

BOOK REVIEW

Roland Allen. *The Notebook: A History of Thinking on Paper*. London: Profile Books, 2024, 416 pp.

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Jorge Nuno Silva

Centro Interuniversitário de História das Ciências e da Tecnologia,
Faculdade de Ciências, Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal

jnsilva@cal.berkeley.edu

The Notebook: A History of Thinking on Paper, by Roland Allen, is a captivating exploration of how a simple object—the notebook—has profoundly influenced human thought, creativity, and culture. Through a rich tapestry of historical anecdotes and cultural analysis, Allen traces the evolution of notebooks from ancient times to the present, revealing their crucial role in shaping the modern world.

The author began this book while he contemplated the story behind the creation and commercial success of a popular notebook brand. Everyone knows them: they are black, have rounded corners, smooth paper, and come with a little pocket. Although this particular brand outperforms most of its competitors, there are several comparable products on the market at lower prices. However, it has not always been this way. Someone had read Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines* (New York, NY: Viking/Penguin, 1987) where a character refers to

a French-made notebook that had gone out of production. The need for a good notebook thus became clear.

Allen begins his narrative with the precursors of notebooks, dating back a thousand years before our era. Naturally, the materials involved were expensive and difficult to handle. Once paper became affordable, the author takes us to medieval Florence, where notebooks were widely used for accounting and record-keeping. By facilitating double-entry bookkeeping they played a significant role in the development of trade. Allen explores the emergence of various notebook forms, such as the *zibaldoni*—a type of personal anthology combining family history, quotations, and jokes—which served as a precursor to modern social media and became innocent witnesses to many facets of human life.

The book also examines the notebooks of renowned figures, such as the mathematician Luca Pacioli (c. 1445–1517) whose work in mathematics and accounting was highly influential in the sixteenth century; the polymath Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), better known as a painter, who filled notebooks with sketches of inventions and scientific and artistic observations; Isaac Newton (1642–1727), who documented his discoveries in the now-famous Waste Book, partially filled by his stepfather; Charles Darwin (1809–1882), who developed his theory of evolution in pocket-sized notebooks, one of which contains the celebrated phrase “I think...” beside a diagram of branching evolution; and Agatha Christie (1890–1976), the queen of mystery writing, who plotted her novels in notebooks. These examples illustrate how notebooks have been crucially influential for many aspects of cultural and scientific history.

Allen documents many other examples—from tradespeople to artists and caretakers while his list lays no claim to being exhaustive. To name some further notable figures from the history of science the following come to mind: Srinivasa Ramanujan (1887–1920), a mathematician born in India who gained entry to Cambridge after sending some results of his work, recorded in worn-out notebooks to the local professor G. H. Hardy; and Dmitri Mendeleev (1834–1907), who left behind notebooks still in existence and showing the steps towards the construction of the Periodic Table.

Beyond these historical accounts, Allen emphasizes the notebook’s role as a “cognitive technology.” He argues that the act of writing by hand can enhance memory, foster creativity, and even improve mental health. The book discusses how bullet journaling can aid individuals with ADHD, how journaling can alleviate PTSD symptoms, and how patient diaries in ICU settings can help people process traumatic experiences.

Naturally, given Allen’s approach to the subject, the geographical focus of his book is primarily on Europe and North America. Perhaps other scholars might explore similar

traditions and practices in different parts of the world. *The Notebook* includes numerous references and notes that support the author's arguments, but lacks a formal bibliography. Its index is relatively complete and quite useful, especially given the large number of names and places mentioned throughout the text.

Overall, this meticulously researched and engagingly written book offers a fresh perspective on the significance of the humble notebook. Allen's work is a testament to the enduring power of pen and paper in an increasingly digital world. Whether you are a historian, a writer, an artist, or simply someone who appreciates the practice of writing, this book provides valuable insight into how notebooks have shaped—and continue to shape—our thoughts and lives.