

INTERPRETING CHARLES LAMB'S 'NEAT-BOUND BOOKS'

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we consider a much-quoted phrase published by the essayist Charles Lamb (1775–1834) in the *London Magazine* in 1822 about a desirable quality in books: that they should be 'strong-backed and neat-bound'. We identify meanings of modifier *neat* as evidenced by different communities of practice in early nineteenth-century newspapers, and in particular we present meanings of *neat* as used in certain Quaker writings known to have been read with approval by Lamb. By this method we assemble a series of nuanced meanings that the phrase *neat-bound* would have conveyed to contemporary readers – specifically, the readership of the *London Magazine*.

Keywords: Collocates; communities of practice; social networks; leather-workers; accountants; Quakers.

1. Introduction

In his 1822 *London Magazine* essay "Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading", the London East India Company clerk, poet, novelist, playwright, critic, author of literature for children, essayist, and book-collector Charles Lamb (1775–1834) advanced the credo that "to be strong-backed and neat-bound is the desideratum of a volume". In this article, we consider what 'strong-backed and neat-bound' might have meant to Lamb, because the phrase was taken up and repeated after his lifetime, to the extent that it figures in the *Pan Dictionary of Famous Quotations* (Hyman 1993 [1962]).

Unusually, Lamb traversed the social classes in that he was born the son of a servant and his wife but received an education at Christ's Hospital through the intervention of his father's employer. At Christ's Hospital he was a contemporary

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of the poet Coleridge (a life-long friend), through whom he also became close friends with the poet Wordsworth. Lamb was a particularly sociable individual, pronounced by the essayist De Quincey to be “positively the most hospitable man I have known in this world”, and he also had a decided sense of right and wrong, coming from a Quaker background and sympathising with dissenting Unitarians.³ *Neat* had multiple meanings, and Lamb was particularly alert to what he called ‘bivalent words’.⁴ Knowledge of these biographical details has directed us towards religious and moral interpretations as well as more literal bookbinding and bookselling ones, and also to detect an economico-political undertone that would have been apparent to a contemporary readership. We use the concept of communities of practice as defined by Jucker and Kopaczyk (2013: 6) (that is, a group of people, embedded in complex social relations, who “interact and share ways of doing things”) to track shifting senses of the phrase *neat-bound* within early nineteenth-century leather-working industries, and we also identify a social network of dissenters (of which Lamb was a part) in whose writings we discern multiple meanings of modifier *neat*.

The word *neat* collocated with positive terms in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, although this started to shift in the twentieth, collocating with words such as *respectable*, *fastidious*, *prim*, *prissy* (Lamb’s word for this state was *finical*), lending it (in context) a potentially slightly pejorative force.⁵ This development postdates Lamb’s usage of 1822; in his day the word had positive connotations. Our method has been to search databases of eighteenth and early nineteenth century writings, as well as Lamb’s own oeuvre, and then to seek out letters written by people known to Lamb. Our purpose is not to cover the whole semantic field governed by *neat* as that task has already been completed by the *Oxford English Dictionary*; rather, we are concerned to discover interlocking uses of *strong* and *neat* in order to understand what might have motivated Lamb to conjoin them in his dictum. Accordingly we consider collocations of *strong* and *neat* in contexts that Lamb could have seen, and in particular, we draw attention to an accountancy textbook that he would almost certainly have studied carefully.

³ Lamb’s father had been a Quaker and in 1797 he too had considered joining (Burness 1986: 148–149) (Quakers refer to themselves as The Society of Friends). Biographical details are taken from Lamb, Charles, (1775–1834), Peter Swaab <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/15912>, unless specified otherwise.

⁴ The bandying of puns was both “a characteristic mode of expression” and “a common and collaborative pursuit among the *London Magazine*’s contributors” (Lodge 2007: 146, 151). His own surname is a case in point. Lambs are themselves ‘neat-bound’ (that is, they are bound neatly in an outer surface that can be turned into leather for book-binding), adding an extra dimension to the desideratum.

⁵ E.g., “She was a small, neat, rather prissy-looking girl with primly smooth brown hair and rimless glasses.” Raymond Chandler, *The Little Sister* (1949).

2. The *London Magazine*

Lamb published his article on the binding of books in the *London Magazine* where he was briefly a staff writer. Magazines target specific readerships, and because the *London Magazine's* habitual contributors were involved in a joint enterprise, and met to engage in shared practices – in particular, a repertoire of themes – they can be considered communities of practice.⁶ The *London Magazine* ran from 1732–1785, and then again from 1820–1829, when it was revived in order to rival the elitist Tory *Blackwood's Magazine* by having a middle-class (and as will be apparent below, a working-class) appeal. The *London Magazine* presented a miscellany of writings designed to convey the energy and diversity of metropolitan life, with contents ranging from literary pieces, essays and reviews, to travel writing, reports from foreign correspondents, as well as columns on agriculture and commerce, including reports on bankruptcies and the markets. The 1820–1829 issues published literature by Wordsworth, Keats, Clare, Hazlitt, Percy Bysshe and Mary Shelley, Carlyle, and de Quincey. In particular, the *London Magazine* championed “peasant poet” John Clare and “Cockney Keats” against the background of a vicious class-based culture war with its arch-rival Blackwood's (de Montluzin 1998; see also Bauer 1953), in which Leigh Hunt, Hazlitt, and Keats were personally targeted. Who was the readership? According to Hull (2010: 14) the *London Magazine* was aimed at “an average figure: a reasonably well-read ... suburbanite with moderate political opinions and who enjoys, in moderation, the pleasures of the metropolis, a clerk, probably, with the usual aspirations but also the guilt of his class”.

3. Strong-backed and neat-bound

We begin by presenting Lamb's phrase ‘neat-bound’ in its fuller context, as there are interconnected metaphors, and readers of a specific social class are invoked. At this date, new books were usually bought unbound and with pages uncut, and the purchaser would take them to the binders and choose from an array of different bindings at different costs, half-bound being cheaper (leather at the spine or ‘back’ with board covers):

I confess that it moves my spleen to see these *things in books' clothing* perched upon shelves, like false saints, usurpers of true shrines, intruders into the sanctuary, thrusting out the legitimate occupants. To reach down a well-bound semblance of a volume, and hope it is some kind-hearted play-book, then, opening what “seem its leaves,” to come bolt upon a withering Population

⁶ See Wenger (1998) and Meyerhoff (2002) for a discussion of the criteria underlying communities of practice. On Lamb's privileged position within the *London Magazine* circle, see Hull (2010: 2).

Essay. To expect a Steele, or a Farquhar, and find – Adam Smith. To view a well-arranged assortment of blockheaded Encyclopaedias (Anglicanas or Metropolitanas) set out in an array of Russia, or Morocco, when a tythe of that good leather would comfortably re-clothe my shivering folios; would renovate Paracelsus himself, and enable old Raymund Lully – I have them both, reader – to look like himself again in the world. I never see these impostors, but I long to strip them, to warm my ragged veterans in their spoils.

To be strong-backed and neat-bound is the desideratum of a volume. Magnificence comes after. This, when it can be afforded, is not to be lavished upon all kinds of books indiscriminately. I would not dress a set of Magazines, for instance, in full suit. The dishabille, or half-binding (with Russia backs ever) is *our* costume. A Shakespeare - you cannot make a *pet* book of an author whom everybody reads - or a Milton (unless the first editions), it were mere foppery to trick out in gay apparel. The possession of them confers no distinction. The exterior of them (the things themselves being so common), strange to say, raises no sweet emotions, no tickling sense of property in the owner. Thomson's Seasons, again, looks best (I maintain it) a little torn, and dog's-eared. How beautiful to a genuine lover of reading are the sullied leaves, and worn out appearance, nay, the very odour (beyond Russia), if we would not forget kind feelings in fastidiousness, of an old "Circulating Library" Tom Jones, or Vicar of Wakefield! How they speak of the thousand thumbs, that have turned over their pages with delight!—of the lone sempstress, whom they may have cheered (milliner, or harder-working mantua-maker) after her long day's needle-toil, running far into midnight, when she has snatched an hour, ill spared from sleep, to steep her cares, as in some Lethean cup, in spelling out their enchanting contents! Who would have them a whit less soiled?

What better condition could we desire to see them in?

In some respects the better a book is, the less it demands from binding. Fielding, Smollet, Sterne, and all that class of perpetually self-reproductive volumes—Great Nature's Stereotypes—we see them individually perish with less regret, because we know the copies of them to be "eterne." But where a book is at once both good and rare—where the individual is almost the species, and when *that* perishes,

We know not where is that Promethean torch

That can its light relumine—

such a book, for instance, as the Life of the Duke of Newcastle, by his Duchess—no casket is rich enough, no casing sufficiently durable, to honour and keep safe such a jewel.⁷ (Charles Lamb. July 1822. *London Magazine* 6/31. 33–36)

⁷ Sir Richard Steele (a1672–1729), playwright and co-founder with Joseph Addison of *The Tatler*.
 George Farquhar (1677–1707), playwright.
 Thomas Robert Malthus, 1798, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*.
 Adam Smith (1723–1790), philosopher and economist.
Encyclopaedia Anglicana, an allusion to the *English Encyclopaedia*, 1802, ed. George Kearsley.
Encyclopaedia Metropolitana, 1817–1845, ed. Samuel Taylor Coleridge.
 Paracelsus (1493/4–1541), physician, alchemist and astrologer.
 Raymond Lully (Ramon Llull, c1232–c1315), philosopher and theologian.

Amongst other metaphor domains, we draw attention to religion (saints, shrine, sanctuary, tithe) and dress (clothing, array, strip, re-clothe, ragged, dress, suit, dishabille, costume, foppery, apparel), to the trope of right and wrong (false, true, usurpers, intruders, legitimate, semblance, impostors), and to the specification of one kind of reader: the seamstress. Lamb shows an intimate familiarity with the hours, days and nights of London milliners and mantua-makers who borrowed books from circulating libraries, and he knows the difference between them in terms of their working conditions. The model for the reader in question is likely to have been his sister, who spent eleven years of her life as a needle-worker.⁸ Lamb himself spent thirty-three years working as an accounts clerk for the East India Company, scraping his money together to buy his books. A friend remarked that Lamb owned “the finest collection of shabby books I ever saw; such a number of first-rate works of genius, but filthy copies, which a delicate man would really hesitate touching” (cited in Lucas 1907 [1905]: 2, 121). To the reading public, “Elia” (Lamb’s pseudonym and dramatic persona) was a literary figure aligned with Coleridge, Wordsworth, Southey, Hazlitt, Keats, De Quincey and all the other literary authors with whom Lamb socialised.⁹ But in private life, Lamb worked long hours at his day job (an “understrapper at a desk”), earned little, and spent his leisure time caring for his sister Mary who suffered fragile mental health.¹⁰

As well as a real-life reflection of how books were obtained and by whom they were read, there is a striking corporeality in Lamb’s evocation of the book. Lamb imagines a vindication of the vanquished after a battle of the books, a division of spoils that would allow him to re-clothe and warm his shivering and ragged veterans with a tenth of the expensive leather taken up by a row of encyclopaedias. The force of the passage is to invite a reading of ‘neat-bound’ as a desideratum that necessarily involves the ‘books’ clothing’, that is to say, the material rather than the manner of their binding. Such a reading is reinforced by the use of ‘dishabille’,

James Thomson (1700–1748), poet, author of *The Seasons*, 1726–1730.

Henry Fielding (1707–1754), author of novel *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling*, 1749.

Oliver Goldsmith (1728–1774), author of novel *The Vicar of Wakefield*, 1766.

Tobias Smollett (1721–1771), novelist.

Laurence Sterne (1713–1768), novelist.

Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle. 1675. *The Life of the Thrice Noble, High and Puissant Prince, William Cavendish, Duke, Marquess, and Earl of Newcastle, etc.* London: A. Maxwell.

⁸ Mary Lamb. 1 April 1815. On needle-work. *British Lady’s Magazine and Monthly Miscellany*.

⁹ For an account of the literary coterie to which Lamb belonged and its influence on the history of English, see Pratt & Denison (2000).

¹⁰ Charles Lamb. 1811. The good clerk, a character; with some account of the complete English tradesman. *The Reflector* 2/4: 432–437.

a state of half-dress, to describe half-binding with Russia leather, which had an odour that some found unpleasant (and was cheaper than Morocco).

3.1. *Neat* meaning ‘tidy’

The present-day meaning of *neat* is predominantly ‘tidy’ and that meaning is operative in Lamb’s phrase *neat-bound*, but further meanings are also implicit:

About the middle of Shoemaker-row, near to Broadway, Blackfriars, there resided for many years a substantial hardware-man, named Ephraim Wagstaff. He was short in stature, tolerably well favoured in countenance, and singularly neat and clean in his attire.

(Charles Lamb. 1827. *Mr. Ephraim Wagstaff, his Wife, and Pipe*.
In Hone (ed). 1827: ii, col. 185)

The earliest sense of *neat*, *adj.* from Anglo-Norman *net* ‘clean’, is ‘characterised by an elegance ... agreeable ... finely made ... well-formed’ (*OED neat*, *adj.* (*n.*² and *int.*) and *adv.* A. ‘Senses relating to elegance’ *adj.* (*n.*² and *int.*) I. 1. a.), with the sense ‘clean and tidy’ attested from 1594 (A. *adj.* (*n.*² and *int.*) I. 4. a.). This is the predominant meaning now, but *neat* meaning ‘skilful’ is attested slightly earlier:

3.2. *Neat* meaning ‘skilful’

Ketch, my good fellow, you have a neat hand. Prithee, adjust this new collar to my neck, gingerly. I am not used to these wooden cravats. There, softly, softly. That seems the exact point between ornament and strangulation.

(Charles Lamb. 1825. Reflections in the pillory. *London Magazine*)

OED neat, *adj.* (*n.*² and *int.*) and *adv.* A. I. 3. a. ‘Exhibiting skill and precision in action or expression.’ *Obs.* First attestation 1571.

3.3. *Neat* meaning ‘unadorned, simple, plain’

Nor speak I of the hard-handed Artisan, who on this night receives the pittance which is to furnish the neat Sabbatical dinner

(Charles Lamb. 1830. Saturday Night. *The Gem, A Literary Annual.*)

OED neat, *adj.* (*n.*² and *int.*) and *adv.* A. I. , also has senses of ‘freedom from unnecessary embellishments, simple’: “In early use the handsomeness of the thing appears to be the more prominent idea; later the notions of simple elegance or regularity of form predominate”. There was a proverbial use contrasting *neat* with over-decorated: A. *adj.* (*n.*² and *int.*) I. 1. c. ‘neat (but) not gaudy’, first attested in 1700, with *OED*’s second attestation by Lamb in 1806: “A little thin flowery border

round, neat not gaudy” (in reference to a card he had designed). Here Lamb used *neat* in contradistinction to showiness – which fits with his sentiment about it being mere foppery to trick out easily-available books in gay apparel, and also with his nonconformist outlook. Unitarians in particular were rational, and although not a professed Unitarian, Lamb’s biographer Swaab speaks of his “enthusiasm for Unitarianism, especially that of Joseph Priestley”. Lamb’s opinion on bookbinding quoted above conveys a differentiating between rare books of valuable content on which he was willing to spend money and the ownership of which conferred distinction, as opposed to non-rare books of valuable content, the ownership of which conferred no distinction as they were popular and easily available and on which he felt there was no need to lavish resources. It is a rational, if unusual, distinction, born of a need to scrupulously apportion every penny. Making a virtue of necessity, only the rarest books merited non-simple bindings.

OED has more illustrations from Lamb under further subdivisions, but for the present purposes they do not warrant separate categories:

3.4. *Neat* meaning ‘clear and to the point’

May day, with that sweetness which is peculiar to her, in a neat speech proposing the health of the founder, crowned her goblet (and by her example the rest of the company) with garlands.

(Charles Lamb. January 1823. Rejoicings upon the New Year’s Coming of Age. *London Magazine*.)

OED neat, adj. (n.² and int.) and adv. A. I. 3. b.

3.5. *Neat* cookery meaning ‘choice’

Quoting Milton:

‘What neat repast shall feast us, light and choice’

(Charles Lamb. *Letter to Mr Manning*)

OED neat, adj. (n.² and int.) and adv. A. I. 3. d.

We disagree that *neat* means ‘concise’ and ‘choice’ in these contexts – or rather, that this is all that it means, because Lamb’s alertness to polysemy precludes precision in the identification of sub-senses. We subsume the nuances of both the concise May day speech and the springtime repast under the meaning ‘simple, unadorned’, and the purpose of including them here is not taxonomy but to note Lamb’s ‘simple, unadorned’ use of adjectival *neat*.¹¹ *Neat* modifying the artisan’s

¹¹ The Milton quotation is from Sonnet 20, referencing plenitude in the spring countryside.

dinner, the springtime repast and May day's speech shows Lamb equating simple, plain food with simple, plain language.

3.6. *Neat-bound*

The adjective *neat-bound* is included as a lemma under *OED* *neat*, *adj.* (*n.*² and *int.*) and *adv.* 'Special uses' S2. Adverbial. *neat-bound adj.*, where the first attestation is Lamb's 'neat-bound' of 1822 but no separate definition is provided. The adverbial senses are supplied by *OED* headword *neatly*, *adv.* 2 "Adroitly, skilfully; cleverly, dexterously", first attested *a*1547, and *adv.* 3. "So as to present a neat appearance or produce an elegant or tidy effect; in a nicely finished way", first attested 1577 (the earliest usage meant 'pithily' and is therefore not relevant to an inanimate book cover). A book cover could be skilfully bound, and it certainly rendered the unclad book tidy, as unbound books are fragile and shed paper fragments.

3.7. *Neat* meaning 'cattle'

Mr Herod says he kept two milch cows and ten head of neat stock this season, in his yard

(*The London Magazine* 3. January-June 1821. 342.)

The bringing-up of Urania had been among country hinds and lasses; to tend her flocks or superintend her neat dairy had been the extent of her breeding.

(Charles Lamb. December 1858. *Cupid's Revenge*. *Harper's Magazine*.)¹²

OED *neat*, *n.*¹ 'bovine animal' had largely been replaced by 'cow, ox, cattle' in London by Lamb's time, except in the semantic fields of food and leather-working – and given that leather was used in bookbinding, it might be supposed that a neat-bound volume was therefore also a cowskin-bound one. Under *OED* *neat*, *n.*¹ C1.a., *neat leather* is last attested in 1883 and so was still in use in Lamb's lifetime. There is an attestation of *neat-hide* in 1977, and *neat's foot oil* is still sold. Neat's foot oil is used for softening leather for all sorts of uses, including bookbinding, and was also used medicinally for skin conditions and aching joints. It was easily available in London:

James Siddall, Oil-Man and Coal-Merchant; at (No.10.) in Honey-Lane Market, London: Sells Wholesale and Retail, at the lowest Prices, viz. Oils, Fine Lucca, Florence, Olive, Chamber, Linseed, Neatsfoot, Turpentine, Rape, Seal (Tradecard. 18th century. *London Metropolitan Archives*)

¹² Lamb's predilection for 'bivalent words' prompts citation of this quotation, where the primary meaning of *neat* is 'tidy, agreeable'.

Neat in the sense of 'cow' was also visible in shop-signs, including this one not far from the Unitarian chapel in Essex Street, off the Strand:

John Lyde & Co., at the Three Neat's Tongues, opposite Charles Street, in the Strand.

(Tradecard. 1768–1823. *London Metropolitan Archives*)

And as an epicure who at the same time needed to be careful with money, Lamb is likely to have known neat's-tongues and neat's feet.¹³

I went to the pastry-cook's, and got a gible-pye and a neat's-tongue, and we had our supper, and three or four pots of half-and-half, and four or five half pints of gin; then he would have another pot of twopenny hot

OldBaileyOnline (OBO), t17661217–56, 1766

I lost a neat's tongue, and caught the prisoner with it; it is here; it is the same tongue that was taken from him; he was about ten doors from my shop; the prisoner came in to me to ask for gun-powder; he went out; and going out he cut the strings of the tongues, and took this tongue with him; I did not see him cut it.

OBO, t17900526–61, 1790

I keep a tripe shop in Barbican. On Tuesday the 23rd of May, the prisoner came to my shop to buy a neat's foot

OBO, t18150621–47, 1815

In literature, Lamb would have been acquainted with silence as commendable only in a 'neat's tongue dried' (Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* 1.1.111–12) and also the Elizabethan catch-phrase 'as/that ever trod upon neat's leather' (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* 1.1.25–6; *The Tempest*, 2. 2. 69, and see also Dent 1984: 495). The year before Lamb's 'strong-backed and neat-bound' dictum was published, Walter Scott had also used 'neat's leather' in *Kenilworth*, a novel Lamb professed to admire.¹⁴

Interpreting *neat-bound* as 'bound in calfskin' would preserve lexical cohesion with *Morocco*, *Russia* and *leather*. *Morocco* was leather imported to Europe from Morocco, *Russia* leather was leather treated with oil distilled from birchbark. *OED* has attestations of *Russia-bound* from 1808, first attested in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, to which Lamb was a contributor (*Russia*, n. I. 6. c.); and *Morocco-bound* (*Morocco*, *adj.* and n. C1. b., although postdating 1822). The

¹³ Recipes for the preparation of neat's tongue feature in a number of contemporary cookbooks: e.g., Simpson (1806), Millington (1810), Mrs. Smith (1810), Kitchiner (1817). The Lambs' strongly carnivorous eating habits are discussed by Balle (2009).

¹⁴ Scott (1821: Chapter 8): "for women, though they wear not swords, are occasion for many a blade's exchanging a sheath of neat's leather for one of flesh and blood".

question then arises as to whether by *neat-bound* Lamb exclusively meant ‘calfskin-bound’, as opposed to sheepskin or goatskin, as in the finest Morocco binding; that is, was his phrase a technical restrictive usage from the realm of bookbinding? A search of booksellers’ catalogues in the *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (ECCO) database reveals that this is unlikely. There are 22 tokens of *neat bound*, 16 tokens of *neatly bound*, and one token of *neat half bound*. A search of the *17th–18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers* shows that *neatly bound* predates *neat bound*.¹⁵ Of the 22 *neat bound* tokens in the ECCO database, three are modified by *very* and so cannot mean ‘calfskin’: “new and very neat”, “2 vol. very neat”, “very neat, bound in red Morocco”. Of the remaining 19 tokens, another five are explicitly Russia or Morocco leather: “neat, bound in Russia leather”, “neat, bound in Russia”, “fair and neat, bound in Morocco leather”, “neat, bound in Morocco leather” x 2. Two tokens are explicitly calfskin, which would be tautologous if *neat* primarily meant ‘calfskin’: “neat bound in Calf” x 2, and two more can be excluded as belonging to separate clauses: “neat, bound together” x 2. The remaining ten tokens appear to mean ‘bound in fair condition’: “2 vol. neat bound very scarce”, “Neat bound in black, and edg’d with shining Gold”, “our neat bound Duodecimos”, “a neat bound book”, “3 vol. neat bound”, “neat bound and gilt”, “price neat bound 18s”. Of the 38 hits in the *17th–18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers*, 26 are *neatly bound*, and of the remaining twelve tokens of *neat bound*, three refer to shoes. Like bookbinding, this is another ambiguous domain where *neat* could be either a noun, ‘bovine animal’, or a gradable modifier able to take bound morphemes (*very neat*, *fair and neat*, *neatly*), ‘(very) elegant’:

1780 Men’s best London leg boots, 18s to 1l. 1s. Ditto strong and neat calf-skin shoes, 5s. 0d. Ditto small sizes, 4s. 9d. Ditto very neat, bound, 5s. 3d., Ditto exceeding strong, cow-leather, 5s. 0d. Ditto very large sizes 5s. 3d. Boys, girls, and children’s, proportionately cheap. Children’s morocco, all colours and sizes. Morocco skins sold on the lowest terms.

(*Adam’s Weekly Courant*. 11 April 1780. *17th–18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers*)

We note the collocation in “strong and neat calf-skin shoes”. Returning to the nine remaining tokens of *neat bound* in the *17th–18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers*, again, they carry the same semantic weight as *neatly bound*: “a collection of neat bound books, displayed so as to have a pleasing appearance”,

¹⁵ *Neatly bound* first attestation 1714; *neat bound* first attestation 1766, although not in the context of books: “neat bound shoes and pumps 4s. 9d. plain ditto 4s. 3d.”; first attestation in the context of bookbinding 1767 (*Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, 29 January 1766, *17th–18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers*).

“about 150 volumes of neat bound books”, “neat bound in red leather”. An advertisement in *The Star* of 14 and 28 January 1796 would seem to have a usage that explains them all: “Price 9s. in Boards, or 10s. 6d. neat bound.”; where *neat bound* and *neatly bound* indicated that the book was leather-covered in contradistinction to boards, which were not. However, *bound* was doing the semantic work here, as catalogues routinely advertised *neat* and *very neat* books, meaning that neat was, or also was, a gradable condition, so that meanings of ‘leather’ and ‘good condition’ intersected in this domain. We conclude that although the phrase *neat-bound* collocated with booksellers’ catalogues and with no other text-type outside the leather industry and so did have a technical meaning within the trade, it did not primarily carry the meaning of ‘calf-leather’, ‘calf-hide’, in that context.

3.8. Strong and *neat*

We return to the strong and neat shoes advertised in 1780. A search of the *British Library Newspapers* database for the years 1800–1822 reveals, as well as a further advertisement for neat bound shoes, a technical domain not yet mentioned, that of second-hand coaches:

1802 The Gig and Harness are almost new, having only been one journey of one hundred miles; is very strong and neat

1803 GIG and HARNESS to be SOLD. – The Gig is strong and neat, made within these three months, blue lining, boxes, &c.

1807 A SECOND-HAND CHAISE. – To be SOLD. a good strong and neat CHAISE, with a head to take off and on, made by one of the first Manufacturers.

1817 the Chaise is very strong and neat, Harness nearly new.

(*British Library Newspapers*)

Bookbindings, shoes and second-hand coaches were all made of leather.¹⁶ We conclude that the phrase *strong and neat* circulated within communities of practice of sellers of worked leather during Lamb’s lifetime. Despite searching, we have been unable to find it in any other professional or social domain. However newspaper readers would have been familiar with it as they would have repeatedly seen the juxtaposition in advertisements, even if they were not themselves purchasers of coaches, books, or shoes.

¹⁶ For the components of coaches, see Felton (1796: 35): “the stuffing on the inside of bodies, and the covering with leather on the outside, are not to be mentioned hereafter; that matter ... will be included in the price”.

3.9. *Neat* meaning ‘pure’

Neat adj. has another sense which when used metaphorically, imparts a moral, virtuous sense:

OED neat, *adj.* (*n.*² and *int.*) and *adv.* A. II. 7. a. ‘Clean; free from dirt or impurities’ and 8. a. ‘Of alcoholic liquors: pure; unadulterated; *spec.* not mixed with water’. The *Old Bailey Online* database provides attestations:

- 1732 for too gallins neat brandy 0 18 0 t17321206–28
- 1796 I examined the bag, and found it neat sugars, except about half-a-pound
of scrapings mixed with it in the bag t17961026–18
- 1805 I have sent her bottles of neat milk from the cow to do her good
t18050109–29

The ‘unmixed’ sense is included under headword ‘NEAT. adj.’ in Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* (1773): “1. Elegant, but without dignity, 2. Cleanly, 3. Pure; unadulterated; unmingled: now used only in the cant of trade.” We note Johnson’s comment about the commercial pragmatics of *neat*. The expression ‘neat as imported’ arose in the context of blending in the wine trade:

Since the early eighteenth century, wine had been advertised as ‘neat as imported’, to indicate that the importer had not blended the wine when it was received. Blending could be legitimate (port, after all, is a blend of wine and spirits), but the distinction between blending and adulteration was often a fine one. The claim ‘neat as imported’, occurring repeatedly in eighteenth-century advertisements, suggests that customers preferred wine merchants to leave what they received alone. (Duguid 2010: 149)¹⁷

The reviewer of Southey’s poem *A Tale of Paraguay* in *The London Magazine* for October, 1825, observes: “He gives the tale to us, as the publicans say, “neat as imported”, plainly assuring the reader that it is so singular, so simple, and withal so complete that it must have been injured by any alteration.” Leigh Hunt used the phrase in his description of Lamb’s own library:

¹⁷ Duguid cites Defoe, himself a former wine importer: “Infinite Frauds and Cheats of the Wine-Trade will be discover’d, and I hope for the future, prevented; for if once we can come to a usage of drinking our Wines neat as they come from the Country where they grow, all the vile Practices of Brewing and Mixing Wines, either by the Vintners or Merchants, will die of Course” (quoted from Duguid 2010: 207).

It looks like what it is, a selection made at precious intervals from the book-stalls; — now a Chaucer at nine and two-pence; now a Montaigne or a Sir Thomas Browne at two shillings; now a Jeremy Taylor; a Spinoza; an old English Dramatist, Prior, and Sir Philip Sidney; and the books are “neat as imported.” The very perusal of the backs is a “discipline of humanity.” There Mr. Southey takes his place again with an old Radical friend: there Jeremy Collier is at peace with Dryden: there the lion, Martin Luther, lies down with the Quaker lamb, Sewell; there Guzman d’Alfarache thinks himself fit company for Sir Charles Grandison, and has his claims admitted. Even the “high fantastical” Duchess of Newcastle, with her laurel on her head, is received with grave honours, and not the less for declining to trouble herself with the constitutions of her maids.

(Hunt 1823: 1–6, 17–22)

Hunt had certainly read Lamb’s essay “Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading” in which ‘strong-backed and neat-bound’ appeared, and so the near proximity in the passage of *neat* and *backs* may invoke Lamb’s desideratum as well as his well-known love of wine.¹⁸



Tradecard, HFM/7/9, Archive, C. Hoare & Co. The authors thank C. Hoare & Co. for permission to reproduce the image.

¹⁸ See Lamb’s “Confessions of a drunkard”. January 1813. *The Philanthropist* 9: 48–54.

3.10. *Neat* meaning ‘free from reductions’

Lamb left school at fifteen in 1791 and worked firstly as a secretary for a businessman, Joseph Paice, who allowed him to use his library, and then at the South Sea House. In the Spring of 1792 he joined the East India Company, where he worked until aged fifty as a clerk in the accounts department. There was a usage of the word *neat*, obsolete now but prevalent then, that he would have routinely met during his working day. The *Old Bailey Online* database shows twenty tokens of *neat* meaning ‘remaining after all necessary deductions have been made’: *OED neat*, *adj.* (*n.*² and *int.*) and *adv.* A. II. 10 a. ‘free from any reductions’.

1743	12 s. and 7 d. was the neat Produce of them	t17430223–26
1744	There was 18 l. 5 s. 7 d. due, neat wages	t17440510–28
1750	this is not the neat weight, this is what we call the water side weight	t17501205–58
1752	He had neat money of me, 4 guineas and a half	t17520625–47
1799	That is the neat value of it	t17990109–45

This is *neat* as a technical accounting term that had spread into wider usage. Lamb is known today for his literary achievements, but his working life for the East India Company was also spent writing, and in order to serve his masters he must have received early training:

But, in order to write *well*, there must be just Rules given, and much Practice to put ‘em in Execution. Plain, Strong, and Neat *Writing*, as it best answers the Design for Use and Beauty; so it has most obtain’d among Men of *Business*; with whom all *affected* Flourishes, and quaint Devices of Birds and Bull-Beggars, are as much avoided, as Capering and Cutting in ordinary Walking.

(Watts 1716: 17)¹⁹

Thomas Watts’ *An Essay on the Proper Method for Forming the Man of Business* went into at least four editions over the eighteenth century. It was an accounting textbook for young men training to become merchant’s clerks. In 1715 Watts opened an influential academy for the training of such clerks (Edwards 2011), with boarders put up in a house previously owned by the Governor of the East India Company (Hans 1966 [1951]: 83). Lamb is almost certain to have studied this book in his capacity as accounts clerk. We interpret the meaning of *strong* in the context of penmanship as *OED strong*, *adj.* 22. c. “Of a line: broad, thick,

¹⁹ Watts, Thomas (d. 1742), Ruth Wallis, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/47146>. We have been unable to discover his religion. A bull-beggar was a spectre, bogey, or object of groundless terror; *OED* bull-beggar, *n.*

prominent", and *plain* and *neat* as near-synonyms. The collocates show that meanings of 'free from adornment', 'unaffected' and 'simple' were foregrounded, as in the neat Sabbatical dinner of Lamb's hard-handed artisan and May day's speech. In his published letters, Lamb repeatedly used *neat* to qualify penmanship, overlapping meanings of 'skilful, adroit', 'elegant', 'tidy', and 'plain, simple'. Here are a handful taken from Johnson's (1892) edition:

To Manning, August, 1800: "Manning's Algebra, with a neat manuscriptum in the blank leaf"

To Richard Wroughton, June, 1806: "I'll have in capitals; the rest in a neat Italian hand"

To Miss Hutchinson, April, 1823: "which spoils the neatest epistle"

To J. B. Dibdin, June, 1826: "pleasure at seeing your old neat hand, nine parts gentlemanly, with a modest dash of the clerical"

And from Talfourd's (1849) edition:

To Bernard Barton (the Quaker poet), March, 1823: "I am ashamed of the shabby letters I send, but I am by nature anything but neat. Therein my mother bore me no Quaker."

3.11. *Neat* in Quaker usage

There is a moral force to Watts' stricture that plain, strong and neat writing best answers, in contradistinction to the quaint flourishes and devices Watts branded as affected. "*Plainness* requires the sacrifice of quaintness and exclusiveness to clarity and *simple truth*" (Tibbals 1926: 208). The italics are Tibbals' and signal specific Quaker usages.²⁰ To examine this moral force we now move to Lamb's wider social network. He is primarily known nowadays for his friendships with famous literary authors Coleridge, Wordsworth, Hazlitt, De Quincey, Southey, but he was also part of a religious dissenting network via these friendships. Our method here has been to identify relevant individuals from various biographies of Lamb and then to search their letters (where they exist) for tokens of adjectival *neat*. We begin with Lamb's friend the Quaker poet Charles Lloyd

²⁰ For Quakers, *plain* and *quaint* were antonyms (*OED* *quaint*, *adj.*, *adv.*, and *n.*² *A. adj.* I. 'Cunning, ingenious; elaborate, elegant'. *C. n.*² 1. 'A curious or clever ornament or device. Also: a cunning trick').

(1775–1839), who included Lamb’s poem *The Grandam* in a book of his own verse in 1796, with further joint publications between them in 1797 and 1798.²¹

Lloyd was the eldest son of the Quaker banking philanthropist also named Charles Lloyd (1748–1828). Lloyd *fils* preferred poetry to the banking concerns of Lloyd *père* and on meeting Coleridge, paid him to come and stay – in a relationship that might be characterised today as close mentoring. A friendship developed between the two with Coleridge and his wife lodging with Lloyd *fils* and introducing him to their friends (although later in life Coleridge and Lloyd were to quarrel). Lloyd was thus brought into Lamb’s social ambit, Lamb and Coleridge being old schoolfriends. Lloyd’s Aunt Rachel was married to the Quaker banker and brewer David Barclay (Courtney 1984 [1982]: 182; Gilbert 1951: 8).²² Barclay was an abolitionist, in regular correspondence with Philadelphian Quaker abolitionists John Pemberton (1727–1795), President of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, and Anthony Benezet (1713–1784), abolitionist, teacher of girls and black people, and author.²³ Benezet was an influential pamphleteer and some of his correspondence with Barclay and Pemberton was published during Lamb’s lifetime, from which we select: “some plain lectures on anatomy ... a plain simple way of life ... should be copied in a neat bound book” (quoted from Vaux’s edition of Benezet’s letters (1817: 17–18)). We do not assume that Lamb read Benezet’s letters and directly lifted his *neat bound* collocation therefrom, neither do we infer that Lamb necessarily conversed with his friend’s uncle’s correspondent; rather, our purpose is to show how the polysemy implicit in *neat bound* appealed to dissenters prior to Lamb: tidy, skilful, adroit, but also pure, plain and simple. The neat bound book for copying anatomy lecture-notes is both business-like and also morally sound.

Thus, for Quakers, *adroit* and *simple* were not antonyms; *simple* was a term of approbation. Comfort (1933: 13) explains Quaker usage of adjectives *plain*, *solid*, *weighty*: *a plain Friend*: “one who sticks fairly closely to the old traditions”; *a solid Friend*, *a weighty Friend*: “a Friend whose opinion is respected”; *to feel the weight of the meeting*: “to get the judgment of the solid or weighty Friends”. *Neat* does not figure in any discussion of Quaker speech that we can find, but this does not signify in that *neat*’s polysemy would have been apparent to nineteenth century readers,

²¹ Lloyd, Charles, (1775–1839), Richard Garnett, revised by Geoffrey Carnall, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/16823>. In his clothing, Lamb was invariably unostentatious. Leigh Hunt recalled that the young Lamb “dressed with a Quakerlike plainness” (1949 [1850]: 102). Lamb himself declared in *Old China* that “neat black clothes” replaced threadbare garments after he recovered from the poverty incurred by his book-buying (Talfourd (ed). 1855: 261, 267).

²² Barclay, David, (1729–1809), Jacob M. Price, revised by Leslie Hannah, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/37150>.

²³ Benezet, Anthony [formerly Antoine], (1713–1784), Carla Gerona, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/2091>.

whereas the multiple meanings of modifiers such as *weighty* discussed in, e.g., Tibbals (1926) and Comfort (1933) were less transparent to non-Quakers. But it is not Quakers in general that we are interested in so much as specific Quakers known to Lamb in either a literary or personal capacity.

Who, then, did Lamb read or talk to? Lloyd gave Lamb a copy of the journal of Quaker minister John Woolman: "Writing in the early nineteenth century Charles Lamb said that Woolman's *Journal* was 'the only American book' he had ever read twice, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge despaired of the man 'who could peruse the life of John Woolman without an amelioration of heart'" (ODNB: 2).²⁴ Anti-slavery campaigner, proto-animal rights advocate, proto-environmentalist, accountant and tailor, John Woolman (1720–1772) was an influential American Quaker who travelled to London and elsewhere. Benezet quoted Woolman's writings and sent copies of his essays to government officials in England (Moulton 1971: 6). Turning to Woolman's *Journal* we find (apropos of Nantucket fishermen's wives):

I was concerned to Speak with the Women Friends, in their monthly meeting of business, many being present; and in the fresh spring of pure Love, to Open before them the Advantage, both inward and outward, of Attending Singly to the pure guidance of the Holy Spirit, and therein to Educate their Children in true Humility, and the disuse of all Superfluities. Reminding them of the Difficulties their Husbands and Sons were frequently Exposed to at Sea, and that the more plain and simple their way of living was, the less need of Runing great Hazards to Support them in it; Encouraging the young Women in their neat, decent way of attending themselves on the Affairs of the house.

(Woolman 1760: VII, quoted from Gummere (ed.), 1922: 240)

Modifiers here are *fresh, pure, pure, true, plain, simple, great, young, neat, decent*. In Quaker usage, *pure, true, plain, simple, neat* and *decent* overlapped semantically. In May 1826 Lamb wrote to his friend Bernard Barton:

Dear B. B., - I have had no spirits lately to begin a letter to you, though I am under obligations to you (how many!) for your neat little poem. 'Tis just what it professes to be, a simple tribute, in chaste verse, serious and sincere. I do not know how Friends will relish it, but we out-lyers, honorary friends, like it very well"

(Talfourd 1849: 330)

Lamb the accounts clerk used *neat* in the sense of 'skilful', 'adroit', 'well-formed' and Lamb the honorary Friend used it in all the approbatory Quaker senses too, metaphorically derived from business uses of 'pure, unadulterated, free from dirt, free from reductions.'

²⁴ Woolman, John (1720–1772), David Sox, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/29960>.

4. Conclusion

Neat bound, despite the Old English sense ‘cattle’ and the continuing currency of this sense in London in 1822 via comestibles neat’s tongues, neat’s feet, and neat’s foot oil, meant not specifically ‘calfskin-bound’ in the context of bookbinding but ‘bound in leather’. In the context of bookselling, (*very*) *neat (bound)* signaled ‘in (very) good condition’, and the two are not always distinguishable. *Strong and neat* occurred as a collocation within the leather-working trades of bookbinding, shoes, and coaches, and the phrase was readily visible to the newspaper-reading public in Lamb’s lifetime. *Plain, strong and neat* occurred in a seminal accounting text which Lamb is likely to have studied at a young age. In historical pragmatic terms, there is an intersection here of the fields of [trade and industry, subsection leather-workers, subsection salesforce] and [commerce, subsection book-keeping, subsection penmanship]. The moral overtones detectable in Watts’ textbook for young men learning the accountancy business are also identifiable in specific Quaker writing which Lamb is known to have read and approved of. Freedom from adornment – the theme of Lamb’s bookbinding desideratum as well as Watts’ penmanship desideratum – was a particular preoccupation within the Quaker discourse community, adding another historical pragmatic intersection: [religion, subsection dissenters, subsection Quakers].

In sum, we have set out to achieve informational maximalism, “the utilization of all reasonable means to extend our knowledge of what might have been going on in the past, even though it is not directly observable”.²⁵ We suggest that the combination ‘strong-backed and neat-bound’ resonated with Lamb due to a triangulation of bookbinders’ and booksellers’ terminology frequently met with in newspaper advertisements and familiar to the public through booksellers’ catalogues, an accountancy textbook familiar to him, and his Quaker network use of modifier *neat* to reflect a set of virtues (as Quakers saw them) having to do with lack of adornment.

There is a further resonance, which is that of the poorer classes who worked for their living as opposed to wealthy readers who could afford to have their books bound sumptuously in fine leather. Accountancy textbooks, bookbinding, stout shoes made for walking, second-hand coaches, and wine-importing all pertain to the domain of trade, commerce, and industry, evoked by Lamb’s Sabbath-dining, hard-handed artisan and his seamstress straining her eyes to read her worn-out library books by midnight candle. Although the Quakers known to Lamb and mentioned here were far from poor (Lloyd and Barclay were from families running banks that are still in business today), their sympathies were more aligned with the labouring than the ruling classes, with concomitant

²⁵ Janda & Joseph (2003: 37), cited in Nevelainan (2015: 263).

repudiation of costly, and thus unaffordable, luxury. The original *London Magazine* readership is likely to have been more sensitive to this social nuance than those who have repeated the 'strong-backed and neat-bound' desideratum over the intervening two centuries.

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