Jefferson's Literary Commonplace Book

Thomas Jefferson ; Douglas L Wilson

Thomas Jefferson. As a law student and young lawyer in the 1760s, Thomas Jefferson began writing abstracts of English common law reports. Even after abandoning his law practice, he continued to rely on his legal commonplace book to document the legal, historical, and philosophical reading that helped shape his new role as a statesman. Indeed, he made entries in the notebook in preparation for his mission to France, as president of the United States, and near the end of his life. This authoritative volume is the first to contain the complete text of Jefferson's notebook.
Commonplace books (or commonplaces) are a way to compile knowledge, usually by writing information into books. They have been kept from antiquity, and were kept particularly during the Renaissance and in the nineteenth century. Such books are essentially scrapbooks filled with items of every kind: recipes, quotes, letters, poems, tables of weights and measures, proverbs, prayers, legal formulas. Commonplaces are used by readers, writers, students, and scholars as an aid for remembering useful concepts.
A commonplace book helps readers to see the "unending conversation of ideas," a metaphor noted by the rhetorician Kenneth Burke. Reading lets us listen to the conversation of earlier speakers in this great "parlor conversation" of history. Selecting quotations and copying them allows us to reflect on what is important, what is eloquent. We develop an urge to respond. To make your own commonplace book, first decide whether you simply want to include words or if you want to include illustrations. If you have artistic sensibilities and want to use pictures or write in calligraphy or a special let