement throughout his life was in all likelihood the quill pen, probably made from a goose feather, though feathers from swans and turkeys were used as well; for those who wanted a finer hand, crow feathers were preferred. There was much more to procuring a quill than simply going out to the barnyard and plucking one from the wing of the nearest bird. First, the feathers had to be taken at molting time, when they were loose or had fallen out. Then they were dried and baked for about an hour, sometimes in sand. Finally, they were cleansed in a boiling solution, after which they were ready to be cut using a penknife. Penknives were usually about a hand's width in length with a narrow blade that folded into a handle made of wood, bone, or even ivory; nonfolding varieties had long handles and short, leaf-shaped blades for scrape erasing. To prepare the quill for ink, the end was cut at an angle and the pith removed, followed by another cut, about half an inch further back and halfway through the quill, which provided for an even flow of ink. When the tip of the quill dulled, split, or cracked—which resulted in uneven flow or spattering of the ink—the writer had to repeat the process, until the quill was whittled down to such a short length that it was no longer usable. On occasion it is possible that Edwards acquired quills in cosmopolitan centers such as Boston, either from booksellers or from stationers standing on street corners. Whatever the source, quill pens had to be kept damp between writing sessions, or sittings. For this purpose, small glass quill holders with concave bottoms were made, though Edwards may have made do with any glass cup or similar receptacle.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The following section relies on Thomas A. Schafer's section "Resources and Their Uses" in his introduction to the "Miscellanies," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 13, *The "Miscellanies," (Entry Nos. a–z, aa–zz, 1–500)* (New Haven, Conn., 1994), 60–69.

<sup>2</sup> *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 16, *Letters and Personal Writings*, ed. George S. Claghorn (New Haven, Conn., 1998), 780. Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson both used ivory table-books for making temporary notes. These were made of oblong pocket-sized pieces of ivory joined at one end so that they could be spread out like a fan. Slate pencils were used to write on the tablets, which could then be erased. See Kevin J. Hayes, *The Road to Monticello: The Life and Mind of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 2008), 98.

<sup>3</sup> *Works*, 13: 66; Joe Nickell, *Pen, Ink, and Evidence: A Study of Writing and Writing Materials for the Penman, Collector, and Document Detective* (Lexington, Ky., 1990), 3–8. See also Lilian Baker Carlisle, "How to Make a Quill

Iron-gall inks were the most popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Edwards would have had to purchase the basic ingredients for the formula, but from there the ink was home brewed. A typical recipe was one part gum arabic; two parts copperas or green vitriol (ferrous sulfate); three parts gall; and thirty parts rainwater or white wine. Gum arabic acted as a binder and gave viscosity, and copperas served as a colorant. Gallic or gallotannic acids, which bit into and created a durable bond with paper fibers, came from oak trees on which the female gall wasp laid her eggs, around which excrescences, or galls, the size of nuts would form. To mix the ink, first the oak galls were crushed and soaked in the rainwater or wine and exposed to the sun or placed by the fire for a day or two, and then strained. Next the copperas, “beaten small,” would be stirred in, and the mixture kept in the sun or on the hearth for another day or two.<sup>4</sup> The gum arabic was then stirred in. To make the ink glossy, the concoction could be simmered over a fire after adding a small amount of sugar. The finished product was decanted into clean bottles and stoppered. We can imagine a number of such bottles, of various sizes, in Edwards’s study, perhaps on a shelf in one of the bookcases. By 1690 ink powder was being sold in London, and such a product was available on the Atlantic seaboard by the mid-eighteenth century; so it is possible Edwards availed himself of this commercially prepared ink from time to time. Of course, travelling often as he did, Edwards borrowed quantities of ink from his hosts, creating variations that have helped to establish the chronology and dating of his manuscripts.<sup>5</sup>

Besides the bottles for keeping his ink reserves, Edwards would have used various receptacles when actually writing. A traditional item was the inkhorn, made from the horn of an ox or cow, sometimes with a lid or cover at the wide end for transport. Such inkhorns could be cut down to smaller sizes. The challenge with an inkhorn, of course, was that it had to be held upright, either by hand or in some sort of stand. Other receptacles for ink included inkpots, or inkwells, of earthenware or pewter, which were popular in New England during the eighteenth century; the more affluent could purchase writing utensils and desk sets made of silver and various exotic materials.<sup>6</sup>

---

Pen,” *Antiques Journal*, September 1973, 36–38, 63; Philip Mason, “The Lost Art of Quill Pen Making,” *Early American Life* 6, no. 2 (April 1975): 40–41.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Cocker, *The Pen’s Triumph* (1658), quoted in Joyce Irene Whalley, *Writing Implements and Accessories: From the Roman Stylus to the Typewriter* (Detroit, 1975), 78, quoted in Nickell, *Pen, Ink, and Evidence*, 36.

<sup>5</sup> *Works*, 13: 53–65; Nickell, *Pen, Ink, and Evidence*, 36–44; William J. Barrow, “Black Writing Ink of the Colonial Period,” *The American Archivist* 11, no. 4 (October 1948): 291–307. On the availability of ink powder, see *Works*, 13: 65 n. 3. Even printers were still making their own ink in Edwards’s day; printer’s ink was not manufactured in New England until 1775. Hugh Amory, “The New England Book Trade, 1713–1790,” in *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*, ed. Amory and David D. Hall, vol. 1 of *A History of the Book in America*, ed. Hall (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2007), 314–46, esp. 332. The late Thomas A. Schafer worked for decades studying ink, paper types, handwriting, and orthography as criteria for constructing a chronology for Edwards’s manuscripts, particularly the early ones, where paper and ink variations were the most frequent. On methodology, see *Works*, 13: 60–90; for chronological parallels for the period 1720–1731, see *ibid.*, 13: 91–109.

<sup>6</sup> Nickell, *Pen, Ink, and Evidence*, 35–39, 44–57.