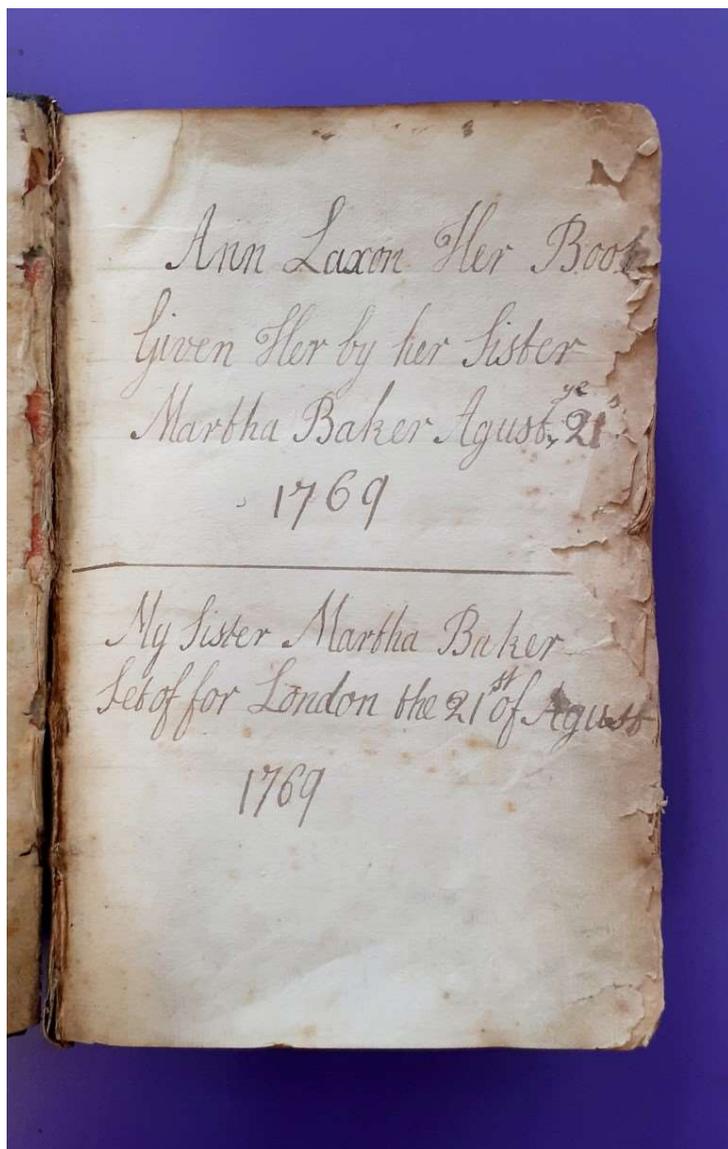


## Treasures from the Archives: a moment in the lives of two women, 21<sup>st</sup> August 1769



*A Practical Discourse Concerning A Future Judgement*, by [William Sherlock](#), was published 1692 (C H.2.20). But the really interesting thing about Westminster's copy of this book is an inscription on the first page – written 80 years later – which gives us a tiny glimpse into the life, not of William Sherlock, but of two unknown women in the eighteenth century.

**Ann Laxon writes that her sister, Martha Baker, has given her this book as a gift before setting off for London, on August 21<sup>st</sup> 1769.**

We don't know where Ann and Martha lived, or what they did; we don't know when they were born or died. We've got a total of 28 words about them, and about a third of those are repeated. And yet, written in the C18th, at a time when women's voices are less present in the historical record, this inscription is a tiny portrait of women's literacy, women's migration, and sisterly love.

Estimates of the numbers of C18th women who could read and write vary considerably (and there's an [interesting article by Eleanor Hubbard on how this is assessed](#)) – but we learn from this inscription that Ann can write. We can guess that Martha and Ann can perhaps

both read, as the gift is a book. We can see that they are rich enough to own a book; but that they have few enough books that a book is a suitable gift on an important occasion, like leaving home – and that being given a book is an occasion worth noting with an inscription.

We don't know how old they are, but they have different surnames, so we might assume that one or both of them is married – though there's no mention of any other family members, either going with Martha or staying with Ann. And we can also tell something about women's mobility within the population, because even though we don't know where they live, Martha is setting off to London, and Ann is staying behind.

But if, in the history of 1769, women's voices are heard less often, then perhaps the most important factor in this inscription is that this is Ann's own writing. The 28 words we have about her are the words she chose. And the ones she repeats – the words worth repeating – are Martha's name, and that they are sisters, and the date.

