

Ex Libris: 20th Century Australian Bookplates

The History of Bookplates

A bookplate is a small, printed label typically affixed to the endpaper in the front of a book to register ownership and to designate provenance. These labels often bear the words *Ex Libris*, a Latin phrase meaning “from the library of”, followed by the name of the book’s owner. Bookplates tend to be highly decorative and feature various designs, crests, or mottos relating to the owner. Around the turn of the 20th century, bookplates became increasingly collectable, with those made for well-known persons of interest often more valuable than the book in which they are found.

Woodcut prints are the earliest printed examples of bookplates, emerging in the 15th century. Woodcuts are a form of relief print where the printmaker carves the negative space of an image away from a wood block. The resulting positive image or design remains on the surface, and when inked, the woodcut impresses or stamps the design onto paper.

Etching and lithography are other printmaking techniques commonly used to produce bookplates. Both techniques use chemical processes to produce a printed image. Etching is a form of intaglio printmaking where an artist

uses acid to burn into the surface of a metal plate. The ink pools into the corroded gouges etched into the plate, which is then pressed into the paper when run through a printing press.

Lithography reproduces images drawn with a greasy substance onto a stone plate. After treating the stone with an acid mixture to etch the surface, the oil-based inks only adhere to the areas of the original drawing, which is then transferred to paper. Bookplates are miniature artworks that demonstrate the skill and dexterity of artists and printmakers.

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Bookplate Artists: Adrian Feint & George David Perrottet

Adrian Feint (1894-1971), born in Narrandera, NSW, is known for his bold, vibrant paintings and woodcut prints of landscapes and still life flower arrangements. He studied at Sydney Art School and the Académie Julien in Paris, after which he trained with Modernist artists Thea Proctor and Margaret Preston. Feint is also a well-regarded bookplate designer, with examples

of his work included in significant early 20th-century bookplate exhibitions. Many of Feint's bookplates have found their way into major Australian collections, including the National Gallery of Australia and Art Gallery of New South Wales, revealing their artistic and cultural value.

George David (GD) Perrottet (1890-1971) is an amateur artist that spent his formative years in the Melbourne surrounds before moving to Sydney in 1928, where he began making bookplates. He produced over 200 bookplates during his career, which feature monochromatic compositions utilising rich swathes of colour and stylised designs. His preferred

printing process was linocut, a technique similar to woodcuts that substitutes a wood block for linoleum. In 1931, he joined the Ex Libris Society, and due to his experience as a practising accountant, he became their Honorary Treasurer.

UNSW Library Special Collections also includes bookplates commissioned for many notable figureheads. Feint and Perrottet both produced bookplates for the royal family. Feint's bookplate for Elizabeth, Duchess of York, who would later be known as the Queen Mother, features his signature flower motif. In 1935, Perrottet designed a bookplate for Princess Elizabeth of York who would later become Queen Elizabeth II.

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Bookplate Collector: P. Neville Barnett

P. Neville Barnett (1881-1953) was born in Christchurch, New Zealand and immigrated to Sydney with his parents as a child. He began a career in finance at the Bank of New South Wales before ill health caused him to retire in his 30s. Barnett developed a keen interest in bookplates and Japanese woodblock prints, and wrote, designed, and self-published works on the topics over several decades. He possessed a meticulous eye for detail and sourced

many of the finest materials for his publications, including handmade paper, German-type fonts, English vellum, and Japanese brocades. He often tipped in genuine colour plates by hand into his limited-edition publications.

Barnett was involved in the genesis of the Australian Ex Libris Society, which heralded a groundswell of interest in the Australian Ex Libris movement in the 1920s and 30s. This drew many local artists into the book-plating scene, with many of these works finding their way into Barnett's archive and publications. He was also affiliated with the New Zealand Ex Libris Society and the Los Angeles

chapter of Bookplate Association International. Barnett was an active author and publisher until his death in Sydney in 1953.

UNSW Library Special Collections holds three volumes of P. Neville Barnett's personal collection of bookplates, an excerpt of which can be found among the display cases of *Ex Libris: 20th Century Australian Bookplates*. In 1951, his friends commissioned a commemorative bookplate by artist Gayfield Shaw. Shaw's etching features a portrait of Barnett and a stack of his publications on bookplates and Japanese prints.

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Bookplate Clubs & Ex Libris Societies

In the late 19th century, artists, scholars, and hobbyists began collecting and researching bookplates, leading to the Ex Libris Society in London. It took until the early 20th century for an interest in bookplates to reach Australian shores, and in 1923, following an exhibition of bookplates at Tyrrell's Galleries in Sydney, the Australian Ex Libris Society emerged. John Lane Mullins led the formation of the Society and acted as its president until he died in 1939. Members

of the Society included P. Neville Barnett, an avid collector and scholar, and G.D. Perrottet, a prolific bookplate artist. The Australian Ex Libris Society lasted until Lane Mullins died in 1939, which, along with the outbreak of WWII, caused the group to fold. Over the 16 years the Society operated, it produced annual booklets cataloguing Australian bookplates and launched various limited-edition publications and journals.

The 1930s and 40s saw various short-lived bookplate clubs emerge around the country. The New South Wales Bookplate Club operated from 1932-1935, and the Australian Bookplate

Club launched in Victoria in 1941 and ran until 1944. Both clubs issued newsletters and publications cataloguing the work of eminent bookplate artists, also held in UNSW Library Special Collections.

The late 20th century saw a renewed interest in bookplates with the formation of the Australian Bookplate Society in 1997 and the New Australian Book Plate Society in 2005. The New Australian Book Plate Society is an active organisation, producing a quarterly newsletter and an annual general meeting that furthers the study and documentation of this diminutive art form.