

**BOOKSELLER TO THE CITY OF SYDNEY:  
JAMES TEGG IN 1838**

IN A RECENT ESSAY for Wallace Kirsop's and Dietrich Borchardt's *The Book in Australia: Essays Towards a Social and Cultural History*, Marc Askew and I sought to demonstrate the paucity of evidence for, and subsequent lack of research into, Australian colonial reading tastes.<sup>1</sup> For the period prior to 1850 direct evidence of reading tastes is rare, with the extraordinary exception of the loans register of Walch's Circulating Library in Hobart, recently analysed by Wallace Kirsop.<sup>2</sup> The remaining evidence is circumstantial, being almost entirely restricted to the newspaper advertisements and booksellers' and auction catalogues so comprehensively treated by Elizabeth Webby.<sup>3</sup> It is exciting then to find new evidence originating in the shop of one of Australia's most notable early booksellers, James Tegg.

James Tegg was one of Thomas Tegg's five sons, all of whom continued in the book trade in various parts of the Empire. James and Samuel arrived in Sydney in 1834 and immediately went into business in George Street. Samuel later went to Hobart, where he established another shop — the same one which Major Walch bought in the mid-1840s. Judging from a recent account of his publishing activities, James's business was very active.<sup>4</sup> Webby's analysis of the catalogues and advertisements further supports this contention.

James died in 1846 and was buried in the Sandhills Cemetery. In 1909 his gravestone was reported to have read: 'James Tegg | Bookseller to the City of Sydney | Son of Thomas Tegg Esq of London.'<sup>5</sup> He died intestate and so the colonial Master-in-Equity was required to report on the financial affairs of the estate. Payments of £303 14s.5d. were made, but only £101 0s.5d. was received. £7 2s.1d. was left in the savings bank, and 9s. in the Master's hands.<sup>6</sup> This account probably reflects the normal state of business, as the lack of a will indicates that Tegg died suddenly — he was only 38 years of age — without time to organise his affairs. It appears then that the business had a high turnover of stock but that there was not much profit to be made selling books in the colonies.

There is not much evidence for the operation of Tegg's business. He did make the rather rhetorical claim for promptness, and also claimed that he sold books at London prices.<sup>7</sup> So, a letter from James Tegg's clerk to a customer is of particular importance not only for the light it throws on reading tastes in Australia in 1839, but also as evidence for Tegg's bookselling business. The text of the letter follows, and it may be compared with the photographic reproduction (Plates 1 and 2).<sup>8</sup>

Sydney Aug<sup>t</sup>. 7. 1839

Dear Sir,

I have to acknowledge the receipt of 8£, which is duly placed to your Cr with thanks. Your goods should have been sent by return, but 'Graham's Medicine' and one or two other articles were not landed from the vessel. Under these circumstances I thought best to keep it, and send all at once. On the other side you have Prices of the Books mentioned in your last. As yet I have not been able to do a catalogue for you.

I am, Sir, Yours truly  
James Tegg Per William Colman  
Mr Armstrong

Saturday Magazine 11 Vols £2:15:0  
 Anecdote Library 6/-  
 Sunday Library 6 Vols None left  
 Gil Blas, 2 Vols 14/-  
 Don Quixote 3V. 21/-  
 Curiosities of Literature 30/-  
 5000 Receipts 12/-  
 Wilson's Borders 4V. 40/-  
 Ross' Voyages None  
 Parry's do- 4V. Calf 24/-  
 Dr. Syntax about 12<sup>s</sup>/- not yet received  
 Sunday Evening 10/6  
 [Qy] Plasterer's Guide I have none  
 Walker's Assistant to Arithmetic  
 Do you mean Walkingaine's Tutor's Assistant? This sells 3/6  
 All the above are *selling* prices [original emphasis]

What light does this letter throw on Tegg's business? Several issues are raised but few firm conclusions can be made. First, in this instance at least, Tegg did not operate on credit. Armstrong's books were only sent after a draft for £8 was received from the customer. Mr Armstrong's identity is not known, but, given the value of his order, he is assumed to be a man of some means. It might be supposed then that Tegg did not normally extend credit. Secondly, there is no evidence for Tegg's claim to promptness. On the contrary, Tegg delayed a consignment because some books on order did not come when expected. Thirdly, it appears that Tegg's prices were reasonable, though it is not possible to know what was the London price, or indeed whether the books were even new. A tentative identification of the titles mentioned in the letter indicates that they range in date from 1835 to 1837, so it is probable that Tegg was receiving books from his father, who was well-known for his remainder business.<sup>9</sup> It should also be noted that the *Doctor Syntax* of the letter was almost certainly an edition published by Thomas Tegg in 1838, which had not arrived by August 1839. Fourthly, Tegg provided an invaluable bibliographical service in the days when there were very few public libraries. He was able to identify 'Walker's Assistant to Arithmetic' as Walkingaine's *Tutor's Assistant*, and was also distributing catalogues of books in stock as aids to his customers.<sup>10</sup> These catalogues may even have been customised judging from the comment: 'As yet I have not been able to do a catalogue for you.' Fifthly, and not unimportantly, Tegg was also a stationer, as is demonstrated by the sale of 5000 receipts. As in the English provincial trade of the eighteenth century and Walch's business in Hobart in the 1840s, the sale of stationery probably provided Tegg with a steady and secure cash flow which then allowed capital to be tied up in more slowly moving bookstock.<sup>11</sup> Finally, as to business acumen, James Tegg appears to have been competent, even successful. He almost certainly knew the value of a quick turnover: his father's business was largely based on a rapid turnover of remaindered stock. We might suspect then that Tegg was likely to be conservative when speculating about demand by choosing books with broad appeal. This possibility will be further examined below when we look at the stock on sale. Whatever Tegg's policy, it seems to have

been successfully implemented judging from the fact that some items ordered by Armstrong were no longer held, presumably having been sold out. In conclusion, Tegg operated a sound business, as is demonstrated by his length of service — twelve years — in a volatile colonial retail trade, and by the fact that, apart from his Sydney shop, Tegg also established repositories at Windsor, Maitland and Cambelltown. The evidence of the estate may indicate that there was little profit in bookselling in this period, but Tegg did make a living for the time in which he operated.

Let's now turn to the question of readers' tastes. Again, several issues are raised, but the evidence only allows us to propose tentative answers. First, a simple analysis of the titles bears out the findings of Elizabeth Webby: that is, that by the late 1830s the supply of books was steady and well organised, providing colonial readers with contemporary and topical literature.<sup>12</sup> Miscellaneous and anecdotal literature, including the *Saturday Magazine*, *Anecdote Library*, *Sunday Library*, *Curiosities of Literature*, *Wilson's Border Tales*, and *Sunday Evening*, is well represented in the Tegg letter, though, as suggested above, this may reflect Tegg's opinion of what would sell rather than what was in demand.<sup>13</sup> Two travel accounts, the Arctic voyages of John Ross and William Parry respectively, reflect an interest in geography and travel. Perhaps such an interest was shared by a population clinging to the edge of a continent itself still being explored. William Combe's *Doctor Syntax*, almost certainly a popular work in the colonies — a Sandy Bay public house which dates from this period is called 'Doctor Syntax'<sup>14</sup> — encompasses the three literary types represented in the Tegg letter: it is anecdotal, a popular classic, and a travel account, albeit imaginary.<sup>15</sup> Another group of works — Graham's *Domestic Medicine*, a plasterer's guide, and Walkingaine's *Tutor's Assistant* — can be described as practical.<sup>16</sup> It is clear that at this time there was a shortage of doctors, tradesmen and teachers, and that therefore, to a large extent, the only instruction available was by means of books.<sup>17</sup> It appears that, like the tradesmen themselves, the instruction books were often in short supply. Mr Armstrong's tastes then can be characterised as conservative. His interest in Arctic exploration was topical — the 1830s were the middle of a golden age of Arctic exploration — but there are no novels on his list and the books of imaginative literature date from an earlier age. *Gil Blas* and *Don Quixote* date from the seventeenth century, and even these Smollett translations were most popular in the eighteenth.

What then can be said about James Tegg in conclusion? He ran a solid business in which he supplied books of a conservative nature. This may have reflected the tastes of his customers, Mr Armstrong being one, or it may have reflected the exigencies of the trade. Until more is known about commercial practices in the early colonial booktrade, and more specifically the business relationship between James and his father, we cannot hazard an answer to this question. Either way, Tegg maintained a close relationship with his customers and was one of the first colonial booksellers to offer a professional service. He truly was 'Bookseller to the City of Sydney'.

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## NOTES

1. Marc Askew and Brian Hubber, 'The colonial reader observed: reading and its cultural context', in *The Book in Australia: a Social and Cultural History* (Melbourne, 1988), pp.110-138.
2. Wallace Kirsop, *Books for Colonial Readers*, Sandars Lectures, Cambridge University, February 1981. (I thank Associate Professor Kirsop for allowing me to read the manuscript of his lectures prior to publication.)
3. Elizabeth Webby, *Literature and the Reading Public in Australia, 1800-1850*, PhD Thesis, University of Sydney, 1973.
4. *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v.2 (Melbourne, 1967), pp.504-505. Victor Crittenden gave a paper at the Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand's Annual Conference held in Canberra in May 1986 on the topic of the publishing activities of the colonial Teggs.
5. Mitchell Library. Newspaper Cuttings, v.116, pp.19-26.
6. Mitchell Library. MS A1242, v.53, pp.493, 499. N.S.W. Governor's Despatches to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Jan-Mar 1847. Return of Intestate Estates, 1846.
7. *Colonist*, 29 January 1835, p.40. It might be noted that George Robertson made similar claims in the second half of the century: see John Holroyd, *George Robertson of Melbourne 1825-1898: Pioneer Bookseller & Publisher* (Melbourne, 1968).
8. This letter was found among loose papers in the cataloguing backlog in the Rare Books Library, Fisher Library, University of Sydney. There is little evidence for its provenance, though it was found in an envelope with the following return address: 'Messrs Berkelouw Antiquarian Booksellers 114 King St Sydney Australia 2000.' In MS is: 'C/65125 in drawer', which seems to be an accession number. Miss Pamela Green, a long-serving Rare Books Librarian at Fisher, had no recollection of the item. It is reproduced here with the assistance of the University Librarian, University of Sydney.
9. For a summary of Thomas Tegg's business activities see Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: a Social History of the Mass Reading Public 1800-1900* (Chicago, 1963), pp.284-285.
10. John Ferguson claimed that Tegg produced the first bookseller's catalogue issued in Australia, in 1835, for which see John Ferguson, *Bibliography of Australia* (Sydney, 1963-1969), no. 2051. See also *A Catalogue of the Most Extensive and Valuable Stock of Books*, Sydney, 1838 (Mitchell Library 019.4/1141; not in Ferguson). This may well be the catalogue from which Mr Armstrong made his choice, because seven of the titles referred to in the letter appear in this catalogue. I should like to thank A. Kelly of the Mitchell Library for this information.
11. John Feather, *The Provincial Book Trade in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1985), pp.80-82; Wallace Kirsop, *op cit*.
12. Elizabeth Webby, *op cit*.
13. The popularity of anecdotal literature in the 1850s is evident in the reading of Ned Peters, for which see *A Gold Digger's Diary*, ed. Les Blake (Newtown, Vic., 1981). For an analysis of Peters' reading and the uses to which he put it, see Askew and Hubber.
14. William Mitchell held the first licence of the Dr Syntax Hotel in September 1846. I should like to thank Ian Pearce of the State Library of Tasmania for this information.
15. For the popularity of the Doctor Syntax cult in England, see Harlan W. Hamilton, *Doctor Syntax: a Silhouette of William Combe, Esq (1742-1823)* (Kent State University Press, 1969), pp.260-261. There is no evidence for the popularity of the work in Australia except the naming of the Hobart pub. Webby did not record an instance in the pre-1850 period (she explained in recent correspondence that she was not looking for one), so our letter is the only evidence that the book was available in the colonies during this period. It is probable that by the late 1830s the taste for Doctor Syntax had diminished, but we learn from Hamilton that there was an illustrated edition published by Ackermann and Tegg in 1838, and it is almost certain that this was the work sold by James Tegg. It does not appear in the Tegg catalogue of 1838 and yet was available some time before the date of our letter, 7th August 1839.
16. A later edition of *Domestic Medicine* was to be found in the suburban cottage of Joseph Elliott in the 1860s, for which see Joseph Elliott, *Our Home in Australia: a Description of Cottage Life in 1860* (Sydney, 1984).
17. For evidence of the contemporary shortage of craftsmen see *Copy of a Despatch from Lieut.-Governor Sir John Franklin, to Lord Glenelg, dated 7 October 1837, Relative to the Present System of Convict Discipline in Van Dieman's Land* (London, 1838), Ferguson no. 2654.

Sydney Aug<sup>r</sup> 7 1839

Dear Sir,  
I have to acknowledge  
the receipt of 8/6, which is duly  
placed to your ~~credit~~ with thanks. Your  
goods should have been sent by  
return, but "Franklin's Medicine" and  
one or 2 other articles were not landed  
from the Vessel under these Circum-  
stances I thought best to keep it  
and send all at once. On the  
other side you have Prices of the  
Books mentioned in your list. As  
yet I have not been able to do a  
Catalogue for you.

I am, Sir,  
Yours truly  
James Tegg  
24 Armstrong St. Williamstown

## Plate 1

Letter to Mr Armstrong from James Tegg, 7 August 1839 (recto)

Saturday Magazine 11 vols £ 15. 1  
 Anecdote Library — 6/-  
 Sunday Library 6 vols None left  
 Fitz. Atlas 2 vols 14/-  
 Don Quixote 31. 21/-  
 Curiosities of Literature — 30/-  
 5000 Receipts — 12/-  
 Wilson's Curses 1st. 40/-  
 Ross Voyages — None  
 Campy. W. — 1st. 25/-  
 D. Lyttelton — about 12/- not yet received  
 Sunday Evening 10/-  
 By Stationer's Guide — I have none  
 Walker's Assistant to the Astronomer —  
 Do you mean Walkington's Astronomer's  
 Assistant? This sells off  
 All the above are selling freely

## Plate 2

Letter to Mr Armstrong from James Tegg, 7 August 1839 (verso)

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