Lauren O'Hagan

Stepping up to the Bookplate

INDENT He was not as courteous as the average rich man, nor as intelligent, nor as healthy, nor as lovable … and so he was obliged to assert gentility, lest he slipped into the abyss where nothing counts. INDENT

The above words, taken from E M Forster's 1910 novel *Howards End*, introduce readers to the character of Leonard Bast, the low-paid insurance clerk with high intellectual ambitions. Bast was part of the growing lower middle class of Edwardian Britain, which had emerged in the late 19th century as increased numbers of working-class people obtained positions in new, white-collar, salaried occupations and moved to the suburbs. Members of this group struggled to carve out a niche for themselves in Britain's rigid tripartite class system and were often ridiculed for being people with, in the words of the Liberal politician Charles Masterman, 'unconquered aspirations, divorced from the realities of life in an artificial city civilisation'.

Aware that their claim to status was tenuous, many lower-middle-class individuals became highly concerned with self-improvement in a bid to decrease their sense of isolation and legitimise their position in Edwardian society. Some also used 'portable property' as symbols of their respectability. Just as the fictional Bast used his umbrella and top hat to signal status, many real-life Leonard Basts relied on bookplates.

Traditionally, bookplates had been the stronghold of the upper class, who commissioned artists to produce designs incorporating their heraldry. However, by the beginning of the 20th century, bookplate usage had filtered down to the middle class, who took advantage of the new in-house services offered by many booksellers and stationers across the country to fashion their own designs. The development of faster and more efficient printing machinery also prompted the creation of mass-produced bookplates, which drastically democratised the bookplate market and enabled many artisan workers to afford them for the first time.

Members of the lower-middle class found themselves in a challenging situation. They lacked the financial means to afford artists' bookplates, but to use mass-produced bookplates would betray their inferior status. Many came up with canny alternatives. In *Howards End*, Margaret Schlegel's visiting card follows Bast around, becoming a 'battlefield on which the souls of Leonard and his wife contended'. One of the ways in which real-life Leonard Basts projected social status was through the recontextualisation of their own business cards and calling cards as bookplates. Individuals exploited the fact that these cards bore similarities to typographical bookplates in terms of their shape, material and textual content. **S**hopkeepers even cut out their names from shop paper bags and pasted them onto their books' endpapers to feign wealth and gain cultural capital, **as seen below [NB check at layout]** in a book owned by William Straw, a grocer from Worksop. Like domestic servants, these bookplates publicly

displayed the economic power of the lower-middle class, even if their users actually experienced financial difficulties in keeping up appearances.

[note for designer: drop cap?] The rise of stationer-designed bookplates led to a wave of fake armorials. More concerned with increasing profits than upholding tradition, stationers made no effort to ensure that the customer was legally entitled to bear arms or that the heraldry used was accurate. Members of the lower-middle class quickly capitalised upon this, designing their own armorials in the hope of projecting a more elevated social status.

The bookplate of Maude Goff is a characteristic example. Goff (née Coe) was a housemaid and daughter of an agricultural labourer from Kirtling, Cambridgeshire. In 1906, she married William Goff, a shopkeeper. Shortly thereafter, she had a stationer's bookplate designed as a sign of her new status. Women with legitimate claims to coats of arms could not use crests and their shields had to be lozenge-shaped. Goff's bookplate flouts both conventions, showing her lack of knowledge of heraldic custom. Furthermore, the crest itself is pseudo-heraldic, the red squirrel chosen as a clever play on the fact that 'Goff' means someone with red hair. Divided shields typically showed the husband's and wife's arms next to each other. However, on this bookplate, the heraldry on the left-hand side in fact belonged to Lionel Trevor Goff, a lieutenant colonel in the Royal Artillery who was not related to William Goff, while that on the right is an arbitrary assortment of tinctures and symbols. Knowing this, there is a certain irony in the motto *fier sans tache* ('flawlessly proud'), which boldly suggests that Goff has nothing to hide.

This brief overview shows how real-life Leonard Basts were just as concerned with 'asserting gentility' as their fictional counterpart and, like him, 'would have died sooner than confess any inferiority to the rich'. Of course, we must be careful not to reduce all members of the lower-middle class to the status of 'pretenders'. Those employed in professions that were treated with contempt, such as clerks, may have used bookplates as defensive responses to a sense of threat. These bookplates reveal anxieties about belonging rather than just a desire to emulate social superiors. Equally, they show how lower-middle-class individuals used creative means of self-fashioning in an effort to find their own place in Edwardian society. The fiftieth anniversary of the death of E M Forster is a good time to reappraise these real-life Leonard Basts, drawing attention to their multi-layered identities and, in doing so, reminding ourselves that 'all men are equal', even those who do not possess umbrellas.