

Bookplates and the Alexander Turnbull Library

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The European use of bookplates (*ex libris*) can be traced back to the fifteenth century. Whether engraved, etched, or otherwise printed, they were commissioned by booklovers from artists as distinguished as Dürer, and developed through recognisable variations of, and embellishments on, the heraldic insignia of the owner. In England there was a notable increase in the demand for bookplates designed to prescription from the 1860s onwards. By 1880 their collection had become sufficiently popular for John Byrne Leicester Warren, later the third Baron de Tabley, to publish the first major British treatise on the subject. His *Guide to the Study of Bookplates* is the forerunner of numerous books on the subject, while his idiosyncratic categorisation of armorial plates has remained standard ever since. By 1891 the Ex Libris Society of London had been founded, with its invaluable *Journal*, the complete set of which is held by the Turnbull Library.

It was at this point, six years after the founding of his library, that Alexander Turnbull commissioned his first bookplate from Walter Crane, the influential disciple of William Morris, of Arts and Crafts fame. Turnbull's biographer, E. H. McCormick, meditated on Turnbull's commitment to his Scottish ancestry, which provides the central motif, and Crane's 'rendering of the clan's eponymous founder, that man of great spirit who seized a charging bull by the horns and turned it aside from Robert Bruce, thus earning rich estates from his grateful monarch.'¹ Technically, such a bookplate is a kind of visual pun known as a 'rebus', derived from the Latin tag *non verbis sed rebus* (not by words but deeds), and exemplifies the family motto, *Fortuna favet audaci* (Fortune favours the brave). Turnbull must have been greatly flattered when his bookplate was almost immediately reproduced in Egerton Castle's *English Bookplates*² of 1892, where it is described as 'spirited'; in fact Crane designed few such plates. In 1896 Turnbull decided on a second, more orthodox *ex libris*, and commissioned his bookseller Bernard Quaritch to procure a design which should be 'accurate armorially . . . and artistic'.³ And so it was, complete with crest, torse, mantling, helmet (an esquire's), shield, motto and name. With some variations in size it was his most frequently used armorial plate.

However, in 1909 Turnbull veered towards discreetly erotic art nouveau, for which he commissioned D. H. Souter of Sydney. Two plates resulted, both featuring curiously appendaged mermaids against