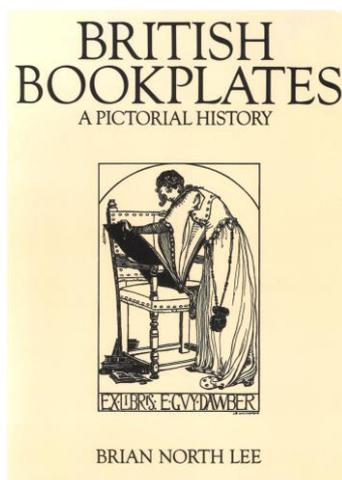


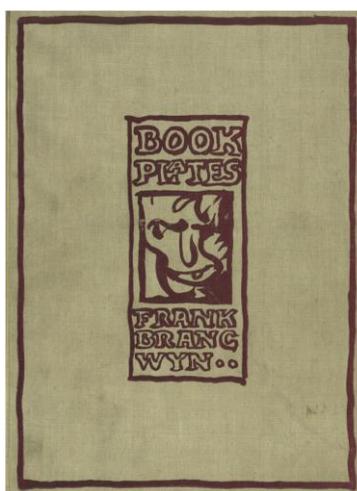
British Bookplates: A Pictorial History

Brian North Lee 1971



and Bookplates

Frank Brangwyn 1933



In Britain, people have been sticking labels into their books to state their ownership of them since the 16th Century. The earliest one in the Pictorial History dates from 1585.

The helpful Introduction outlines what a niche field the actual collecting of Bookplates was to begin with – a pastime that really only took off three centuries later: the 'Ex Libris Society' was founded in 1891, there was a Bookplate Magazine in the 1920s and, just to show that the interest was sustained, in 1971 a new 'Bookplate Society' was formed.

In short, Bookplates provide a record of what books people collected. They can yield invaluable evidence for genealogists.

They can offer a wider insight too into the response of a people at a certain time, culturally, to the artistic currents of their period: each is the product, after all, of a commission. In addition, Bookplates give glimpses into the personality of the owner, the artist, and even more intriguingly, the relationship between the two. Finally, they give us little snapshots into the artwork of some of our best graphic artists and illustrators.

The History is chiefly illustrations of Plates, with the text on the left hand side of the page given over to substantial paragraphs of information about the illustrator and the person who owned the book. Possibly a good two thirds of the collected works are based on Heraldic devices. These often incorporate Latin mottoes and embody a certain 'stiffness and archaism', 'austerity and dignity' to quote the introduction of the second book under consideration here. You could have a lot of fun looking up famous names, both of the owners and the authors – there's the Plate for Richard D'Oyly Carte of Gilbert and Sullivan fame for instance, or the artists Kate Greenaway, Arthur Rackham, even the cartoonist Max Beerbohm. Gradually and chronologically the style gives way to something at once simpler and more florid: names and decorative borders. Finally, we see plainly the name itself without explanation or personalisation beyond the choice of font: Lytton Strachey and J.M.Barrie being two notable examples.

But there is also a phase where something much more interesting was going on, and that's where our second book comes in. From the evidence in the History, it's around the 1890s that the emphasis on Coats of Arms begins to weaken and there is much more in the way of expressionism, wit and imagination. The lettering becomes a feature all of itself and the intention seems to be more about gaining a tiny piece of a real artist's work, the more beautiful the better.

'Bookplates' by Frank Brangwyn is actually referenced in the History (p108). The illustrator, who worked in Woodcuts, is praised there for his 'impact', though the colouring may be 'sometimes rather violent' and the graphics themselves 'not to the taste of all of us'.

You can decide for yourself!

(Darlington Library's copy is, fittingly, embellished with our very own Bookplate. Below the County Borough Heraldic device it features an engraving of the Library before the extension was added, the Mill chimney visible.)

You might not want to call Brangwyn's work beautiful exactly, but it is certainly striking. It opens with the timeless message on a large plate in blue, orange and black, 'Greater is he that ruleth his own Spirit than he that taketh a City.'

Brangwyn (1867 – 1956) had an enormous range, being commissioned as much for public art, for huge murals, as for Bookplates. The Foreword by Eden Phillpotts (memorialised in his own Bookplate, Plate Five) outlines how other countries, other artists, Durer, Holbein had moved on from the 'tyranny of couchant lions' etc. Now, however, no book lover could possibly deny himself a work of art to link him with his book. In an introductory 'Technical Note' there is a rather poetic tribute to the specific qualities of the art of the Woodcut: 'The 'natural voice' of a graver is a white line on a black ground'; it is 'a scar that prints white'.

In a nutshell, the Bookplate now asserts that the owner, by way of his discerning choice of illustrator, holds 'a sort of spiritual right in his volume'.

And in this book you can see both how and why.