THE NEW TRADITION IN BOOK PLATES

By Babette Deutsch

THE art of printing is something less than five hundred years old. A mediæval library was far less than a modern first edition, and it is not to be wondered at if books were considered a choicer rarity in those days than a glass of wine in these. There was something warming and exciting about owning a book, even in the early years of the printing press, something that went to the heart like a cordial. It is not for nothing that we find old books heavily bound and fastened with lock and key.

And it is natural, too, that the owners of books placed their seal upon these rich and bulky properties. But it is only in very recent times that a genuine art has grown up around the passions of the book lover. I mean, of course, the bookplate.

The average man who visualizes a bookplate probably sees a heap of books, a quill pen and a wise old owl, or perhaps an oil lamp burning through midnight, or a coat of arms. But of late years, and especially among some of the younger American artists, a new tradition is being developed. The modern maker of bookplates would as soon sketch in the worn out designs as he would name his child Habakkuk as being an old, high sounding name. It was well enough, in the old days, to stamp books with "gules and a lion rampant" or some such time honored emblem. But what true lover of books would mark them as one brands cattle?

"What a pity it is that all owners of books do not put their signatures on a fly-leaf!" writes Andrew Lang. "It is more interesting than a bookplate, and takes up less room. It is interesting to learn who have been our predecessors, and to trace them, perhaps for four hundred years, would be of exceeding interest. They might add the price they paid, and the place of purchase, as Sir Mark Sykes has done, in an Aldine 'Fustinus', in red

morocco, with yellow silk lining, *penes me*. But men have owned that book for nearly four centuries, and there is nothing to tell us who they were. Our predecessors shared our tastes, at all events, and if they had taken the trouble to write their names, they might receive from us, and we from them, a slight telepathic impact of a friendly character.

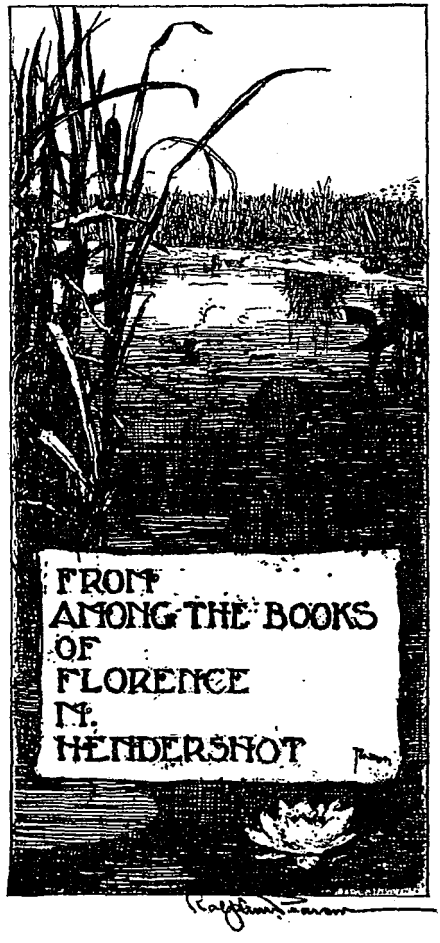
"Our old books are haunted things, but in an obscure way, when they lack signatures. Even marginal notes I own to liking."

One wonders what this genial scholar would have said to bookplates as good as signatures — nay, as confiding as marginal notes! For that is what the modern bookplate artist aims at. He is in a sense a veritable portrait painter. Some of the keenest of them declare that the personal aspect of their work is its chief charm. It gives the artist the pleasure of portraiture without limning his model's face. It gives the owner an expression of his personality as unique as himself. Ralph M. Pearson's work is remarkable for freshness of design and charm of execution. To him the appeal of the bookplate is that of an art "providing a natural set of boundaries, within which there is an unlimited field for individual expression both for the owner who, in selecting subject-matter typical of his own character, chooses boundaries for the artist within which he is, or should be, absolutely free, and for the artist who because of this freedom can bring to bear all of his creative ability."

Thus we find Pearson's bookplate for Albert and Margaret de Silver showing a Gothic arch through which one looks out upon the spires and towers of the great city, the dark figures in the foreground reminding one that the owners of these books are not buried so deep in literature but that they have a keen sense of life — the beauty and struggle of the artificial life of the cities. It reminds us, too, of Pennell's lovely etchings of "the unbelievable city". And for contrast we have the picture of the low — is it adobe? — house of Irving and Ione Scales, with the great tree before it, a feeling of terraces below, and the sun bursting through the clouds above. So, on the other hand, we have Thomas E. French's bookplate for Samuel Groenendyke McMeen, with its Scotch

thistle and Dutch tulip, its knights brave with bow and arrow, and the legend: "Il faut bien avoir deux cordes à son arc." For Mr. McMeen is a man of books whose interests go far beyond them, and whose hobby is archery. On the margin of Pearson's bookplate for Florence Lowden we find the history of her interests, which range apparently from plants and children to stars and paints and chemical retorts, not least being the horse and the squirrel and the honey bee.

It is curious to note that at least two exceptional bookplate artists have lived in regions remote from libraries. Pearson makes his home in the Ranches of Taos, New Mexico. H. Nelson Poole has been making bookplates as far from the haunts of civilization and Carnegie branches as the Hawaiian islands. As Pearson employs the New Mexican landscape of Indian desert and Spanish terraces, so Poole uses the lagoons and towering palms of the sea washed beaches. Recently he returned to the California coast. It will be worth while watching his progress there. When he was on the islands, people from the mainland were apt to be surprised by his designs, especially, the artist declared with ironic humor, that anything like them should come from a place that they generally regarded as semi-savage. His retirement to the islands had a touch of the Gauguin romance in it: for it was largely influenced by the artist's desire to get away from the barbarisms of the suburbs, from the reduction of life to certain standardized forms of which his chosen symbol is the Ford. Art does not travel in Fords. It may swoop forward in an aeroplane or go backward to once-upon-a-time in the seven league boots of the fairy tales. But it rejects what Poole also definitely rejects: a leveling to the commonplace and the mechanical.



Another bookplate artist who wanders far from the traditional path is Aaron Levy. The main contribution of his work is the obvious and interesting influence of European decorative art. With the true passion of the craftsman he designs his plates, engraves them on wood blocks and finally prints them on his own proof

press. His use of brilliant color in his plates gives them distinction and marks them as the work of a designer of posters. His bookplate for Ann Brown, who is an artist's model, has a design in soft browns and sepias, of a nude figure easily posed.

It is a far cry from the antique heraldic device to a bit of color pattern inspired by the gentle uses of advertisement. But it is a clue to the possible developments in bookplate designing. Not that the bookplate artist need imitate any current mode, but that the bookplate is no longer reflecting the past. Neither the owner nor the artist is longer content with dead symbols and dull mottoes. Owners of libraries are beginning to appreciate that the bookplate is not a family emblem so much as a personal mark. The calling card has replaced the totem of the tribe. The fact that the contemporary prefers to omit designs of books themselves is the clearest sign of the growth in this intimate and fascinating field. We learn thereby the owner's taste in life as well as in literature, and the scope of the artist is vastly amplified. That the public is becoming more generally engaged by this delightful art is evidenced by the increasing frequency of exhibitions.

The restrictions of the graver's art plus the flexibility of the designer's imagination, make for something at once firm and fine. A. D. French, Winifred Spencelly, and Sidney Smith have become names to conjure with among bookplate collectors. But it is the very young men and women, and often the merest amateurs working *con amore*, to whom we must look for the future of an art that is both decorative and personal. An art that should flourish immortally if, as the prophet declared, "of making many books there is no end". The experience of two thousand years inclines us to agree with him.