

SOME NOTES ON DATING WHITCOMBE & TOMBS PUBLICATIONS, 1882-1960.

NOVEMBER 1982 MARKS THE CENTENARY of the entry into partnership of George Hawkes Whitcombe, bookseller, and George Tombs, printer and bookseller, both of Christchurch. The joint business, to be known as Whitcombe & Tombs, was formally registered in 1883 as a limited liability company (one of the earliest under the 1882 Companies' Act) with Whitcombe as managing director.¹ Since then New Zealand's most prolific printing/publishing concern (and largest chain of retail booksellers) has established an enviable record for quality bookwork and printing of all sorts. Notwithstanding the impact of 'the new technology' and the 1971 merger with Dunedin-based printers and publishers Coulls, Somerville Wilkie, which resulted in the name change to Whitcoulls, the firm still maintains its traditional standards.

The notes presented here, in the hope that they may be of some practical use, spring directly from the need for the accurate dating of items to be included in the *New Zealand National Bibliography to 1960*.² For the period in question some three thousand books and pamphlets published and/or printed by Whitcombe & Tombs are recorded in the bibliography, and many of these are undated. Some other publications, such as reprints of overseas publications and most of the Story Book series, which are outside the scope of the bibliography, are also covered by the system outlined, which is based on examining the imprints of dated publications and inferring the dates of undated publications by comparing the form of imprint.³ Some comments on the dating implications of job numbers are also added.

In the expansionist first half of the twentieth century Whitcombe & Tombs had regularly opened new branches (mainly retail outlets; Christchurch, Dunedin, Auckland and Wellington were to remain the printing houses) and consistently added them to their imprint, which had a fixed order. Though the standard form of imprint at a particular time is quite rigidly adhered to, it must be emphasised that the system does not necessarily (though it *may*) hold true for items which do not meet the general criterion of 'printed *and* published in New Zealand by Whitcombe & Tombs'. That is, it tends to exclude items printed by them for private or overseas publication, joint publications, and items printed overseas or by other New Zealand printers for publication in New Zealand by Whitcombe & Tombs. These are minority categories and in very many cases the imprint for the firm as printer is given in the same form as its publisher/printer imprint.

The standard forms of imprint listed below are given in a schematic form, i.e. ampersands and 'and's and the names of the countries (which are given sometimes) are omitted, and no attempt has been made to represent the layout, only the order. Where the significant new factor is the addition of a place name it is printed in bold type; where it is a change in order, italics are used. Notes on variations follow.

1883–1892	Christchurch
1892–1894	Christchurch, Dunedin, London
1895–1902	Christchurch, Wellington , Dunedin, London
1903–1916	Christchurch, Wellington, Dunedin, Melbourne , London
1916–1928	Auckland , Christchurch, Dunedin, Wellington, Melbourne, London
1929–1936	Auckland, Christchurch, Dunedin, Wellington, Melbourne, Sydney , London
1936–1939	Auckland, <i>Wellington</i> , Christchurch, Dunedin, Invercargill , Melbourne, Sydney, London
1939–1944	<i>Christchurch</i> , Auckland, Wellington, Dunedin, Invercargill, <i>London</i> , Melbourne, Sydney
1944–1949	Christchurch, Auckland, Wellington, [Lower Hutt], Dunedin, Invercargill, London, Melbourne, Sydney, Perth <i>Note: Lower Hutt is included randomly.</i>
1950–1952	Christchurch, Auckland, Hamilton , Wellington, Lower Hutt, Timaru , Dunedin, Invercargill, London, Melbourne, Sydney, Perth <i>Note: Lower Hutt and Wellington sometimes in reverse order.</i>
1953–1954	Christchurch, Auckland, <i>Wellington, Dunedin, Hamilton, Lower Hutt, Timaru, Invercargill</i> , London, Melbourne, Sydney, Perth [i.e. New Zealand branches in 4 main centres listed first, followed by minor centres]
1955–1960	Christchurch, Auckland, Wellington, Dunedin, Hamilton, Lower Hutt, Timaru, Invercargill, London, Melbourne, Sydney, Perth, Geelong

Notes on variations:

1. Overseas branches are occasionally omitted and subject to some variation in order.
2. Occasionally the order of the New Zealand branches listed varies and this appears to signify that the work was printed in the branch named first. As most of the significant changes in the form of imprint are additions and not order, this does not affect the hypothesis. (Conversely, though, an item is not necessarily printed in the branch listed first in the *standard* imprint.)
3. Items identified as being printed in Auckland in the 1920s have the imprint order: Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, Dunedin They also tend to be more adventurous typographically.
4. A radical difference between the imprint on an item (e.g. only one place given) and the standard form usually means that the firm had only the role of printer and that it was printed in the place named.

Of course there will always be quixotic publications which refute any hypothesis and keep bibliographers on their toes, such as the 1922 issue (undated)

of J.C. Andersen's *Maori life in Aotea*. This is a reissue of the 1907 (undated) sections up to the end of signature R, signatures S to the end being reprinted.⁴ The imprint is, of course, in the 1907 form, and the only immediate distinguishing feature is the different job number — G36033, whereas the earlier issue had the number G14875. In this case the job number is a useful double check, but there are some problems in using them to determine the date of publication. When included, job numbers are usually printed as part of the colophon, but on average at least 20% of items seen do not give the job number; there are periods in which it is rare to find job numbers at all, and years in which there are few publications.

There are two main sequences of numbers: those preceded by 'G' (which seem to be allocated only to Whitcombe & Tombs' own publications) and a straight numerical sequence, which *may* be allocated to their own publications but which seem to be allocated more often to jobs for which they are only the printers. Both these sequences stop and begin again — by 1960 there were two repeated 'G' sequences and five repeated numerical sequences. In the case of the latter there may be a span of only about 10 years before a number is used again, and it can be difficult to know which to choose. In addition to these two main sequences there are also other job numbers, prefixed 'C', 'D', 'W' (presumably for Christchurch, Dunedin and Wellington jobs), 'L' and 'R', but not in any definable sequences. The final problem with job numbers is that they were allocated when a job was begun and therefore the actual publication date could be years later; this tends to confuse both determining the sequence and the dating consequent upon it.

In view of these qualifications it is with some hesitation that the following scheme of numbers, compiled from those occurring in the two main sequences, is presented. The highest number recorded in any year is given, in an attempt to weed out the older jobs, but no explanation for the obvious inconsistencies can be given; some appear to be straight errors. The 'G' numbers for the period 1950–1960, however, are transcribed from the firm's ledgers, to which I refer at the end. For each year the first number is from the G sequence, the second from the numerical sequence. (Asterisks mark the points at which sequences recommence.)

1887	1888	1889	1890	1891	1892	1893
—	—	—	—	—	—	—
8565	9651	12241	—	21256	23571	—
1894	1895	1896	1897	1898	1899	1900
—	—	—	—	—	—	G7895
29048	—	37425	—	44347	—	53623
1901	1902	1903	1904	1905	1906	1907
G9218	—	G10796	G11917	G12074	—	G14875
—	58092	—	61316	67164	—	82871

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1908	1909	1910	1911	1912	1913	1914
G17707 85006	G19464 —	G20884 92639	G22271 —	G22558 —	G24955 —	G26597 101007*
1915	1916	1917	1918	1919	1920	1921
G28475 20178	G29567 14043	G31389 21474	G34867 32720	G33118 40214	— 36480	— 49432
1922	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928
G36033 —	G39883 61604	G38950 64207	G44796 74957	G45189 61849	G48718 83160	G49201 72131
1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935
G51156 99407	G52916* 99445*	G31 11153	G211 —	— —	G656 30308	G714 33975
1936	1937	1938	1939	1940	1941	1942
G912 44293	G1142 52345	G1372 68989	G1416 77220	G1830 81481	G2170 —	G2530 — *?
1943	1944	1945	1946	1947	1948	1949
— —	G2703 —	G3121 21006	— —	G3359 —	G5451 47938	G3631 —
1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956
G3880 68399	G3987 —	G4113 —	G4220 —	G4335 —	G4427 — *?	G4502 —
1957	1958	1959	1960			
G4554 —	G4636 25289	G4706 26076	G4801 —			

One disappointing discovery made while trying to determine job number sequences was the apparent loss of the firm's early ledgers, though they are known to have existed some 10-15 years ago. The ledgers, which record not only job numbers and titles, but also print run, completion dates and costings (wages; paper and materials) now exist only from 1950.⁵ It must be a matter of some concern for our bibliographical history if the records of such a large and indeed important company as Whitcombe & Tombs can slip away unnoticed.

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NOTES

¹ A.A. Smith, *Printing in Canterbury* (Christchurch, 1953), p.27-30.

² A.G. Bagnall, *New Zealand National Bibliography to 1960* (4v. in 5, Wellington, 1969[i.e. 1970]-1980); Volume 5, Index to v.2-4 and Supplement, in preparation.

³ An attempt has been made to sight as many of the publications as possible to test the hypotheses, but has been restricted to the holdings of the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, which are at most seventy-five percent complete for the period, and weakest in the 1920s and 30s.

⁴ A note in the Turnbull Library copy by Andersen (Chief Librarian at the time) explains that the last sheets of the unbound stock were destroyed by rats, and demand warranted reprinting. Apart from the different job number he notes that the only points which distinguish the issues are the varying position of the signature marks 'S' to the end and a resetting difference at the foot of p.575 and the head of p.576.

⁵ I am most grateful to Mr Barrie Eaton, Publications Production Manager of Whitcoulls, Christchurch, for the trouble he took in answering my queries concerning the company's records.

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