

DEDICATIONS IN BOOKS

William F. E. Morley

FOR many years I have been collecting book dedications that struck me when encountered as being amusing, touching, or clever. Going through this collection recently I was impressed not only by their great variety, but by the difficulty I had had in categorizing them. Within this *omnium gatherum* (as it were) headings had been assigned such as “Conjugal,” “Clever Humility,” “Esoteric,” “Cryptic,” “Patriotic,” “Literary,” and many more. Yet in spite of this wide range of subjects, most book dedications (in contrast to dedications received by buildings, ships, and bridges) have one thing in common: under scrutiny they may well throw light on the relationships between the volume and its author and between the author and his circle. They seem therefore to have a special human interest that, to my knowledge, has not been often examined.

Years ago those elaborate dedications, flamboyant in style and typography, by humble authors to persons of nobility, expressed a relationship of past or anticipated favours. Today the standard dedication also expresses gratitude, though in more commonplace language, and often with the mock-modest disclaimer that “all the faults are mine alone.” But though dedications appear first they are written last. Compliments and praises are easily bestowed, and one’s own credit is diminished, at the conclusion of the long travail or research and creativity, when fatigue and frustration are submerged in the flood of release. Small wonder that dedications are so imbued with hyperbole and abandon. Yet intoxicated behaviour still expresses something of the subject’s personality, often in revealing ways. Book dedications bear studying.

I would like to present here some random samples, in the hope that they may entertain, and also to encourage interest in these under-considered trifles to prove that they do have a value beyond their first impression. It is not inconceivable that one day someone will be inspired to produce an *Anthology of Canadian Book Dedications*.

The greatest number of dedications in my file express appreciation to wives for their inspiration and help – a modern instance of the almost lost impulse of chivalry. Before setting forth some of these, I have a few in an unnamed category that, in their coyness, reflect some of the influence that

women have on men. (I avoid the tedious details of sources, unless a book title or subject is necessary to appreciate the dedication; but I do have the precise citations on file should anyone be curious). Take these then: “For Rita, who gave up her living room.” “For Pat, who made all understandable.”

In a book on medieval calligraphy: “To Martha, with love; I owe my achievements to her enthusiasm, and my concentration on things no later than medieval to her assurance that I am anything but a Renaissance man...”

In a study of “dynamic programming”: “To Betty-Jo, whose decision processes defy analysis.”

And of women on men, at least one example: In Carol Botwin’s *Love Crisis*, after naming her two children, the author continues with the initials (only) of 601 men “who have contributed to this book in one way or another.”

In the conjugal category, gratitude to wives takes various forms: “To Isabel, whose absence ensured the completion of this book.”

In a work on the politics of budgets: “For my wife Carol who will appreciate the irony.”

In a book on surveying: “To Diane. We started rambling through the hills together and then we decided to ramble through life together.”

A work by several hands on sexual deviance: “To our wives for being many more things than alternatives to deviance.”

“To my wife Pat, whose patience and understanding long ago passed my understanding.”

A work on Ptolemy’s geography: “To my wife, in recognition of the cheerful patience with which she was my companion through the large intervals and the small hours when I was most seriously afflicted with what my family called ‘Ptolemy on the brain...’”

There are more dedications to wives in the collection, but I seem to have encountered only one to a husband – and then only as one of other influencing males. Are men less appreciative, then, of literary wives than the reverse? We suspect so!

“To the men in my life...my father who showed me the Old World and

the New; my husband for his patience and love; my son...for his future.”

Mothers come in for a share of acknowledgement, bless ‘em: “This is for the Old Lady who never had time to do anything else but be my mother.”

“To my Mother, who read many books.”

“This book is dedicated to my mother, who showed me there is no end to a woman’s growth, and to my husband and sons who grew with me.”

Now to fathers, both to and from them: “This book is affectionately dedicated to the memory of my Father, who would have liked it; and to my Grandfather – who certainly wouldn’t.” (The reasoning is private; the book’s title reveals nothing).

“This book is dedicated to Kate Searle in the fond hope that one day she will forgive her father for all this.”

“To my dear sons Michael and Nicholas, without whose school bills this anthology would not have been made.”

Next, dedications with reference from or to fond parents: A book on ‘pre-biological systems’: “Dedicated to my favourite biological systems including their co-originator: Larry, Ron, and Tom and Raia.

“To my wife Pam, who made it all possible, and to Jane, Judy and Stephen who supplied background noises.”

“To Lillian who quietly helped; and To Barbara, who helped when quiet.”

By a professor of crystallography: “To my seven Jewels: Lila, Marla, Julie, Laura, Janet, Dorothy, Tricia.”

A book about Gregory Dexter: “To the memory of my Father because he would have liked Gregory, and to my Mother, because every book needs one reader who is going to like it anyhow.”

And grandparents: “...I dedicate this book to four sweet little girls, my cousins: — actually my grandchildren, but, thinking that cousins are more becoming to a man my age and habit, we exchange that name among us.”

“To my son...in the hope that in the years when he grows from infant to adult, he will share with his grandparents a relationship as warm and rich as that which I shared with my grandparents.”

There are several transcriptions whose meaning is privy only to the author and the subject of his dedication – a sort of private language. These are

under the heading "Cryptic": "To MJ with love, adding the reminder that the magical number is 3 1/2. She will understand."

"For Maw & Paw, D.J., Bob & Dea, &, for 55, who started the last leg, a beginning."

"To Katy, who knows why."

In *Streamflow Synthesis*: "To Jill, with whom I went up the hill to fetch a pail of water."

"To Ellen who used to like marmalade and Daniel who still likes jam."

"To the hostess at The Sign of the Pheasant."

"To the glorious memory of the little lad in the daisy field."

"To T.E. in the absence of anything else."

Belloc, in *On Something*: "Dedication to Somebody."

"I dedicate this book to those who drank coffee with me in the smoke room of the Mauretania – CCC, MRC, JCB Jr., RHC and GWB. To the first three my friendship; To the fourth and fifth, my apologies as well. To the fifth a request that he show mercy to all slanderers, that he report me and my cause aright with Veronica and a dozen Georgian widows."

"To my friend Alfred Moffat, in memory of Auld Lang Syne."

Related to "Cryptic" are those dedications filed under "Esoteric", a couple of which follow: A book on the 'demon rum': "To my good friend who bears watching, C₂H₅OH."

A work on 'ham radio': "To my XYL for all the usual reasons, plus a few extra ones."

Now a couple under the rubric "Clever": "To LN'NM, for heroism at the typewriter." "To WE-2."

A volume on The Canadians: "For Connie, eh?"

And then there is the simply charming, as illustrated right:

This small sampling must be brought to a close; but not, I hope, before piquing the interest of the reader. I'll close with a few diverse inscriptions which I have placed under the heading (sometimes tongue in cheek) "Humility": "This book is gratefully

L	E	N	A
A	gratefully,		N
	to the women		
R	who surround		N
	me		
A			E

dedicated to those who read it.” “To Richard Aldington, who encouraged these follies.”

In a book on evangelism: “To Mary...who practices what I preach.”

“To anyone who has ever told me anything.”

“To Eleanor, who suffered through it.”

“To the Privileged Few who were born on Christmas Day.”

Collecting dedications is a harmless pursuit for the alert reader; I commend it to anyone with nothing better to do.

Bill Morley is the former Head of Rare Books at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. He has written extensively on bibliographic subjects. In his retirement he divides his time between Ontario and Florida.



Pitching Hay, Woodcut by Leonard Hutchinson