

*A renowned numismatist*

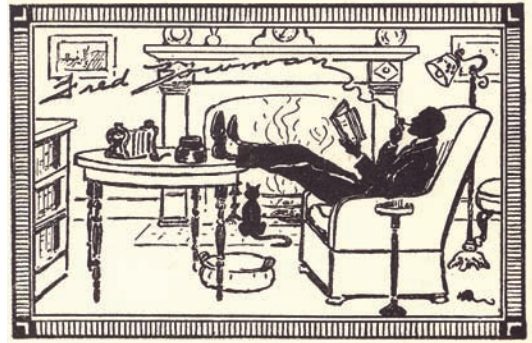
*The hackneyed symbols of the book-lover—a reading figure, a pile of volumes, an hour-glass, midnight lamps, and the rest of common ‘properties’ require much novelty in handling to be acceptable.*

—Gleeson White, “Designing for Bookplates,” *The Studio*, Vol. 1, April 1893

AND WHAT WOULD MR. WHITE think of Fred Bowman’s ex libris? Certainly the “hackneyed” symbols typical of bookplates litter the scene: the solitary male figure absorbed in reading, the crackling late-night fire, the quiet company of bookshelves. Yet, even with such standard fare, the unknown artist has managed to present a genuine and cozy scene, one which warmly invites the viewer. The lined border that subtly suggests rows of books frames a tableau that hints at the character and personality of the owner.

Rather than a figure curled over a desk and labouring heavily over a book, our main character leisurely leans back in his chair, his feet irreverently placed on the table. In addition to the pipe in his hand, a second pipe rests on the table, either for an unseen companion or perhaps as a testament to the owner’s epicurean smoking habits. This pipe’s placement next to a jar, perhaps an old humidior, suggests we may be dealing with a real tobacco aficionado. But before any message of connoisseurship becomes overly stuffy, the cat and mouse present themselves as whimsical and playful companions. This bookplate does not belong to a man who pursues his hobbies in a grave and austere manner, but rather to someone who has maintained a playful and childlike sense of humour.

But who is this dandy Mr. Bowman? In the end, it was the smoky signature that gave him away. An autographed copy of a 1957 museum catalogue confirmed that the Fred Bowman in question was in fact the curator of the Numismatic Collection at the Château Ramezay Museum in Montreal. A civil engineer by day, Bowman began his interest in coins after encountering some unique currency in Fuji while en route to an engineering project. What began



as an innocent collection of souvenirs “developed into the beginning of a most absorbing and interesting hobby,” according to the man himself. He founded the Montreal Numismatic Society and in 1969 was the first recipient of the J. Douglas Ferguson Award, which honours a “living numismatist who has made the greatest contribution during the year to the advancement of numismatics in Canada by research, writing, publishing, or other means.” Not bad for a guy who started out with curios from the South Pacific.

Bowman was well-known in the world of Canadian numismatics, and it’s clear that the study depicted in the bookplate was well used. During his lifetime he compiled an extensive encyclopedia on various aspects of Canadian coin collecting, which remains unpublished but available upon request at the Bank of Canada in Ottawa. *The Canadian Numismatic Bibliography* refers to it as an “enormous, unpublished compendium of coins, tokens and medals (and some scrip) of every imaginable description for every imaginable purpose, entered in 29 ledgers in Fred Bowman’s distinctive printed hand.” In both his bookplate and his encyclopedia, it’s his script that stands out as distinctive.

~ Meghan Bellavance is a student at the University of British Columbia’s School of Library, Archival and Information Studies. She volunteers at UBC Library’s Rare Books and Special Collections where she assists in the digitization of the Thomas Murray Bookplate Collection.

*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>.*