THE VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE:
ITS ESTABLISHMENT AND EARLY YEARS*

ON 21 AUGUST 1898 AN OLD MAN died in Hawthorn, and his death marked the end of a remarkable era in the history of printing in Victoria. His name was John Ferres, and he had held the position of Government Printer for nearly thirty-three years between November 1851 and July 1887, with a three-year break in the late 1870s. The obituaries in both the local papers and the printing trade journals were universally laudatory of his achievement in building up the Government Printing Office from a tiny office with six staff to a large and efficient organisation of over 270 people, and all spoke glowingly of his technical competence and inexhaustible stock of patience.[1]

Yet despite these achievements, remarkably little has been written about the work of Ferres, and the influence of the Government Printing Office, particularly in its role as printer of non-government material, has likewise received scant attention. My talk today is a preliminary attempt to document these early years and to relate expansion of the office to the progress of the Colony of Victoria. I propose to trace the history of government printing from the earliest settlement in 1803 to around 1864, some years after the opening of the first permanent office in Macarthur Street in 1858, and to discuss briefly the achievements of the two main personalities, Edward Khull and John Ferres. Some mention will also be made of several of the important books produced by the Office. The Government Printing Office was to remain at Macarthur Street until well into this century except for a five-year period between 1882 and 1887, when printing took place in the Exhibition Buildings. The present office in Macaulay Road, North Melbourne was occupied in the 1960s.

The first government document printed in Victoria was the combined General Orders and Garrison Orders for the Port Phillip Settlement produced on 16 October 1803. The 'office' was the beach at Sullivans Bay (near present-day Sorrento) under the shade of a gum tree, and the printers were the Commandant, David Collins, and a convict, George Clark.[2] The press was a small hand press brought to Australia around 1800. General and Garrison Orders continued to be issued until the area was abandoned on 25 January 1804 and the entire party removed to the Derwent in Tasmania.[3] The only set of these printed orders in existence is held by the Public Record Office in London, although the documents are reproduced in *Historical Records of Australia*.[4]

The Period to 1850
Port Phillip was left to its native inhabitants until John Batman's so-called purchase of 600,000 acres of land around Melbourne and Geelong in 1835. A village was soon established, later called Melbourne by the New South Wales Governor, Sir Richard Bourke, in March 1837. The district's first newspaper was published on 1 January 1838 in the form of the hand-written *Melbourne Advertiser* of John Pascoe Fawkner. Apparently some thirty copies of each of the first nine issues were produced by hand before Fawkner secured his printing press from Launceston.[5] Seven further issues appeared before the paper was suppressed by the Superintendent of the settlement, Captain Lonsdale, for failing to comply with the requirements of the Newspaper Act.[6]

Fawkner was later to bring out the *Port Phillip Patriot*, although by then a rival had appeared, the *Port Phillip Gazette* of Mr. George Arden. On 3 January 1840 yet a third paper entered the arena, the *Port Phillip Herald*, which, in the colourful prose of Garryowen [E.J. Finn], was to cause 'quite a gust of dissatisfaction in the minds of the two already in possession who gnashed their typographical teeth and vowed to make it hot for the intruder'.[7]

However, the owner of the *Herald*, George Cavenagh, had the ear of the establishment, and it is in the pages of his paper that the next official Government publication is found — the 'Melbourne Government Gazette', which was simply a column of government announcements. This began in mid-1841.

Official government information continued to be published this way until 1843, when the separate *Port Phillip Government Gazette* replaced it. This was in turn to disappear with the separation of the district from New South Wales in July 1851. On 9 July 1851 the first *Victoria Government Gazette* was produced, with a supplement on 15 July. Although published by the Government Printing Office, it was in fact printed by George D'arly Boursiquot at the offices of the newspaper, the *Melbourne Daily News*, in Collins Street. The first *Gazette* actually printed by the Government Printer was produced on 7 January 1852 under the imprint of John Ferres.

Prior to the formation of Government Printing Office, various Melbourne printers were entrusted with the printing of government work and designated themselves as Government Printers.[8] These were:

January 1843 — December 1843 — Brown and Howards
January 1844 — December 1844 — William Clarke
January 1845 — December 1845 — Samuel Goode
January 1846 — December 1846 — William Clarke
January 1847 — December 1848 — Samuel Goode
January 1849 — December 1849 — Edward Wilson
January 1850 — February 1850 — G.D. Boursiquot
March 1850 — December 1850 — Wilson and Johnston

However, it was the imminent separation of Victoria from New South Wales to form a separate colony which prompted consideration of forming a Victorian Government Printing Office.

Edward Khull and the Formation of the Office

The office had its origin in a letter written by the Clerk of Works, Henry Ginn, to Superintendent La Trobe on 12 January 1850.[9] Ginn pointed out that the formation of the new colony would necessitate a large increase in the number of forms needed by Government, and that existing suppliers were frequently unable to meet present needs because of shortage of materials. In January orders for over 51,000 printed forms (some of two or three pages) had been placed with a local contractor, and Ginn estimated that they would require four months. As the *Gazette* was handled by another contractor, Ginn recommended that the Government Printer in Sydney be contacted for an estimate of the requirements and costs of setting up their own printing office to produce all documents needed for Government and Parliament.

These estimates were duly forthcoming: £2000 for an office on the same scale as Sydney's. In the meantime James Macarthur had offered the type and presses of the *Australian* newspaper to the Government in an 'advantageous arrangement' for equipping the Melbourne office. The New South Wales Government Printer, W.W. Davies, recommended against the offer, instead preferring 'material from England.' However, when La Trobe applied to the Colonial Secretary's Office in Sydney for funds, he was told somewhat frostily: 'this sum — cannot he placed on the estimates without striking out some other items to the same amount which you have placed on the estimates already forwarded —'.[10]

Provision was eventually made in Clause 63 of the Estimates to set up a small office. The successful applicant for the position of Government Printer was Edward Khull, former printer to the University of Glasgow, who had been sheep farming at Shepparton. Khull brought some eighteen years of practical printing experience to the position, having commenced working as a printer with his father, Edward Khull Senior, in Glasgow in 1827.[11] Khull was interviewed by La Trobe in November 1850 and was appointed on 1 January 1851, taking up his position the next day. His salary was £200 per year, but until 1 April he was to be on half salary.[12]

Khull ordered the required presses and type from England and arranged for the making of other items in Melbourne. There is also an undated list of material ordered from the Government Printer in Sydney, although it is not clear that this was ever received. The type ordered from England was lost when the ship *Isabella Watson* struck Corsair Rock on 21 March 1852.[13] Nor were his local purchases any more successful. Garryowen commented scathingly about his 'collecting a few miscellaneous articles in town', one of which was a second-hand press of 1800 vintage, 'for all printing purposes worth about its weight in iron'.[14]

Khull surprisingly does not appear to have done any printing on the premises; instead, he supervised the local contractors and had still not finalised the office by September, when control was passed to the Auditor-General's Office. La Trobe was growing increasingly impatient with the lack of progress, and Khull was eventually dismissed on 24 October 1851 after a protracted argument between himself, the Auditor General and La Trobe about the requirement that the Government Printer 'work with his hands'; this Khull resisted as being 'more than what is expected of a superintendent'.[15]

Khull later obtained the position of Clerk and Reader of the Legislative Council. His stay was even shorter here, and he was dismissed on 23 December on allegations of incompetence. He later became a successful bullion merchant and stocks and shares broker, providing the first price listings of shares for the Melbourne papers. Khull was also a founder member of the Melbourne Stock Exchange, but his later years were clouded by failure in business and by family crises. He was never again involved in printing.[16]

John Ferres and the Hectic 1850s
The abrupt dismissal of Khull caused a rapid search for a replacement, more particularly as the Government urgently needed to print the Estimates. One well-known figure who was approached, and who finally accepted the position, was

John Ferres, Manager of the *Melbourne Morning Herald* newspaper, owned by George Cavenagh. Ferres had had a practical apprenticeship in Bath, England, where he worked for sixteen years for a Mr. S. Gibbs, a printer and stationer. Ferres migrated to Melbourne in December 1848 and spent some time in Gippsland before returning to printing as a compositor with the *Herald* office. Promotion was rapid, and within a few months he was sub-overseer and then manager. He proved capable and far-sighted in this role, for it was on his advice that the first steam-driven printing press in the Southern Hemisphere was purchased and erected in the *Herald* office. He was also later to issue the first eight-page newspaper in the colony.

It is not certain why Ferres left the *Herald*'s employ. He had clashed with Cavenagh over the latter's proposal to employ poorly-paid 'cadets' as a cost-cutting measure and was summarily dismissed, only to be quickly reinstated. His position as manager certainly brought him into contact with members of the Government, and it appears that he was persuaded to take up the position by the Auditor-General, C.H. Ebden. Approval for his appointment was given by the Governor-in-Council on 28 October, but Ferres was unable to commence work until 10 November.[17]

In the intervening fifteen days, Mr. Benjamin Lucas, well-known printer and owner of the *Melbourne Daily News*, was placed in temporary charge of the office, apparently to facilitate the urgent printing of the Estimates and Census returns. Lucas was paid at the rate of £3-16-11d per week for his troubles.[18]

The Government Printing Office in these days occupied part of the lower floor of the Audit Office in Lonsdale Street West and consisted of a staff of six people, with two super royal hand presses — in Ferres's own words, 'this force was utterly inadequate to perform the work required by the Government'.[19] The purchase of an Albion foolscap broadside press in December helped alleviate the situation, but the quarters were too cramped, and two further moves were made — in February 1853 to another building in Lonsdale Street West, and then on 14 July 1853 to the temporary wooden ballroom building in William Street erected by La Trobe for the Birthday Ball of 23 May.

The first permanent home of the Government Printing Office was a two-storey stone building in Macarthur Street, which was occupied in May 1858. This building now forms part of the Parliament Square complex and is probably one of the oldest stone buildings in Victoria.[20]

The decade 1850-1860 was an exciting if somewhat traumatic time in Victoria's history. The Port Phillip District became the Colony of Victoria in July 1851. Within a week gold was discovered at Clunes, followed in a few months by the fabulously rich fields at Ballarat and Bendigo. The population of the colony more than doubled in the two years between 1851 and 1853 and by 1860 stood at an estimated 537,847. The trauma of the Eureka Stockade and the financial crises of 1855 were but temporary aberrations in the steady rate of progress — Melbourne University opened in 1855 and the Public Library in 1856, and during the decade several private schools were founded, in part to supply the University with students. The badly polluted Yarra water supply was replaced in 1857 with pure water from the Yan Yean reservoir, and progress was made towards metalling the city's dusty streets. And, of course, the railways expanded, so that by 1864 Melbourne was linked by rail to Echuca and the prosperous riverboat

trade. Perhaps another significant milestone was the introduction of an eight hour day in May 1856.[21]

Many of these changes, especially the rising population and enormous revenue brought in by gold, were to have major influences on government and, through it, on the work of the Government Printer. The situation was complicated by the fact that in these early years local government was almost non-existent, so that the central government had this additional responsibility in the smaller towns of Victoria. In November 1855 the semi-elective Legislative Council of thirty members was replaced by two Houses — a Council and an Assembly — consisting of thirty and sixty members respectively. An expanded government meant an expanded bureaucracy, and we can see the effects on John Ferres's establishment in the following figures. In 1851 Ferres had a staff of six and two hand presses. In 1853, when he bought his first printing machine, a second-hand Napier Perfecting Machine of 1000/1200 copies per hour capacity, the staff had grown to fifty-five. The machine was purchased specifically to print the large number of gold licences that were required, around 60,000 per month in June 1853. It was driven by a flywheel, which was worked by two men, but could also be operated by steam. In 1854 a book binding section was added, and in 1855 a major step was taken with the purchase of three new printing machines and a four-horse-power steam engine to operate them. Additional founts of type were procured, extra binding equipment was purchased, and recruitment brought the staff to 110. Stereotyping was introduced in 1860, and steam power was applied to lithographic printing around 1861 — a first for the Southern Hemisphere.[22] By 1862 the office was one of the largest in Melbourne, with five printing machines and nine hand presses capable of producing 6600 sheets per hour. The staff then stood at 163.

Such expansion was not achieved without cost. The correspondence between Ferres and the Chief Secretary in the 1850s contains many requests from Ferres for improved conditions and for new equipment and new staff to meet the expanding needs of Government Departments and the Parliament. Conditions were cramped, lighting was poor, and both paper and type were frequently in short supply. The premises, at least in the early 1850s, were lit by candles, of which there were usually more than 100 in use during late-night sessions of Parliament — the danger of fire prompted Ferres to ask for fire extinguishers, while the poor illumination provoked a strike by staff asking for gas lighting.

Ferres, in describing the Printing Office in 1859, was to point out other problems:

(1) In hot weather, the composition rollers frequently melted from their stocks unless they were changed frequently and kept cool by immersion in tanks sunk in the floor.

(2) The immense clouds of dust 'which so frequently envelope the city' were seen as a great impediment to fine printing. He reported that dust wore the type so fast that a fount of type would last at least one third longer in England than in Victoria, while 'wood cuts wore out even faster'.

(3) The high summer temperatures caused rapid drying out of paper. Hence, even though by then Ferres had access to a Napier printing machine, the whole of William Archer's *Statistical Register* of 1854 (5000 copies of 448

pages) was printed on hand presses in half sheets to reduce the problem.[23]

Yet, despite these difficulties, Ferres demanded and got high standards. Wallace Kirsop has previously mentioned the William Caxton Fourth Centenary brochure compiled by Ferres in 1871. Ferdinand Mueller, the Government Botanist, who had many of his works printed by Ferres, was to praise him for the 'correct excellence of the print, the composition of which requires classical knowledge'.[24] (Mueller was referring in particular to the 94-part *Fragmenta Phytographiae Australiae*, printed entirely in Latin and published by the Government Printer between March 1858 and December 1882.) Some years previously, Ferres had received a decoration from the French Government through the University of Montpellier for specimens of fine printing. His staff were also capable, and several had received first-class certificates for printing and for binding in the prizes awarded by the Exhibition Commissioners in Melbourne, as well as a first-class medal for printing and binding combined at the Great International Exhibition in London in 1858. Perhaps the major monument to Ferres's prowess as a printer was the beautifully printed and illustrated *Goldfields and Mineral Districts of Victoria* of 1869 by W. Brough-Smyth, a work which achieved remarkable fame both here and overseas for the high quality of its production.

Some books produced by the Printing Office
In conclusion, mention should be made of several of the major non-Parliamentary books produced under Ferres's direction. What perhaps is disappointing to me is that these books have not been given enough recognition, even though they were in nearly all cases quality productions. Perhaps because their contents were largely technical — statistics, botany, gold mining etc. — they were ignored, but this does not explain why in the two chapters on Victorian publications in Charles Barrett's book, *Across the Years: the Lure of Early Australian Books*, not a single Government Printer-produced book is mentioned. A comprehensive compilation has recently been produced for the period 1853 to 1887.[25] However, the position of Government Printer-produced books in Victorian booktrade history still needs to be assessed.

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NOTES

1. Obituary, *Argus* (22 August 1898): 1; Obituary, *Australasian Typographical Journal* 29, 338 (1898): 8; see also 'Garryowen' [E.J. Finn], *The Chronicles of Early Melbourne, 1835-1852*, Facsimile ed. (Melbourne: Heritage Publications, 1976) vol.2: 928-929.
2. D.H.Borchardt, *The Spread of Printing: Eastern Hemisphere, Australia* (Amsterdam: Vangendt, 1961): 20-24.
3. For a recent account of the settlement, see P.J.F. Coutts, *Victoria's Official Settlement, Sullivans Bay, Port Phillip* (Melbourne: Ministry for Conservation, Archaeological Survey, 1981).
4. The first General and Garrison Orders has been reproduced in David Collins, *Account of a Voyage to Establish a Settlement in Bass's Straits. . .*, edited by John Currey (Melbourne, Colony Press, 1986): 113.
5. Charles Barnett, *Across the Years: the Lure of Early Books* (Melbourne: Seward, 1948): 20.

6. E.J. Finn, *op.cit.*, vol.2: 824-825, states that these requirements included registration with the New South Wales Government and the posting of bonds and sureties for good management and solvency of the paper.

7. *Ibid.*, vol.2: 828.

8. *One Hundred Years of Service* (Melbourne: Victorian Government Printing Office, 1958): 2.

9. Henry Ginn to Superintendent C.J. LaTrobe. Letter 50/96, Victorian Public Records Office Series No.19 (hereafter abbreviated as VPRS 19): Box 130.

10. Letter group no.50/697, containing correspondence from the New South Wales Colonial Secretary's Office, James Macarthur and the New South Wales Government Printer (VPRS 19, Box 134).

11. For an account of Khull's work in Glasgow, see James Maclehose, *The Glasgow University Press, 1838-1931* (Glasgow: Glasgow University Press, 1931): 231-239.

12. Khull outlined the terms of his appointment and subsequent developments in the office in a long 'Memorial' statement written on 17 October 1851, just one week before his dismissal (Letter no.51/946, VPRS 1189, Box 4).

13. *One Hundred Years of Service* (1958): 4.

14. E.J. Finn, *op.cit.*, vol.2: 928.

15. *One Hundred Years of Service* (1958): 3.

16. For an account of Khull's later career see A.R. Hall, *The Stock Exchange of Melbourne and the Victorian Economy, 1852-1900* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1968) and Hall's entry for Edward Khull in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol.4 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1972): 23-24.

17. Information obtained from: E.J. Finn, *op.cit.*, vol.2: 928-929; *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol.4: 23-24; T.L. Work, 'Cavenagh and the *Port Phillip Herald*', *Australasian Typographical Journal*, 28, 332 (1898): 1-2.

18. E.J. Finn hints at such an arrangement, *op.cit.*, vol.2: 929. The appointment of Lucas is confirmed in a letter from the Attorney-General, C.H. Ebden, 18 November 1851. In a list of expenses for the period 15 October to 15 November is an entry: 'B. Lucas, for superintending printing from October 27 to November 9 at £3-16s-11d/week £7-13s-10d'. (Letter no.51/1195, in letter group no.51/1544, VPRS 1189, Box 6.)

19. J. Ferres, 'Government Printing Office', in W.H. Archer, *Statistical Register of Victoria* (Melbourne: Government Printer, 1854): 188.

20. Much useful information on the early history of the office is found in J. Ferres, *Report on the Government Printing Establishment for the years 1859, 1860 and 1861*, Victoria. *Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly, 1862-1863*. Paper no.27.

21. See Geoffrey Serle, *The Golden Age: a History of the Colony of Victoria, 1851-1861* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1977); Brian Carroll, *Melbourne: an Illustrated History* (Melbourne: Lansdowne, 1972).

23. The press was installed by Joseph Pittman and the lithographer Thomas Ham to print colour maps for the Victorian Geological Survey. See Thomas A. Darragh, 'The Geological Survey of Victoria under Alfred Selwyn, 1852-1868', *Historical Records of Australian Science*, 7, 1 (1987): 5-6.

23. W. Fairfax, ed. *Handbook to Australasia* (Melbourne: W. Fairfax, 1859): 80-81.

24. F. Mueller, *Report of the Government Botanist for the Year Ending 30th June 1874*. Victoria. *Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly 1874*. Paper no.70.

25. Tony Cavanagh, 'The Victorian Government Printing Office; its Early History and its Publications', *Australian Library Journal* 38 (1989): 282-295. This article includes a list of the Office's publications up to 1887, the year Ferres retired.