

AN AUSTRALIAN 'DIME NOVEL' PUBLISHER

THE FIRST MAJOR VENTURE in cheap paperback publishing reached its prime in Australia during the first decades of this century. Although a number of local publishers issued cheap paperbacks for light reading prior to this, the beginnings of the heyday of the shilling book can be dated 1904 when Alfred Cecil Rowlandson commenced publishing his Bookstall Series paperbacks in Sydney, using the imprint of his New South Wales Bookstall Company to launch the series with Steele Rudd's *Sandy's Selection*.

Bookstall Series stories were characterised by Australian and Pacific themes, and were mostly designed to meet a growing nationalistic market in Australasia which no longer wanted to read exclusively Wild West and English countryside yarns which Australian readers had previously been supplied with.

Although there is no known connection, Bookstall books catered to a similar audience to that of the dime novel, and comparisons will be drawn.

The Bookstall was highly successful as a publisher until shortly after Rowlandson's death in 1922. It published over 300 titles, many of which were reprinted in print runs unprecedented in Australia, sometimes following serialisation in periodicals. A few, such as the works of Steele Rudd, remain in print with other publishers to this day.

Because of the nature of their original distribution and their poor physical structure, Bookstall books are imperfectly recorded, and in the major libraries of Australia holdings, even in legal deposit libraries, are at best uneven. Some of the authors and artists associated with the Bookstall were prominent figures, whilst even the identity of others is today unknown.

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The dime (or ten cent) novel was a manifestation of popular literature in nineteenth-century America which trickled into the cheap bookshops and newsagents of Australia and into the hands of Australian readers. Arising out of cheap serial papers in 1860, it was an influential and controversial source of reading matter in America, largely because its cheapness put it within the reach of all. Edmund Pearson, writing about dime novels in 1929 quotes Percy Waxman, Associate Editor of *The Pictorial Review* of New York, as saying;

I lived in Melbourne, Australia, and long before I had reached the age of twelve I was familiar (in a way) with many phases of life in America and with much of its early pioneer background, almost entirely from what I had absorbed from dime novels. Furthermore, those colorful volumes gave me an intense desire to visit the United States and meet as many of its remarkable inhabitants as possible.¹

Thus we learn that dime novels were available in Australia, although the extent of their influence and whereabouts in Australian collections today is unknown. They probably did not reach the Australian reading public in the numbers of the 'penny dreadful' and 'blood' novels, as their occurrence in Australia today is even rarer than is British ephemeral fiction. Channels for their importation to Australia existed. In the 1870s British mail to Australia was directed through San Francisco. From the time of the

California gold rushes of the late 1840s and the Australian gold rush after 1851, cultural and trading links between America and Australia multiplied. There was some inter-migration between the two countries of which Mr Waxman is an example. Black and white artists such as the American Livingstone Hopkins ('Hop') and Australian Percy Leason (creator of the Victorian town of Wiregrass in the Australian press) are further examples. Cross-fertilisation and improved printing technology introduced new possibilities for lively illustration and mass-market fiction to Australia at a time when the population was becoming sufficiently large to provide a market for cheap fiction.

Mass-produced fiction was not published in Australia until over forty years later than in America. *Malaeska; the Indian Wife of the White Hunter*, credited with being the first dime novel, appeared in that format in 1860; mass-produced Australian cheap fiction appeared for the Christmas market of 1904. These books were not like dime novels in their physical appearance, nor were they the same type of fiction. The more sensational sort of fiction that was published in America as dime novels was published in Australia in seedy scandal sheets. Unlike the dime novel the earliest Australian cheap books were almost exclusively the output of one publisher, who created and held the market to himself.

Nineteenth-century Australian readers wanting cheaper books had purchased British paper-covered books, and the so-called 'colonial' editions. Even Australian authors such as Boldrewood were sold in Australia in British editions. Australia's population by the turn of the century was more ready for a local product, being sufficiently large for local sales and cheaper larger print runs. If a publisher had at his disposal a ready-made distribution network as the franchise holder for a chain of railway and ferry bookstalls, he was in a good position to begin publishing cheap editions. Such a man was Alfred Cecil Rowlandson, proprietor from 1897 of the New South Wales Bookstall Company. Rowlandson was born in 1865 on the goldfields of Victoria and had an elementary education. At an early age he became a shop boy and then an office boy. By 1884 he was working for the New South Wales Bookstall Company, which had been founded in 1879. In 1897 he bought the business from the estate of the founder, and augmented and advanced its fortunes before his death in 1922.

About 1900 he initiated the Company's production of an extensive range of postcards, playing cards, and small albums of views, commemorative volumes for visiting cricket tours, souvenir volumes on Australia's contribution to the Boer War and other patriotic affairs. In 1904, following his predecessor's spasmodic publishing of paperback fiction most of which was printed in England as parallel editions bearing the New South Wales Bookstall Company's imprint, Rowlandson launched the first extensive venture in publishing Australian fiction. The landed prices of British paperbacks in Australia late last century were frequently two-thirds of those of cheap hardback fiction. A scattering of paperbacks had been published in Australia, but, like the foreign imprints, their authors were frequently not Australian. Angus and Robertson, had started in a modest way in the 1890s on one shilling novels but had not continued their publication. The rising tide of nationalism which led to federation, and the growth in population made the time right for a venture such as Rowlandson's.

The first Rowlandson fiction title to be commissioned was by Steele Rudd (Arthur Hoey Davis), for which the firm paid the unprecedented sum of five hundred pounds, a figure never to be equalled by the New South Wales Bookstall Company, or by any other publisher for over a generation. Thereafter the Bookstall's fee to authors remained relatively static at a lower rate of between thirty and one hundred pounds. The publicity gleaned from announcing the fee paid to Rudd was no doubt valuable in itself, as it was reiterated for years in company advertising. Like dime novel writers, most authors, apart from those with contracts signed very early in the Company's publishing career, relinquished their rights and did not receive royalties. By the time that Norman Lindsay sold Rowlandson his *Curate in Bohemia* for publication in 1913, the copyright of the work was registered in the name of the Company. With the increasing popularity of motion pictures, quite early on picture rights were assigned to the Company in most contracts. Not that this always did the publisher much good, as the pirating of books to create film scripts with different titles was a common practice.

At around 50,000 words, books were longer than those of the dime novel type, which commonly had a length of about 25,000 to 30,000 words. Manuscripts were received unsolicited once the Company was established, and from the start were sought actively. Rowlandson's reputation for patience with even the most crackpot authors was well-known. A number of books started life as serials in popular magazines, including that of one of the few anonymous authors, Paul Cupid, whom Morris Miller states in his bibliography may have been Rowlandson himself. About seventy per cent of Rowlandson's authors had never previously had books published. Several who wrote best-sellers published their first books with him and remained with the Company until after his death. Among these authors was Vance Palmer. Over half of the titles published in the Bookstall series were reprinted at least once, with some running into many impressions.

By the end of 1906 the Bookstall had published eleven titles, which is modest by dime novel standards, but an achievement for the developing Australian publishing trade and for the population size, which did not reach five million until around 1920. Over this two-year period from 1904 to 1906 no fewer than ten of these titles were reprinted. Thereafter the Bookstall's publishing ventures went from strength to strength.

One of the factors of the earlier success of the dime novel had been the U.S. Mail, which, until the postal rate structure was changed at the turn of the last century, had aided their cheap distribution. The New South Wales Bookstall Company, with a large number of outlets of its own, a ready-made distribution network and a preferential rate for rail freight, was well placed to expand into publishing. Rowlandson was a great believer in the power of advertising, and the periodicals of the time carry regular full-page advertisements for his publications. In 1907 he offered a prize for a manuscript at the Adelaide Exhibition of Women's Work. We do not know who won this literary prize, or if the Bookstall published the prize-winning entry, because the records of the Exhibition are incomplete. A woman who won a prize for a novel in the First Australian Exhibition of Women's Work in Melbourne later that year subsequently appears as a Bookstall author. One wonders if in offering the prize he was also

seeking new talent, as he published a number of woman writers, including Sydney Partridge, Beatrice Grimshaw and Sumner Locke (mother of Sumner Locke Elliott).

The first venture, the publication of Rudd's *Sandy's Selection*, was a success. The required break-even figure of 20,000 copies was quickly passed, with over 40,000 copies sold within one month of its publication in December 1904. Earlier in the year Rudd had been invited to visit Rowlandson at his office in Sydney, next door to the old Cyclorama. Rudd described the office;

It wasn't an imposing business place — yet some might say it was. It was a long narrow dingy, dusty, shapeless, untidy affair stacked with magazines, papers, almanacs, and books, like corn-cobs thrown and shoveled (sic) into a barn . . . And at first look around you wondered why in the name of Barabbas, who was something of a publisher according to olden unreliable writers, was it called the New South Wales publishing place? . . . Still it filled me with the happy feeling that the proprietor of it, in whatever corner of the debris he was located, was a humorist . . . Suddenly I came upon men working silently among those piles of magazines, . . . One . . . pointed a pen to a set of narrow rickety stairs much like a ladder, (there were no lifts in those days . . .) sloping along a crumbling wall told me I'd find him 'on the next floor in his office'. I crept up those narrow stairs wondering at every step if my last insurance premium was paid, then out on to a balcony no wider than a possum or wallaby track, looking out over George Street to the railway station. At the end of this balcony, in a little dug-out little more than large enough to hold himself, so long as he kept quiet . . . sat a fair-skinned, well built, well groomed man with a waxed moustache.²

The familiar Bookstall Series paperback format dominated the Company's publishing output. The format consisted of a small octavo text, printed using linotype on to superior newsprint, with black and white text illustrations. The whole was folded into sections, and wire sewn stab-wise. The spine was glued, and the paper cover applied directly to the endpapers.

Rowlandson believed in the use of colour for book covers.³ The covers were gaily coloured, with an illustration from the story on the front, and usually a paid advertisement on the back. As edition and impression information, apart from year of publication, is poor, these advertisements can assist in the separation of variant impressions of the same year. Typically the final section of the book was a catalogue of Bookstall publications. The paper has rotted today, the wire sewing rusted, and many copies are dog-eared and worn from reading. In the early days, a few titles were printed on better paper and bound in cloth as parallel editions, the earliest of them in pictorial cloth designed by the illustrator. Usually the paperback cover design doubled as a book jacket design. It is possible that these lively covers of Bookstall paperbacks became the precursors of coloured book jackets in Australia. Their design was, from the very first of the Series, very much of the twentieth century, dispensing with the more formal design of their predecessors.

Bookstall hardbacks were normally sold for the recognised cheap hardback price of three shillings and sixpence, rather than the more expensive six shillings. Some pictorial, and all plain cloth editions, had a dust-wrapper. The principal hardback

market was probably circulating libraries. The Bookstall itself operated one of these, which was particularly geared to rail or mail supply to country customers. Rowlandson's prime marketing targets were travellers and people living in the bush, for whom he believed the major competitors in the market, the English half-crown novels, were too dear. He was proven correct by the demise of the two and sixpenny book, which had only a brief career as a cheaper reading alternative.

Rowlandson viewed his books as a disposable commodity. Time has proven him right again, as the bibliography of these titles is by no means complete. Legal deposit libraries have good coverage of the titles published, but no library has anything like a full set of the successive editions and reprints. Because of their weak structure and their ephemeral character, libraries gathered and retained incomplete files. The recording of the holdings of the nation's collections of these books is made difficult by the publisher's loose and inconsistent identification of editions and impressions. Only the year of publication appeared on their title pages; edition, impression or print-run data, if it was given at all, was given on their extremely vulnerable covers.

Art work was an integral part in the books' appeal. Composition of the art work was largely left to the artist. For Louis Becke's *Bully Hayes* (1913) Becke posed shortly before his death for Norman Lindsay and provided him with descriptions for the drawing of Hayes and other piratical characters of the Pacific's notorious 'blackbirding' era in which Hayes had been for a period a prime entrepreneur.

Rowlandson was extremely fortunate to have available to him the stable of artists then working in Australia which was at that time probably producing more black and white artists of quality than it could accommodate. As with authors, Rowlandson took risks with his choice of artists, although he used established artists more frequently than he used established authors. Apart from several members of the prolific Lindsay family, there were their relations by marriage, Will and Ambrose Dyson (their brother Edward was a busy Bookstall author) and the American, 'Hop'. Charles Hunt, who made his name in the nineteenth century on the *Picturesque Atlas*, Percy Spence, the little-known Vernon Lorimer and dozens of others were engaged. Rowlandson was the first in Australian publisher to see the value of lively art work in book promotion. Illustrations occur both on the covers and in the texts of his books, which carry no fewer than six full-page black and white line drawings. He even advised some British publishers whose output he handled on his bookstalls on the colour and layout of their publications. His advice which was directly heeded in at least one case.⁴

Illustrations were printed on the same paper as the text. Their line had to be hard, vital and clear, as the coarse paper did not do justice to fine work. The best Bookstall work is of this bold character, although artists did not always allow for the effect of reduction on their work. The quality of the art work, even from well-known artists, was frequently poor, which may suggest that the artists were not well paid for their work, although we know little about this. It is of a higher technical standard than that encountered in the wood engravings of the dime novels, even allowing for the improvements in the printing of illustrations which were available by the end of the nineteenth century. The draughtsmanship is better, and the subjects, whilst lively, are less sensational. Poor production could have been an added disincentive to good colour work, and some cover designs are not their artists' best work. Much of the work

has a hasty 'journalism' feel to it. That the covers were sometimes drawn in haste is shown in a cover by Percy Lindsay, on which the hero's right leg is splinted — the author had broken the hero's left. Not surprisingly the art work rated considerably less contemporary critical attention than the text, and the comment which does appear tends to be jovial and condescending.

Joviality and condescension describe too the attitudes of critics who chose to notice Bookstall books in the press. The Bookstalls seem never to have aroused the fury of social reformers and critics for allegedly corrupting the reader as did the dime novel. Their themes also lack the self-conscious morality or didacticism of some dime novels, which seem to have been a response to community pressure. Such disapproval of the Bookstalls as there was related to their perceived triviality. 'Jack North', (journalist Percy Reay), author of three Bookstall titles, had little time for contemporary critics when writing at the time of Rowlandson's death in 1922;

Those highbrow critics who affect to despise the Bookstall Series, and discuss each addition with a few satirical observations, are of the school of knockers who do nothing themselves for Australia, and would discourage public support of local writers. Any old mush from England or America is given lengthy, oft times fulsome notices. The Australian is often damned with faint praise.⁵

Bookstall novels at one shilling were cheap, and Rowlandson was able to make a fair thing of it, even through the first World War. For a period of about fourteen months in the years after the War he was forced to raise his prices by twenty-five percent when the effects of postwar paper shortages really hurt Australia, but he reverted to the shilling price as soon as possible.

The titles of the majority of the books were simple and arresting, with the double-barrelled descriptive title used by dime novel publishers being less common. Titles such as *In Racing Silk*, *Steve Brown's Bunyip*, *The Double Abduction*, *The Squatter's Daughter* are the norm. Rowlandson's policy was to provide lively stories for the middle of the market. Bushrangers, horse races, gold, floods, bushfires, droughts and other Australian phenomena feature as do themes of life in the Pacific Islands. He aimed to provide a change from the themes of popular writing then being imported into Australia. In 1915 he described his market thus;

You see most of our people have never seen England or America; most of them will never see any country but Australia. Education helps them to comprehend and be interested in other countries; but they're always most interested in their own. That's natural, isn't it? You can't expect Bill or Mary in the backblocks to really thrill about daisies in English meadows, or train-robbing in the Wild West. Tell them about the Big Flood or the Old Man Drought, and they sit down and take notice — they've been there. Or they've heard their grandmother tell how a bushranger asked for a drink of milk — they can appreciate bushranging stories.⁶

This interview with Rowlandson brings out two other factors. His market was 'Mary' as well as 'Bill', unlike the dime novel, which seems to have been a male preserve. Secondly, he specifically mentions education. The novels were unashamedly for light reading. The rise in popular education in colonial Australia meant that by this century

the literacy rate was high, fostering demand for easy reading matter at economical prices. The Bookstall's approach has contributed to its publications being neglected by some literary historians.

Catering to a much larger market, dime novel titles ran into tens of thousands originating from several publishers, compared to the Bookstall's three hundred or so with no publisher competing for the market. The writing of the Bookstall Series books remained in its nature a part of the traditional fiction market with authors submitting their work, or being sought out by the publisher because he had heard that they had a manuscript. Very few pseudonyms were used. You do not encounter the phenomenon of a stable of anonymous or pseudonymous writers working for the publisher in a factory situation. The dime novel policy of offering numerous titles about characters such as Nick Carter, Jack Harkaway, Deadwood Dick, or old King Brady was not taken up, nor was the quarto format ever adopted. Nor do you find, because of this lack of developing the exploits of a particular character, numbers of authors working at producing the deeds of the same character or characters over a period of years or decades.

When their works first appeared with a Bookstall imprint some authors were near-amateur in that they had had few books published. If their books were successful they were reprinted over and over again, and some continued for over a generation to find a ready market. Many dime novel plots were so ephemeral that each title appears only once in the numbered series, and, if it was reissued, it reappeared as a new number in the series.

Rowlandson's books stayed in the realms of the credible to a greater extent than did many of the dime novels which I have seen. There was romance, there was action, drama and heroism, but there was too a strain of humour. The books did not venture into tall tales, fantasy or larger-than-life situations, and tension is commonly less strong. The success of Steele Rudd as Rowlandson's most-published author probably says it all. The twist of black, dry or slapstick humour, a humour aided by the illustrations, this no doubt having its origins in the work which the artists were accustomed to produce for the newspapers and magazines of the day, in places permeates even the more dramatic stories. The American product, on the other hand, both in its text and illustrations, seems to take itself very seriously indeed. Even when the subject is quite bizarre, such as in discussing 'The steam man of the prairies', or lighthearted, as in the 'Frank Merriwell' series based on student life at Yale, the writing is earnest in the extreme.

The Bookstall books filled a place similar to that of the dime novel in other ways. They reflected and reinforced Australian cultural traditions, the ambivalence felt towards the bushranger being one of these. It was only in 1880 that Ned Kelly had been sentenced to death by that famous patron of the arts, Sir Redmond Barry, and the ongoing popularity in society of the bushranger was to remain manifest for decades to come. In 1911 a motion picture promoter held a film-script competition in which bushranger themes were specifically excluded, partly because they were so common, but also partly because at that time the exhibiting of bushranger films was forbidden by law in some states. Other pervasive themes, still alive today, related to the admiration for life in the bush, worship of physical strength and manliness, simple morality and the

love of the race course, including the love of gambling and the consequent acquisition of wealth.

By 1940 over 250,000 copies had been sold of the most popular title of all, Steele Rudd's *On Our Selection*. This Rudd title the Bookstall took over after it had earlier been published by the *Bulletin*. Even without this work, Rudd was without a doubt the Bookstall's most popular author, with well over twenty titles and hundreds of reprints to his credit. Rudd's books provided the infant Australian film industry, in its first wave of success, with *On Our Selection*, which was filmed several times, as well as sequels in the same genre from other Rudd books. No fewer than twenty Australian silent films on bush life, bushranging, horse racing and the Pacific resulted from Bookstall Series books in the period from 1910 to 1928, although Bookstall publications themselves did not note film tie-ins on their covers until the 1930s, well after Rowlandson's death, when a number of Charles Chauvel's films had a New South Wales Bookstall Company 'book of the film'.

From the beginning most of the Company's output seems designed to appeal to emerging Australian nationalism. In the 1907 issue of *Rowlandson's Success*, an annual of short stories with illustrations, the heading to an advertisement for the Bookstall Series issued the sedate demand, 'Be patriotic and encourage local industry, more especially as the books are equal to any of the imported lines.' Years later, a publications' catalogue dating from about 1921 included a string of slogans such as 'Written by Australians for Australians', 'Australia's country library'. Despite the limitations brought about by paper shortages in 1921, this latter catalogue lists 120 titles in print.

The combination of shrewd judgment, outright ownership, active advertising, cheap production and big print runs was the formula on which the success of the Bookstall Series was built. Despite tight policy, Rowlandson the man was popular with staff, authors and associates. At the time of Rowlandson's death a celebratory volume was in preparation, edited by his Manager, Reginald Wynn, who was the son-in-law of the founder of the Company. This became instead a memorial volume entitled *The Late Alfred Cecil Rowlandson*, which is a prime source for research.

By 1912, 1.5 million Bookstall copies had been sold. The Great War further aided the progress of the Bookstall by isolating Australians from British books in any quantity. During the War, despite increased costs, at least a dozen new authors were introduced. About fifty other novels were accepted for later publication, paid for, and had illustrations commissioned. Some never appeared, and some of them survive as unpublished manuscripts. By the time of Rowlandson's death around 4.5 million copies had appeared.

After the death of Rowlandson, the character of the Bookstall as a publisher changed, and in 1928 the last of the Bookstall Series appeared. Philip Lindsay, son of Norman, later to become a novelist, stated that in the late 1920s he and others were forced to leave Australia in order to get a start as writers specifically because of the demise of the Bookstall Series.⁷ Although this series was dead, publishing activity continued at a lower level until 1946, ending with a spurt when Australia was once again cut off from trade in heavy 'non-essential' commodities by war. The Company

lasted until 1957, latterly under the direction of Rowlandson's son, who did not demonstrate his father's flair for business, although by the time he was old enough to manage the firm its direction had changed under the managers appointed by the executors of Rowlandson's will. The later titles have less of the appeal which characterised the period to 1922 or 1923, and none of these later publications have survived as popular classics. The railway bookstall business gradually reasserted itself from 1922 onwards as the prime concern of the Company.

In 1922 Rowlandson was not well. A hard worker all his life, he needed a rest, and a sea trip was prescribed. He set off with his family for San Francisco. His daughter-in-law tells me that he intended to study the American five and ten cent stores whilst away with a view to introducing them into Australia. When he reached San Francisco he was too ill to disembark, and on the return voyage died in Wellington, New Zealand, leaving a wife and a young family. This man of elementary education left a large estate, and hundreds of grieving friends and associates. He had published over three hundred titles, often almost single-handedly whilst carrying on his other business ventures, running in all to over nine hundred editions and reprints. Despite his popular approach, some works have proven by no means ephemeral in their appeal. Several dozen titles have been in and out of print to this day as Australian popular classics.

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NOTES

1. Edmond Pearson, *Dime novels, or, Following the Old Trail in Popular Literature* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 1929, pp.230-231.
2. A.H. Davis, 'Recollections of A.C. Rowlandson', La Trobe Library, Melbourne, MS 52762 218/3.
3. Paragraph on paperbacks, *Bookfellow* (Sydney). Trade Supplement (1 June 1912): xxviii.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Reginald Wynn, ed., *The Late Alfred Cecil Rowlandson* (Sydney: New South Wales Bookstall Company, 1922), p.17.
6. '1,500,000 Australian Books; N.S.W. Bookstall Co.'s Little List', *Bookfellow* (Sydney) (15 January 1915): 21.
7. Philip Lindsay, *I'd Live the Same Life Over* (London: Hutchinson, 1941?): 116.

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