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Launch of The New Australian Bookplate Society

By Elisabeth Bastian, Blackheath, NSW

The New Australian Bookplate Society was launched by bookplate expert and author Dr Mark Ferson with an exhibition of bookplates at Stop Laughing This is Serious Gallery, Blackheath, on Saturday 22 October 2005. The Society hopes to revive the art of personalised, artist-designed bookplates, or ex libris, and to provide an opportunity for those passionate about this miniature artform to share information as well as images.

Mark, who recently completed a thesis on the history of bookplates in Australia, was joined by Lyster Ormsby, the nephew of the Lyster Ormsby of an earlier generation who invented the wooden surf life saving reel and who suggested, back in 1923, the formation of the original Australian Ex Libris Society. They are hoping to revive the art of the bookplate which flourished in the 'golden period' from the 1890's to the 1930's — the same area in which most of the arts reacted to industrialisation and advocated the beauty of the personal and the handmade. In this period ownership of

a bookplate was both a mark of culture, a bibliophilic fashion statement and a personal expression of one's passions and interests. Patronage was secured at vice-regal level, and some notable Australian bookplates were gifted to the royal family. This was the time when three bookplate societies flourished, though briefly, and when art exhibitions frequently included a set of mounted bookplates. As well, a number of sumptuous books and smaller publications were produced at this time on aspects of bookplate history.

Almost a century after the pictorial bookplate became popular in Australia, bookplates continue to be commissioned and designed, and the exhibition accompanying the launch featured both historical and contemporary bookplates executed in a range of media — linocut, pen & ink, pyrography, woodcut, etching and giclee — by emerging and established Australian artists.

According to Dr Ferson, 'bookplates are both a beautiful design tradition worthy of historical study, and a contemporary expression



At the Society's launch, Blackheath, (l-r) Mark Ferson, Lis Bastian and Lyster Ormsby, whose uncle's wood-engraved bookplate by P Neville Barnett, is shown at left.

of a love for books and art. As a result of a groundswell of modern interest in designing or having a bookplate, a group of collectors and artists have come together to form the New Australian Bookplate Society. They are hoping that artists, booklovers and collectors will join to promote the Society's aims: to raise awareness of the art form and to bring together individuals with an interest in designing, owning, studying or collecting bookplates.'

Current bookplate happenings

Exhibition: 'The Print World of P Neville Barnett'

La Trobe University Art Museum, Glenn College, Bundoora Campus, **6 June to 14 July 2006**, curated by Dr Diane Kraal, PhD. *Email:* artmuseum@latrobe.edu.au

Sydney-based P Neville Barnett (1881–1953) wrote and published 24 limited edition art books in his lifetime. Barnett in his role as dealer, author and book designer was part of the Sydney milieu of print artists and enthusiasts from the 1930s to the 1950s. He developed an early interest in western-style bookplates, predominantly in the form of black and white prints. He was later drawn to the colourful and exotic world of Japanese woodblock prints, his other great passion. This exhibition presents wonderful examples of his superfine books, original bookplate prints by Australian artists, and a selection of Japanese woodblock prints from the old Barnett collection.

Report from the Auckland Ex Libris Society, May 2006

By Ian Thwaites, Dominion Road, Auckland

Auckland Ex Libris Society celebrated 2005 in style, with several stimulating meetings and a magnificent lunch staged at the historic home of Katherine Redshaw and Brendan Waters.

The noteworthy bibliographic happening of the year was the launch of Ian Thwaites

and Rie Fletcher's tribute to the Auckland Ex Libris Society, *75 years of bookplates: Auckland Ex Libris Society, 1930–2005*, printed for subscribers by John Denny at his Puriri Press in an edition of 75 copies. In addition to the generous number of bookplate reproductions the volume contains a register of members and detailed summaries of all the meetings held during the 75 years. A number of members of the Association of Hand Printers were present at the launch at Kinder House, as there are members who belong to both organisations. The visit by Dr Mark Ferson to the Society's Annual General Meeting in May 2005 was a highlight, and fittingly, *75 years of bookplates* lists over 50 bookplates displayed by Mark during his informative talk.

Out of town members continue to give enthusiastic support to our little society. They are John Allan of Masterton, artist Kate Hickey of Amberley Beach, North Canterbury, Professor David Skegg of Dunedin and of course Dr Mark Ferson of Sydney. In 2005, the Society gained two new Christchurch members: Gail Ross, who is completing a doctorate in art history on the topic of 'Printmaking in New Zealand, 1920–1950' and her husband Lawrence Roberts, an authority on typography.

Medical bookplates are a fascinating area for study. In April 2005 Ian Thwaites gave a talk to the Auckland Medical History Society on 'New Zealand medical bookplates', showing over 30 examples. Many of the early members of the Auckland Ex Libris Society were associated with the medical profession, whilst artists such as Hilda Wiseman and Mervyn Taylor created many fine examples for doctors. One of the plates chosen to illustrate the talk was the line drawing by John C Hutton who later designed the ninety plate-glass panels forming the west screen of the rebuilt Coventry Cathedral.

Jim McCready of Dunedin was the distinguished editor for many years of the *New Zealand Armorialist*, journal of the New Zealand branch of the Heraldry Society. For many years Jim has collected and studied armorial bookplates and is gathering

examples and information for a projected book with the title of *New Zealand heraldic bookplates*. Jim has delighted many friends in recent years with skillful and attractive ex libris designs. Recently some of his work was shown in a small display of 'Bookplates and bookplate literature' organised by the Auckland Ex Libris Society at Kinder House, Auckland. Readers may like to know of a recent publication by Jim McCready, entitled 'Some Bookplates in the Hocken Collection' in number 52 of *Welcome to the Hocken: Bulletin of the Friends of the Hocken Collections*, November 2005. Copies may be obtained from Friends of the Hocken Collection, PO Box 6336, Dunedin, NZ.

Blanche Milligan's bookplate letters

By Mark Ferson, Lane Cove, Sydney

An unforeseen, and exciting, by-product of the launch of the New Australian Bookplate Society in Blackheath in October 2005, at least to this far-gone bookplate historian, was the unearthing of a box of letters formerly belonging to Sydney collector Blanche Milligan. After the notice of the launch and exhibition appeared in the *Blue Mountains Gazette*, the writer received a phone call from Blanche's niece, who offered the letters for sale. In early January I duly made the visit and concluded the transaction to the satisfaction of both seller and buyer, and brought the letters home with the hope of filling some of the missing pieces in the jigsaw puzzle which is the history of Australian bookplates in the golden period from the 1890s to the 1950s.

Margaret Blanche Milligan (1863–1947), one time midwife of the Crown Street Womens' Hospital, Sydney, was one of our earliest bookplate collectors. She was an assiduous, and often assertive, letter writer in pursuit of bookplate exchanges. The collection comprises approximately 60 complete or fragmentary letters and bookplate society notices dated between 1912 and 1934. It can roughly be divided into two groups: correspondence with



Engraved bookplate for Blanche Milligan by W P Barrett, London, 1912.

Australian bookplate collectors and artists; and correspondence with American collectors. Sadly, this minor treasure must have been only a small fraction of Blanche's entire bookplate correspondence, the remainder presumably dispersed, lost or discarded. See, for example, her letters of 1938–39 to another early Australian collector, Jane Windeyer, described in the late John Fletcher's *The Jane Windeyer bookplate collection in the University of Sydney Library. A catalogue*, (Sydney, Book Collectors' Society of Australia, 1990).

Of the Australian letters, the treasure box includes multiple items of correspondence from bookplate collector and promoter P Neville Barnett, from artist-collectors George D Perrottet and Ella Dwyer, from collector E G Boreham and from eminent artist Elioth Gruner. In addition there are single letters from a number of collectors and artists such as Jane Shaw on behalf of her husband, etcher G Gayfield Shaw; and from printmaker Ethel Spowers.

These letters reveal some (perhaps not world-shattering) bookplate secrets not previously known to this writer, at least. Barnett's pivotal role in encouraging other collectors is supported by his letter to Blanche which recalls how he started her

on the road to bookplate collecting. There is also an account dated 22 October 1912 from society stationers John & Edward Bumpus, 350 Oxford Street, London, addressed to P Neville Barnett Esqre. Several of Blanche's bookplates date from 1912, one of them a delicate engraved plate signed by W P Barrett, who headed the bookplate department of this prestigious London firm (see left). Barnett undoubtedly arranged the execution of this bookplate for Blanche in London, as he had himself commissioned an engraved 'WPB' bookplate the same year. Based on the quality and status of such designs he was able to exchange bookplates with collectors across the globe. Accordingly, he advised Australian collectors to commission a bookplate of this standard, as the gateway to the international bookplate world, even if they, like him, were forced to scrape pennies together.

Carried away with the enthusiasm caught from Neville Barnett, Blanche commissioned two additional personal bookplates in 1912, an etching from Lionel Lindsay and a pen-and-ink design from *Bulletin* artist D H Souter. Significantly, there is an undated letter from artist Elioth Gruner, in which he recalls that he had arranged for Lindsay to design Blanche's bookplate 'many years ago ... in a little shop in Bligh St'. In the absence of any functioning bookplate society in either Australia or the United Kingdom, around 1915 Blanche joined the American Bookplate Society, and various of the Society's notices are nestled among her letters.

This is all that remains of the evidence of the first period of Australian bookplate collecting, which I believe was terminated by the First World War. Blanche's remaining letters date from that bookplate heyday marked by the existence of the Australian Ex Libris Society (1923–1939). Many of the letters are from fellow collectors seeking bookplate exchanges. However, the five letters from G D Perrottet dated between October 1931 and March 1932 give insights into the precariousness of things in the years after the Great Depression, and the importance of bookplates as a source of

income for a gifted designer. Over this short period, Perrottet recounts how he has been encouraged (probably by Neville Barnett) to collect bookplates; has provided original bookplates for Barnett to tip into his self-published *Pictorial Book-plates* (1931); and how he is too impecunious to afford to join the Australian Ex Libris Society:

... times are too bad, and the needs of my family too multitudinous for me to be able to pay away subscriptions, so I am perforce waiting until business improves, and my income recovers from the buffets it has received in the last 18 months.

Perrottet's last letter to Blanche in this collection, dated 16 March 1932, strikes an optimistic note, for both his financial position and social life:

I have had two or three commissions for bookplates lately, and on the strength of them I joined the Society, for which I am very glad, as I have met several congenial people, most of whom I gather are also friends of yours...

Which brings us neatly back to Blanche Milligan, whose American letters must be the subject of a future essay.



Undated photograph of Blanche Milligan with her fox terrier which featured on her later bookplates.

Designer profile

No. 1: Mary Keep

One of the aims of The New Australian Bookplate Society is to raise the profile of bookplate design as a contemporary activity, and to facilitate the connections between artists and those who wish to commission bookplates, and with other artists.

This is not so strange, or hopeless, a desire as it might seem. Australian interest in the artform had been kicked off in the 1890s by one or two patrons who in turn had been influenced by extensive promotion of the new pictorial bookplate style by the *Studio* magazine. The revival of interest in printmaking after the First World War reignited the spark, so that in the 1920s and 1930s, the making of bookplates in Sydney became an art movement in all but name, and was practiced by a large number of artists, many of whom had trained with Julian Ashton at the Sydney Art School.

So to turn to modern times, we have great pleasure in providing a brief profile of Mary Keep, who is not only a bookplate artist, but also the designer of this *Newsletter*, and we



Linocut bookplate on mulberry paper for Virginia Dummett by Mary Keep, Sydney, 1989.

hope of many more to come. We thus feel it most appropriate to feature Mary in the first issue of the *Newsletter*.

Mary grew up in Cronulla, and in the late 1970s studied Fashion and Textile Design at Sydney College of the Arts. She was employed in a range of creative jobs, such as making windsurfer sails and ballet shoes, and in the early 1980s, she worked as a wardrobe assistant in Australian films and TV. In the mid-1980s Mary moved in the direction of book and magazine design: first book designer for an educational publisher, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, then Art Director of a craft magazine called *Handmade* in the mid-1990s, five years as a designer on *The Women's Weekly Cookbooks*, and currently Photo Editor on *Qantas Magazine*.

In Mary's own words:

I first became aware of and interested in bookplates when I was at college. The first bookplates I designed were two linocuts (see illustrations) for friends. One for Virginia Dummett who loves books and cats. The other for Ric Taylor whose family referred to him as 'Bear' and he is a Cancerian, wears glasses and is passionate about books and writing. When designing a bookplate I like to use images and symbols that tell you something about the owner. Now that I am freelancing and have a little more time on my hands I would like to do more bookplates and try other media, such as pen and ink, and hopefully, master computer illustration.

Not surprisingly, Mary has a range of other interests of a refined nature (the ones she is admitting to, anyway): books; cinema; theatre; costume design; all things Art Deco (you may have noticed a touch of this style in the *Newsletter* masthead); mah jong; children's toys etc, etc.

Mary may be contacted on 02 9558 8449 or marykeep8@hotmail.com

Editorial

Thus ends the first issue of *The New Australian Bookplate Society Newsletter*. I would like to record my thanks for contributions to Elisabeth Bastian and Ian Thwaites, and especially to Mary Keep for her wonderful design of the *Newsletter*. We plan to issue the *Newsletter* on a regular basis, perhaps four times a year.

If you have any ideas for material you would like to submit or otherwise see published in the *Newsletter* please get in touch with the Editor.

The next step is to organise the inaugural meeting of the Society where we will develop a simple constitution, elect office bearers and decide such things as subscription fees and services to members. You will find inserted in this *Newsletter* a form to be returned if you are interested in joining the Society.



Linocut bookplate on mulberry paper for Ric Taylor by Mary Keep, Sydney, 1991.

Any bookplate designer wishing to be the subject of a Designer profile or to have work reproduced in the *Newsletter* should contact the Editor on 02 9428 2863 or by email.

The Society's website may be found if you go to www.stoplaughing.com.au and click on the Society link.

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