



BOOKPLATES

Text by Carolyn Ryder from an *Exhibition of bookplates in Special Collections, University of Calgary Library*

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A bookplate, or ex-libris commonly refers to a label or a stamp usually placed on the inside front cover of a book. Its primary purpose is to indicate ownership in order to act as a safeguard against loss or theft. There is a great range of methods for indicating proprietorship which can vary from simple statements of ownership to elaborately designed coats of arms, emblems, pictures and quotations. In fact, bookplates can be as varied and creative as the imagination of the artist and the owner permit. The most common methods of producing bookplates are by wood cuts, wood engravings, linoleum cuts, steel or copper engraving, etching, aquatint, lithography and, most recently, photoengraving.

History

Bookplates originated shortly after the invention of movable type in Germany. There is some doubt attached to the earliest known bookplate. It may either be the coat of arms on printer's scraps belonging to Austrian theologian Hildebrand Brandenburg (c. 1450) or the picture of a hedgehog and motto belonging to Johannes Knabensberg, called Iglar ("hedgehog"). The first dated bookplate was 1516 and was designed by the artist Albrecht Dürer. Dürer also set the style of using heraldic motifs on bookplates. The use of bookplates spread from Germany to France, and then, much later, to England, the Low Countries and North America. In the British Isles, ownership of books was, until late in the 17th century, generally marked by gilt bookstamps on the covers (super-libros) or by printed labels, sometimes dated. The earliest armorial bookplate in Britain, dating from 1574 (a woodcut gift plate of Sir Nicholas Bacon to Cambridge University Library), was followed by two dated 1585 (Sir Thomas Tresame and Joseph Holand). From the start of the 18th century, armorial bookplates became more popular.

Collecting bookplates came into vogue in the last half of the 19th century. The Ex-libris Society was founded in England in 1891 and interest in collecting peaked at the turn of the 20th century. A number of societies have sprung up throughout the world and meetings are organized to exchange information and bookplates. There have been several declines and revivals of collecting throughout the 20th century. Institutions such as the British Museum are now collecting and cataloguing bookplates.

Reason for interest in Bookplates

The main reasons for the interest in bookplates are:

1. *Antiquarian* - Early bookplates can often be dated from an actual inscription or the style and influences evident in the art work. They can be of interest, then, from a historical point of view.
2. *Provenance* - Bookplates of well-known individuals help indicate ideas and authors influencing these people. As Emerson states, "If we encounter a man of rare intellect, we should ask him what books he reads". In these instances, then, it is the provenance of a book which may be a great interest.
3. *Artistic* - Bookplates have often been called works of art in miniature. Many well-known artists from William Hogarth to Kate Greenaway, Rockwell Kent and Eric Gill have all been involved in designing and creating bookplates. Unfortunately, though too few have been signed or dated. In more recent times, the style and subject of bookplates tend to reflect the interests and tastes of the owner. Popular styles and trends of art can often be detected in bookplates.
4. *Heraldic* - Early books were, to a great extent, owned by the aristocracy or the clergy. Indeed, coats of arms were often more readily and widely recognized than the written names. Heraldic arms, then, were widely used to indicate ownership. The armorial bookplates, can be of great interest to genealogists and those interested in the peerage.

Types of Bookplates

Several styles of bookplates have been identified up to approximately the turn of the 19th century, although there is some dispute over the exact number. The earliest ones are *Carolean* (c. 1690) and *Restoration* (c. 1700); however, these are extremely rare. Some of the better known ones are as follows:

Jacobean (1700-1750) - The style is distinguished by the great attention to symmetry and convention. They are virtually all armorial bookplates and are formal, solid and angular. Little ornamentation is evident.

Chippendale (1750-1780) - These bookplates, usually heraldic, are distinguished by elaborate ornamentation. A great amount of frilling, borders or open shell work or flowers is very common and the design itself is much less symmetrical.

Allegorical (c. 1730) - Although this style was more popular in France, the trend to incorporate mythological figures into designs has been evident in other countries as well. William Hogarth and John Pine were two engravers known to have used this style, which evolved from the Jacobean.

Landscape (1780-1810) - This style is related to the Chippendale style. Often it has heraldic arms in

combination with the other styles mentioned. Thomas Berwick was known to favour this type.

Phrases of Possession

Quotations on bookplates are often either mottos, puns on names, or, frequently, sayings directed against potential borrowers. Such phrases have been popular throughout the history of bookplates. As Warren wittily states,

Next to an umbrella, there is no item of personal property concerning the appropriation of which such lax ideas of morality are current as a book.... The gaps, which they [book borrowers] have left in innocent homes, break not their sleep at night. Their tables groan with a holocaust of odd volumes, filled with any one's ex-libris but their own.... The ex-libris is the mature act of book-preservation, and to engrave thereon some fulmination against the borrower, is a virtuous and commendable procedure.

Frequently such phrases have a humorous twist to them, such as Sir Walter Scott's "Please return this book; I find that though many of my friends are poor mathematicians, they are nearly all good bookkeepers" or Norman Bethune's "This book belongs to Norman Bethune and his friends".

Many of these types of bookplates are still in evidence today and often several styles can be seen in one bookplate. The accompanying bibliography will provide more information for those interested in the field of bookplates.

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