EX-LIBRIS FOREVER

Anthony Pincott explains why we should all take a closer look at any bookplates we find in our collections, and points to two current competitions for budding bookplate artists that demonstrate the art is alive and well today.

Placed on to the inside cover of a secondhand book you sometimes find a bookplate – a pictorial or heraldic printed design also known as an ex-libris. When book dealers describe a book as having no marks, damage or bookplates they imply that such marks of former ownership are a disfigurement. It may be argued that a poorly designed ex-libris detracts from a book, but a more favourable view will be found in the recently issued second edition of David Pearson’s Provenance Research in Book History. In a chapter on bookplates, the author demonstrates these to be a valuable record of the past life of each book. Ask antiquarian bookseller Christopher Edwards of Henley-on-Thames about the basis for his interest in books and he’ll tell you that provenance is a substantial reason. Increasingly, librarians are recognising that best practice is to expand catalogue entries to include full copy-specific records of former ownership.

Forty-eight years ago, just post decimalisation, I emerged from an Oxford bookshop with a pile of tenpence books, selected for their

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1. A simple armorial for clergyman, historian and novelist Charles Kingsley (1819-75) fulfils its function, but affords no decorative interest.
2. Initials ‘JW’ on a shield for publisher John Weale (1791-1862), designed by Augustus Welby Pugin (1812-52) and engraved on wood, perhaps in the 1840s, by Orlando Jewitt (1799-1869).
4. The Royal Library Windsor Castle VRI, an armorial by George Wier (1825-1916) whose initials and year of etching, 1897, are placed each side of the garter ribbon.
5. Edith Castlereagh (1878-1959) became Marchioness of Londonderry in 1915 when her husband Charles Stewart Henry Vane-Tempest-Stewart succeeded as seventh Marquess. Her bookplate is signed ‘WPB 1910’, but was engraved by Robert Osmond (1874-1959).

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Some of the illustrations shown here are not depicted actual size.
Jane (1830-1917), who is perhaps by his wife Moring (1819-84), but heraldic artist Thomas so is not by engraver and aged 86). It is dated 1901, Chard, Somerset, in 1947, person who died at Bookplate for Mabella reproduction of photographic larger size, an advantage This exists also in a proprietor, by Robert Cardiff newspaper Bookplate for Sir John Garth Jones (1872-1955) the artist) by [Alfred] (perhaps a relative of For Olga Jones 12 (1877-1909) by Henry Ospovat and forbiddingly James Hoy's imperious Gaskin (1862-1928) artist Arthur Joseph the year she married ink drawing dated 1894, (1866-1934), a pen and used by William Neish by George Cave France (1866-1934), a pen and ink drawing dated 1894, this was the married artist Arthur Joseph Caskin (1862-1928) II James Hoy’s impertious and forbiddingly also of female figure is by Henry Duvivier (1877-1919) II For Olga Jones (perhaps a relative of this artist) by [Alfred] Garth Jones (1872-1935) II Bookplate for Sir John Duncan (1844-1914). Cardiff newspaper proprietor, by Robert Aning (1853-1932). This exists also in a larger size, an advantage of chromo reproduction II Bookplate for Mahella Hoskins (possibly the person who died at Chard, Somerset, in 1847, aged 40). It is dated 1892, so is not by engraver and heraldic artist Thomas Mabury (1846-94), but is perhaps by his wife June (1840-1917) who in the 1891 census described herself as a seal engraver

Throughout the 19th century there were antiquaries and others who collected bookplates, but this was mostly a side-interest to books and heraldry. Few of their collections have survived. These collectors are identified in a comprehensive article in the Spring 2018 issue of ‘The Bookplates Journal’. The typical 19th-century bookplate had plain, flat heraldry, such as that of the novelist Charles Kingsley (fig 1), author of ‘Water Babies’. His is one of the several hundred ex-libris in ‘Famous in their Time’, a book illustrating the bookplates used by well-known people that will be published next year. A few Victorian plates displayed rather more skill, such as the work of Orlando Lewin (fig 2), who engraved so finely on wood that, at a quick glance, it could be mistaken for copper engraving. Total proficiency was also achieved by Charles William Sherborn, the leading Victorian engraver of heraldic bookplates, and by George William Eve, a master of etched armorials, who produced his best work in the Edwardian years. A typical Sherborn armorial is shown here (fig 3), one of a huge output of over 500 bookplates (plus many variant states), including some he made for the royal family, as did Eve (fig 4), whose checklist runs to over 250 items.

Exhibitions and personal recommendations made these two artists widely known, but the names of the engravers employed to create bookplates ordered through a heraldic stationer or superior London booksshops J & E Bumpus and Truslove & Hanson were kept closely secret. If not armorial, the typical Bumpus bookplate might include a view of the owner’s house, with symbols of his or her interests scattered around. These misleadingly bore the initials WPB (fig 5) and FGH of the Bumpus and Truslove shop managers Barrett and House. The true engravers for Bumpus were principally John Augustus Charles Harrison (fig 6) and Robert Osmond, who in their careers engraved over 250 and over 500 ex-libris respectively. Eve and Harrison also worked for Truslove, as did Alfred James Sparkes, Frederick Henry Tayby and several others.

Popular interest in bookplates during the 1890s coincided with the flourishing of Art Nouveau, the encouragement of book arts and a golden era of book illustration. There was an upsurge in ex-libris designed for women and bookplate design switched from heraldic to pictorial. Many even by the same artists who were making names for themselves as book illustrators. On the A-list are Aubrey Beardsley and Jessie M King of the Birmingham School of Art, which was central to her characteristic style (fig 9). Another woman artist, represented here by a pictorial bookplate she designed for William Neish (fig 10), was George Cave France of the Birmingham School of Art, which at the end of the 19th century was a centre for the Arts and Crafts movement. Russian-born Henry Ospovat (fig 11) created bold book-
plates, as did Garth Jones (fig 12), but their work mostly eludes collectors and they created far fewer than Art Nouveau designer Robert Anning Bell, who produced more than 70. He spent five years up to 1899 as an instructor at the Liverpool University school of architecture. His design for Sir John Duncan’s bookplate (fig 13) is only a quarter of the size of some of the others he made. The curious paradox is that, whereas the competent bookplate artisans (Sherborn, Eve, Harrison, Osmond, Bell etc) turned out good quality ex-libris in large quantities, we look to the book illustrators, who produced far fewer bookplates, to determine whether such work merits the accolade of “fine art.”

Bookplates are not always large or imposing – Mahella Hoskyns (fig 14) and Mary Lawson (fig 15) had modest examples. Nor need they be pictorial or armorial – Martin Chandler’s decorative name label by Griggs (fig 16) serves well enough to proclaim his book ownership.

Some subjects, such as the medieval scholar in his library (fig 17), trees bearing fruit (fig 18), or the sowing of seed (fig 19) are favourite themes well-suited to appear at the front of a book.

Four further illustrations (figs 20–23) are the work of Henry Stacy Marks, Thomas Erat Harrison, Harold Nelson, and Henry Justice Ford. There lies behind these, as for so many other bookplates, a personal story for both owner and artist, which keen researchers can unearth.

Cash prizes for newly created bookplates

Bookplates continue to be made today, and competitions for contemporary work are held frequently. Visit www.bookplatesociety.org/2020competitionLondon.htm for details of the competition that is being run by The Bookplate Society as part of its hosting of the 2020 FISAE International Exlibris Congress in Central London on 12–15 August 2020. This is an open competition for artists worldwide, but to encourage young artists one of the prizes is restricted to students in the UK and Republic of Ireland, and another will be awarded to an artist aged under 35 at the deadline entry date of 31 March 2020.

The website also includes entry details for the Australian Bookplate Design Award. The deadline for entries for this is 15 November 2020.
It might be imagined that, with more than a century elapsed, little remains to be discovered about bookplate history (post-1900), but this is far from the case. Collector and prolific author Brian North Lee FSA (1936-2007) wrote British Bookplates A Pictorial History, published by David and Charles in 1979, and this remains readily available secondhand and is the best text for anyone new to the subject. Yet for Laurence Housman, younger brother and literary executor of the poet A E Housman, Lee records only three bookplates. One of these was for journalist Hubert Bland (fig. 24), illustrated in The Studio Winter Number 1898-99, but recently two more have come to the knowledge of bookplate collectors—a pair of roses, appropriate to the name of its owner Rose Mary Paul, and one for author Edith Nesbit (fig 25) who remained Bland’s wife until his death in 1914, notwithstanding his offspring by other women. Lee’s checklists were often made possible by reference to family-held archives of work by particular artists, but myriad designers remain to have their work recorded in comprehensive manner.

There may exist up to about 100,000 British bookplates created before 1900, and many more were produced during the following century, so the images presented here, mostly from a couple of decades, are an arbitrary selection, giving only a brief taste of this huge field of graphic art. Yale University claims to hold more than a million bookplates. It used to be said that the best days for collecting bookplates were long over, but there remain enough in circulation for this still to be a most rewarding hobby. The study of bookplates draws in those with adjacent interests in heraldry, graphic art, biography and family history. After all, a personal bookplate may be one of the few pieces of property tangibly remaining of one of your ancestors.

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