

“Good luck, Mary…….”

Victorian Silver Name Brooches

By Dorothea Burstyn



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

“Carrie, Fanny, Florrie, Lucy, Minnie, Lizzie...” are the charming names found on silver brooches in large collections of sentimental jewelry. Name brooches were made of many materials-- wood, jet, ivory, bone (Fig. 1), mother-of-pearl and even stoat tail, as well as combinations of tortoise shell, mother-of-pearl and silver wire, but this study concerns itself only with solid silver examples.

Silver jewelry had been all the rage since the 1870s. Its appeal increased in England in the mid-1880s when Queen Victoria liberalized her strict mourning attire and started to wear a silver necklace once in a while. Popular were the heavy book chains, (Fig. 2) elaborate medallions and locket and pieces inspired by Japanese styles. With the discovery of the Comstock Lode in 1859 silver prices declined dramatically over the next decades, and silver jewelry had fallen out of favor with high society by the late 1890s. But the price reduction brought about an enormous upswing of the silver trinket industry. And love brooches were decidedly the favorites of this category of jewelry. Affordable by even the members of the working class, brooches with “Mother,” “Baby” (Fig. 3), and “Sis,” as well as those featuring mottos such as “Regards,” “Best Wishes,” and “Remember Me” were popular tokens of appreciation, but it was the name brooch which became the all-time bestseller. Name brooches became very popular, the idea was promoted by heavy retail and trade advertising in Britain, and the fashion grew enormously. The many metal factories of Birmingham, which long had been turning out novelties such as buttons, buckles, snuff boxes, etc., took up mass production of



affordable silver jewelry. In 1895 the English trade journal *Watchmaker, Jeweller and Silversmith* reported that name brooches were selling “by the absolute peck.”¹

Female pet names and all diminutive forms of names such as the examples given above put these brooches firmly into the category of sweetheart jewelry, given by an admirer or between girl friends, family members or as a bridesmaid’s gift. Brooches with two female names testify to long-lasting friendships. Brooches with male names are rarer. A brooch reading “From Joe” is an obvious reminder of Joe (the big spender?), while other brooches with male names let us speculate that they might have been exchanged by lovers, she wearing his name, he maybe attaching her brooch to a watch fob. Brooches with male names with compartments for woven hair as well as serpent-shaped brooches with male names are more likely mourning brooches. The same applies to brooches featuring a name next to a cross over an ivy bed, which symbolizes death (Fig. 4). The high child mortality rate in Victorian times may explain why these brooches are found quite frequently. Brooches with “Maud,” “Gladys,” “Mary,” etc., expressing no special sentiment in the name alone, might have been given to maidservants, not because the house had so many servants that one could not tell them apart, but because these brooches made an easy and sure-to-please present for birthdays and other deserving occasions. “Morecambe” (Fig. 5), “William Richmond,” and “Mrs. Ewbanke”² might show the elevated status of a butler, housekeeper or cook, or might have been given to a favorite teacher and may have been the only piece of jewelry these persons ever owned.



Name brooches came in many different shapes, which further expressed certain sentiments. Brooches in the form of a horseshoe expressed, of course, the wish for good luck; a crescent moon and star stood for love. The cornucopia shape (Fig. 6) is also self-explanatory, but other shapes are more puzzling. The rectangular calling-card brooch with one down-turned corner might be interpreted as a message from a personal caller or a calling card left for a daughter--all reminiscent of the complicated calling card ceremonies when visiting was an elaborate social ritual. (Fig. 7)



¹ Pamela M. Caunt, *Victorian Silver Novelty Jewellery: Names and Mottoes. A guide for collectors*, Arbras Publishing, London 2006, Plate II, page 13.

² Ibid, page 11, ³ Ibid, Plate I, page 10



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

More unusual is a pierced name brooch showing a young man with his bundle slung over his shoulder, expressing the yearning for a left-behind sweetheart.³

While the shape itself could express sentiments, the decoration of the name brooches did the same in a more discreet manner. Flowers, hearts (Fig. 8), hands, anchors, knots, and love bird motifs abound on name brooches. The language of flowers was understood by every Victorian and Edwardian. These included not only the obvious ones such as roses, forget-me-nots, and pansies (*pense à moi*), but also the more elusive fern standing for sincerity, lily of the valley for the return of happiness, ivy for marriage and fidelity, and jonquil for the hope for a return of affection, to name just a few.⁴ The shamrock, rose and thistle are national symbols; in combination with a man's name they might symbolize service for the homeland. Such a brooch might have been worn by his girlfriend hoping for his safe return.

Disk-shaped name brooches had either hand-pierced, stamped-out or applied letters soldered into a smooth, scalloped, cog-wheel or beaded frame (Figs. 9). The beads were tiny spheres that were applied individually. Some brooches feature elaborately engraved letters, while cheaper versions have simple stamped letters without further adornment. The disk shape was also the common form of many puzzle brooches (Fig. 10) where the various letters of the name are scrambled, and the name cannot be readily deciphered. From the middle 1890s to the 1920s the bar brooch became fashionable; here cushion- and bow-shapes with fields for an engraved name as well as individually soldered letters are found with frequency (Fig. 11).

One finds pieces decorated and marked differently but made from identical blanks, suggesting that a single manufacturer supplied the blanks, which were then decorated and finished by various other companies. Due to its popularity many Birmingham makers specialized in name jewelry and advertised long lists of "common" names such as Adelaide, Agnes, Blanche, Bessie, Georgina, Lydia, Madge and Violet as being in stock and deliverable the same day

⁴ L. Burke: *The Illustrated Language of Flowers*, A. Routledge & Co., London 1865; Diane Cooper & Norman Battersill: *Victorian Sentimental Jewellery*, David and Charles Publishers, Newton Abbot, 1972, page 72ff.

as the order was placed, while “orders for special names could be executed generally the day after.”⁴

Many, but not all, silver name brooches are hallmarked. An act of 1790 excluded certain items of silver, including brooches, from this requirement. But any freeman of the Goldsmiths’ Company was entitled to have his wares hallmarked even if not required, and many took advantage of this to give added authenticity to their products (Fig. 11).⁵ As only items required to be hallmarked attracted duty, no Victorian silver brooch has a duty mark. There may or may not be a maker’s mark. A good list of the more common makers’ marks is in Caunt’s book.⁶ Sometimes the marks are partially cut-off, suggesting that the blanks were stamped haphazardly before they were actually cut out. Some brooches feature different makers’ marks on the frame and the inserted disk, suggesting that the frames could be purchased wholesale as a jewelry finding by smaller manufacturers. Rarely a name brooch will have a registry number in a form adopted from 1884, indicating that the design was registered with the Patent Office in London.

The variety of brooches seen on eBay marked “Sterling” and “Silver” and pointing to an origin in either North America or Australia begs the question if name brooches enjoyed an equally commercial success in North America. American Victorian cabinet photos of girls wearing name brooches let us further speculate an existing popularity of this type of jewelry in the USA (Fig. 12). The *1889 Illustrated Catalogue* of Louis DeTice, Ellenville, NY,⁷ which called itself “The busiest house in America,” offered bar pin brooches with “Baby,” “Darling,” “Pet,” “Mammas [sic] Pride,” and “Papa’s Joy,” as well as a large variety of styles with vacant fields where a name could be engraved. But searching through complete volumes of the trade journal *Jewelers’ Circular* and the *Ladies Home Journal* for several years before and after the turn of the nineteenth century brought forth not a single ad. And no name brooches were advertised in American wholesalers’ jewelry catalogues such as S. F. Myers & Co., New York, F. N. Sproehle & Co., Chicago, and Otto Young & Co., Chicago, dating from 1890 to 1900.⁸ Given that virtually everything else becoming fashionable in England eventually spread to the US, the near-absence of advertising for this type of novelty jewelry is odd. One explanation could be that English brooches might have been imported for such low prices that local production was discouraged. In Canada, where



Fig. 11



Fig. 12

⁴ Advertisement by A. Sydenham, Birmingham, in *The Watchmaker, Jeweller and Silversmith*, Jan. 2, 1893, p. xiv; reproduced in Caunt, p. 46

⁵ David McKinley: email to Dorothea Burstyn Aug. 26, 2011; David Beasley (Librarian Goldsmiths Hall, London): email to Dorothea Burstyn, Sept. 1, 2011. Beasley cites an interesting aside from J. Paul de Castro, *The Law and Practice of Hall-marking Gold and Silver Wares*, C. Lockwood and Son, London, 1926: From 1880-1890 4.75 million ounces of gold and silver wares were voluntarily marked and 6.6 million ounces were compulsorily marked.

⁶ Caunt, p. 47

⁷ *1889 Illustrated Catalogue*; Louie DeTice, Ellenville, NY, p. 418, reprint 1974 by Warner D. Bundens, Woodbury, NJ

⁸ I am grateful to Judy Redfield for this information.

people looked even more to England for every fashion, a “Good Luck, Mary” brooch, available of course with other names also, was advertised by A. M. Wellings, a Toronto firm, in *The Trader*, the journal of the Canadian silver and jewelry industry, in December 1885 (Fig. 13).⁸ And Ryrie Bros. Limited, Toronto, advertised in their *1905 Diamond Hall Catalogue* the “No. 31338 Gold Brooch with engraved name” for \$ 2.00.⁹ A hybrid of the name brooch might be the many examples of engraved names on coin jewelry, which was very popular in America and Canada. Coins with engraved names were made not only into brooches but also into necklaces, bracelets and even earrings.

Although usually referred to as “Victorian,” name brooches persisted well into the Edwardian era, falling out of fashion after WW I. There were occasional revivals in later periods. But even at the height of their popularity the name brooches were never considered more than a fad, and in the chronicles of jewelry they are regarded as hardly more than junk. In Margaret Flower’s *Victorian Jewellery*, the “Bible” in this field, they rate one sentence and no illustration. But Victorian and Edwardian name brooches have become a hot collector’s item today. Every day brings new examples on eBay, and some English dealers maintain websites dedicated solely to this type of jewelry. The appeal of name brooches is found in the symbolism of their decoration and the charm of the various old-fashioned names, so evocative of long-bygone eras and friendships. In many ways looking at the various name brooches brings us nearer to the sentiments, aspirations, hopes and wishes of the people living in these times than the precious jewelry of the upper classes.

⁸ Advertisement by A.M. Wellings, Toronto, in *The Trader*, Dec. 1885, page 26

⁹ *Diamond Hall Catalogue*, Ryrie Bros. Ltd. Toronto, 1905