



'EX LIBRIS'

STORIES TO TELL ...

Ann Nugent samples the Library's array of bookplates

In 1897 Norman Lindsay took a penknife to a scrap of wood and produced a woodcut for a bookplate for an H.R. Conant. It was a simple nude seated on what looks like a tree stump. The Conant bookplate is held by the Art Gallery of New South Wales. However, it was not the first pictorial bookplate produced in Australia. Five years earlier, Sydney solicitor and patron of the arts, John Lane Mullins, had commissioned Percy Spence to produce a pictorial (as opposed to an armorial) 'ex libris' plate. Spence's 'Library Interior' shows Mullins seated at his desk in a library walled with books. Mullins' heraldic shield and motto are incorporated into the bottom of

the design. Several copies of this bookplate are held in the National Library's collection. The Library also holds an elaborate oriental styled plate for Barbara Lane Mullins, executed by the artist Tom Roberts and printed in red ink.

The shift towards personalised, pictorial bookplates gained impetus from Norman Lindsay's production of a further nine bookplates in the 1890s. One was designed for J.S.C. Elkington who, along with the Lindsay brothers, Norman and Lionel, was part of the bohemian scene in Melbourne. Norman's plate depicts Elkington in swaggering mode, dressed as a seaman, holding a beer mug and sucking on a pipe. The Elkington bookplate is illustrative of the often close relationship between the designers and their subjects. Indeed, Elkington was to be related to the Lindsays

Adrian Feint (1894–1971)
Bookplate (with printer's plate on left) for Alice Kelso King 1924
etching; 12.5 x 8.6 cm
copper printer's plate; 12.1 x 8.4 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an10995319 and
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above:
Eirene Mort (1879–1977)
Bookplate for Eirene Mort
1928
etching; 15.5 x 11.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an11056010

right:
Thea Proctor (1879–1966)
Bookplate for Thea Proctor
between 1920 and 1940
coloured print; 9.5 x 10.0 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an11195485
© Art Gallery of
New South Wales

Mort was treasurer. The Society aimed 'to promote and extend the use of Ex Libris, to develop their artistic character ... to hold exhibitions of Ex Libris, and to promote the publication of literature on the subject'. The Society succeeded on all fronts. The first exhibition devoted to Australian bookplates was held at Tyrrell's Galleries, 144 Elizabeth St, Sydney in 1923. The gallery owner and bookseller James Robert Tyrrell was himself a keen collector of bookplates.

The National Library holds P. Neville Barnett's authoritative work, *Australian Book-plates and Book-plates of Interest to Australians* (1950). This limited edition publication gives some 250 examples of bookplates, about one-tenth of which Barnett hand-coloured. The Library also has an impressive 1951 bookplate designed by Gayfield Shaw honouring Barnett's contribution to bookplate design. He died in 1953. All his books were published by H.P. Mortlock's Beacon Press, in Sydney. In Melbourne, ex libris production was encouraged by John Gartner, founder of Hawthorne Press.

Sifting through the National Library collection, it becomes apparent that bookplate makers and the people who made the plates were formed from a mix of writers, artists, printers, publisher owners and promoters who knew

well. Added to this group were patrons who wished to advertise their achievements and display their possessions, spouses, hobbies and pets. In the 1920s, bookplates were booming. Clients commissioned, artists produced, promoters promoted, and collectors collected. Prominent among bookplate artists post-1920 were George D. Perrottet, Allan Jordan, Adrian Feint, Eric Thake, Lionel Lindsay, Gayfield Shaw, John Shirlow, D.H. Souter and L. Roy Davies.

John Lane was not an artist, but he did aspire to be a publisher and his publication *Ex Libris* of a brochure titled *Ex Libris* further promoted the use of ex libris bookplates. Ex libris societies and clubs played an important role in fostering Australian bookplate design and production. Two names stand out: John Lane and P. Neville Mullins. In 1923, Mullins edited the influential, Sydney-based *Australian Ex Libris Society*. P. Neville Mullins was a committee member, and artist Eirene

well. Added to this group were patrons who wished to advertise their achievements and display their possessions, spouses, hobbies and pets. In the 1920s, bookplates were booming. Clients commissioned, artists produced, promoters promoted, and collectors collected. Prominent among bookplate artists post-1920 were George D. Perrottet, Allan Jordan, Adrian Feint, Eric Thake, Lionel Lindsay, Gayfield Shaw, John Shirlow, D.H. Souter and L. Roy Davies.

The 1920s revival of woodcuts and linocuts saw many women artists, particularly those interested in printmaking, undertake bookplate design. Eirene Mort was one of the first of these. Her tree bookplate is well known; less reproduced is her personal 1928 plate, 'Eirene Mort, her book', which shows a jaunty female swaggie as a type of Australian centaur, with its lower half being kangaroo and its top part, human. The Library holds three Mort bookplates as well as a collection of Thea Proctor's work, and one plate by Ella Dwyer. Dwyer's etched rose (1932) was designed for Gwendolen Game, wife of a former New South Wales governor, and hints at Gwendolen's love of flowers.

Lionel Lindsay was a prolific producer of bookplates. His plates date from 1900 to 1950, and employ both etched and relief techniques. Lindsay's plates provide a veritable gallery of his social, political and artistic contemporaries. In an etched image, judge and renowned bibliographer John A. Ferguson appears as a gentle koala in a smoking jacket, H.P. Mortlock is presented as an industrious printer at his press, while



bookseller and gallery owner Jam R. Tyrrell is drawn as a comic act. Several bookplates in the Nation Library's collection come from the extensive collection of Australian bookplates bequeathed to it by John Ferguson.

One of the pleasures of sorting through drawers of bookplates is finding something completely unexpected. One envelope felt heavier than it should, so I opened it. Inside was an Adrian Feint engraved metal plate with five imprints of a bookplate, dated 1924. Conveniently within the envelope was a letter explaining that the original plate had been handed to the Library by Mr Alec Bolton, founder of the Brindabella Press, Canberra (first director of the National Library publishing program). The bookplate had been commissioned by Lady Kelso King, and features a water scene.

Adrian Feint is well represented in the Library's collection. He produced mainly etched plates in the years 1922–1926, and plates in wood and lino from 1926 on. Feint's relief prints are quite beautiful and well worth calling up from the stacks. Under the auspices of the Australian Ex Libris Society, the Palmtree Press published a fine collection of Feint's work, with 21 plates tipped in. His bookplate for the child Peter Tansey surrounded by his toys is a block print in three colours, the first of its kind in Australia. His red-inked plate for W. and M. Preston features stylised Aboriginal motifs. Feint's woodcut for Raoul Lempriere was awarded a first prize at the International Bookplate Exhibition of Los Angeles in 1929.

Frank Clune, accountant, journalist and author, had a passion for commemorating himself and family members (and their talents and possessions) in bookplates. Adrian Feint's 1930 etched plate for Thelma Cecily Clune, Clune's wife—the 'Brown Eyes' of his newspaper column—shows the Sydney Harbour Bridge under construction, as seen from Clune's Vaucluse home. Feint was also responsible for a book of Clune family bookplates. Clune's personal plates refer to his interest in music and sailing, however, their Napoleonic allusions are more difficult to interpret.

Not all was light and bliss on the Clune bookplate scene, however. One of the plates



left:
Adrian Feint (1894–1971)
Bookplate for Peter Tansey
1930
coloured print; 10.5 x 8.3 cm
Pictures Collection
S10420 LOC 8096

below:
Eric Thake (1904–1982)
Bookplate for Jean Daley
between 1920 and 1940
coloured print; 9.4 x 5.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an11195485

in the Library's collection shows a sailing ship, and the anchor of the *Sirius* in Martin Place, Sydney. An anonymous handwritten note beneath the etching explains: 'This plate is by Gayfield Shaw Francis Clune as part of a payment for taking him on in which Shaw sold his et refused to complete the p refused to give Clune pro The plate was finally give Shaw's name scratched o Copies of both the signed bookplates are held by th seems to have had better Dame Mary Gilmore. Her trunk of a tree incised wi motifs, and the inscription her totem'. The Library's c both Gilmore and Shaw.

A 1932 plate by L. Roy the conclusion of Douglas expedition to Antarctica, Walls of ice, a ship and d central image, while circling the frame illustrate Maws and interests.

Not only humans have there's 'Dan' the dog, designed Feint for Margaret Allen; plate of R.M. Chirnside, e John Shirlow, features th Linass looks a champion, the winner's garland, but are a disturbing note, and





arises: Was the plate a memorial for the horse, or a celebration of his wins? In the annals of racing, Linass came 14th in a field of 24 in the 1917 Caulfield Cup.

In intent, the bookplate ranges from the practical purpose of asserting ownership (as in Anne Lindsay's 1944 warning 'to keep my books secure from rooks', or the more preemptory 'This book belongs to Loreto Convent, Normanhurst'), to a more direct emphasis on aesthetic appeal.

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Lindsay's easygoing friendship with Robert G. Menzies (who described their conversations as 'divine and disordered') was probably the impetus for his plates focusing on the then prime minister. The two plates held by the Library are more like political cartoons than bookplates. One, politically direct, shows a parliamentary dispatch box and a scroll headed, 'Declaration of War', which was Menzies' 'melancholy duty'. The other plate shows the boy Menzies fishing in an Australian creek, his line hooked on what looks like a parliamentary mace. The image could be taken as indicating the future political career of the boy Menzies. However, the fishing line could also refer to Australia's coming to the aid of the British, as indicated by the crown in the creek. These plates were

produced in 1940, when Australian troops were fighting alongside allied forces in the Middle East.

Another political bookplate I came across was an 'after-the-event' creation. It was designed by Phyllis Shillito (an English-born art teacher at the Darlinghurst campus of Sydney Technical College). The plate commemorates Francis Edward de Groot's upstaging of New South Wales Premier Jack Lang at the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge in 1932. De Groot, leader of the proto-fascist New Guard, charged on horseback and slashed the official ribbon with his sword before the premier was able to marshal his ceremonial scissors. Shillito's ex libris shows the Harbour Bridge, the head of a Roman warrior, a shield with both British and Australian flags, a sword, and a pair of scissors. The unfurled motto reads: 'The sword is mightier than the scissors.'

'Canting' was the term given to a form of visual punning on names in the design of armorial bookplates. The visual jokes continued in freer form in modern plates. Norman Lindsay's plate for the printer Hjalmar Josephi is invaded by a host of Lindsaysque devils (a parody of the 'printer's devil', as the printery's message-boy was traditionally known). Fairly obvious puns are seen in a plate by George D. Perrottet's ex libris for Elizabeth [Diamond], which shows a female nude holding up a diamond; and in Adrian Feint's repetition of floral motifs in his 1926 plate for John Cyril Flower, in which swords are replaced by a French lily and an English rose.

Bookplates in the Library's collection give glimpses of Australian artists, writers, explorers and adventurers, book-lovers and publishers, ranging across the first half of the twentieth century. The plates have many points of entry—the historical moment, as in Menzies' and de Groot's plates, the personal relations between owner and artist, the in-jokes and the prejudices of the age—but, most importantly, by way of their aesthetic appeal. An idle afternoon sifting through the Library's bookplate collection brings its satisfactions and surprises.

ANN NUGENT edits and publishes the Canberra-based literary magazine *Blast*: *poetry and other critical writing*, <http://annsverbandah.com/blast/>

top:
Sir Lionel Lindsay (1874–1961)
Bookplate for Robert G. Menzies
c.1942
wood engraving; 7.8 x 6.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an11052721

above:
Norman Lindsay (1879–1969)
Bookplate for Hjalmar Josephi
c.1950
wood engraving; 9.3 x 7.0 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an11100127
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