

Concerning Book Plates

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CONCERNING BOOK PLATES

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A BOOK plate has been described as a name plate decorated, not a decoration defaced by a name plate. The essential point is that it is a name-label, a means of identification for lost, strayed, or stolen volumes. Consequently *anonymous* book plates are anomalous. This name-label may be printed or engraved and the name may be expressed heraldically or otherwise, but its prime object is, or was, when pasted inside the covers of a book or added to its title or fly-leaves, to proclaim the ownership of the book.

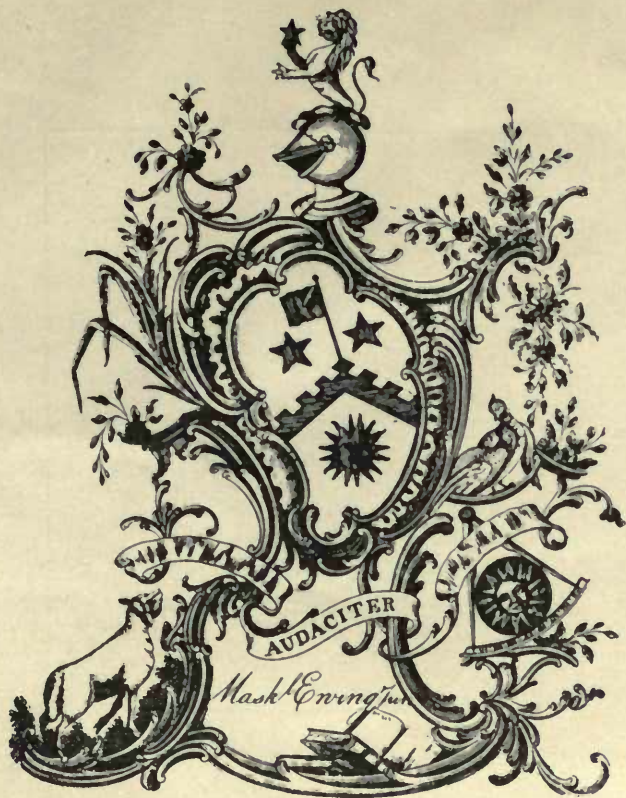
The origin of the book plate is found in the desire of the owner of a book to retain possession of his property. Many estimable people find a difficulty in distinguishing between mine and thine in books as well as in umbrellas. Therefore, both should be marked for identification.

Books in the early libraries were chained. When they became cheaper and multiplied rapidly, the chains were done away with, but marks of ownership were placed either inside the covers or on the covers of books to prevent their straying. The marks of ownership on the covers usually consisted of monograms or coats-of-arms done in gold on the leather sides, and there are many ornate bindings in which such devices, called *super libros*, have been most attractively tooled. As books

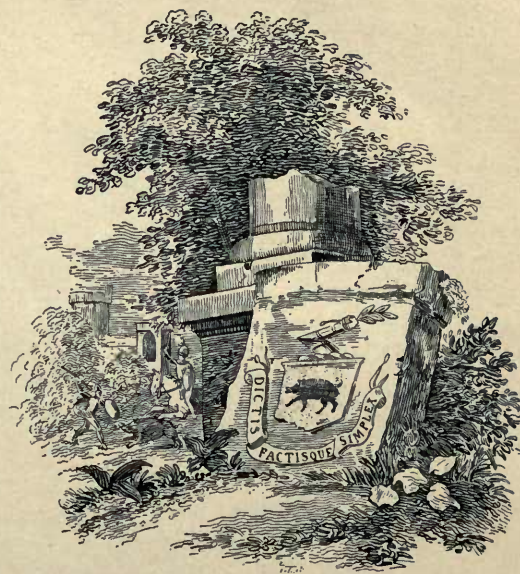
in the early libraries were laid flat on their sides, these devices showed up most effectively.

The book plate, like the printed book, had its origin in Germany. Both date from the middle of the fifteenth century. Albrecht Dürer is known actually to have engraved six plates between 1503 and 1516, and to have made designs for many others. Most of the larger and more wealthy monasteries used more than one plate. The advent of each new lord abbot was celebrated by the creation of a new plate for the library. With individuals it grew out of the various armorial bearings of the family. Frederick August, duke of Brunswick-Öls, had, in 1789, sixteen plates. More recently, Count Leiningen-Westerburg had twenty-one plates, all in use, and the Countess had eight for her own use. I have no data as to the size of the family library. The Count was an authority on the subject of book plates, had written a book on German ex-libris, and many of the twenty-nine different plates used by him and his wife were complimentary plates from well-known artists.

A book plate is in no sense a part of the book. Its removal can be ordinarily effected without harming the book in any way. Many book plates are removed in order to give place to the new owner's plate, or to add to the collector's store. The ethics of this procedure has been questioned. It must be granted that there are cases when it would be almost an act of vandalism to remove a book plate, as in the case of a certain copy of the first edition of Pope's *Dunciad*, 1729, well preserved in the



CHIPPENDALE PLATES



HENRY D. GILPIN.

original binding, with the Chippendale book plate of David Hume, above which is the autograph signature of John Home, the oldest friend and executor of Hume. Remove the historian's book plate and the chain of association linking Pope, Hume, and Home is broken. A collector who would remove a coat-of-arms stamped in gold on the leather or vellum binding of a fine old book has been compared to the miser depicted by Hogarth in the act of cutting from the cover of the family Bible a piece of leather with which to mend his shoe. Book plates have not always been regarded as giving added value to the books they adorn. A writer in 1757, in speaking of a library offered for sale, says: "The books are in good order, and are little the worse for use, and have no arms in the best of them."

Book plates, being intended to go into books, must appeal to book-lovers and will continue to interest those who like fine books well bound and properly cared for. The man who is insensible to the influence of a good book plate is probably insensible to the claims of good printing, the beauty of good book-making, and all the seductions to which the bibliophile yields himself. Putting a harmoniously designed, well-executed plate into a book shows that the owner thinks enough of it to treat it with respect. "I urge upon all lovers of books to provide themselves with book plates," said Eugene Field. "Whenever I see a book that bears its owner's plate, I feel myself obligated to treat that book with special consideration. It carries with it a certificate of its

master's love; the book plate gives the volume a certain status it would not otherwise have."

Miss Agnes Repplier says that when she was a girl she had access to a small and well-chosen library, each volume of which was provided with a book plate containing a scaly dragon guarding the apples of Hesperides, and the motto "Honor and obligation demand the prompt return of borrowed books." These words, she continues, ate into her innocent soul and lent a pang to the sweetness of possession. Doubts as to the exact nature of "prompt return" made her painfully uncertain as to whether a month, a week, or a day was the limit which honor and obligation had set for her. Other and older borrowers were, however, less sensitive and, books being a rarity in that little southern town, most of the volumes were eventually absorbed by the gaping shelves of neighbors, where perhaps some may still be found, "forgotten in dark and dusty corners, like gems that magpies hide."

"Some people have an instinctive aversion to anything plated," said a recent writer in the Contributors' Club of the *Atlantic Monthly*, adding that he disliked *plated* books. He saw no apology for the person addicted to the substitution of a book plate for his genuine signature and was sure that no man with poetry in his soul would use a plate to record his ownership of a volume. "To establish that immortal communication between author and reader, that sense of intimate personal relation," said he, "the reader must not refuse the author his *hand*,

and try to meet him, as it were, by proxy." "A book plate," in the mind of this critic, "indicates a certain love of ostentation. Is it fitting," he asks, "that an individual should suggest that his library is so voluminous that he cannot undertake the physical fatigue of writing his name in each book he possesses? Public libraries, large and abstract collections, may make use of this mechanical means of identifying property, but the private library should be more modest, more personal."

The defender of the book plate will answer that there is a decided objection to having names written into books, especially modern books, where the ink is almost sure to run and produce a blurred result. An autograph is usually inconspicuous and, with poor penmanship, it is ineffective. Unless it be in ink on the title-page, it is more easily removed than the book plate. The latter is the silent witness against the book thief. "To have a book plate," says Edmund Gosse, "gives a collector great serenity and confidence." A book plate not only testifies to the owner's appreciation of his books, but, if of his own choosing, also reflects something of his character. A good book plate gives also a certain unity to what might otherwise be a very miscellaneous library.

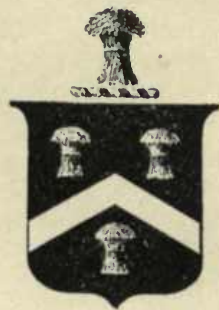
The use of coats-of-arms as an indication of ownership was very common in bygone days. Arms were cut in stone on the front of a house to indicate the family name of the owners, carved in furniture, woven in hangings, or engraved on the family silver, to carry out the same

idea within the house, or emblazoned on the family carriage to declare to the world at large who it was that was going forth on one errand or another. Originally the arms would not have the name appended. When a knowledge of heraldry was widespread the addition of the name to a coat-of-arms was unnecessary. The arms were as well known as the family name; in fact, it was the name heraldically expressed. Many retainers who could not read could easily recognize the family coat-of-arms. So, in the earliest armorial book plates, the arms alone were engraved. The names appear only in the later plates.

In the simple armorial plates, up to about 1720, the shield is surmounted by a helmet on which are the wreath and crest. With the decay of heraldry, more and more attention was paid to the ornamentation or mantling and eventually the heraldic interest became of very minor importance.

Some collectors limit their attention to armorial plates, as others limit their interests to those of other periods, or to those by special designers. Armorial plates are in questionable taste for most American families. The use of them reminds one of a question put to a certain gentleman who had assumed what appeared to be a veritable coat-of-arms. "Are those really your arms?" he was asked. "They ought to be," was the reply, "for I made them myself."

I know of librarians who scoff at the idea of a book plate, and many people smile at those who take a serious



Eugene Field.

PLATES WITH LITERARY INTEREST



George W. Childs.



Oliver Wendell Holmes.

interest in collecting book plates. A writer in the *London Daily News* stirred up a "tempest in a tea-pot" some twenty years ago by an article entitled "The Burden of Book Plates." "Let infancy frolic and senile fatuity count its two-penny treasures," said this scribe, "but why, of all things, collect book plates? Are there not door-knockers which a man may collect, or visiting cards of all ages, or muffin bells, or old books, or political walking sticks, or the decayed hairbrushes of celebrities, all of which are instructive and amusing, compared to book plates?" Mr. Hardy writes about the propriety of removing book plates from books "for the purpose of study and comparison." "Study and comparison of warming pans! Even an old warming pan is an enviable piece of portable property compared with a book plate. . . . It seems about as agreeable a possession as an old postage stamp." Well, we know of those who put a great deal of time, money, and enthusiasm into the collecting of postage stamps and dignify their hobby by calling it philately. The collector of ex-libris is not to be lightly put aside. He is only one kind of a bibliophile. Anyone with a hobby is to be envied, not derided. "Here lies Smith, who was nothing, not even a collector of postage stamps," would not be the epitaph of a cheerful man.

The size of a collector's library, it must be confessed, is usually in inverse ratio to the number of personal plates which he owns. An amateur with too many individual plates is to be looked upon with suspicion. "A fool and

his book plate are soon parted," said Thomas Bailey Aldrich, in characterizing those who have a book plate primarily for purposes of exchange with other collectors. There are collectors who have had new plates made or new impressions of old plates struck off on a different colored paper, expressly for the purpose of adding another plate to their exchange list. They resemble the Central and South American principalities which have new issues of postage stamps struck off every little while, seemingly for the purposes of revenue through their sale to collectors. It is this class of collectors who have brought down some of the more severe criticisms upon the whole subject of ex-libris collecting.

Then, too, there have been unprincipled dealers who have attached ex-libris (generally counterfeits or reprints) to inferior volumes in order to promote their sale. The plate of George Washington is thus far the only American one thought worthy of counterfeiting. Some years ago a number of volumes purporting to have come from Washington's library were offered for sale at auction. They all had what claimed to be his book plate, but a comparison of it with the original showed it to be clearly a forgery. The purpose of the forger was defeated by the cheat being cried out in the auction room.

The natural desire to protect his own book property is seen in the schoolboy, who is given to writing the simplest form of an ex-libris on the fly-leaf of his textbook: "Bill Jones, his book." This plain statement of fact is elaborated into a variety of forms. The following

is copied from an old schoolbook found in Canterbury, England:

This book is mine
By right divine
And if so be, it go astray
Please be so kind
My desk to find
And stow it safe away.

Schoolboys in old England were fond of inscribing in their books these verses:

Steale not this book for fear of shame
For here you see ye owner hys name
And when you dye ye Lord will saye
Where is that boke you stole away?
Then if you saye, you cannot telle,
Ye Lorde will saye, then go to helle.

Variant forms of versified prophecies of what will happen to the book thief are quite plentiful. The following was at one time popular with youths fond of scribbling over the fly-leaves of their books:

My Master's name above you see,
Take heede ther fore you steale not mee;
For if you doe, without delay
Your necke for me shall pay.
Looke doune below and you shal see
The picture of the gallowstree;
Take heede ther fore of thys in time,
Lest on this tree you highly clime.

Another doggerel manuscript ex-libris used to be made up in this fashion:

THIS BOOK

Belongs to .

John Doe

If thou art borrowed by a friend,
Right welcome shall he be
To read, to study, not to lend,
But to return to me.

Not that imparted knowledge doth
Diminish learning's store;
But books, I find, if often lent,
Return to me no more.

Sometimes there was appended the following advice and caution:

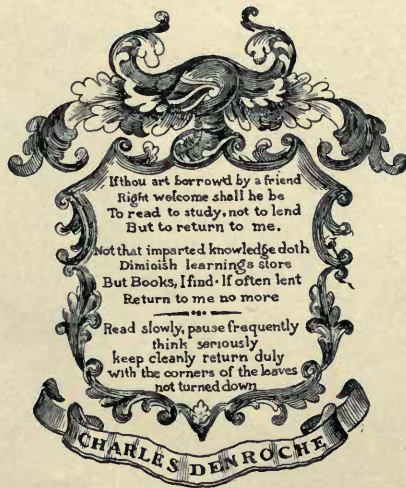
Read slowly, pause frequently,
Think seriously,
Keep cleanly, return duly,
With the corners of the leaves not turned down.

Some book-owners have gone to Scripture for their book-plate inscriptions. Mr. George N. Noyes uses the following: "And if a man borrow aught of his neighbor and it is hurt he shall surely make it good" (Exod. 22:14). An apprentice's library has used the following: "Take fast hold of instruction, let her not go; keep her, for she is thy life" (Prov. 4:13).

There is a wide range from the generous and dignified legend on the plate of Grolier "Jo. Grolierii



PLATES HAVING A PERSONAL INTEREST



If thou art borrowd by a friend
Right welcome shall he be
To read to study, not to lend
But to return to me.

Not that imparted knowledge doth
Diminish learning's store
But Books, I find. If often lent
Return to me no more

Read slowly, pause frequently
think seriously
keep cleanly return duly
with the corners of the leaves
not turned down

CHARLES DENROCHE

et Amicorum" (the property of John Grolier and his friends) to such as:

I'm stingy grown
What's mine's my own.

An anonymous plate has: "This book was bought at the sign of the Shakespeare Head. Borrowing neighbors are recommended to supply themselves in the same manner."

Dr. Holmes once said mottoes should be given in pairs so that one might offset the other. I therefore give the following as an antidote to the last quoted:

I'm not one of those selfish elves
Who keep their treasures to themselves.
I like to see them kept quite neat,
But not for moth or worm to eat.
Thus willingly to any friend
A book of mine I'll freely lend
Hoping they'll mind this good old mean,
Return it soon and keep it clean.

We have seen that the use of a book plate is no modern fad, though the collecting of the book plates is of comparatively recent origin. Various interests center around book plates. These might be listed as follows:

1. **The personal interest.**—This would be called forth by the plates of such men as George Washington, William Penn, Gladstone, Gambetta, Horace Walpole, Samuel Pepys, David Garrick, Hogarth, Sir Henry Irving,

all of whom used book plates which have been reproduced in the literature of the subject.

2. **The genealogical interest.**—This is exemplified particularly in the sequence of plates belonging to old families given to book-collecting for several generations.

3. **The heraldic interest.**—Heraldry is a conspicuous element in the older plates, the majority of which are of armorial design. In no way can one get a better or more comprehensive survey of the changes in heraldic design.

4. **The historical interest.**—Something of the history of engraving and the arts of illustration is sure to be imbibed by those who dip into the history of book plates. Even if one only learns to distinguish between a copper plate and a steel engraving, an etching and a zinc plate, he has acquired valuable information. When he is able to distinguish between a Jacobean and a Chippendale plate, he has made a considerable advance. Before long the amateur is able to judge of the approximate date of a plate and to characterize its style in proper fashion. A dated plate may help to give definite information in regard to the history of a particular style of engraving or design, or otherwise throw light on the book it adorns.

5. **Artistic interest.**—Dürer, Holbein, Lucas Cranach the younger, Piranesi, Bartolozzi, Hogarth, and Bewick, among the old engravers, did not think the designing of book plates beneath their dignity. Among modern artists of note who have designed book plates, mention may be made of Sir Frederick Leighton, Sir John Millais, Aubrey Beardsley, Edwin A. Abbey, Miss Kate Greena-

way, Walter Crane, Louis Rhead, and Randolph Caldecott. These names should suffice to arrest the attention of the carping critic, if only long enough to see how these artists have handled the problem. Many plates by artists of no great note are worthy of study on account of the beauty of design or artistic workmanship.

In 1880 there appeared *A Guide to the Study of Book Plates*, by the Hon. J. Leicester Warren, who later became Lord de Tabley. In classifying book plates he divided them into broad classes, such as Jacobean, Chippendale, allegorical, and the like. His classification has been accepted by later writers and is now so generally followed that we must pause for a moment to study it.

The term Jacobean, as applied to a book plate, is somewhat misleading, but it is understood to mean the heavy decorative style in vogue during the Restoration, Queen Anne, and early Georgian days. This style was in vogue approximately from 1700 to 1750. The book plate had by that time become a recognized essential in a well-ordered private or public library. The plates of the period are armorial in type, the decoration is limited to a symmetrical grouping of the mantling and an occasional display of palms and wreaths. The mantling surrounds the face of the shield as the periwig of the portraits of the period surrounds the face of the subject. It springs from either side of the helmet into elaborate patterns. The manner had been imported from France but soon assumed English characteristics of its own. The decoration was conventional, remarkable for its solidity rather

than its gracefulness. The design was strictly symmetrical, massive, and imposing from its heaviness. The plates of the period have a carved appearance.

During the middle third of the eighteenth century a flamboyant rococo style of engraving was in vogue which was named Chippendale, after the designer of furniture, many of the patterns in his books being reflected in the book plates of the period. The distinguishing feature of the Chippendale book plate is a fanciful arrangement of scroll and shellwork with acanthus-like sprays. The grouping was usually unsymmetrical so as to give a freer scope for a great variety of counter-curves. Straight and concentric lines were avoided. The Chippendale plates are lacking in variety of design. The type was in vogue only for a score of years, but during that time it was the fashion in copper-plate engraving generally. The characteristic of the style is the frilled border of open scallop shellwork set close to the escutcheon, and more or less inclosing it. George Washington's plate is a good example of the Chippendale style.

The similarity of the Chippendale patterns reminds one of the story of the traveling artist who was employed by an innkeeper to paint a blue boar for a sign. "I'll try the boar," said the man, "but I have never painted anything else than a red lion, and so don't be surprised if your blue boar turns into a red lion when I've done." It seems equally impossible for the designer of a particular period to get away from the characteristics of that period.

During the latter third of the eighteenth century, new styles were adopted by the engravers. Among these mention may be made of the simple and chaste design known as the ribbon and wreath style. Originality began to assert itself and a great variety of motifs appeared—pastoral scenes, landscape effects, pictorial compositions, and library interiors of all kinds. When steel engraving came into use in the beginning of the nineteenth century, it had the effect of continuing the formality of the previous century. It was also used later in connection with the copper-plate designing, by furnishing the plate-maker with a harder surface with which to cover the copper. With the development of photo-mechanical processes in the latter half of the century came greater freedom and ease in the reproduction of the original sketch. Etching had not only rivaled copper-plate engraving, but had come to be used with it. Photo-engraving, or the half-tone process, is hardly a legitimate means of reproducing a book-plate design. While it is the most common method of reproducing a photograph or wash drawing, neither of these media furnishes satisfactory designs for book plates, although they have sometimes been used fairly satisfactorily in connection with line work. Line work is the basis of ninety-nine out of every hundred book plates, whether done on copper, steel, or zinc.

The success of an engraved plate depends, not only on the skill of the designer, but also upon that of the engraver. In the case of such men as C. W. Sherborn,

E. D. French, and J. W. Spenceley, both the design and execution were done by themselves or under their close supervision. This brings engraved plates by men of note up to a high cost. Consequently recourse is had to cheaper methods of reproduction, and the one most in vogue is the zinc cut. The danger of this lies in its cheapness. For a dollar or two one can have reproduced an india-ink sketch by an amateur designer, and as there are many people with a certain amount of skill in pen-and-ink drawing who are quite willing to present their friends with what they think are appropriate designs for book plates, there are a great many inside covers of books being plastered over with cheap zinc cuts from cheap designs that had better not have been perpetuated through this or any other process.

Anyone who owns a book plate is likely to be interested in the subject. So also is the person who hopes some day to have his or her own book plate. The latter may welcome a few suggestions. A book plate ought not, according to all precedent and the canons of good taste, to try to rival a poster, or a book-wrapper, or ornate end papers. It ought not to be much larger than two by three inches. It should be small enough to go easily on the inside of the cover of any volume without crowding. Japan vellum or plate paper are good papers on which to print plates. Too thick a paper is difficult to paste down. Do not have the plates gummed. The name should be clearly drawn, not in hieroglyphics, and should not be run in on the bias, nor in any fanciful way.

The motif should be appropriate to the general run of books the plate is to adorn. A jester is permissible in the ex-libris of a comedian like Francis Wilson, but would hardly be suitable for a philosophical library. Humorous plates are in general to be avoided. The humor will be sure to pall upon you and your friends. Designers are often called upon to do things against their best judgment. One designer was asked by a patron of considerable avoirdupois to include in the plate he had ordered the representation of an elephant, as that was the nickname by which he was known among his friends. Another wanted "a girl, with sandals on, standing by the sea, over which the moonlight was streaming; bulrushes or something in the foreground. And," he added, "give me plenty of moonlight."

Portrait plates are not at all common. Most of those that have been made date from the latter half of the nineteenth century. Dürer's friend, Bilibald Pirkheimer, is known to have had a plate of this kind which he pasted on the back covers of his books. Good old Bishop John Hacket, of Lichfield, presented a number of books to Trinity College, Cambridge, in each of which was pasted his portrait and the motto "Serve God and be cheerful."

The tendency to overload a plate with details with a view to suggesting the proclivities of the owner is to be decried. As Mr. Charles Dexter Allen says, "One sometimes sees a plate that has so much of the life-history of the owner within its small compass that at a glance it is

evident to all that he glories in golf, has a regard for roses, rides a wheel, esteems Omar Khayyam very highly, reads Scott and Lowell, can quote Shakespeare, has been to Switzerland, collects butterflies, and lives in New Jersey."

