

CATALOGUES OF AUSTRALIANA

(D.A. Spalding, *Australiana Booksellers' Catalogues: Desiderata & Background*,
Mawson, A.C.T., D.A. Spalding, 1994)

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'This book is so essentially an accumulation of notes and so emphatically wanting in the qualities of completeness and learning proper to genuine bibliography that I have sought, even on the title-page, to indicate its limitations.' Thus Michael Sadleir prefaces, modestly and inaccurately, his unexceptionable *Excursions in Victorian Bibliography* of 1922. Sadleir's example, in every sense, is one that any amateur would do well to follow.

The 'limitations' of Sadleir's volume were spelt out on the title-page, which is where the limitations of David Spalding's volume begin. Taking his title-page, we might expect that a volume dealing with booksellers' Australiana catalogues will do just that. If, instead, we find that half the catalogues listed are not published by booksellers but by auction houses, that some are, in fact, publishers' catalogues of new books, even that one is a catalogue of predominantly non-Australian books, then we are entitled to feel disconcerted. This is no pedantic quibble, for here is one case where we should be able to judge a book by its title. The volume evidences throughout the same imprecision and lack of clear direction.

Writing, editing and publishing one's own work is, of course, always a risk. It is certain that a good editor would have improved this book. No editor would have missed such potentially confusing phrases as: '. . . while the book may lack the folding map called for by Ferguson, the map was printed on pale blue paper and not an apparent photocopy of an original'. The book is bedevilled by awkward constructions that are hard to understand when analysed, and this flawed expression at sentence level is mirrored in an uncomfortably digressive and disconnected text.

A designer would also have improved the look of the volume. Nevertheless, the expense of publishing a book in Australia with a severe limitation (200 copies) is so prohibitive and the retail price is comparatively so low (\$45) that it would be churlish to complain about the modest standard of production.

Spalding's book falls broadly into two parts. The first discursive part addresses a confusion of topics. The nine-and-a-half-page 'Introduction' attempts to deal with the virtues of the catalogue but becomes side-tracked into the educational standards of booksellers and the inconvenience of auction lots, and is liberally – some might say engagingly – salted with often distracting personal anecdote. The eight-and-a-half-page 'Brief Historical Notes' sets out to offer a thumbnail sketch history of bookselling in Australia. This is a noble ambition, but it has not, in the end, been achieved, due to the often superficial and at times eccentrically selected reference to both Australian and English auction sales and book-

sellers' catalogues, coupled with some disconcerting remarks about librarians and 'persons of other ethnic origins'.

The second half is a nonce list of booksellers' and auctioneers' catalogues that may broadly be defined as Australian. Arranged chronologically (there is no index) from 1927 to 1993, it comprises 52 catalogues of secondhand books issued by auctioneers and booksellers, followed, oddly in this context, by three publishers' lists of new books. The basis for selection is unclear, despite the concluding sentence of the author's 'Notes on the List': 'With or without occasional commentary, the listed catalogues have the qualities to survive as desiderata.'

Even if we do accept the author's choices, the various entries and annotations again leave one wishing that the author had a more clearly defined purpose. We are entitled to expect more from an author who correctly complains that the *Australian National Bibliography 1901-1950* 'presents only bare bibliographical details', although one is less pleased when he attacks the character of those who compiled it. From the bibliographical point of view the author does not measure up to his own standard, expressed in his concluding, ringing exhortation: 'Authentic authoritative scholarship should rise above such considerations for the attainment of responsible recognition of texts of national heritage status for future generations.'

It is a reasonable assumption that in such a list, which pretends to some degree of bibliographical exactness, the compiler should take care to establish the physical forms in which a work was published. There are some significant omissions: the Edge Partington catalogue (Spalding's no. 2) was issued first in two wrapped parts and only later in dark blue (not black) cloth; the Pilkington and Tremewan catalogues (5 and 6) were subsequently issued by Gaston Renard with prices written in the margins and also in a superior form, bound in quarter leather; there were loose lists of supplementary lots or addenda for the Tremewan (6), Turnbull (21), Hammet (22), and Russell (34) catalogues, among others; Maggs *Volume IV* (7) was issued in various coloured cloths (green, orange, blue, and possibly others); there was a (now rare) special issue of both the Coles catalogue (8), uncut and in printed boards, and the Brookes catalogue (11), uncut and in blue cloth; there were two issues of the Glover catalogue (12), a presentation issue in red plasticised wrappers and the ordinary one in brown; so too with the Craig catalogue (14), a presentation issue in grey wrappers with a separate pamphlet of plates and the ordinary sale issue in standard Christie's pink wrappers with the plates bound in; there were special issues of several Hordern House catalogues (32, 41, 43), bound in half or quarter morocco. There are further omissions (in 16, 17, 23, 31 and 35 for instance), but these few examples will indicate the limitations of this list for anyone with an interest in the physical bibliography of the bookseller's or auctioneer's catalogue.

There are also some flaws in the notes. Some are trivial (tagging the Bremer catalogue (35) with the name of David Lake Bremer but not anywhere noting him as the collector, for instance), some ill-informed (tagging the 1985 Hince

auction (28) with Lord Casey's name when only a fraction of the lots were his), and some inexplicable (an authorial '(sic)' after the word 'indices' in describing a Maggs catalogue (1) of 1927). A potentially embarrassing mistake is the note to the Ebes-Sotheby's catalogue (33) of John Gould's Australasian works: the former owner of the set broken up for that sale is Dr Geoffrey Edelstone of Winchester, UK, not 'an Australian medical practitioner, deregistered for professional misconduct, and a descendant of John Gould'. The publisher should perhaps avoid filling orders from any solicitor's office in Winchester!

More problematic are the occasional errors of significant fact. The plates in Lewin's 1813 Sydney *Birds of New South Wales*, for example, were not 'engraved, printed and published in colour in 1813', a fact that the italicised annotation in the sale catalogue of the Barne collection (51) makes clear. Sadly, such oversights provide ammunition to those who say that we book collectors don't actually read our books.

In a way, one would have been happier had the author made more mistakes like this. At least here he has attempted to say something enlightening. Instead we are too often given a catalogue of lost opportunities – the pun is excusable, surely. These sins of omission are probably the most unfortunate.

First, there is much of interest yet unsaid that might have been said about the catalogues that are noticed. To take a simple instance, there is a book to be written about the connoisseurship of those collectors whose libraries are described in many of the catalogues. One cannot expect Spalding to be an Australian Seymour de Ricci, but he should, perhaps, have tried. From that point of view, it is disappointing how often the author has missed an opportunity to place on record what is now held only in the memories of the initiated. Why could we not be told that Mr. Miles Barne was the owner of the Longueville collection – this is by no means a secret? Or that the substantial collection, a portion of which is described in Kenneth Hince's catalogue *Seventy*, was formed by Mr. William Drever? Or that the 1977 auction of Sir Thomas Ramsay's books comprised a mere fragment of his substantially retained collection, now gifted to Scotch College, Melbourne? Or that the 1984 Cowlshaw sale catalogue was a mere selection from a much larger library dispersed variously at auction and by tender? And so on.

Secondly, there is the selection itself. It has already been remarked that this lacks method and that interloping auctioneers and publishers place a greater burden on the volume's title than it can comfortably sustain. More worrying is the distorted picture of Australian bookselling history that is given, on the one hand, by catalogues not noticed that should be and, on the other hand, by the over-representation of some firms. Was it necessary in such a brief list to mention *all* the auction catalogues published by Gaston Renard, especially the thoroughly undistinguished ones for the Barrett, Pilkington and Tremewan sales, but not, for example, his excellent celebratory *Catalogue 100*, let alone his first illustrated catalogue published by an Australian bookseller? Should half a dozen auction

catalogues produced by Kenneth Hince be noticed but only one of his vastly more interesting catalogues as a bookseller? Should the firms of Hordern House and the Antique Bookshop and Curios be represented by twelve entries in total, while Peter Arnold (the Rollo Hammet catalogue, for example), James Dally (everything really, but *Catalogue 111* above all), and Tim McCormick (1985 book fair catalogue, for example) are completely excluded?

This is a distorted picture. Until the early 1960s Australian booksellers' catalogues were uniformly terse – and that emphatically includes Gaston Renard (here lionised), whose more elaborated cataloguing style was a later development. From the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s the degree of erudition and scholarship consistently displayed throughout the previous two decades in London by Frank Maggs in his Australasian catalogues was emulated, and in many ways surpassed, by three Australian booksellers: James Dally, Kenneth Hince and Gaston Renard (the alphabetical order is coincidental, not tactful).

The time must surely have come when it is no longer permissible to laud one and effectively to ignore the others. Frank Maggs must also be given his due. That his was a potent influence may be seen most clearly in Renard's 1965 Coles catalogue. Students of textual transmission will find hours of harmless fun in comparing it to Maggs's *Voyages and Travels... Vol. IV* (1946-64).

By the late 1970s the new generation of serious and knowledgeable Australian dealers, especially Peter Arnold in Melbourne and the McCormicks in Sydney, had swayed the balance substantially away from the earlier, imprecise list towards the detailed, anecdotal and scholarly catalogue. This was not especially innovative: that style of cataloguing had, of course, been commonplace in the United States, England and Europe for many decades. The innovation consisted in treating Australian books with the same degree of seriousness.

That is why Spalding's assertion that the greater elaboration to be found in catalogue descriptions today springs from 'general advances in literacy and education of booksellers and their customers' is so misleading. While personally I would back Petherick's knowledge of Australian books against any bookseller now living and most dead, the real point is that over these years Australian books became a subject worthy of serious and sustained attention. It is interesting but perhaps not surprising that this occurred in the same period that saw the more self-confident growth of Australian cultural life in general.

Arguably, the first Australian bookseller's catalogue to treat Australiana with a relaxed assurance that the material described was worthy of grand presentation was James Dally's *Catalogue 111* of 1976 (inexplicably not in Spalding). It is pleasant to record that, with true Australian cheek, much of the exceptional material described there had come, unsung, from the stock of Messrs Maggs in London. That grand step forward was not really equalled until 1978, when Timothy and Anne McCormick produced their exceptional book fair catalogue, *A Selection of fine Australian books honouring the Sixth Australian Antiquarian Booksellers' Fair* (not in Spalding). Intelligently annotated and stylishly presented, this

was an uncompromising signpost to what would become the prevailing trend towards highly discriminating cabinet collecting that has characterised the serious Australiana market from the late 1970s until the present day and that is well demonstrated in the embryonic Bremer collection, untimely cast onto the auction block in 1988.

One leaves this book wishing that one could indulge it. If there were competent works on the subject to compete with it, then that, indeed, is how it should be viewed. However, apart from a few scattered approaches (such as John Holroyd's bibliography of Angus & Robertson catalogues published in several issues of *Biblionews*), there has been no serious study of either Australian antiquarian booksellers' catalogues or, in the de Ricci mould, of Australian book collectors. With that breach to be filled, it is impossible not to be critical.

In the end, the real question that this book raises is whether antiquarian booksellers' catalogues are worthy of collection and study. There are, of course, those who collect them simply because they are there (and usually distributed free of charge). There are also those who collect them for utilitarian purposes – for the cutting-edge bibliography that the best catalogues usually contain or to trace changing price structures, for instance. One fruitful use to which catalogues, whether booksellers' or auctioneers', may be put is in the study of the development of bibliophilic taste and technique within a collecting tradition through the record of individual collections formed or dispersed in the last fifty or sixty years.

One can see a strong argument for an intelligent, discursive bibliography of commercial catalogues of antiquarian or secondhand books based on the libraries of individual collectors. That would also be an essential prolegomenon to an *Australian book collectors and their marks of ownership*.

Nevertheless, it would not be as simple as it sounds. Who, for instance, is an *Australian* collector? Is James Edge Partington, or Sir Rex Nan Kivell, or Dr Charles Fox? Furthermore, the catalogues themselves rarely give a complete or entirely accurate view of a collection. The Edge Partington catalogue excluded a significant number of what were then considered lesser books (now much prized juveniles, for instance) as well as some books sold before publication of the catalogue. A number of significant books from Ivo Hammet's collection were bequeathed to the State Library of Victoria and to his brother, Rollo, well before it was catalogued for sale. Peter Arnold's 1977 catalogue of the Rollo Hammet collection was hugely selective, the bulk of the collection sold subsequently in various batches both privately and through auction between 1978 and 1990. The Bremer sale catalogue included a number of silently introduced lots never owned by David Bremer. The Hordern House catalogues of the Carlsmith and Ellis collections openly included works from 'other sources'. And so on.

To deal more generally with the development of bibliophilic taste would, inevitably, involve the study of the entire corpus of booksellers' and auctioneers' catalogues directed to the Australian public from the 1890s to the present day – a

considerable job. More manageable might be to identify those catalogues that self-consciously set out to shape collecting taste and then to place them in their historical context. In both grand and humble ways, booksellers do this as often as their resources allow. While identifying those catalogues has something of the parlour game about it, one suspects that it might be a useful exercise. Had Spalding attempted something like it to justify his selection, there would be less to complain of in his book.

Usually booksellers do know what they are about, and when they intend a catalogue to make a statement in advance of current taste they do so pretty shamelessly. These standard-bearing catalogues are generally set apart by their commercially unnecessary elaborateness, exemplified in the Maggs 1927 catalogue, *Australia and the South Seas*, the Renard 1965 Coles catalogue, the Dally *Catalogue 111* of 1976, the McCormick 1978 book fair catalogue, or the 1987 Hordern House *Carlsmith* catalogue.

It is always a matter of luck whether this over-capitalisation (a real-estate term aptly applied by one bookseller to the adventurous 1993 Hordern House catalogue, *Australian Colonial Poets*) has an immediate effect, as it did at the Coles sale, or a gradual one, as it did with the Dally and McCormick catalogues of 1976 and 1978 respectively. There is no doubt that an Australian John Carter, yet unborn, will in the future be able to trace trends, to which you and I are completely blind, back to some humble bookseller's list that we have all tossed into a lower drawer. But if this pre-foetal biblio-historian is to build that scholarly edifice then it is now time to do the groundwork.

At least Spalding has reminded us that there is a job to be done.

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