
John Doble’s journal and letters are an uncommon collection of the writings of a gold miner. In addition to his insightful and detail-oriented account of his daily life in the early 1850s, this book includes the 1860-1865 courtship letters between Doble and a woman in Pennsylvania named Lizzie Lucas. These letters, combined with Doble’s daily journal of a decade earlier, create an excellent source for interdisciplinary researchers, particularly social and cultural historians, looking for material to mine.

This edition of Doble’s writings is a reprinting of the 1962 edition by Volcano Press of Amador County, where John Doble lived when he wrote much of what is in this book. Born in 1828 in Indiana, Doble served in the war with Mexico in 1846, then headed for California in 1851. We begin reading on October 27, 1851 as he leaves Indiana for New York City and steamer passage for Panama. Like many of us Doble decided to begin journal writing when he set out on a big adventure. Fortunately for us Doble continued to see his life as an adventure and he continued his writing. The journal ends on February 11, 1854.

The editor focuses on Doble’s writings as illuminating the Gold Rush days in this part of the Mother Lode, in keeping with the book’s original purpose as a piece of local history. Maps drawn by Charles Camp carefully situate the sites where Doble lived and worked. Doble emerges in his journal as a kind-hearted man who takes it on himself to care for the sick around him and raise subscriptions for them, while not being immune himself to gambling and drink.

Throughout, Doble is wheeling and dealing with everyone else; claims, cabins, supplies, labor and livestock are all fluid commodities traded interchangeably in the boom-town spirit. The language is not beautiful, and the interest in the journal comes from the accumulation of ordinary events over the years.

Treated as an interesting curiosity by the editor is the correspondence between Doble and Elizabeth E. Lucas, an “old maid” in Pennsylvania. The correspondence was arranged by Doble’s sister-in-law, a friend of Lucas, and Doble wrote a letter introducing himself on June 11, 1860. Lucas eventually married in 1865 and the correspondence ended soon after, with the correspondents never having met. Doble invested great energy into his letters to Lizzie, (an energy-level Lizzie didn’t return.) Courtship letters, love letters, romantic letters—whatever they may be the letters are the expression of Doble’s attempts to be kind, charming, smart, modest, and knowledgeable, all those things that this form of writing strives to be.

This extraordinary combination of journal and courtship letters by Doble demands work by researchers interested in the minds and thoughts of men and women like Doble and Lucas. For Doble, this book contains a rare combination of writing forms, a journal, where he constructs for himself links between his daily life and his social and cultural sphere, and courtship letters, where he constructs himself for a distant and largely imagined Lizzie.

Doble eventually left the Sierra foothills and joined his brother at his iron works in San Francisco. On October 9, 1866, in his San Francisco rooming house, Doble fell asleep with his pipe in his mouth. Cause of death, apoplexy.

Andrew Johnston, Caltrans, Oakland