Dr Lauren Alex O'Hagan, Centre for Language and Communication Research, School of English, Communication and Philosophy, Colum Drive, Cardiff, CF23 9HJ, United Kingdom

ohaganla@cardiff.ac.uk +44 7971979912

How to Use Book Inscriptions to Research Your Family History

For the past five years, Lauren Alex O'Hagan has been collecting and researching Edwardian book inscriptions as part of a project that aims to give a voice to the forgotten people of early twentieth-century Britain. These inscriptions have served as a unique entry point into the lives of inscribers, whose stories have been unearthed by delving into census returns and vital records. So far, she has retold the stories of 3,000 individuals, from servants and clerks to barristers and peers. Here, she tells us about how book inscriptions can be used to research your family history and shares the previously untold story of one remarkable woman.

I am sure that most of us have dusty, old books tucked away in our attics, cupboards or garages that once belonged to our parents, grandparents or distant relatives. What we might not realise, however, is just how useful these books can be when carrying out genealogical research. Not only can these inscriptions provide us with the names and addresses of unknown ancestors, but they can also offer personal information not found elsewhere about their daily lives and hobbies.

When reading names on a census return, it is easy to forget that, just like us, these people lived, loved, laughed, cried, learnt, grew. Book inscriptions bring us back in touch with their human side, reminding us of the person they once were. They are also one of the few records that capture the actual handwriting of our ancestors and allow us to view events from their own perspective. Reading an inscription is an emotional experience, as the idiosyncrasies and imperfections of our ancestor's handwriting personalises the book and imbues it with an immediacy that transcends the temporal void between them and us.

Family Bibles are a particularly valuable genealogical tool. If you are lucky enough to have one in your possession, then much of your groundwork has already been laid for you. Considered 'the life blood of families', Bibles were used to record births, deaths and marriages, as well as other significant life events, such as a child's illness or a son going off to war. As civil registration was not introduced until 1837 (in England and Wales) and only became compulsory in 1874, Bibles are a useful way to trace your family roots without having to trawl through parish records.

Birthday books, **daily scripture books**, **autograph books** and **confession books** are all equally essential genealogical devices. Popularised in the mid-nineteenth century, these gift books combined blank spaces for personalisation and signatures with printed content based on

advice manuals and instructional articles. Like with Bibles, owners of birthday books and daily scripture books regularly appropriated them to document deaths, marriages, funerals, christenings, new jobs, moving house and world events. Confession books and autograph books, on the other hand, shed light on ancestors' wit, humour and irony as owners, and their family and friends, answered pre-written questions on their personality, tastes and interests (e.g. What is your idea of happiness/misery? What are your favourite qualities in a man/woman?).

If you can find none of these books amongst your family heirlooms, fear not. While they might require a little more effort, standard book inscriptions also carry a lot of meaningful information.

The most basic form of inscription is the **ownership inscription** which, as the name suggests, consists of the owner's name and may also be accompanied by their address and date of inscription. Discovering this information can be essential when starting out on the journey into your family history. **Gift inscriptions** – books inscribed as presents from one person to another – are also important because they can show links and relationships between people that may be harder to discern from more official records, such as friendships or comradeships.

Like with Bibles and gift books, it is often the accompanying quirks that can help make your ancestor come to life as a person. Sketches, poetry, correspondence, newspaper clippings, diary entries, marginalia and even curses to protect books from theft are just some of the extraordinary marks that can be found frequently. Peculiar to books from the late nineteenth century, however, is the *in memoriam* inscription, which marked the informal bequest of a book by the dying to a family member. This inscription emerged in Britain following the death of Prince Albert in 1861 and became a key aspect of the Victorian cult of mourning. There are very few things more moving than reading a dying mother's final words or the heartache of an orphaned child. Inscriptions like these allow us to sense the inscriber's feelings when writing. No vital records can provide such personalised tales.

Prize inscriptions or **prize stickers** are another common inscription type that you are likely to come across, particularly if you have British ancestors, because the practice of awarding books as prizes was extensive in Victorian and Edwardian Britain. The widespread distribution of prize books grew as a direct consequence of the 1870 Education Act (the first piece of formal legislation on education in England and Wales), which saw the awarding of books as a new measurement of competency. Soon, schools, Sunday schools and clubs across Britain and its Empire began gifting religious books to children in recognition of good behaviour or attendance.

Books containing prize stickers (pre-printed decorative designs) are a real treasure trove for genealogists because they feature comprehensive details of the awardee, their address and

the specific school, Sunday school or club that they attended. This, in turn, can supply information on their religious denomination and help focus local archive searches of school and Sunday school records. It can also give a taste of the broad range of leisure activities that children had at their disposal, again offering a good starting point when looking for specific archival records.

While prize books were awarded to all children and many adults, the working classes were particularly targeted because educators believed that they needed to be provided with 'healthy' role models. For this reason, prize inscriptions and stickers present a unique way to track down poor children who lived in slums, workhouses or orphanages, providing an alternative view on their social lives to that represented by a name on a Poor Law register.

Another novel way to trace your ancestors is through **bookplates** – small, decorative labels used to denote book ownership. Although the first recorded use of a bookplate in Britain was in 1574, it was not until the nineteenth century that they became popularised as a result of the Victorian obsession with social status and commodity culture.

Traditionally, bookplates were used only by the upper classes who commissioned artists to custom-design ciphers, rebuses or armorials with heraldic symbols relating to their lineage. These armorials can be identified fairly easily using heraldic dictionaries. They can also be cross-referenced with the College of Arms database to check whether the owner's claim was genuine. False armorials became a growing problem in the late nineteenth century when stationers began to advertise bookplate designs for a much cheaper price than private commissions. The middle classes immediately flocked to stationers and, naturally, more concerned with profit than authenticity, the stationers did not check whether these customers were actually entitled to a coat of arms.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, pictorial bookplates had become popularised amongst the middle and upper classes (they were never affordable to the working classes until mass production began) due to their ability to showcase images that reflected anything from an owner's favourite sport or literary/historical character to their religious/political beliefs or job title. Pictorials could also be used to display self-portraits of owners dressed in their finest or show off new furniture or artwork in their study. Therefore, they are a whimsical, multimodal way of discovering the person behind your ancestor's name.

If you have a particular interest in the experiences of your ancestors during World War One, late Victorian and early Edwardian inscriptions can be important resources. Some capture a period of innocence before the relentless intrusion of the Great War, while others reveal surprising links between the book, its owner and life on the frontline. These inscriptions also present new ways to explain the War to young people, which is particularly important now that the conflict only exists outside of human memory.

Below, I present the tale of one individual who played a key role in Britain's war effort and girls' education. Her story would not have been known to me had I not discovered her inscription in a book at Bookbarn International, Britain's largest secondhand bookshop.

Gertrude McCroben was born in 1863 and grew up in Bradford (Northern England) in a lower-middle class family, where her father worked as a draper. She attended Bradford Grammar School for Girls and, at the age of seventeen, received distinctions for her essays in English Literature. Based on her high aptitude, she was granted a scholarship to study at Newnham Hall North Ladies College in Cambridge, gaining Triple Honours in Maths in 1884. She then became a teacher at Manchester School for Girls, before obtaining the post of headmistress at Wakefield Girls' High School in 1894.

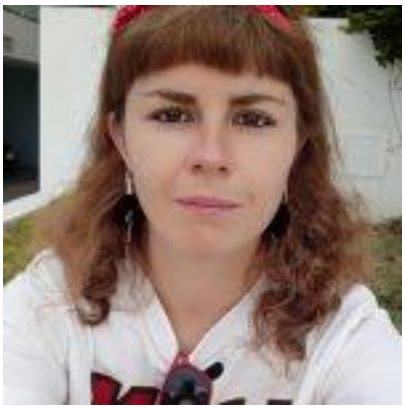
Gertrude was the first headmistress in Britain to develop a broad, arts-based curriculum that included physical education. Under her headship, pupil numbers rose from 139 to 541, making Wakefield Girls' High School one of the largest girls' schools in the country and gaining her a national reputation as an educationalist. At just forty-three, she was chosen by the Mosely Commission to be among a select group of educators to travel to New York and observe the teaching styles being used there with the aim of introducing them to the British education system.

Gertrude's book – *The Life and Letters of George Meredith* – was purchased in 1913 from W.H. Smith in Wakefield when she was fifty years old. The book contains a personalised bookplate, which was custom-designed by an artist who has left their initials (WSL) in its bottom-right corner. Personalised bookplates cost between £20 and £50, which attests to the considerable income that Gertrude had amassed by this time. The bookplate shows a fictitious diamond-shaped coat of arms bearing images of a rose and a fleur-de-lis with a sword running diagonally across. As a woman, Gertrude was not legally entitled to a coat of arms. Therefore, it is likely that she created this design herself. The bookplate also shows an open illuminated book with Gertrude's initials in dropcap lettering. Above is the motto of Wakefield Girls' High School: 'each for all and all for God.'

Upon the invasion of Belgium and Northern France in 1914, Gertrude used her position as headmistress to advocate support and compassion towards refugees. She helped organise the arrival of Belgian refugee children to Wakefield, encouraging local families to take them in and enrolling them in the school. She also arranged relief programmes for them, which included book clubs. Gertrude's copy of *The Life and Letters of George Meredith* may have been one of the books used for this purpose. Gertrude also encouraged ex-pupils of the school to join the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps and Women's Royal Naval Service, work in canteens and serve as nurses or as part of the Voluntary Aid Detachment in hospitals at home or abroad. Thanks to her efforts, the school raised £40 for an ambulance, which was presented to the Belgian army in 1915, as well as thousands of pounds to support families in Britain left bereaved by the war. She even converted part of the school into a hospital for war casualties and trained pupils in the basics of nursing.

In 1920, Gertrude left Wakefield Girls' High School to serve as a school inspector. She died in 1933 in Richmond, Surrey. Her entire estate, which included *The Life and Letters of George Meredith*, was left to Lottie Isabel Clark, a fellow teacher at Wakefield Girls' High School. In March 2019, after many years of campaigning by the Forgotten Women of Wakefield project, Gertrude was commemorated with a blue plaque on Wakefield Girls' High School.

Dr Lauren Alex O'Hagan is a research associate in the Centre for Language and Communication Research at Cardiff University, United Kingdom. Her current project is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and is entitled 'Reading, Writing and… Rebellion: Understanding Literacies and Class Conflict Through the Edwardian Book Inscription'.



Gertrude McCroben
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Bookplate of Gertrude McCroben
Image taken by O'Hagan (2016) at Bookbarn International, Somerset, England