

## Citizens' Free Library

EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE, when I'm digitizing a collection of Canadian bookplates from the late 19th century in UBC Library's Rare Books and Special Collections, I come across a 7 by 10 cm plate with more history than I can fit into a 100-word paragraph. While this happens less often than I would hope for, it certainly makes the more routine bookplate descriptions that take up the majority of my time feel far more worthwhile.

A recent example is this late-19th-century bookplate from the Citizens' Free Library in Halifax. It made me eager to spend a solid hour reading what libraries say about themselves on their online About pages, and the information others have assembled for entries in the *Canadian Encyclopedia*. The library itself has since changed its name and become the Halifax Public Libraries, but 150 years ago it was a novel experiment in philanthropy, predating Andrew Carnegie's similar ventures that began in the 1880s.

The Citizens' Free Library began as the fee-based Halifax Mechanics' Library in 1831.<sup>1</sup> This institution lasted until 1864, when it fell into debt and sold its collection of roughly 3,000 volumes to Chief Justice William Young, who later donated them to the City of Halifax on the condition that they be provided for free to the public as a library collection.

A resource of this size being made available to the public was uncommon in the 1860s. The library was named the Citizens' Free Library and opened in 1865. Its collection was subsequently combined with two other collections over the next two decades, those of the fee-based George R. Young and Halifax libraries. By the 1890s, the collection had reached more than 11,000 volumes.

Unfortunately, this collection did not continue to grow during the first half of the 20th

century and occupied only a small portion of Halifax's City Hall, until it was moved into the new Memorial Library, which opened in 1951.

To complement this interesting history, the bookplate itself contains an early version of Halifax's coat of arms in dark blue ink. Within this coat of arms stands a sailor on the left, with his hand placed on the crest containing a Belted Kingfisher on a grassy mound. Directly above the crest is a masoned Sable containing a sprig of mayflower. To the right is a fisherman holding a codfish by its head. Both figures and the crest are standing upon heraldic

ribbon containing Latin phrasing—the city of Halifax's motto, *E Mari Mercēs*, which translates as “From the sea, wealth.” Following the motto, the name of the library appears in Germanic lettering and the name of the town in cursive.

This coat of arms, like the Free Library, would be replaced in the mid-20th century by a more modern equivalent. Yet, as with many historic bookplates, the textual and visual histories behind them are very often largely forgotten. We are lucky to have had someone with the foresight to preserve these bookplates to remind us, and researchers keen to make their histories known.

1. Adena Brons discussed Mechanics Institutes in relation to the London Free Public Library in the Ex Libris column “Founding Institutes,” *Amphora*, no. 169 (Spring 2015), 24.

.....  
 ~ Simon Robins is a Master of Library and Information Studies student in the iSchool at the University of British Columbia.

The Rare Books and Special Collections Bookplate Collection can be accessed from the UBC Library Digital Collections and Services site, <http://digitalcollections.library.ubc.ca>.

