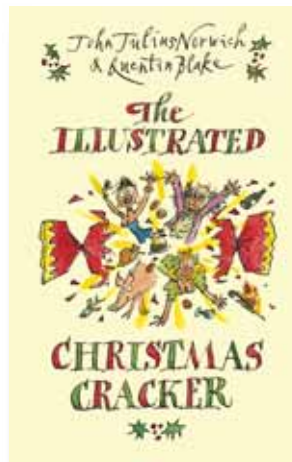

COMMONPLACE BOOKS

John Julius Norwich describes the addictive habits of a commonplace book compiler, and how his *Christmas Crackers* anthologies have satisfied his cravings for the past 40 years

It all started half a century ago when I was living in Beirut. In those days the city was a stopping-place for every eastern-bound airline; our house became a sort of transit lounge, and at Christmas my mother gave me a book, bound in beautiful blue goatskin, in which to record our visitors. Alas, almost on the day it arrived, Lebanon erupted in revolution. For the next six months we had no visitors at all. And so I used my book for something else. For some years I had the habit of jotting down on scraps of paper various passages from books that had caught my imagination and that I wanted to remember. The visitors' book seemed a far worthier home for them, and I copied them in. Then a strange thing happened. In the splendour of their new environment, the scraps of prose and poetry took on a new identity. Suddenly they became a collection, and the goatskin volume became my commonplace book.

I have always been fascinated by commonplace books. The genre goes back at least to the fifteenth century, but it was only in the sixteenth and seventeenth that it really came into its own in England. Francis Bacon and John Milton both kept them; so did John Aubrey, who reminded his readers 'how these curiosities would be quite forgott, did not such idle fellows as I put them down'. Aubrey was incapable of writing a boring sentence, but I find that, with that one exception, commonplace books do not become really interesting till the twentieth century. T.E. Lawrence kept one, which he rather mysteriously referred to as his *Gepäck* (baggage); so too did E.M. Forster and W.H. Auden. Auden's, which he called *A Certain World* (1970), and Lord David Cecil's *Library Looking-Glass* (1975), are among the best I know, openable anywhere and always rewarding. But the greatest of them all for my money is that of my godfather Maurice Baring. His *Have You Anything to Declare?* (1950) has been on my bedside table since I can remember. Baring was fluent in at least half a dozen European languages, and they are all represented here; but he is generous with his translations, and one is constantly amazed by the breadth of his reading.

I am now on my eleventh album of commonplace books, and I realise that I have stumbled on one of the most wholly satisfying subjects for collection that the world has to offer. First, it costs literally nothing: nicely bound volumes are good for creating a sense of pride in the collection, but



John Julius Norwich's *The Illustrated Christmas Cracker* (2005), illustrated by Quentin Blake.

are in no way essential. Secondly, it knows no restrictions of size or scope, apart from those the collector himself imposes. It follows that no other collection can so accurately reflect his taste and personality. One bunch of Rembrandt etchings will be very much like another, but no two commonplace collections will be remotely the same. One volume may show a

preponderance of love lyrics, another of Wildean epigrams.

Thirdly, the commonplace addict is on his own, far from the world of catalogues and dealers. Indeed, one of the first lessons he learns is never to go out looking for material; the very act of searching seems to desensitise his antennae. If he can only keep them sharp, there is no telling where he may make his next *trouville*. A chance remark, an opera programme, a menu, the instruction book for the new washing-machine, a notice in a foreign hotel room: any of these things, or a thousand others, may yield the unexpected nugget of pure gold, and his joy at finding it will be every bit as great as that of more exalted collectors when they stumble on a rare first edition or a Mauritian Penny Black.

In one respect, however, the commonplace collector is no different from the collector of etchings: sooner or later he feels the irrepressible urge to ask people to come up and see them. And it was in response to this urge, in 1970, that I hit upon the idea of having a little booklet printed, containing a couple of dozen of my favourite items, to send round to my friends as a sort of glorified Christmas card, with another 50 copies for sale at the Heywood Hill bookshop. Rather to my surprise, it worked. And so the fortieth volume of *A Christmas Cracker* is published this month. I can only hope that all those who send me their contributions and have bought the *Crackers* year after year, will continue to do so; for it is they who have kept the whole mildly dotty enterprise on the road for so long.

