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O'Hagan, L. orcid.org/0000-0001-5554-4492 (2020) Social posturing in the Edwardian bookplate, 1901-1914. *The Book Collector*, 2020 (04). ISSN 0006-7237

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Social Posturing in the Edwardian Bookplate, 1901-1914

LAUREN O'HAGAN

While the chief purpose of a bookplate is to express ownership, marking possession is, in fact, just one of its many communicative functions. Bookplates often involve a reiteration or performance of a person's existing identity and status, but they can also forge new identities and statuses, which are dependent on the roles and relationships between owners, inscribers and readers, and which guides how the self is displayed and interpreted. Self-presentation was particularly important in Edwardian Britain, as the period was one of intense class struggle marked by a heightened awareness of class consciousness. As the lower classes sought social mobility and access to power, the upper classes fought to hold onto the 'hallowed structure' of British society. As a result, social posturing – overt displays of status associated with a condition higher than one's own – became essential. Aware of the book's liminal position as a semi-public object, many Edwardians saw bookplates as a chief way to carry out this act.

The Democratisation of the Bookplate

Traditionally, bookplates were the stronghold of the upper classes who commissioned artists to custom design armorials with heraldic symbols relating to their family heritage or typographical designs that used ciphers or rebuses to indicate their family name. These bookplates typically cost between £20 and £50. During the late nineteenth century, as the Victorian concern for respectability grew, book owners began to recognise the potential of bookplates as identity markers. This led to the emergence of pictorial forms, which were characterised by large images that reflected elements of the tastes, temperaments and dispositions of their owners. According to Temple Scott,¹ pictorials were directly responsible for filtering down bookplate usage to the middle classes.

Keen to profit from the widespread growth of bookplates amongst a new middle-class audience, stationers and booksellers started to offer bookplate design as an in-house service. While this was a cheaper option than appointing an artist, the 1890 pattern book of the London-based J & E Bumpus lists bookplates varying from £2 to £30 in price, which indicates that they were still by no means affordable to all.

By the beginning of the Edwardian era, the application of newspaper print methods and machinery prompted the creation of mass-produced bookplates. Typically, the image or typography for these bookplates was designed by an anonymous artist, and then sent to stationers or booksellers, who would add it to their pattern catalogues. Then, customers seeking a bookplate visited the shop and browsed the pattern catalogues to find a design that they liked. The design was then engraved and printed with a blank space for the customer to fill in their own name. In some shops, the designs were mass-printed and displayed on the shop floor for customers to browse and purchase. Varying in price between 2s 6d and 6s,

¹ Temple Scott, 1902. 'The Artistic Bookplate'. In: Macey Stone, W. ed. *Bookplates of Today*. New York: Donnele & Co, p. 20.

mass-produced bookplates were more affordable to the general public. In fact, many booksellers sold batches of 100 for 17s 6d. This drastically changed the bookplate market, enabling many members of the newly literate working classes to afford them for the first time.

The democratisation of the bookplate meant that owning one no longer symbolised status in itself. Now, owners had to draw upon their range of verbal and visual devices to assert themselves in a social space and set themselves apart from others. While this assertion was often legitimate when coming from the upper classes, many members of the lower classes had to resort to social posturing. In a society in which everything was organised around the concept of class, these strategies of distinction played an important role in codifying social difference and taste differentiation.

The Fake Armorial

A direct consequence of the democratisation of the bookplate was the rise of the fake armorial. Traditionally, only men with a right to a coat of arms could use armorials. However, the growth of stationer-designed bookplates jeopardised this conventional practice, as no effort was made to ensure that the heraldry was accurate, or that the owner was entitled to bear arms. As the stationer was most likely concerned with making profit than upholding tradition, he would not have questioned any claim. These plain armorials were derogatively labelled “die-sinkers” by the upper classes in reference to the fact that they were made from steel engravings and produced with little artistic flair.

This is apparent from the example of the armorial bookplate owned by Maude Goff. First and foremost, as a woman, Maude had no legitimate claim to a coat of arms. The rules of the College of Arms state that “coats of arms must be descended in the legitimate male line from a person to whom arms were granted or confirmed in the past.” Secondly, archival records show that Maude Goff was a housemaid and daughter of an agricultural labourer. Although she rose up the social scale to lower-middle-class upon her marriage to a shopkeeper in 1907, she did not have the financial or social means to possess an authentic armorial bookplate.

Furthermore, closer inspection of the elements of Goff’s bookplate reveal that they are largely an assortment of pseudo-heraldic symbols that do not adhere to the fixed rules of heraldry. The crest, for example, is the non-characteristic red squirrel. Here, the squirrel serves as a rebus rather than a real emblem, ‘Goff’ deriving from a Welsh nickname for someone with red hair. The shield itself shows an unusual blending of two coats of arms: a chevron containing two fleur-de-lis and a lion, and a quarterly containing a lion. Although the symbols on the left are historically associated with the Goff family, the College of Arms database shows no connection between this coat of arms and Maude Goff’s own family. Likewise, the College of Arms database contains no examples of the symbols on the right, suggesting that the colours and images were chosen at random rather than based on any historical laws. Knowing this information, there is a certain irony in the motto “fier sans tache” (spotlessly proud), which boldly suggests that Goff has nothing to hide.

While social posturing has often been associated with the lower-middle classes, even those in a somewhat high social position still sought to climb the social ladder and saw armorial bookplates as a symbolic means to do so. Like Goff, Langford Lovell Price, an economist and examiner in the moral sciences tripos at Cambridge University, also combined erroneous symbols to create his own armorial. Again, the College of Arms database confirms that Price was never legally entitled to a coat of arms. This may explain why, despite having the financial means to afford an artist-designed bookplate, Price opted instead for an armorial designed by a stationer.

The dubitable authenticity of Price's bookplate is reflected in the various attributes of the coat of arms that, in fact, come from the lineage of the Vaughans, not the Prices. The Vaughans were an ancient Welsh family originating from Brycheiniog (now part of Powys), who were granted a coat of arms in the fourteenth century when Roger Vaughan died at the Battle of Agincourt defending King Henry V. *The Book of Baglan* asserts that this coat of arms was inspired by the legend that three sons in the Vaughan family were born with an adder around their necks. Price has also drawn upon the Vaughan's own heraldry in his choice of colours, the crossed horizontal and vertical lines on the shield's background representing sable and the dotted fess representing gold. He has also adopted a fourteenth-century English shield, which may have been chosen deliberately for its associations with Roger Vaughan's death at Agincourt.

Working and socialising in an upper-class environment, Price may have felt the need to fit in and used social posturing to do so. Given his relatively high social status and reputation, it is likely that most Edwardians who came into contact with Price's book would have accepted his bookplate at face value, and thus accorded him with the corresponding cultural capital. In contrast, the bookplates of lower-middle-class Edwardians, such as Maude Goff, may have been subject to greater scepticism. This suggests that those who begin with particular forms of capital, whether economic or intellectual, are advantaged from the outset.

The Self-Made Bookplate

For those Edwardians who could not afford custom-made bookplates but did not wish to use mass-produced bookplates, there was one other available option: make their own. These self-made bookplates were largely used by the lower-middle classes and functioned as symbolic status indicators that served to distinguish them from the working classes, while approximating to the class above them. They are a perfect example of what Charles Masterman cynically calls "empty symbols of prosperity,"² as they index wealth, even if the owner often experienced financial difficulties to maintain this appearance.

Self-made bookplates were typically created from business cards or calling cards. These cards were chosen because they shared many characteristics with traditional booklabels (e.g. lack of bordering and image, rectangular shape, central position of the

² Charles Masterman, 1909. *The Condition of England*. London: Methuen, p. 59.

owner's name), so they could be easily transferred into this new context without anybody realising their original purpose. The recontextualisation of business cards or calling cards was particularly common amongst clerks (see the example of Fred Dane, clerk) and may have been a defensive response to a sense of threat. Therefore, while we may read these self-made bookplates as a sign of their wish to signal wealth associated with a condition higher than their own, these marks can often, in fact, betray their anxiety and uncertainty at belonging. Johnathan Wild³ believes this search for belonging was one reason why the office clerk was at the forefront of the successful recruitment drive for soldiers at the outbreak of the First World War. He argues that the qualities of team spirit, which the office environment had inspired, helped to foster a group mentality centred around heroism that resulted in clerks joining up *en masse*.

For shopkeepers, self-made bookplates were typically made from shop paper bags. Owners cut their names out and affixed them to the endpapers of books (see the example of William Straw, grocer). Like business cards, shop paper bags also shared a physical similarity with booklabels, which made them easily transferrable. However, their true nature still risked being exposed if scrutinised closely.

Thus, the lower-middle classes had an ambiguous position in the social structure of Edwardian society: they were predisposed to equate material objects, such as bookplates, with social status and wealth, yet, as their bookplates were mere performative constructs of an unattainable social mobility, they were deprived of the actual benefits associated with a recognised status.

Feigned Erudition

For Edwardians with more disposable income, custom-designed bookplates offered an opportunity for them to posture their educational level. It was not uncommon, for example, for pictorial bookplates to show shelves of books by canonical authors or images of literary figures to communicate the message that the owner was well-educated. This is particularly apparent in the bookplate of Bertha Johnson, the principal of the Association of Home Students (St Anne's College, University of Oxford). Her choice of image and quote come from John Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies* – a book that had a tremendous influence as a self-help book for middle-class Edwardians. The quotes used are preceded in *Sesame and Lilies* by “Will you go and gossip with your housemaid or your stableboy when...” and “jostle with the hungry and common crowd for entrée here, and audience there, when all this while...” When read through the context of the bookplate, it becomes apparent that the owner is expressing her distaste for communicating with the labouring classes, thereby equating herself with a higher status than she truly possesses.

Multilingual messages were also used frequently by some Edwardians to imply that they had knowledge of several languages and thus were intelligent. However, these multilingual inscriptions are often incorrectly transcribed. The bookplate of Edward Andrew

³ Johnathan Wild, 2006. *The Rise of the Office Clerk in Literary Culture, 1880-1939*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, p. 124.

Donaldson, for example, has the message “it is the wickedeth who borroweth and payeth not again” written in English, Latin, Greek and Hindi around its borders. The Greek and Hindi examples, however, are grammatically inaccurate. As with most cases of social posturing, the owner’s concern is with the identity display itself rather than the actual message. Most people who came into contact with this bookplate were likely to presume that Donaldson was multilingual, not aware of the fact that he memorised (albeit incorrectly) set phrases and copied them from elsewhere. In addition, the fact that Donaldson was a Church of England clergyman also gave him an additional authority that strengthened his posited claims in the bookplate. Like Price’s fake armorial, the example indicates that even those in a high position of power still felt the need to social posture in competition with the classes above them.

Weapons of Social Distinction

Throughout the Edwardian era, personal possessions were treated as weapons of social distinction that spoke to the outside world of a person’s social status. Consequently, those with the financial means used their bookplates to showcase their homes, furniture and ornaments to anybody who came into contact with their book. The bookplate of Mabel St. Oswald, a baroness and the wife of Rowland Winn, a Conservative politician and baron, is a clear example of this. St. Oswald’s bookplate shows an image of her house, Nostell Priory, and her large collection of furniture, which was all made exclusively for the house by Thomas Chippendale. Modern-day images of the house, now a National Trust property, show that the image is a faithful replica of the room. This was not true in all cases, however. As these bookplates were privately commissioned, owners could choose what elements to include and what elements to miss out, or even add details that did not really exist in order to reflect on themselves favourably in posterity. A case in point is the bookplate of Edith Bessie Cook, a headmistress from Leeds. Not only does it show furnishings and decorations outside of her financial means and social status, but it also displays a self-portrait in a mode of dress associated with the class above her.

Self-portraits offered overt opportunities to social posture, using clothing, jewellery and hairstyles. Owners often chose to depict themselves as saints or historical figures, or made themselves more handsome or pretty than they actually were. Indeed, the four corners of Mabel St Oswald’s bookplate uses figures from Ancient Rome to represent her, her husband, her daughter and her son.

The democratisation of the bookplate offered an unprecedented opportunity for Edwardians of all classes to use verbal and visual symbols to express social status and a desire for upward mobility. Nonetheless, it is clear that even social posturing was nuanced, as each class group was constrained by the modes and affordances available to them. For this reason, lower-class social posturing was centered largely around the recontextualisation of personal possessions and fabricated coats of arms, while upper-class social posturing was linked to custom-made designs, using multiple foreign languages, personal possessions or self-portraits.

The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 played a major role in the erosion of hierarchical British society by creating many 'temporary gentlemen'. As upper- and lower-class men became united in their fight against Germany, the need to use bookplates to distinguish oneself from one another reduced dramatically. After the War, its economic consequences and subsequent worldwide financial collapse in 1929 led to the gradual disappearance of personalised and custom-designed bookplates, as cheaper, mass-produced designs came to replace them. These designs offered limited possibilities for creativity. As a result, social posturing began to be indexed in other ways, whether through kitchen appliances, cars or clothing.

Today, social posturing has found a new avenue on social media where, much like bookplates, users project favourable images of themselves to gain prestige and status amongst peers. However, this social posturing is not concerned with pecuniary wealth or cultural capital. Instead, it is heavily bound up with 'virtue signalling', whereby users express moral values primarily with the intent of enhancing social standing. Despite their different goals, these actions suggest that, just like in Edwardian Britain, many people still pay more attention to their outward appearance over their actual self-created identity.



