

This is a short article written at the request of the Editor, Peter Latcham, for the Journal of the Bookplate Society, 2005

Robin Tanner – *a Bookplate and the naming of a Private Press*

2004 marked the centenary of the birth of Robin Tanner, etcher, teacher of young children, Schools Inspector and HMI for Art and unforgettable friend. There were exhibitions of his work and publications but, above all, it gave gloriously increased incentives to friends and devotees to indulge in the happy pleasures of recalling the days of Robin Tanner, his wife Heather and their adopted son Dietrich Hanff in their simple Arts & Crafts house (almost completely overgrown by their beloved garden!), Old Chapel Field in Kington Langley, Wiltshire.

My first contact with Robin was in 1975, the first of an exchange of letters and visits which went on until his death in 1988. The chain of coincidences that preceded our first correspondence was strange, to say the least, and I have described it in *Robin Tanner and The Old Stile Press*; a book which, above all, sought to express the depth of gratitude I felt (and feel) for the understanding, advice and encouragement that he so readily gave to me, as to so many others. As I have said on many occasions, if it had not been for Robin Tanner's belief in the activity and his willing me to take it forward, my early fumbblings with letterpress printing would not have developed into The Old Stile Press. But . . . all that still lay in the future.

The idea of asking whether Robin might do a bookplate for me arose as early as 1975 – the first year of our friendship. I was a publisher by trade and an avid collector of illustrated books and prints of various

sorts and herein lay the secret of my ‘success’ while so many other people (I understand) were gently but firmly turned down. The fact is that I knew what was what in terms of the techniques of etching and other methods of reproduction in printing. I knew what I was asking!

However it would be best now to turn to original sources. Like everyone else who had the good fortune to receive Robin’s exquisitely calligraphed letters, we have carefully preserved them so the story of the bookplate can happily be told, in the form of extracts from letters, by Robin himself.

(30th August 1975) . . . I’ve thought a lot about your idea for a bookplate, & one day I would like to try to do it for you. Hitherto I’ve declined such invitations, which have often been for an etched bookplate (which is quite impossible; or for a lot of heraldic-symbolic stuff which would bore me so much that I shd do it badly. But with all the freedom you offer I think I might perhaps achieve something fairly presentable. A pen drawing (made with ordinary methods of reproduction in mind) would, I think be the most satisfactory medium. Let us talk about it one day. Then you must tell me some of the things you would like me to crowd into it. . .

(May Day, 1976) . . . I’m glad to have the measurements for yr Bookplate. Making that drawing will be pure joy. I wish I could say I can begin it soon, but an absurdly full time stretches ahead of us, & I may have to ask you to be patient for some months.

(14th June 1976) . . . I often think about your bookplate, dear Nicolas & when this high season of visitors quietens a little I hope I shall be able to give shape to the little design I can ‘see’ so clearly in my mind. . . It is full, late Spring, I think; & there is a figure strolling away into a dreaming distance of meadows & woods, with a far horizon . . .

(5th September 1976) . . . *I've thought a good deal about your bookplate and have made several rough designs for it. May I now describe the one I propose to use? & before I begin will you please say whether or not the notion would appeal to you? . . . The moment is April: A stile spans the foreground, & primroses & anemones star the grass. On the left, a spriggy hedge, & on the right a still-bare ash tree – whose drooping branches frame the distance. Other trees, with woodland, border the meadow path that leads from the stile. A contemplative figure sits on a gate where the meadow ends – in the shade of the budding trees! The path winds on & on, through a patchwork of fields & up to the wooded horizon. Sunlight streams across the whole scene . . . I can't quite say when I shall be able to do the drawing, Nicolas, as very full weeks lie ahead.*

(27 September 1977) . . . *My dear & patient Nicolas. Yes! At last I have finished yr bookplate, & I've thoroughly enjoyed myself. I've thought about you so intensely throughout the work that I almost felt I've had you by my side . . . there are two nice problems, Nicolas: . . . 1 I found myself hesitating to write your name & wonder whether after all it would be better to have it printed in a good type like, say, Gill's Perpetua or the fine old Baskerville . . . 2 Does the bookplate look rather naked without enclosing border? Or do you like it like this?*

(30 September 1977) . . . *How characteristically sweet of you, dear Nicolas, to rush those reassuring words to me! I am so happy. You see, in a sense, you took an active part in composing & making that little drawing: I didn't just coldly sit down and draw. You seemed to say, 'Yes tuck one more primrose plant there if you can. It wd be nice if polypody ferns could droop away into that corner'. And I would say, 'Shall we have Ash as well as Elm, since Elm will soon have perished?' And you agreed & goaded me on to have those*

weeping young ash boughs coming to the fore. And when I suggested that I shd inscribe my initials in a stone you laughed & said that would be perfect. So the drawing is a joint venture . . . I've thought more about borders & type; & I've come back to the original notion of just the drawing and the written name!! And Heather & Dietrich agree. I wonder what you will decide?

(15 October 1977) . . . From start to finish the bookplate gave me pure pleasure, & if I needed reward you have given it to me through your pleasure in it too. So, sweet as your thought was – of wanting in some way to 'pay' for it – let it stand as I always conceived it, as a personal, private gift. That will keep my happiness unsullied.



After the drawing was thus completed, history relates two sadnesses and one glorious development. When I came to have the bookplate printed, I was ill-advised and not experienced enough to foresee problems myself. I have always felt that the resulting label let down the original and have seldom used it. I think that Robin was unhappy with it also, although he was too generous-minded ever to mention it.

Years later, we found we could not lay our hands on the original drawing. I still feel it possible that one day we will find it nestling safely in a pile of something else but fear that it somehow was mislaid on its way home from being displayed, with a number of other items, in a museum. We have a line block and good copies so the image is by no means lost but that tiny piece of paper (Robin always worked same size) over which the artist pored had a very special presence.

It was at the end of 1978 that I took the weekend course in letterpress printing by hand that was to prove such a pivotal event in our lives. This is no place to describe these happenings in detail but such was the level of my manic progress in this new direction that I was soon working towards the printing and publishing of real books and my wife Frances and I were planning to establish a private press.

Such a conceit needs the working out of many details, of course, if efficiency (to say nothing of legality and solvency!) are to be maintained. Above all, however, it needs a name. We must have thought of a number of other possibilities but I cannot recall any. Very soon and very firmly we hit on The Old Stile Press – with the idea that the bookplate image (without my name) could be used in our books as a colophon image. Funnily enough it never occurred to us that people new to us might incline to spell stile with a ‘y’ opening up the horror that they might think we had consciously aimed at an ‘olde style tea shoppe’ image! This has been a recurring problem but the better the work of the Press is known the less serious the problem becomes.

Robin was thrilled with this new development and from then began the years of involvement, encouragement and help with all our adven-

tures that only ended with his death. His first act, though, was to take up pen and ink again and make for us the ‘emblem’ shown here. This has now been used on titlepages, catalogues, exhibition displays and suchlike for more than twenty years. It feels entirely appropriate that Robin Tanner’s old stile should continue to accompany the exploits of the press that owes so much to his nurturing love.

Nicolas McDowall

