

CATCHING UP ON THE NEWS: LOCAL, COLONIAL AND AUSTRALIA-WIDE

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The catalyst for this paper is a coloured supplement from the Melbourne-published *Illustrated Australian News* of December 1873, entitled 'Diggers' Saturday Night'. It depicts five men inside a roomy hut with the central figure reading from a newspaper aloud to his companions. The accompanying article further evokes the scene:

The weekly papers have just come up from town – the dailies seldom penetrate the ranges.¹

We are not given the locality for this image; for all we know, this scene of diggers relaxing on a Saturday night could be from here in Chiltern. In other words, the subject of the image is generic as opposed to being specific.

In a colonial Victorian context, the reference to the weekly papers coming 'up from town' can only be taken to mean the weekly counterparts of the Melbourne-published dailies. These were the *Leader*, the sister paper of the *Age*, the *Australasian*, the sister paper of the *Argus*, and the still published *Weekly Times*, which originally was the sister paper of the now defunct afternoon *Herald*. These were not local papers, in the sense that local papers have been the theme of this conference.²

They were, however, the means by which local communities – as defined by the distribution of local papers – were able to keep abreast of news from across the colony, from other colonies and from Home. Indeed, the publication of weekly newspapers for a predominantly rural readership by the daily city papers was described by Frank Greenop in his *History of Magazine Publishing in Australia*, published half a century ago, as one of the most successful innovations in newspaper publishing in the nineteenth century.³ It grew out of the realisation in the 1850s that although the tyranny of distance meant it was impractical to distribute the Melbourne daily papers to rural readers, the combination of the growth of provincial cities and spread of railways meant that weekly papers were likely to be viable.

A clearer sense of this publishing innovation can be gained by comparing Australian patterns of newspaper publication and distribution with those in Britain and the United States. In the case of Britain, smaller size, denser

1. 'Diggers Saturday Night' *Illustrated Australian News* 31 December 1873: 218.

2. See Appendix for the publication dates of all newspapers discussed in this paper.

3. F. Greenop *History of Magazine Publishing in Australia* (Sydney: K.G. Murray, 1947).

population, and the establishment of a national railway network by 1842 meant that it was relatively straightforward for the London-based daily newspapers to achieve national distribution, at least throughout England. There was no need for weekly newspapers, and the weekly magazines, which often called themselves newspapers, were dominated by fiction. The principal news-orientated weekly was the *Illustrated London News*.⁴ In the United States, by contrast, and concentrating on east of the Mississippi, the major cities each produced their own dailies without expecting to distribute them nation-wide. This market was left to the illustrated weeklies such as *Harper's Weekly* and Frank Leslie's *Illustrated Weekly*, both of which had established an east coast distribution by 1860, courtesy of a rapidly expanding railway network.⁵ The key issue in all of this is that in both Britain and America, there was no link between who published the dailies and who published the weeklies.

In Australia, and more particularly Victoria, the opposite occurred, as became even clearer with the launching of monthly illustrated newspapers. After numerous attempts in the 1850s by independent publishers to launch weekly illustrated newspapers in imitation of the *Illustrated London News*, in 1862 two of the established dailies, the *Age* and the *Herald*, their weekly counterparts already in tow, launched the monthly *Illustrated Australian News* and *Illustrated Melbourne Post* respectively. A decade later, the *Australasian Sketcher* was launched by the *Argus*.

This three-tiered structure to Melbourne-based newspaper publication in the second half of the nineteenth century, that is daily metropolitan newspaper, weekly rural newspaper and monthly illustrated newspaper, all produced by the one publisher, was of particular significance for local communities and local identities in urban, regional and rural Victoria. The reason was that all three types of newspaper, to borrow from Benedict Anderson's seminal book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, played a role in contributing to local communities of readers collectively imagining themselves as also belonging to a community at a broader Victoria-wide level, and ultimately at an even broader Australia-wide level.⁶ In effect, the daily paper kept its Melbourne readership informed about issues and events occurring in Melbourne and throughout the colony. The weekly paper provided the same service for rural readers and thus was the means by which readers in one local community were able to learn about newsworthy events and issues in other local communities. The end result was that readers, both urban and rural, were able to recognise themselves in terms of a shared colonial Victorian experience and sense of identity.

4. D. Reed *The Popular Magazine in Britain and the United States, 1880-1960* (London: British Library, 1997) p. 80-83.

5. Reed, *op. cit.*, p. 50-51.

6. B. Anderson *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983) p. 30.

Finally, the monthly illustrated newspapers were the means by which readers in a local community, whether urban or rural, were able to recognise themselves at a visual level. Hence the significance of the illustration, 'Diggers' Saturday Night', having a generic title rather than a specific title because this expanded the appeal of the image in that regardless of where a digger-reader and his mates were living - whether in Chiltern, or Woods Point (in the ranges proper), or even in the Central Highlands - they could empathise with this image. Furthermore, it is interesting that the writer of the accompanying article also included some nostalgia for what life was like on the diggings in the 1850s. This was, no doubt, for the benefit of those readers of the gold rush generation who had retreated to the comforts of city and town. Yet they would have enjoyed a chuckle at the mock conversation between two of their contemporaries marvelling at the comforts of home included in this image: proper fireplace and chimney, study table, candlesticks, crockery and pictures on the walls. The inclusion of this passage would have served to further boost the appeal of the image, so that it struck a chord not just with the diggers of 1873, regardless of where they lived, but also with former diggers now living in more established communities, urban or rural.

The link between weekly rural and monthly illustrated newspapers is Anderson's definition of the nation as:

an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.

The nation is imagined because members of even the smallest nation can never know most of their fellow citizens, meet them, or even hear of them, yet, in the minds of each member, there lives the image of a sense of national community. The nation is imagined as limited because, regardless of population, its boundaries are finite, if elastic, beyond which lie other nations. Finally, the nation is imagined as sovereign in the sense that the rise of nationalism was a reaction against universal religion, divinely ordained monarchical realms and imperialism.⁷

So whilst I am fully aware that, in 1873, the idea of colonial Australia becoming a nation had been scarcely thought about, the various colonies certainly saw themselves as token nations, as exemplified by the formal title of Victoria's state gallery, the National Gallery of Victoria. Anderson also comments on how the reporting of news in colonial newspapers correlated with the structure of that colony, in terms of both its political administration and market system. This explains why the distribution pattern of the various colonial weekly newspapers matches almost exactly the political and trade boundaries of the various colonies.⁸ Hence, the Melbourne-published *Leader*, *Australasian* and *Weekly Times* all had a Victorian and Riverina distribution, the Sydney published *Sydney Mail* and

7. Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 15-16.

8. Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 55

Australian Town and Country Journal had a New South Wales distribution, the Brisbane-published *Queenslander*, a Queensland distribution.

On the other hand, the monthly illustrated newspapers had a pseudo-national distribution as opposed to conforming to a colony-based distribution like the weeklies. This was due, firstly, to the three Melbourne-based papers all engaging in the publishing of separate editions in the other smaller colonies. Secondly, the *Illustrated Australian News* is estimated to have shared approximate twenty per cent of its images with the *Illustrated Sydney News* via the practice of stereotyping. Indeed, 'Diggers' Saturday Night' was published in the Sydney paper with a different title, 'Diggers Reading Letters and Papers from Home'. Notwithstanding this change of title, it can thus be seen that the appeal of this image now spreads beyond its nominally Victorian-based subject matter to take on a trans-colonial appeal.

Both the weekly rural and monthly illustrated newspaper can thus be seen to have quite naturally, and even apolitically, created an imagined sense of colonial identity in the minds of its readers above and beyond the sense of local community/local identity, as engendered by local newspapers.⁹ Even more interesting is the fact that the Melbourne-based daily counterparts of the weeklies and monthlies acted as the primary collection point for news from throughout the colony, both urban and rural. Indeed, in terms of the rural dimension, Elizabeth Morrison, used her doctoral thesis to research the way in which the Melbourne daily papers would reprint articles from local papers across the colony.¹⁰ Yet it was the weekly papers which would then disseminate a distilled version of this daily gathering of news throughout the colony.¹¹ It was in this way that different local communities were able to learn about the newsworthy events and issues occurring in other local communities. The net effect was a collective imagining by urban and rural readers of the weekly and monthly papers of the colony as a community bound by a nascent common sense of identity. So, whilst I would agree with Morrison in attributing the 'making of Victoria' to a Melbourne-centric gathering of news by its dailies, I would extend this by suggesting that the 'making of Victoria' was also dependent on how that news in a collective form then returned to country Victoria in the weeklies and monthlies. This facilitated a collective imagining of all of Victoria by readers in both Melbourne and the country. It will be noticed that I now include urban dwellers, as readers of the weeklies, suspecting that some could not afford the time to read

9. Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

10. E. Morrison 'The Contribution of the Country Press to the Making of Victoria, 1840-1890' (PhD thesis, Monash University, Melbourne, 1991).

11. This is not to deny that country newspapers also exchanged articles with one another directly, which meant a bypassing of the weekly newspaper. I am grateful to Rod Kirkpatrick for alerting me to this in giving feedback on my paper.

the daily papers whilst others enjoyed their broader coverage of topics other than just news.

Switching attention to the 'making of New South Wales', the idea of each and every colony having its own sense of identity – in effect, a colonial nationalism – is lent further credence by the efforts of Rolf Boldrewood to publish *Robbery Under Arms*. Apparently he originally offered it to the Melbourne-based *Australasian*, but it was rejected on account of the novel being set in New South Wales. Boldrewood then offered it to the *Sydney Mail* which proceeded to serialise it in the second half of 1882.¹² So whilst as late as the early 1880s competing colonial identities could influence where a novel was published, a decade later a painting such as Tom Roberts' 'Bailed Up' (1895) could be appreciated for its nationalist subject matter in both Sydney and Melbourne. One Melbourne journal even commented that the painting depicted a scene from *Robbery Under Arms*.¹³

It is the monthly illustrated newspaper, however, which raises an issue that is at the crux of the relationship between the mass of news collected by the daily papers – the reader in a local community and the collective imagining of all of these readers as a community at a colonial-cum-national level. For, if we accept the adage 'A picture is worth a thousand words', what were the mechanisms of the distillation process whereby the hundreds of editorials and articles in the local newspapers were scanned by the sub-editors of the daily newspapers for what was most newsworthy, to then warrant publication for an urban audience? Indeed, Morrison answers this question in her thesis by exploring the contribution of the country papers to the forming of public opinion vis-a-vis colonial politics.¹⁴ In turn, what was the rationale of the editor of the weekly in condensing six days' news over eight pages into one week's news of thirty-two pages for the maximum benefit of a predominantly rural readership? Then, finally, what was uppermost in the mind of the editor of the sixteen-page monthly illustrated newspaper in condensing four weeks' news at thirty-two pages apiece, knowing all along that prospective readers would already know much of the preceding month's news from reading the dailies or weeklies? Furthermore, what was the rationale during that month for deciding what events warranted the commissioning of an illustrator or photographer to produce an image for inclusion in the forthcoming issue, or alternatively, to produce an image of a generic subject, such as 'Diggers' Saturday Night'?

Since the illustrated newspapers are my research interest I can attempt to answer this by saying that, in contrast to the daily papers, coverage of colonial

12. I am indebted to Paul Eggert for alerting me this piece of publishing history during the feedback session on my paper.

13. J. Clark & B. Whitelaw *Golden Summers: Heidelberg and Beyond* (exhibition catalogue) (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1985) p. 144-145.

14. Morrison, *op. cit.*, p. 16-18.

politics does not rate highly in the illustrated newspapers. But then again, politics does not lend itself particularly well to the visual. I believe that the dominant theme, or underlying ideology, of the illustrated newspapers was the celebration of colonial progress: buildings, panoramas, the spread of railways, land selection, exhibitions. This helps to explain why the graphic journalism of nineteenth-century Australia was able to reflect in such a varied way the various concerns and interests of readers, both urban and rural, in all their different local communities. It also explains why a generic image such as 'Diggers' Saturday Night' not only reflects something about daily life 125 years ago, but also the process by which an element of local identity can and does contribute to a broader national identity.

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Appendix: Publication Dates and Title Changes of the Major Daily, Weekly and Monthly Newspapers*

The publication of weekly newspapers for predominantly rural audiences by daily city newspapers was to prove one of the most successful innovations of Australian newspaper publishing in the nineteenth century. The concept was developed in Melbourne in the mid-1850s, owing to the realisation that, although it was impractical to distribute daily papers to rural readers, the combination of the growth of provincial towns and improved transport services meant that weekly issue papers were likely to be viable.

As for the monthly illustrated newspapers, the catalyst for their success was the short-lived *Illustrated Australian Mail* (1861-1862). Its innovation as the first monthly illustrated newspaper was to make its publication date coincide with the departure of the monthly Royal Mail steamer, in order to capitalise on the Home market. In terms of the domestic market, meanwhile, the high costs associated with producing an illustrated newspaper meant that monthly publication was better suited to colonial Australia's small population.

The weeklies were founded by the daily papers initially as weekly news summaries: the *Melbourne Morning Herald* (1840-1990, founded as *Port Phillip Herald*, 1840-1849, then known as the *Melbourne Morning Herald*, 1849-1869, and finally as the *Herald*, 1869-1990) launched the *Weekly Herald*, (1854-1868); the *Argus* (1846-1957) launched the *Weekly Argus* (1855-1866); and the *Age* (1854-) launched the *Melbourne Weekly Age* (1855-1868).

* L. Stuart *Nineteenth Century Australian Periodicals: An Annotated Bibliography* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1979) for all dates with regard to weekly and monthly papers, and W. Holden *Australia Goes to Press* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1961), Appendix, for all dates with regard to daily papers.

Within a couple of years, the idea was developed further when the *Age* launched the *Melbourne Leader* (1856-1957, title changed to *Leader* in 1862). Its format was akin to a weekly family paper, it being divided into sections devoted to agriculture, sport, literary, domestic and news summaries. In 1868, the *Melbourne Weekly Age* was incorporated into the *Leader*. In the meantime, the *Age* had launched the monthly *Illustrated Australian News* (1862-1896).

The *Argus*, meanwhile, had launched the *Examiner and Melbourne Weekly News* (1857-1864), which was similar to the *Leader*, followed by the *Yeoman and Australian Acclimatizer* (1861-1864). In 1864, the *Argus* incorporated both of these publications, plus the *Weekly Argus* and the *Sportsman*, another inhouse publication, into the *Australasian* (1864-1946). A decade later, the monthly *Australasian Sketcher* (1873-1889) was launched.

As for the *Weekly Herald*, this did not close until 1868, just before the *Melbourne Morning Herald* changed its title to the *Herald* and became an evening paper (1869-1990). Later in 1869, the *Herald* took over the *Weekly Times* (1869-) which had been established earlier the same year by the *Daily Telegraph* (1869-1892). The format of the *Weekly Times* was similar to that of the *Leader* and the *Australasian*, although it had a stronger rural focus, which it has retained to the present day. It was whilst the *Herald* was still a morning paper that it launched the *Illustrated Melbourne Post* (1862-1868). For the first six months it was a monthly, then it became weekly, with a monthly supplement that was published to coincide with the departure of the monthly Royal mail steamer. However, this innovation lasted only until April 1863, when the paper reverted to monthly issue.

In Sydney there is no record of the *Sydney Morning Herald* (1831-) publishing a weekly news summary, but in 1860, it established a weekly paper, the *Sydney Mail* (1860-1938). A second weekly paper in New South Wales was the *Australian Town and Country Journal* (1870-1919), published by the *Sydney Evening Mail* (1867-1931). It was the only weekly paper to be illustrated from the time of being founded. As for the *Illustrated Sydney News* (1853-1855, 1864-1894), this ran in two series. The first series in the 1850s was weekly, the second, longer-running, series was monthly. Neither series had any link with the *Sydney Morning Herald*, nor was there a link between the owner of the two series.

With regard to weekly papers established in other colonies, in Queensland the daily *Brisbane Courier* (1846-, founded as the *Moreton Bay Courier*, title changed in 1861) published the *Queenslander* (1866-1939). In South Australia, it is not known whether the *Advertiser* (1858-) published a weekly paper; however, Frearson and Brother, the firm which published the monthly *Illustrated Adelaide News* (1875-1895), also published *Frearson's Weekly Illustrated* (1878-1884). Finally, in Western Australia, the daily *West Australian* (1833-) published the *Western Mail* (1885-1955). In Tasmania no daily paper published a weekly paper.

All of the monthly illustrated newspapers (with the exception of the *Illustrated Melbourne Post*) closed during the period 1889-1896. The reason was the introduction of the half-tone process. As for the weekly papers which were able

to capitalise on the introduction of photomechanical image reproduction, most of these closed either just before or just after World War Two. The reasons date from the 1920s when changes in distribution, owing to the advent of the motor-car and new forms of communication, began and radio and the cinema newsreel were introduced. There was a general demand for and an ability to provide the news faster. In terms of the print media, this demand could be met solely by the city and rural distributed daily newspaper.