

Editor/President

Dr Mark Ferson
4 Sofala Ave
Riverview NSW 2066
0401 141 890
m.ferson@unsw.edu.au

Secretary

Bronwyn Vost
bronwynvost@bigpond.com

Designer

Mary Keep
PO Box 555
Dulwich Hill NSW 2203
tnabs_mkeep@hotmail.com



A wedding in bookplates

Bronwyn Vost, Sydney

I have entitled my talk ‘A wedding in bookplates’, for reasons which will become obvious a bit later on. I am here today not at all because I know a lot about bookplates but because I was the lucky inheritor of a marvellous collection of them which belonged to my grandmother, Del Lindsay. The bulk are from the 1930s. Del was a favourite niece of Eirene Mort’s lifelong companion Nora Weston. Del was close to Eirene as well as to Nora, and both were considered ‘family’ in my family and known simply as ‘The Aunts’.

The heart of my grandmother’s bookplate collection consists of 76 of the 91 plates designed and executed by Eirene in her lifetime. The rest comprises a fine sample of the bookplates made or owned by the members of the Australian Ex

Libris Society in the 1930s (the ‘Golden Age’ of Australian bookplate making), when Del and Eirene were both members. Members engaged in very serious and formal transactions with each other, advertising their holdings and carrying out exchanges — all by ‘snail mail’, of course.

Eirene was one of the stars among the bookplate creators in the Society (or THE star, I believe), and my grandmother had four great bargaining chips up her sleeve in her exchanging deals — two plates of her own created by Eirene and one for her husband (this is my grandfather, Bill Lindsay, and we will hear more about him in a minute). She also had a personal plate done by George D Perrotet.

This wonderful collection of plates I pored over as a young person even before I inherited



Wood engraving by Margaret Oppen for Eirene Mort and Nora Weston, c. 1933

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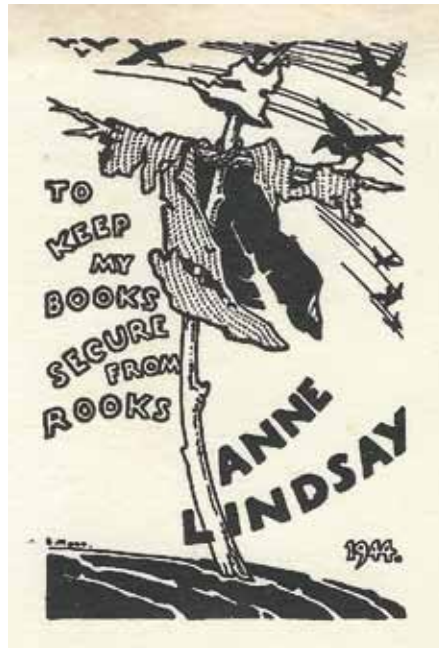


Process design from pen-and-ink by Eirene Mort for David Rees, 1945

it. Names like John Lane Mullins, Margaret Oppen, Adrian Feint, Ella Dwyer and George Perrottet soaked into my consciousness. When my grandmother died, she left the entire collection to me and it has been since then my most treasured possession. The miniature perfection of the artworks, the necessity for good design, the idea of summing up a person's life in one image all appealed to me then and still do now.

I thought this was just a private world until I Googled 'bookplates' and encountered the New Australian Bookplate Society. Suddenly I had found people who knew the same names and loved the same things as I did. I even found the granddaughters of John Lane Mullins and Margaret Oppen! Now, for my sins, I have been made Honorary Secretary. Our Society has great fun together (as all these strange little societies have) under the enormously erudite leadership of our President, Dr Mark Ferson. It produces a really beautiful *Newsletter* thanks to him and our 'resident' designer, Mary Keep.

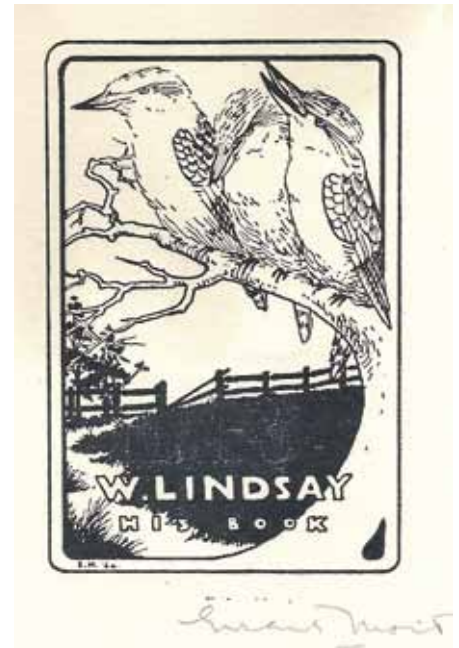
To get back to the 1930s — it wasn't only the ready availability that interested my grandmother in Eirene's work in particular. She thought it was superb, and so do I. I have



Process design from pen-and-ink by Eirene Mort for Anne Lindsay, 1944

always been enchanted by Eirene's mastery of design, but not until Pam Lane's talk last week did I hear some of the principles that informed that design. Eirene liked to use nature, and always Australian plants and animals — 'gumnut deco' as it is now sometimes rather disrespectfully referred to. Nature, but improved-upon nature. She understood that you could use the beautiful lines of a plant without necessarily wanting to make it look completely lifelike. Eirene also often revealed her awesome sense of humour, and always her deft summing up of personality, in her bookplates. I defy you to look at the image of Miriam Chisholm, without a chuckle, and without deciding exactly what sort of person she was.

And now at last we come to the wedding. When we were moving our mother Helen, Del's daughter, from her own home into residential care earlier this year, my sisters and I found a poem in a box. None of us had ever seen it before. Though we were mystified by a few details, we worked out (as was later confirmed by Mum) that the poem was written by Eirene and described our parents' wedding. **And the fascinating thing about the poem that makes it relevant for this talk is that Eirene produced bookplates for no less than ten of the wedding guests that I know of, and all but one are in this exhibition.**



Process design from pen-and-ink by Eirene Mort for W Lindsay, 1924

Mum is 96 now, and although her memory is a bit frayed in parts, in other parts it is remarkably clear. In fact, we're hearing stories now that we've never heard before but that turn out to be true in verifiable ways.

One of the mystifying details within the poem was that Mum apparently hadn't been given away by her father, but by an 'Uncle John'. It seemed unlikely, since Mum and her father adored each other, but was this true, we asked her? Yes it was, apparently. Her father had been laid low that day by his dreadfully weakened lungs, a legacy of the pneumonia that had almost killed him whilst a soldier in World War I. Uncle John Mason, whom we always knew as Uncle *Jock*, was co-opted as giver-away at the last minute and had to borrow an ill-fitting suit, held up by braces and scarcely able to be buttoned at the front. (Uncle Jock & his family had travelled from Tumut to the wedding, which was in Cootamundra, & obviously he wasn't equipped with a sufficiently formal suit.)

Another mystifying detail involved the wedding dress. We had always known that Mum's dress was a frock of Eirene's. This was June 1945, and rationing was in full swing. No-one could buy material for a wedding dress, so Eirene produced a gorgeous satin number that she had worn to a garden

party at Buckingham Palace in her young days in London in the late 1800s. But the poem describes a certain problem with the petticoat — was this true, we asked Mum? Apparently, yes! She trod on it early on in the wedding & could feel it threatening to detach itself all the way through. Mum still has the dress, and was going to lend it for this exhibition, but unfortunately it's far too fragile and disintegrates a bit more every time it comes out of its box. So, this much we know is true. How much else, you can make up your own minds. All I can say is that from my memory of her, Eirene had a terrific sense of humour and a very vivid imagination.

Now we come to the actual bookplates

David Rees — The bridegroom. I was thrilled when I first saw that this exhibition included a preliminary sketch for Dad's plate. I'm hoping that Caren Florance's talk [which followed Bronwyn's talk] will enlighten me about how Eirene would have got from there to the final bookplate. Eirene made an image of Dad that I believe matched his character at the time and later in life as well (I think my sister Jenny who is here today will corroborate this). He had a youthfully hopeful quality to his nature that persisted all his life, despite having trained as a soldier in World War II. He luckily never had to kill anyone, the War having ended just weeks before he was due to be dropped behind enemy lines. He is portrayed on a winged white charger, and the Rees family motto 'Spes melioris avi' ('Hope is Better than Wings') is emblazoned on his pennant. He was certainly Mum's white knight for more than 50 years and a father who never failed in courageous defence of his daughters.

John Wharton Mason — Uncle John, the giver-away. Husband of Del's sister Molly, Uncle Jock was a doctor, a fisherman and a humourist like all the Masons. Have a close look at this image when you can. You can tell that he was a humourist by the sceptical look in the eyes of the fish.

Anne Lindsay — one of the bridesmaids. Mum's sister Anne. Anne was always a rebel and would fight anyone who even looked like nicking anything that she had a claim to. The wording is 'To keep my books secure from rooks'.



Process design from pen-and-ink by Eirene Mort for herself, 1911

E M Lindsay — the bride's mother. Del's two bookplates are firstly an etched sailing ship (referring to her First Fleet ancestry — Johnston of the Rum Rebellion) and secondly a woodcut of wonderful sea horses. You might think that they refer to a love of the ocean, but I believe that they are more a reference to her love of the race track, as evidenced by the fact that her George D Perrottet plate depicts this quite explicitly. The horse bookplate is represented in this exhibition by the woodblock from which it was printed. It is just at the door at the entrance.

W Lindsay — The bride's father. This is the one bookplate that isn't in the exhibition. These benign and jovial kookaburras sum up Mum's father beautifully. He acquired the name Bill when he arrived in Cootamundra and was announced as Mr W Lindsay. It was typical of him that he never corrected people and told them that his name was actually Walter, not William.

Muriel Parker and Thea Parker. Mother and daughter, are both depicted in their bookplates by dogs.

Nora Weston was at the wedding, but does not get a mention in the poem. Eirene made three bookplates for Nora over the years, two of them referencing her First Fleet ancestry with a sailing ship. My



Wood engraving by Eirene Mort for N[ora] K[ate] W[eston], 1914

favourite by far is the one with the rather heraldic-looking wings and woodworking tool.

Charles Weston was at the wedding but also does not get a mention. He was Del's first cousin but was also married to her sister Gwen. His plate is one of Eirene's many very attractive heraldic ones that used the Weston coat of arms.

Miriam Chisholm (referred to as Maryanne Chislewitt in the poem) - a friend of Eirene's & Del's. We have already had a look at her delightful platypus bookplate, which I had to print out because it is represented in this exhibition only by its woodblock.

The Bride's adopted Great-Aunt mentioned in the poem was **Eirene Mort** herself. Eirene did five bookplates for herself over 30 years, beginning with this extraordinary little mouse or rat in 1902. My favourite is the more stylised gum tree, a process plate from 1911, which was also made as an etching. The kangaroo swaggie etching is also from that year. The wood engraving of three gum leaves was done in 1933.

While we are on the subject of plates for Eirene — my real favourite is not one by her, but by her friend Margaret Oppen. It depicts the Aunts, Eirene and Nora, at work



Exhibition floor case 1b
(photo: B Vost)

at their intaglio press, and as the caption says, ‘it conveys the nature of their mutually beneficial partnership’.

I encourage you to find and take a closer look at the actual bookplates after Caren’s talk. The one disappointing thing is that you won’t find a bookplate for the bride, because one was never made.

[This is an edited version of the floor talk given on Wednesday, 6 December 2017 by Bronwyn in association with the exhibition Eirene Mort: A Livelihood, held at the Canberra Museum and Art Gallery from 30 September 2017 to 25 February 2018; Bronwyn was followed by Caren Florance, an artist and printer well known to the Society, who spoke on Eirene’s printmaking processes and approach to bookplate design. Unfortunately we do not have room to print the poem ‘A wedding there was’, but we will look at appending it to the web version of the Newsletter. Kindly contact the author or Editor if you would like a copy.]

Peter Vangioni’s Stanhope press bookplate

Jürgen Wegner, Librarian, Sydney

Collecting thematic bookplates has been around probably as long as there have been bookplates. Or at least since bookplates also became pictorial. (A modern and plebeian form of the earlier heraldry?) And there are plenty of books around on bookplates with owls, dogs, nudes and the like. I’ve recently bought one on the subject of the bookplates of Irish doctors. While I do not collect bookplates as such, these things accumulate. But I do collect two kinds whenever I can. One is the bookplates produced by private presses, fine and letterpress printers. The other is more unusual and very much a niche area of bookplate collecting: bookplates depicting anything to do with the printing and related trades — printing, paper and type making — including those with illustrations of printing presses on them.

It is surprising just how many private presses there have been in Christchurch, New Zealand. It is after all a relatively

small place. From memory there have been the After Hours Press, Caxton Press, Huntsbury Press, Nags Head Press, Templar Press, Wynkyn Press and now Peter Vangioni’s Kowhai Press. Vangioni is a curator at the Christchurch Art Gallery but his passion is not only printing but also printing presses, especially the early iron hand presses. He recently published a study on the early printing presses of the infant settlement around Christchurch titled *A thousand pities: being a history of the first printing presses in Canterbury, New Zealand* (Christchurch: Gaol Press, 2014). The Gaol Press is a new sub-imprint and an allusion to early printing by inmates at the prison at nearby Lyttelton (the old port of Christchurch). The study includes an account of several of these historic early presses held but destroyed by a museum in the Fifties including a Columbian and a Stanhope, possibly as landfill!

The Stanhope was an early printing press invented by the third Earl of Stanhope around 1800. This and the other early iron hand presses gradually replaced the old wooden or ‘common’ presses that had been in use up till then, since the days of Gutenberg. Needless to say, Vangioni is a bit of a fan of Stanhopes — to the extent that he has even bought one to print on. Stanhope presses are rare today, but he has now been able to trace about fifty or so, half of Continental manufacture.

A great deal of private press printing is ephemeral — cards, flyers, posters and the like. Printers often also produce stationery items for themselves such as letterheads and even self addressed envelopes. Bookplates are another. Vangioni recently produced a very few copies of a bookplate designed and printed by him for books in his personal collection. One of these he has sent to me. The bookplate is a revised version of the linocut he did for the cover of the *A thousand pities*, and shows a frontal view of the Stanhope press that was originally used to print the *Lyttelton Times*. Vangioni’s own Stanhope is a late model Tissier made in Paris in 1852. A very collectable private press bookplate but also one of that rare genre of bookplates — those depicting printing presses.

Looking backward and looking forward (a little)

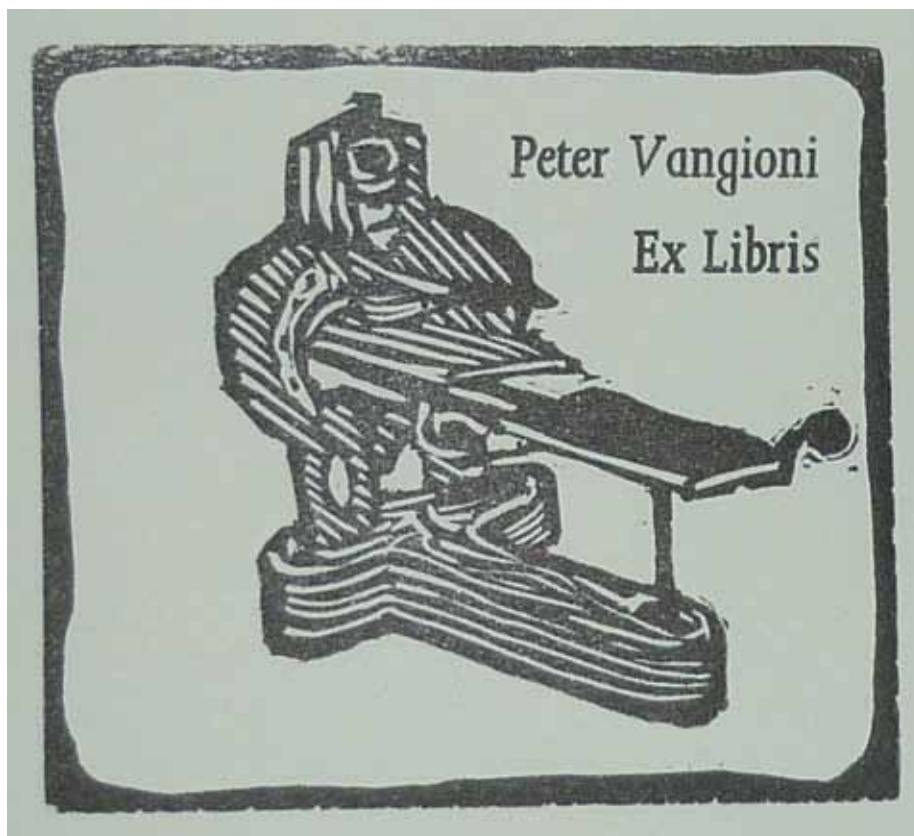
Mark Ferson, Sydney

Whilst this issue of the *Newsletter* is running very late, I thought I would nevertheless use the last number for 2017 to impart some information about the growth of interest in bookplates in the broader arts community; and to note that this growth has largely been the result of what the Society has been doing.

The Bookplate Design Award which the Society organised in the latter part of 2016 had some small success in bringing an awareness of bookplates to colleges and art schools around the country. At the same time it was heartening to hear from some participants that bookplates were already being used as design exercises in courses. The 'buzz' from the Award led the Print Council of Australia's quarterly journal *Imprint* to ask me to pen an article about the Award and bookplates generally, which duly appeared in the Autumn 2017 issue. Later in the year, Monica Oppen and I had an invitation from Akky Van Ogtrop, PCA President, to give a talk on bookplates at the Art Fair: Paper Contemporary, held at the Carriageworks (Sydney) in September. Although the audience was not great in size, other stall holders from the Fair — printmakers and book artists, among others — were good enough to swell the numbers.

The leading article in this issue, written by Bronwyn Vost, highlights a key event in the exhibition *Eirene Mort: A Livelihood*, held at the Canberra Museum and Art Gallery and running to 25 February 2018. The exhibition should generate excitement about bookplates generally as a result of the superb display of drafts, finished designs and the blocks from which they were printed, whilst demonstrating the centrality of bookplate work to Mort's total art/design oeuvre.

This bookplate activity has by no means ceased! Caren Florance, Canberra printmaker, book artist, typographer and sometime Society member has been in touch to say that *Imprint* has asked her to write an article about bookplates. This reminds me that, though they are poorly



Linocut bookplate by Peter Vangioni for himself

supported, our web site and Facebook page have prompted a number of enquiries from people seeking advice on designing bookplates or what paper to use or the best means of pasting them into books using archival materials.

And to round off my 'exhortation' to you and to prove that what *we* are doing is of interest to *others* as well as to us, the curators at Adelaide's Carrick Hill have indicated that, thanks in part to a gift from Society member Richard King, they are mounting an exhibition of the works of Adrian Feint — details of which will appear in the March issue of the *Newsletter* — and have invited me to talk about his bookplates at the Adrian Feint Study Day to be held on 12 May. Perhaps more importantly, Carrick Hill is working with the Adelaide College of the Arts to conduct a bookplate design competition among their students in association with the exhibition. This can only lead to good things.

So although it may seem rather quiet in the bookplate world, I am reassured that there is lots happening. If you have ideas on how to increase bookplate activities or use

the above opportunities to make even more of splash, please *do* get in touch.

Jottings from near and far

An old premium or prize plate unearthed in Ballarat,
Michael Taffe, Ballarat

The history of bookplates is well documented but not being an aficionado in this area I wonder when Premium (or prize) plates first appear. The oldest that I have come across is this plate in the collection that I curate for the (Catholic) Ballarat Diocesan Historical Commission. It appears to have been awarded for Geography in 1805.

[Useful information on the history of the premium bookplate, at least in the British context, is given in Premium or prize ex-libris (London: Bookplate Society, 2001), written by the prolific, human encyclopaedia of bookplates, Brian North Lee. Lee states that this type of bookplate was first used in Ireland in the 1730s, and cites a series of fine bookplates from Trinity College Dublin originating at this time — Ed.]



Prize plate, School of Rev William White, 1805

A kangaroo in London,
Neil Wynes Morse, Canberra

In 2013 I meandered around several of the cultural institutions in London. Whilst in the Victorian Walk in the Museum of London, I noticed a bookplate depicting a kangaroo. That afternoon I sent an internal email to the appropriate curator seeking details of the object. Obviously I did something wrong, as 'silence' was the response.

Being older, earlier this year, I again emailed the organisation seeking their assistance.

Result! The delightfully helpful Curator of Social and Working History answered my email and subsequently arranged that I view the copper plate and the four pulls from it that the Museum holds, for the well-known but otherwise unidentified bookplate for George Ernest 'Chinese' Morrison. There is no indication of who engraved the plate, but it came to the Museum in 1979 as one of a group labelled 'Engraver's workbench, c. 1890s', part of a 'job lot' from the copper plate engraving firm of David Elkington, Lamb's Conduit Street, Holborn.

Just proves what is 'out there'!

Editorial

First, I must express my apologies for the lateness of this December 2017 number, which will likely arrive in your letterbox in March 2018. Other activities have got in the way, but the bonus is that it has allowed me to include a shortened version of the floor talk that Bronwyn Vost gave in December for the exhibition at the Canberra Museum and Art Gallery, *Eirene Mort: a livelihood*, together with some images of Mort's imaginative and often humorous bookplate designs, reproduced from examples in Bronwyn's much-loved collection.

I would also like to express an Editor's gratitude to two members, Neil Wynes Morse (Canberra) and Michael Taffe (Ballarat), for their short but insightful contributions on bookplates from either end of the 19th century; and to Jürgen Wegner, who once again brings to light a lovely, in this case, modern, New Zealand, design on a theme Jürgen is passionate about, printing and printing presses.

As this is the December issue, I have taken the opportunity to mention some important bookplate activities that took place during 2017 and also to look ahead to some significant bookplate-related events to occur in 2018. And I have expressed the opinion, and not, I hope in an overly boastful manner, that many of these developments have been stimulated or informed by the activities of **our** Society.

Having missed the opportunity to wish you compliments of the Season, I wish you a wonderful and healthy 2018. These wishes are underscored by the generosity of new member (and very well-established Castlemaine printmaker) Rhyll Plant, for her gift of the beautiful and celebratory linocut magpie bookplate — an original linocut and rubber stamp print — inserted in this issue of the *Newsletter*!



Copper plate of bookplate for George Ernest Morrison, c. 1890s