

Lasting Impressions

ANN MARIE HOLLAND explores the William G. Colgate History of Printing Collection at McGill University.

IN THE LATE 1940S, Toronto art critic, book historian and collector William G. Colgate (1882–1971) set in motion a gift to the McGill University Library of a collection of books specializing in the history and practice of printing. In a letter bound into his book on Tom Thomson,¹ Colgate wrote on December 16, 1946, to Dr. Gerhard R. Lomer (1882–1970), fellow bookman, educator, scholar and McGill University Librarian from 1920 to 1947:² “I hope to be able to make up a list of books which you might like for your racks.”

At the time, Colgate’s pressing publication deadlines prevented him from attending to this task. In compensation, Colgate offered his newest work to Lomer as a Christmas gift. This unrecorded piece of correspondence foretells the donation that was being prepared by Colgate for McGill. It would be another 10 years before it was actually assembled, officially inaugurated and finally listed in *A Catalogue of the William Colgate Printing Collection: Books, Pamphlets, Drawings*, printed for McGill University Library in 1956.

The William G. Colgate History of Printing Collection is now one of the largest and most specialized collections housed in the Rare Books and Special Collections of the McGill University Library. Established in 1954 from a gift of around 800 books of typographical interest, the collection has been developed over a half century into a major research resource on the history of books and printing, amounting to more than 12,500 titles. Today, the collection is heavily used in teaching activities, for study purposes and for loans to major museums. Very possibly unique in Canada, the Colgate Collection represents all of the book arts: type design, book design, papermaking, illustration, colour printing and binding. Substantial sections contain estimable specimens of private press and artists’ books, as well as essential titles describing the history and technique of printing.

All sections include examples of Canadian

historical importance. In the area of graphic arts, for instance, the collection features significant samples of the work of celebrated Ontario illustrator and graphic designer Thoreau MacDonald (1901–1989), including printed designs and illustrations for brochures and cards as well as pen and pencil sketches of title pages and dust jackets.

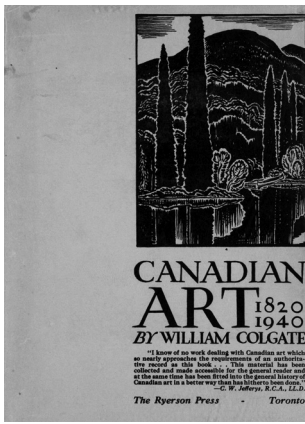
With regards to Canadian contemporary holdings, the collection contains a vast array of printed material by Robert R. Reid, one of the most illustrious designers, printers and typographers ever to work in Canada (for whom the Alcuin Society’s Robert R. Reid Medal for Lifetime Achievement in the Book Arts is named).

Reid came to Montreal in 1963 to take up a position as designer and production manager at McGill University Press, a responsibility he held for at least five years, after which he stayed in Montreal as a freelance graphic designer until 1976. During this time, he was active in designing and printing event posters, books and various pieces of ephemera. For McGill University Press, he designed the now-famous *Lande Bibliography of Canadiana* in 1965. He took over the use of the Columbian Press in 1965, following the retirement of university librarian Richard Pennington, running it through to 1974. McGill University is fortunate to house copies of the excellent work Reid achieved during this period.

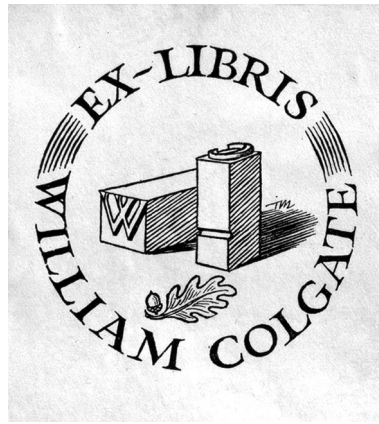
SKETCHING AN ELUSIVE FIGURE

Whatever we know about the collection itself, its founder and benefactor, William George Colgate, is a more elusive figure.³ This article will attempt to give a rough sketch with the aim of reacquainting readers with his multifarious activities and his influence as a writer, scholar, publisher, book collector and practitioner of the art of printing.

William Colgate was an alumnus of several institutions of higher learning: the University of Trinity College, Toronto; the Ontario College of



Cover of Colgate's opus, *Canadian Art* (1943).



Thoreau MacDonald's bookplate for "W.C."

Art, Toronto; and Queen's University, Kingston. He seems to have pursued his career as a writer, with a notable focus on the arts in Canada. Between 1930 and 1940, when he was in his 50s, Colgate authored well over 20 critical articles in the field of art history for a range of popular and scholarly journals in Canada and Europe. Colgate was art editor of and contributor to the popular Toronto magazine *Bridle and Golfer* and a contributor to the well-established illustrated magazine of fine and applied arts, *Studio*, in London, England. He worked as art critic for the *Mail and Empire* (Toronto)—later, the *Globe and Mail*—and the *Gazette* (Montreal). He also wrote biographical entries on Canadian artists for *Who's Who in Canada* and for the 1946 and 1957 editions of the *Encyclopedia Canadiana*. He wrote primarily about Canadian artists, those whose works had not yet been defined or distinguished.

His knowledge of Canadian painting, sculpture, design and decorative arts is synthesized in his most ambitious book, *Canadian Art: Its Origin and Development* (Ryerson, 1943), with a foreword by painter Charles W. Jefferys (1869-1951). The work is a significant achievement in establishing a complete historical survey of the arts in Canada. As Jefferys maintains, the "book contains much matter that hitherto could be found only in scattered papers, reports, or archival records, especially with regard to the early artists and topographical draughtsmen."⁴

Colgate's account begins with the development of the Canadian artistic tradition in

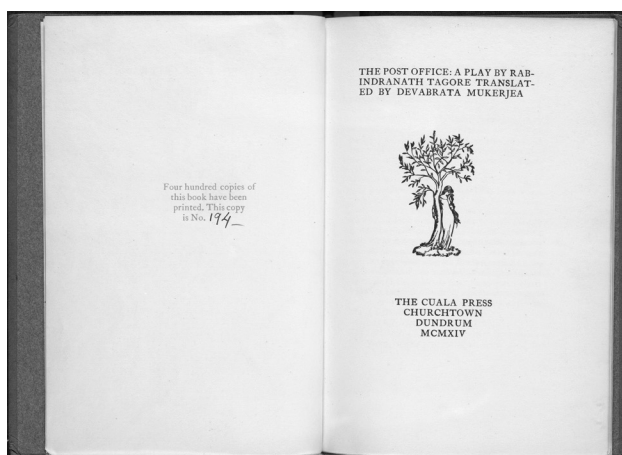
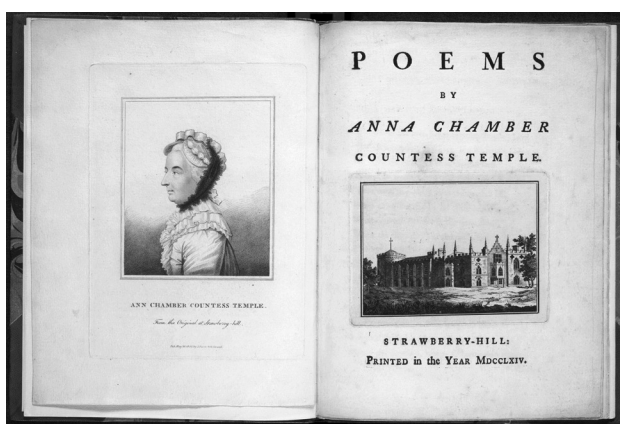
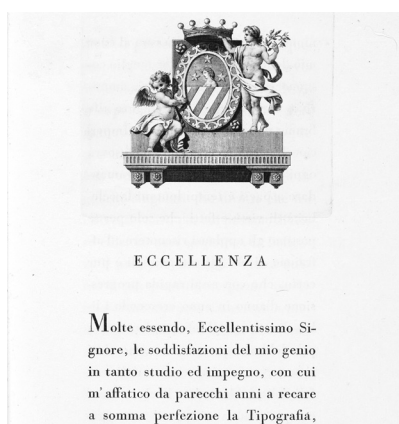
the 1820s and covers more than a century of artistic achievements and experimentation in different parts of the country. Colgate writes with the purpose to explain the progress of art in Canada. "If we have . . . today a Canadian art virile, self-reliant and indigenous to the soil, it is mainly because of the pioneer work, often done under depressing and discouraging conditions by [an] earnest and hopeful band of students and painters of a former generation."⁵

A compact edition of *Canadian Art* was issued in 1967, which testifies to the enduring significance of the text for students and researchers. It continues to be a vital citation source regarding many early Canadian artists.⁶

CLOSE TIES TO CANADIAN ARTISTS

Colgate was keenly familiar with the work of the Group of Seven, having produced several reviews of their exhibitions. He had frequent interaction with the son of J.E.H. MacDonald, Thoreau MacDonald, mentioned earlier. Colgate so admired his talent that he employed the artist to illustrate or participate in design features for several of his publications (e.g., layout, lettering, dust jackets, title pages, headpieces, vignettes, illustrations). MacDonald was also asked to use his creative abilities to design a bookplate for Colgate, whom he affectionately nicknamed "W.C."⁷

The Ryerson Press also had MacDonald design the dust jacket and title page of Colgate's original edition of *Canadian Art* in 1943, as well as the



Top left to right: Example from the Bodoni Press; Strawberry Hill Press example.
Bottom left to right: Cuala Press example; a selection of Colgate's publications under The Old Rectory Press.

design and lettering of the cover of his account of *The Toronto Art Students' League, 1886–1904*, published in 1954. Finally, it is important to mention that Colgate donated to the McGill Library several titles from Thoreau MacDonald's own private printing press, the Woodchuck Press. McGill owns a nice collection of about 10 illustrated booklets, some of which are signed presentation copies to Colgate by the artist.

As a member of the Arts and Letters Club in Toronto from 1938 to 1963, Colgate would have known a number of senior artists. He associated with the painter Evan Weekes Macdonald (1905–1972), who was not only the subject of many laudatory articles written by Colgate but also Colgate's portraitist. A fine oil painting of Colgate by Macdonald (likely made in the 1940s), generously donated to

McGill in 2000 by Mrs. Constance Colgate Wallace, the daughter of William Colgate, now has a place of honour at the entrance to the Colgate History of Printing Collection.

SCHOLAR, EDUCATOR AND PUBLISHER
Colgate's competing passion with fine arts was the printing press. He contributed scholarly articles on topics of book history or on rare printed items, especially those of typographical significance. For example, he was the editor and contributor to the periodical *Canadian Printer and Publisher*. He valued the highest standards of craftsmanship in printing, page design, typeface design, inks and paper quality. We know from the catalogue that he appreciated, for instance, the work of Giambattista Bodoni, the Italian master of the 18th century whose press work,

page design and paper quality combined to produce some of the most beautiful books ever printed; the charming productions of the Strawberry Hill Press, under the direction of Horace Walpole, the 18th-century eccentric British bibliophile; and early imprints from the Estienne dynasty of printers who practised in France and Geneva in the 16th and 17th centuries. Colgate also paid attention to the 20th-century houses, such as the Cuala Press based in Ireland. McGill University Library is fortunate to house Colgate's copies from these presses and many more, which has established a basis for new acquisitions.

Not only was Colgate active in writing on art, history and printing, he was an educator, instrumental in designing an evening course on the craft of printing, its history, principles and practice from the theoretical side. This program was prepared in collaboration with many esteemed subject experts for the Extension Department, under the direction of W. J. Dunlap at the University of Toronto in 1940.

As stated in the course outline, the purpose was to lift the printing trade in the minds of aspiring artists and "to instruct the student in the elements which constitute good printing." Colgate was assigned three classes: *The Influence of Eighteenth-Century Technique upon Modern Typography*; *The Influence of William Pickering and William Morris upon Nineteenth-Century Practice*; and *The Rise of the Private Press*: From Horace Walpole to Frederic W. Goudy.



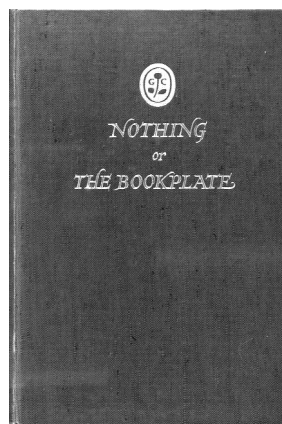
Leslie Victor Smith's bookplate for Colgate.

It is uncertain whether or not this course was actually given—it was dependent upon enrolment of at least 40 students.

Moreover, in May 1954, Colgate wrote an article entitled "Pointers for Students of Canadian Printing" in the Vermont periodical *Printing and Graphic Arts Journal*, for which two drawings of a printing press and one capital letter were designed by Thoreau MacDonald.

Finally, Colgate published and designed several of his own short works in limited press runs of about 200 copies, under the name The Old Rectory Press, in Weston, Ontario. Glancing at his output, we are able to view his scholarly interests from a different angle. His publication on the bookplates of designer Leslie Victor Smith (1880–1952) is a key work indicating his appreciation of the graphic arts. McGill is fortunate to own the prospectus, a mock-up copy and a copy numbered 96, signed by the author. From the prospectus laid in our copy, Colgate asserts that the book is the first compilation of Smith's work (complete with a checklist of about 100 plates) and that it includes a selection of "12 prints pulled by hand from the original coppers and tipped in." In this suite, we see that Smith created an exceptional design for Colgate.

The author considered the bookplates of Smith to be "tasteful, reposeful and satisfying," possessing "a genuine flair for the poetic that lends to the delicate theme a light, graceful and imaginative touch." He reminds us that "bookplates are not labels merely, but a form of miniature decoration



Edward Craig's Nothing, or the Bookplate.

imparting beauty to the book and abiding pleasure to its possessor.”⁸ From a review of the book printed in the *Globe and Mail* dated August 9, 1947, we learn that “[t]his is the first time in Canada that a work of a single bookplate designer has been presented in a volume by itself.”⁹

This book may have been modelled on a publication previously owned by Colgate and now in the collection entitled *Nothing, or The Bookplate*, first compiled by British designer Edward Gordon Craig, published by Chatto & Windus and printed by the Curwen Press in 1924. It is a cloth-bound and well-designed edition, and although Craig’s work is considerably more luxurious (wide margins, high-quality paper, untrimmed) and a larger compilation, it has a full checklist and a suite of original plates tipped in from Craig’s copperplate designs, as does Colgate’s compilation. It is just one example of a private library reflecting the tastes and interests of the collector and potentially offering a source of information on the intellectual labours of the owner.

The library hopes to draw a more complete and precise picture of William Colgate with further investigation, and through research into correspondence files with Richard Pennington (1904–2003), McGill University Librarian from 1947 to 1964, who received and supported the future development of the Colgate collection. The library also hopes to point to links from the collection back to the impressive scholar, writer, publisher, perspicacious collector and generous donor that was William G. Colgate.

1. William Colgate, *Two Letters of Tom Thomson, 1915 & 1916* (first published in *Saturday Night*, Toronto, November 9, 1946, and reprinted the same year in a limited edition by Colgate’s own private press, The Old Rectory Press).
2. See Peter F. McNally, “Scholar Librarians: Gould, Lomer and Pennington,” *Fontanus* 1 (1988): 95–104.

3. There is, however, a thorough and useful bibliography compiled by Brian Forbes Colgate, dated July 1976, housed in the archives, which provides the means to form a cursory sketch of William Colgate.
4. Charles W. Jefferys, foreword to *Canadian Art: Its Origin and Development*, by William Colgate (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1943), vii.
5. William Colgate, preface, *Canadian Art* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1943), x.
6. Examples are the online *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* at www.biographi.ca and the multi-volume set of *A Dictionary of Canadian Artists*, compiled by Colin S. MacDonald (Ottawa: Canadian Paperbacks, 1967).
7. See Margaret Edison, *Thoreau MacDonald: A Catalogue of Design and Illustration* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973). Edison notes in her introduction that “Lorne Pierce, editor of Ryerson Press, was predisposed towards his [Thoreau MacDonald’s] decorative treatment of books” (p. 14).
8. William Colgate, *The Bookplates of Leslie Victor Smith* (Weston, ON: The Old Rectory Press, 1947), 13.
9. Philip Dombowsky of the Library of the National Gallery of Canada just completed a wonderful exhibition and discussion on Canadian bookplate production in the brochure entitled “Canadian Bookplates from the National Gallery of Canada” (exhibition no. 44, May–August 2013), in which Smith’s work is represented.

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 ~ Ann Marie Holland is associate librarian responsible for the William G. Colgate History of Printing Collection in the Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University Library, Montreal. Special thanks to Marlene Chan, who kindly assisted with the concept and development of this article.

