

TOWARDS A HISTORY OF BOOK COLLECTING IN
AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND*

In his article "Some Thoughts on the Cataloguing of Incunabula" in the March 1968 number of *The Australian Library Journal* K. V. Sinclair, amongst other somewhat utopian criticisms of H. G. Kaplan's *A First Census of Incunabula in Australia and New Zealand*, mentioned "an obligation of an historical kind" that fell, he considered, to the lot of his cataloguer: "It behoves the compiler to provide at least an outline of the pattern of incunabula collecting since the European settlement of Australia and New Zealand, mentioning the names of prominent institutions and citizens who created demands or sold heavily" (p. 41^b). Now it is easy enough to understand this curiosity, shared by all those that, like Sinclair, have laboured to list Australian and New Zealand holdings of early manuscripts and printed books, but it is quite a different matter to meet the obligation. The very slenderness of our resources in fifteenth-century books suggests that it is hardly meaningful to talk of a "pattern of incunabula collecting" and that whatever light can be thrown on the subject must come from a thorough study of the way in which private and institutional libraries grew in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Australia and New Zealand. It is this wider study, with its not

* These remarks were made from the chair at the recent Annual Meeting of the Society. The text of this talk, centred on Australian problems and examples, is here retained substantially as it was delivered and without an elaborate apparatus of references (which will in any case find an appropriate place in some of the compilations called for below). Apart from continuing work on the library of C. J. Brennan, the author has begun studies on two other collections mentioned, those of J. Macgregor and William Story.

inconsiderable difficulties and its occasional unexpected rewards, that will be briefly contemplated here.

The paradox is that we have an already substantial body of articles and memoirs relevant to this field, but that the topic cannot be said to have received as yet in any *systematic* way the attention it deserves. George Nadel's *Australia's Colonial Culture* (Harvard University Press and F. W. Cheshire, 1957) comes closest perhaps among professional historical works to due recognition of the importance of this sort of evidence. However, neither Nadel nor Craufurd Goodwin in his *Economic Enquiry in Australia* (Duke University Press, 1966) attempts to quantify the information gleaned from nineteenth-century Australian library and book-auction catalogues, thereby forgoing the solid advantages of methods pioneered in France as early as 1910 by Daniel Mornet in his studies of eighteenth-century intellectual history and recently renewed and refined by Henri-Jean Martin and others. Thus we are left with the reminiscences of J. R. Tyrrell, A. H. Spencer, and G. B. Philip, booksellers operating in the late-nineteenth century and the first half of this, with the recollections of bibliophiles, for example those of Rabbi Falk, published in the *Journal and Proceedings of the Australian Jewish Historical Society* in 1962, and with scattered articles of widely varying quality on the history of individual collections both public and private. Indeed the first necessary step towards a concerted attack on this whole subject is to produce a comprehensive list of all such contributions whatever their intrinsic value. Our Society could with profit encourage such compilations in all the diverse areas of printing and book history in our two countries.

But this is only a beginning, precisely because of the gaps in the available secondary literature. When Beatrice and Sidney Webb visited Australia in 1898, Sidney reported in their diary on 5 October (cf. *The Webbs' Australian Diary 1898*, ed. A. G. Austin, Melbourne: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons Ltd, 1965, pp. 48-49) that he had had "a long conversation with the intelligent principal shopman in the largest bookstore in Sydney." This "refined and rather depressed man of literary tastes" had reported that "there was no sale for anything but cheap novels, supplied from England in Colonial editions at from sixpence to half a crown. The rich people bought little or nothing else, and many purchased nothing more

literary than the weekly editions of the newspapers (the 'Australasian' and 'Sydney Mail' chiefly)." So far nothing to disturb the generally poor opinion the Webbs had formed of Australian society, but much that we should like to verify from archival evidence. Webb's informant continued: "There had been a little set of bookbuyers in Melbourne, but this had died out. Australia had one great and wealthy collector—Mr Mitchell of Sydney—who collected every scrap relating to Australia—old newspapers, pamphlets, etc." Mitchell, too, is hardly unexpected, and he has received his due from bibliopole autobiographers as well as from G. D. Richardson in the T. D. Mutch Memorial Lecture for 1961 printed in *Descent* the same year. But the "little set of bookbuyers in Melbourne" poses a quite different problem. We are brought to recognize how Sydney-centred our secondary sources are with the exception of A. H. Spencer's account of his work in Melbourne after the First World War, and long after the disappearance of the "little set." To get over this failure of memorialists and historians alike we have to turn to primary evidence: the ledgers and account-books of booksellers, auction and other catalogues, newspaper advertisements and reports of sales.

Whether by design or by accident the booktrade in Australia, like the printing and publishing industries, has handed on very little of its records to posterity. Where business archives wax fat on pastoral companies and shipping, they have next to nothing to give us on the subjects of our immediate concern. Printeries move to outer suburbs and destroy all documents in the process; great publishing and bookselling enterprises like the house of the Melbourne George Robertson and the marvellously flamboyant Cole's Book Arcade are taken over or disappear, leaving virtually no archival traces. These past tragedies cannot be undone, but our first duty, our own trust in the national interest, is to try to preserve what remains, and no reminder is needed that these remnants are mightily threatened by the makers of takeover bids. Our second duty is to catalogue and to calendar the documents that have survived and been transferred to libraries or to archival repositories. But, as far as the Melbourne bookbuyers of the late-nineteenth century are concerned, we are already too late.

If we leave aside the problem—of interest to all historians—of providing adequate indexes for the major Australian newspapers of the nineteenth century and beyond, we can turn to the other printed primary sources: auction-sale lists and booksellers' catalogues. These ephemeral and vulnerable items have in the main been more fortunate, not least in Mitchell's omnivorous passion for "scraps" and "pamphlets." As I have indicated elsewhere, the collecting of Australiana goes back at least as far as the heyday of H. T. Dwight's Melbourne bookshop in the 1860s. But from Petherick to Mitchell and Ferguson over a full century we see how prescient collectors and collector-bibliographers set the pace and laid down guidelines for acquisition policies that effectively guaranteed the preservation of the apparently trivial along with the nobly political and literary. The national bibliographies that have grown, are growing, in both Australia and New Zealand from such efforts—and here Hocken and Turnbull should be mentioned—are providing a sound basis for the prosecution of *some* of our enquiries.

Some, not all, for it is precisely in the area of book collecting that there is some uncertainty. The first four volumes of Ferguson's *Bibliography of Australia* covering the period up to 1850 set out to list everything, including all pamphlets and catalogues. Inevitably there are omissions—for example some of the catalogues recorded in Peter Orlovich's article on "The Philosophical Society Library, 1821-1822" in the April 1966 number of *Biblionews*—but there is no cause for alarm or censure in this. The three volumes for the years 1851 to 1900 do not, as is well known, cover the same range of material and, although book catalogues were of special concern to Ferguson, they are excluded in theory and rather haphazardly included in practice. Hence another obvious task for a member of our Society: a checklist of all auction and booksellers' catalogues published in Australia whatever the period.

The catalogues themselves are widely dispersed in public and private collections. Some survive in one or two copies only. It is unfortunately reasonable to surmise that others have been completely lost, their existence attested simply by newspaper advertisements. The rarity of these lists makes it all the more desirable to catalogue them without delay. It is worth recording that one institutional library, the then Melbourne Public Library, took pains to preserve such material, per-

haps in line with the ambitious acquisitions policy at present being examined by David McVilly in the April and October 1971 numbers of the *La Trobe Library Journal*. Certainly, some of the Melbourne bookbuyers can be identified from sales conducted by Gemmell-Tuckett in the 1880s: the Honorable John Macgregor, former Minister for Mines, William Cornell, and E. J. Shollick. William Rae of Happy Valley, Bendigo, who had already issued a catalogue of his own library in the 1870s, was a buyer at these and other sales of the period, but his collection was not dispersed till it was catalogued by Lloyd's Book Shop in 1923—at the same period as A. H. Spencer handled the Sticht library, or, rather, part of it. Hyperbole is, of course, *de rigueur* in the catalogues: Rae's "library is probably not excelled, if equalled, by any private collection in Victoria"; Cornell's collection is "superb and unique"—and very rich in grangerized volumes, it should be added; Macgregor's "magnificent library" is the "finest private library in Australia . . . comprising over 10 000 volumes of costly, rare, and beautifully-bound works in every department of literature." At least we have the evidence to test these assertions of colonial vainglory, and it must be admitted that Macgregor's library for one is worthy of comparison with the most prestigious recent offerings in Melbourne auction-rooms. But a fuller account must await another occasion. A Victorian cabinet minister devoted to the *philosophes* and a reader of Diderot and La Mettrie merits further attention on that ground alone.

But what of the libraries that were not sold at auction and were either dispersed through bookshops or left to institutions? We do not enjoy the privileges afforded by the French notarial archives, so that it is considerably more difficult to investigate the submerged nine-tenths of the iceberg. Mostly one has to rely on the evidence of the volumes themselves, on signatures or stamps or bookplates or telltale shelf-marks. Did Gotch of Gordon & Gotch have a library? Nothing beyond a copy of Alexander Smith's *Dreamthorp*, signed by the great newsagent and picked up by chance two years ago, is there to inform me. Students and amateurs of provenances amass their wisdom in secondhand bookshops and on the shelves of our older libraries. They are tempted to put their trust in serendipity.

The major gift collections are less mysterious. It matters little that N. D. Stenhouse never completed

the manuscript catalogue of his library, famous in the annals of mid-nineteenth-century Australian literature. The 1892 printed catalogue of the Sydney University Library conveniently identifies the books that came from Stenhouse's collection. Time and patience will reconstruct the impressive accumulation of Sir Charles Nicholson, but it is well to remember that his munificence extended far beyond the University of Sydney. Chris Brennan's careless generosity has ensured that his books are not neatly divided between St John's College and the Australian National University, as determined by Herbert Moran and his son. Many strays complicate the task of the cataloguer, who must bear in mind the vulnerability of smaller institutional collections as well as those of individual scholars or men-of-letters.

While it is heartening to see Christ College in Hobart commemorate one hundred and twenty-five years of existence with a book exhibition illustrating the ideals and ideology of its founders or to learn that the catalogue of the older holdings of Moore College has been completed, it must be remembered that other early Australian libraries have been dispersed irretrievably or amalgamated in ways that make the study of provenances so strongly recommended by W.J. Cameron in his paper at the 1966 David Nichol Smith Memorial Seminar very much more arduous. We have a responsibility to be vigilant in this area too. Where we cannot properly recommend against the breaking-up of a collection, we should try to list it for the benefit of future researchers.

For, although the inclination to pursue the reconstruction of a library can be pure of any wider historical purpose, can be a fascinating exercise in detection, we must remember that there are other questions to ask of our material. These questions have to be framed with some discretion, finesse, and imagination. The pitfalls are many, as is noted in Henri-Jean Martin's 1959 article in *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, translated as "What Parisians read in the Sixteenth Century" in W. L. Gundersheimer's selection *French Humanism 1470-1600* (Macmillan, 1969, pp. 131-145). The quantifier has to be aware of the limitations of his sources, of the pamphlets in anonymous bundles, of the forbidden works prudently omitted. He has to have the elementary common-sense not to combine Dr Bray's Associates, the Oxford Tractarians, the London Missionary Society, the Benedictines of Downside, and—in the case of

Salvado's New Norcia—the Escorial, the Society of Friends, and Sir Redmond Barry into a sure recipe for the Australian ethos. But, provided these precautions are taken, provided clear distinctions are made in the case of individual authors and thinkers between what is bought, what is read, and what is thoroughly digested, intellectual history can only gain from systematic and painstaking enquiries in this field. On the one hand quantitative studies of the market for and popularity of certain types of books, imported and locally published; on the other appropriately annotated transcriptions of surviving or reconstructed catalogues of the libraries of men influential in Australian—and New Zealand—literary and public life. What has been done or is about to be done for Montesquieu, Locke, Adam Smith, and John Dee—one of whose books is no further away than the Fisher Rare Book Library as a reminder that Australian-held volumes surprisingly often have significant European provenances—is both possible and desirable here. Our Society could profitably include in its programme of publications the history of the libraries of Sir George Grey and a catalogue of the quite substantial and richly annotated personal collection of Chris Brennan.

But let me end not with a conclusion but—most improperly—with an enigma connected with the "little set of bookbuyers in Melbourne" insofar as its subject was their quarry. Consider the case of William Story, an English land-agent emigrating to Australia at an advanced age after a good half-century of book collecting. Before setting sail he reduces his library "by reason of the great cost of safe package and transit," as the first of two known catalogues prepared for auctions in a provincial town declares. Within three years of landing in his new country he writes, with all the authority of his professional experience, a wide-ranging blueprint for the agriculture of Victoria and sees it awarded a government prize. And then, in the words of Sir Archibald Michie, another bibliophilic cabinet minister, he "lived like a hermit in an obscure part of Richmond, and died in comparative indigence." Some time after his death he appears, thinly disguised but coalesced with the character of an escaped convict, in "Price Warung's" *Tales of the Old Régime* (Melbourne: George Robertson, 1897). The directories of the period know nothing of his whereabouts. Only his reluctant contacts with book collectors whose money he accepts for some of his treasures in order to live seem

to link him to the society around him. Another migrant who failed to adjust? or was misled by Australian promises of the waiting El Dorado? The books add a new dimension. For they keep turning up—in libraries and in shops—and, most disconcertingly, they are those ostensibly sold in an English country town well over a century ago. In one, a much prized copy of a celebrated sixteenth-century collection of voyages to the New World, he records—and my enquiries do not permit me to exclude an element of mythomania—how this volume went from Dalrymple to Heber and from Heber's sale to himself via a Bristol bookseller, who had bought it "as an American speculation." The detailed flyleaf note ends: "The bookseller having got possession of the Book, I had to follow the bookseller, and it, to Bristol, before I was able to make the volume mine; and, to give it, an Australian destination: (in lieu of the intended American one) I trust, to the end of time." Much of the mystery remains, but I freely confess that I am working to dispel it. In the meantime there is perhaps after all a lesson to be learnt. Put crudely, book collectors are human; and even if the anatomy of bibliomania is a branch of abnormal psychology, we have the best of reasons to puzzle over such vagaries as those of the land-agent turned hermit. It is, in short, a proper object of curiosity to examine the behaviour of collectors from Sir Thomas Phillipps down, and I hope that our Society will remain duly inquisitive about such matters "to the end of time."

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