

REVIEW ARTICLE: *THE BOOK IN AUSTRALIA*

The Book in Australia: Essays towards a Cultural & Social History. Edited by D. H. Borchardt & W. Kirsop. Historical Bibliography Monograph, no.16. Melbourne, Australian Reference Publications in association with the Centre for Bibliographical and Textual Studies, Monash University, 1988. pp.vii, 214. ISBN 0-9587876-11. \$28.50.

IN DECEMBER 1891 A.R. JUTSON, an ageing bush teacher and socialist, wrote to his very dear friend William McNamara, from Bourke in western Queensland. 'I too am extremely fond of reading'; Jutson replied to McNamara's complaint (that of many a bookseller!) that he had to snatch what little time he could for reading. Jutson had 'a hundred or two copies of what I deem the best books in the language, all old books the new books I do not reckon, and they are not so numerous in my stock as the dear Old Masters are. I am of the way of Hazlitt in the 'Plain Speaker', he says, 'I hate to read new books. There are 20 or 30 volumes that I have read over and over again, and these are the only ones that I have any desire to read at all'.¹ Later in the letter he lists his library: beginning with Marx, Malthus and Adam Smith, he gets to number 147 before realising that he is going to miss the mail if he describe every volume. It is a wonderful letter, one of a number to William McNamara from Jutson. With it are letters from other remote clients to Bertha McNamara, a key figure in the early history of the Labor Party in New South Wales. The bookshop and newspaper reading room the McNamaras ran in Castlereagh Street, Sydney, was an important source of inspiration and a gathering place for many progressive thinkers in the early years of this century.

These letters are now preserved in the Evatt Papers at Flinders University Library and deserve to be better known, for as well as documenting the history of this interesting couple they tell much of the importance in Australian life of the reading of books. It is a theme that has been neglected by most histories of Australia, and there has long been a need for a scholarly but concise history of the book in Australia. This long-awaited and admirable collection of essays goes far towards satisfying that need.

Borchardt, Kirsop and their colleagues cover a wide range of topics, including journals and little magazines, under the general rubric of 'the book'. Borchardt's introduction to the arrival of the printing press in Australia is followed by surveys of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including reflections on the economics of the book trade. Harrison Bryan discusses the history of Australian libraries, and Alf Hagger offers an interesting essay on the economics of the book trade. The editors intend the collection to act as a starting point for studies of 'the vehicle and medium through which Australian literary culture survives', and if this volume succeeds only in driving home the importance of its topic to the many who effectively ignore the printed word as a field of study it will have performed a noble task.

It was over seven years after their arrival in 1788 that the invaders who arrived in Australia printed the first broadside, even though a press and a selection of somewhat worn type was amongst the cargo carried by the First Fleet. Borchardt's account of the arrival of printing surveys the spread of printing to the Australian colonies as they were established and details the constant shortages of trained workers, paper, ink and type

which bedevilled the early years. Sandra Blair's 1987 study of George Howe, the second and founding printer of Australia, describes the effect of the shift from script to print in transforming 'the nature and perception of authority among colonists'.² Print was needed to carry the messages of government to a colony that had spilled beyond the reaches of barracks ground musters, Sunday church parades and convict assemblies: it is perhaps not surprising that it took a full seven years to get the worn old press, now seemingly lost, into action. Surprisingly, Borchardt dismisses the abridgement of 'certain General Orders' recorded in an announcement by Governor King in October 1801, and not known to survive, as merely 'book-like', and suggests that the first true book printed in Australia may have been either an also lost collection of George Howe's own poetry or an 1811 *Racing Kalendar*. He thus ignores the *New South Wales General Standing Orders* printed by Howe in 1802, of which copies survive in the State Library of New South Wales and in the British Library, and which Ferguson and most bibliographers since have accepted as the first book printed in Australia.

Wallace Kirsop's important chapter on bookselling and publishing in the nineteenth century describes the astonishing variety of organisational forms the book trade went through. Kirsop's periodization, categorizing the entrepreneurs of the century as pioneer improvisers, consigners and first booksellers, colonial importers and finally the controllers of a closed market, sought and won by British publishers, is as persuasive and useful as ever. Australians have paid a high price in recent decades for the ground lost when the independent publishing of George Robertson of Sydney, A.C. Rowlandson and Thomas Lothian, who for a brief time in the early decades of this century defied that British dominance, failed to win immediate successors. This chapter should be required reading for all students of nineteenth-century Australia, and twentieth-century policy makers would be well advised to study it as well.

Kirsop might consider adding Charlotte Barton's anonymous *A Mother's Offering to her Children* of 1841 (Ferguson no.3158) to his brief note on 'the school textbooks that began to appear timidly in the 1830s and then with more assurance in the 1840s', in the light of Robert Holden's recent work on this extremely interesting text, often dismissed in passing as simply the first children's book to be published in Australia.³ This rare book, of which only six copies are known to survive in private hands and eight in public collections, should be read as a key pioneering work, the first general educational text to include a substantial Australian content. It was published in a tiny print run of perhaps one hundred copies by George Evans, a surveyor who set up as a bookseller and stationer in Sydney in 1832. Kirsop rightly concentrates on the brothers James and Samuel Tegg as the publishers who came closest to carrying through 'a regular programme built around works of imaginative literature' and dispassionately charts their failure, but I wonder if he is perhaps not a little too ready to find the roots of later disappointment in the scanty publishing of the decades prior to the discovery of gold and the population growth of the 1850s? Some of the achievements of the early decades were quite remarkable, given the smallness of the population and its natural clinging to an interest in matters European: the 1813 Sydney edition of Lewin's *Birds of New South Wales* is, to my eyes at least, a more elegant work than the phrase 'a makeshift edition of proof pulls' suggests, and Thomas Wells' *Michael Howe, the Last and the Worst of the Bush Rangers of Van Diemen's Land* (1818, Ferguson no.716) is a

poignant and well-written tale. As well as the jobbing printing and government regulations, and later the tentative beginnings of a literary tradition, these early decades also saw the publishing of such political tracts as *Party Politics Exposed* (1834, Ferguson no.1775), a protest against the inhumanities practised upon assigned convict servants, printed by Anne Howe, widow of George Howe's successor Robert and Australia's first female newspaper proprietor. Four years later Alexander Maconochie's important work on penal reform, *Thoughts on Convict Management* (1838, Ferguson no.2540), was printed at Hobart and published there and, a year later, in London. That the colony could produce such a substantial text only a little more than three decades after the foundation of a white settlement at Hobart Town, on a matter so close to its origins and nature, is to my mind quite remarkable. As remarkable is the first volume of poetry printed in Tasmania, the pseudonymous *Van Diemen's Land Warriors, or, The Heroes of Cornwall* (1827, Ferguson no.1157), a clever and very funny skit on the unsuccessful pursuit of a bushranger by government troops: unhappily, it scored another first, as probably the first book to be banned in Australia. The censor's file copy survives at the National Library of Australia, with the offending passages underlined. And here, perhaps, is the nub of the matter. Often, there were authors, printers and publishers who were ready to publish to meet popular need and demand, to criticise and oppose, but the power and oppressiveness of government was such in the convict colonies of Eastern Australia that traditions which might have flourished in a freer land could not for a long time find nourishment.

Elizabeth Webby's chapter on nineteenth-century journals is also vital reading, following the faint traces of probably over 800 journals, of which only a handful survive today. Her fascinating account leads me to one question, which the astonishing array of magazines published in Australia today suggests every time I enter a well-stocked newsagent: why are Australians so dedicated to the purchase and reading of magazines? Michael Denholm's good chapter on the little magazines of the twentieth century can only partly answer this, although obviously factors of distance and the need for media of rapid communication amongst scattered enthusiasts are as potent amongst, say, chicken fanciers and bushwalkers as amongst poets and essayists. Perhaps the developing professionalism Webby traces through the nineteenth century is also an answer, producing a publishing tradition which at least in the magazine world has answered indigenous needs well. But I suspect that part of the answer also lies in the partial failure of the public library movement: many Australians today would rather turn to a recently published magazine, bought and not borrowed, than the scanty bookstock of often savagely under-resourced public libraries. The same could be said of what I suspect is an unusually high degree of encyclopedia ownership in Australia: often of dubious value, poorly updated and with vast acreages of print the owner will never peruse, encyclopedias can serve to offer only the illusion of ready information at the fingertips of people who, for one reason or another, are uneasy with the shifting sea of opinion and data accessible via libraries.

Which naturally brings me to Harrison Bryan's chapter on Australian libraries. It is a most useful survey, describing how in only two hundred years a national collection of rather more than 72 million volumes distributed amongst some 11,000 libraries has been built up. It is worth going back to the beginning again, to 1788, to put this vast

accumulation of print into perspective. Phillip and the expedition he commanded brought with them a considerable library as well as a press and type, further demonstrating that books have been considered a valuable resource since the earliest years of white conquest in Australia. A large proportion of the first convicts and settlers were literate to some degree, and literacy was further encouraged amongst later settlers by the provision of teachers on many emigrant ships. A survey of the books carried on the First Fleet, initiated by Colin Steele of the Australian National University and myself, assembled a wide array of titles and uncovered from varying degrees of obscurity several instances of the actual volumes brought to Australia in 1788 themselves.⁴ These included agricultural texts, Richard Johnson's Bible and his copy of Cruden's *Concordance*. It also produced the information that many thousands of religious tracts were in the baggage of the expedition, along with the press — ever since then the ration of print to people, traced for Victoria in a useful table in Marc Askew and Brian Hubber's account of colonial readers, has been high. All I can add to Bryan's account is a somewhat earlier date for what I believe to be the first, although hopeless, proposal for a public library in the new colony. In 1808 the eccentric, courageous and foolhardy 'gentleman convict' John Grant, sent to Hobart Town after a stormy period of exile on Norfolk Island, recorded on one copy of his political manifesto, his 'Bond of Union', now with his papers in the National Library of Australia, that he had given four volumes of a Chambers dictionary 'to the Inhabitants of the Town of Sydney, Port Jackson, intended as the foundation of a Public Library in all the various branches of Knowledge, human & Divine'.⁵ The fate of Grant's gift is not known to me, nor is it clear to whom he addressed his proposal. His was not an endeavour that could have hoped to succeed, although if he had played his cards differently when he was transported to New South Wales he might have prospered, and we might have been the beneficiaries of a Grant Library founded in the cradle years of the 1830s.⁶

Askew and Hubber's study of 'the reading and the use of books in Australia's colonial past' further demonstrates that books have been unduly neglected by all but historians of ideas and literature. As crucial objects in the translation to Australia of immigrant cultures, they have a vast importance to the social historian. I was fascinated by the description of public readings in Victoria between 1865 and 1870 — the Penny Readings promoted often as fundraisers by the committees of mechanics' institutes. Reminiscent of the readings which took the anticolonial novels of Jose Rizal to vast non-literate Filipino audiences at the end of the nineteenth century, they are a reminder that literary and oral culture often have considerable overlaps. The same must be said of aspects of radio, television and film culture today, which is often dependent on and can be an extension of print — although I felt sorry for the young person overheard in a Melbourne second-hand bookshop the other day, searching for the poems of Cyrano de Bergerac! The lecture tours described by Askew and Hubber, which continued into the present century with such speakers as the photographer and writer Frank Hurley, were also an important adjunct to print culture, often as a means for the consolidation of a hegemonic national culture.

John McLaren's account of publishing in the twentieth century offers much that is valuable but left me feeling a little unsatisfied. Much of it is based on a close reading

of *The Australian Bookseller and Publisher* and its antecedents, which go back to 1921. In its pages can be seen the distinctive Australian identity which the book trade began to acquire between the wars, as McLaren suggests, but I think that it might have been useful to have looked at some seeds of this in the publications of Thomas Lothian in 1916 and subsequent years. The Lothian archive at the La Trobe Library, although smaller than the Angus & Robertson archive at the Mitchell Library, is as crucial a primary resource for the study of the book in Australia. Here are documented the negotiations which led to *The Art of Frederick McCubbin* and Ida Rentoul Outhwaite's *Elves & Fairies*, the books with which large-scale art publishing began in Australia. McLaren also seems to suggest that Angus & Robertson's most significant period as publishers of Australian writing was the 1930s, whereas I think rather of the earlier years, up to Robertson's death in 1932, as their time of greatness. From Paterson's *The Man from Snowy River* (1895), which sold over 5,000 copies within its first four months, to C.J. Dennis' huge war-time sales of *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* (1915) and its successors, and from the books of *Art in Australia*, beginning with *The Art of J.J. Hilder* in 1918, to Neville Cayley's *What Bird is That?* (1931), George Robertson of Sydney published many books that were landmarks in Australian print history. Nonetheless, McLaren's contribution is thoughtful and well argued. So too is Alf Hagger's contribution on the economics of the book industry, although I am no competent judge of writings in macroeconomics. Hagger's analysis of books as simple but not single consumer-goods in the retail sense, and his perspective on some of the vexed questions of social policy that have a bearing on books, such as that of assistance to the Australian book industry, is most useful. Hagger aims to ensure that future discussion of the book industry will be less characterised by rhetoric than it has been up until now. However, some of the issues he canvasses, such as the assertion that a social objective 'of which everyone approves (is) . . . equality of opportunity', are perhaps not as susceptible to unambiguous economic analysis as he suggests.

The Book in Australia is a most satisfying collection of essays: full of material to mull over, to disagree with, to start the reader thinking along new lines. It succeeds admirably in its purpose, and is essential reading for anyone interested in Australian social and book history. It is a pity it was not presented better, with more illustrations, acid-free paper and a sewn binding, but it is a book that, on my shelves at least, will be read hard and often over the years to come.

Michael Richards,
National Library of Australia.

NOTES

1. A.R. Jutson to W. McNamara, 28 December 1891. Bertha McNamara Folder B, Evatt Papers, Flinders University Library.

2. Sandy Blair, 'George Howe and early printing in New South Wales', *Australian Printing Historical Society Journal* 1, 1 (1987): 2-15.
3. Speaking at the Children's Literature Seminar organised by the National Trust at the State Library of New South Wales, 3 August 1990.
4. Colin Steele and Michael Richards, *Bound for Botany Bay: What Books did the First Fleeters Read and Where are They Now?* (Canberra: Friends of the ANU Library, 1988).
5. NLA MS 737/34, 20 April 1808.
6. See W.S. Hill-Reid, *John Grant's Journey* (London: Heinemann, 1957), and my own forthcoming article 'The convict and the cream jug' in *National Library of Australia News*, 1991.

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