

Orger and Meryon: *Booksellers to the Colony*

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The colony of Van Diemen's Land, later renamed Tasmania, experienced an early flowering of culture in the 1830s and 1840s, built on the prosperity of the 1820s. An example is the establishment of a number of the earliest community-based libraries in colonial Australia. The reasons for this are varied and include the desire to alleviate isolation and to establish educational and recreational institutions and traditions, founded on British models, in a land initially settled as a penal colony. This paper discusses the relationship of two of these institutions, the Evandale Subscription Library and the Launceston Library Society, with the London bookseller, Orger and Meryon. It also discusses the role of Orger and Meryon in helping to build private libraries in the colony, and their publication of the works of colonial authors. The argument it presents is twofold: firstly, the role of Orger and Meryon in shaping reading practices in the colony; secondly, their contribution to the advancement of knowledge and the reinforcement of the concept of Empire.

Community-based libraries

The township of Evandale is located fifteen kilometres from Launceston, in northern Tasmania. The Evandale Subscription Library was established in 1847. Its founder, the Reverend Robert Russell, was born in Fifeshire, Scotland, in 1808. Russell is perhaps best known for initiating the building of one of the colony's most elegant churches, St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church at Evandale, constructed in the neo-classical tradition, and influenced by the design of Edinburgh's New Town. The library operated from 1847 until shortly after World War II, when it closed and a number of surviving books and the catalogue and loans register were deposited in the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in Launceston. The register lists the donors, the books, the borrowers, and the loans and is possibly unique in colonial Australia.¹

The Library commenced with donated books and periodicals of which forty percent were the gift of three individuals: Robert Russell, the founder; Dr James Kenworthy, who became the founding President and was also an elected official of the Launceston Mechanics' Institute; and John Glover, the renowned landscape artist, who lived nearby on his pastoral estate, Patterdale. Glover was the chief donor. The minutes of the library committee have not survived, but other

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data and extant volumes suggest that after its establishment by donors, books and periodicals for the library were obtained direct from Britain. Evidence of the arrival of new shipments has been taken from newspaper reports published on behalf of the library. Evidence of titles purchased has been extracted from the subsequent borrowing data.

The Launceston Library Society was formed in 1845 by a number of the town's prominent citizens, including lawyer and parliamentarian, William Henty. The Society's objectives were "the establishment of a permanent collection of useful books, in every department of literature."² Professor Elizabeth Webby suggests that it was "the most liberal of the larger libraries founded in Australia before 1850."³ Although there is no extant borrowing data for the Launceston Library Society, the minutes of meetings have survived. It closed in 1856, when it was decided that the library should be for the "benefit of the public and a claim be made upon the Government for an annual grant of money to maintain it as a public library."⁴ The books and periodicals belonging to the Launceston Library Society and the Launceston Mechanics' Institute, founded in 1842, formed the basis of the Launceston Public Library, later the Launceston Library, where surviving volumes are held today. Volumes from the Launceston Library Society and the Launceston Mechanics' Institute that have booksellers' labels indicate that the books were supplied by Orger and Meryon.

Orger and Meryon advertised regularly in the colonial press. On 20 October 1847, the *Launceston Examiner* reported:

Messrs. Orger & Meryon, Booksellers, Stationers, and General Agents, 174 Fenchurch Street, London, beg to offer their services to parties in this and the neighbouring colonies for the supply of Books, Magazines, Newspapers, and every other publication, selected both from new and second-hand catalogues, a large assortment of which is always retained on hand for this purpose, and copies are regularly forwarded to their various correspondents in their monthly parcels. Orger & Meryon are now landing about 40 parcels of Books and Magazines ... The extensive connection already possessed by Messrs Orger and Meryon, thus enable them to offer greater facilities for the transmission of parcels, by every ship, than any other house. They are also always happy to execute private commissions for the accommodation of their friends at Hobart Town and Launceston, and the adjoining colonies.⁵

Coincidentally, on the same day, the Launceston Mechanics' Institute announced in the *Launceston Examiner* that "100 volumes of selected books had that day been landed from the *Renown*."⁶ Possibly these were supplied by Orger and Meryon.⁷

Enquires in Britain, by the author, have failed to locate the business records of Orger and Meryon or details of their export activities. Furthermore, the pub-

lisher John Murray advises that the name Orger and Meryon does not appear in any of their letterbooks or ledgers,⁸ the relevance of which will soon become apparent. A consequence of this paper is that more is now known of Orger and Meryon's business dealings and the extent to which the company contributed towards the supply of books and the spread of the values of *Empire*, through its dealings in the colony.

Among the first books purchased by the Evandale Subscription Library were thirty-eight volumes of *Murray's Home and Colonial Library*. Thirty have survived, held in the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery library in Launceston. This series of non-fiction works was initiated by London publisher, John Murray, and continued his policy not to publish poetry or fiction. (Murray's own reading, however, indicates that Scott was a particular favourite.⁹) The series appeared after the Copyright Bill of 1842, which protected publishers and authors in England and its colonies, where foreign and American publishers had frequently marketed cheap reprints.¹⁰

Murray's Home and Colonial Library was directed towards both Britons and colonials. At Evandale, surviving volumes carry varying publication dates from 1845 onwards. Of some significance for local readers was the inclusion of Louisa Anne Meredith's *Residence in New South Wales 1839-44*. Meredith was resident in Tasmania at the time of the library's founding, and the author of many books on colonial life and manners. Surviving volumes of the Murray series from the Evandale Library carry the bookseller's label of Orger and Meryon.

At the same time, the Evandale Library also purchased the *Library of Entertaining Knowledge*, a forty-three-volume series, based upon the affairs of man and nature. Thirty-one have survived and are held in the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery. In contrast to *Murray's Home and Colonial Library*, these volumes were the work of various London publishers and were lavishly illustrated. Surviving volumes of this series from the Evandale Subscription Library have publication dates from 1830 to 1847, are uniformly bound, and carry the bookseller's stamp of Orger and Meryon.¹¹

The bindings of *Murray's Home and Colonial Library* and the *Library of Entertaining Knowledge* are noteworthy. In both instances they are half-leather with marbled paper boards, rather than the more economical cloth bindings (a method then recently adopted in Britain) or the more traditional and prestigious full leather bindings. While both series were manufactured economically, and priced accordingly, their binding style achieved the benefit of durability. In the course of this study many volumes were examined. Many full cloth bindings have deteriorated quite badly. Many full leather bindings have fared little better. Surviving volumes of *Murray's Home and Colonial Library* and the *Library of Entertaining Knowledge*, from the Evandale Subscription Library and now in the library of the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery have, despite the lapse of time,

and, in many instances, considerable use, shown that the bindings suffered less damage than full cloth or leather, only exhibiting worn paper boards. It is likely that their smaller and lighter format, placing less stress on spines and joints, contributed to their durability.

The Evandale Library's other major purchases at this time were Scott's *Waverley Novels*, in forty-eight volumes, and *Bray's Novels* in ten volumes. Both series were acquired before September 1848. Scott's novels, based on Scottish tales and legends and those of the Border country, endeared themselves to a generation of readers. Elizabeth Webby has observed, from evidence of newspaper advertisements and library collections, that Sir Walter Scott was the colony's most popular author.¹²

Bray's Novels were the work of English novelist, Anna Eliza Bray, who wrote historical romances set in south-west England, where she resided with her second husband, E. K. Bray, vicar of Tavistock. *Bray's Novels* were first published as individual titles: *De Foix*, in 1826; *The White Hoods*, in 1828; *The Protestant*, in 1828; *Fitz of Fitz-ford*, in 1830; *The Talba*, in 1830; *Warleigh, or the Fatal Oak*, in 1834; *Trelawney of Trelawne*, in 1837; *Trials of the Heart*, in 1839; *Henry de Pomeroy*, in 1842; and *Courtenay of Walreddon*, in 1844. The novels were published as a collected edition in 1845-46.

At the time of publication, the *Literary Chronicle* reported: "*De Foix* poses only to be an historic romance, yet it is a *faithful* and *vivid* picture of the warlike character, manners and customs of that chivalrous age, the fourteenth century."¹³ The *Quarterly Review* suggested: "*De Foix*, and *The White Hoods*, may be consulted as very faithful and pleasing chronicles of the elder day."¹⁴ In the introduction to *Warleigh*, the author, Anna Bray, suggests: "There is no county, perhaps, in England, that abounds more in the traditions of old times and families than Devon."¹⁵

There is no indication in the work of Elizabeth Webby or others that *Bray's Novels* were popular elsewhere in the colony, or any known explanation as to why they should have been among the library's earliest purchases. At Evandale, however, in the period 1847-1861, an analysis of the 11,660 borrowings, by 115 subscribers, of 1911 titles, reveals that *Bray's Novels* were second only in popularity to the *Waverley Novels*. The data shows that the *Waverley Novels* constituted 5 percent of the total library borrowing, compared with 3 percent for *Bray's Novels*. In comparison, *Murray's Home and Colonial Library* accounted for 3.5 percent of the borrowing and the *Library of Entertaining Knowledge* one percent. Furthermore, Mrs Bray was represented by only ten titles compared with twenty-nine titles by Walter Scott.

There are three possible explanations for the popularity of *Bray's Novels* at Evandale. Firstly, Scott's popularity, above all else, was the result of his storytell-

ing ability, and the extent to which he was embraced by readers, for reasons including national identity, at a time when the British Empire was enjoying unparalleled ascendancy. *Bray's Novels* similarly romanticised and perpetuated English folklore. The 1842 census lists denominational percentages for the Evandale district as Church of England 78 percent, Roman Catholic 9 percent, Church of Scotland 8 percent and Other 5 percent.¹⁶ In the eyes of many Church of England adherents and English colonists, Bray may have been the chronicler of historical England as Scott was of Scotland. Secondly, the explanation rests with the marketing and library location of Bray's works, given the success of Scott's *Waverley Novels* and that *Bray's Novels* were similarly acquired as a library set, catalogued, numbered, and presumably shelved together, alongside those of Scott.¹⁷ They would have gained in status both by association and location in the library. Thirdly, while Scott's *Waverley Novels* had been published in various editions over a period of many years, *Bray's Novels*, in a collected edition, were first published in 1845–46 and borrowers were less likely to have already read or owned them, and booksellers would have been keen to promote and sell them.

Because the Evandale Library copies of the *Waverley Novels* and *Bray's Novels* have not survived, we cannot prove conclusively that they were supplied by Orger and Meryon: data suggests, however, that both series were received into the library at the same time as *Murray's Home and Colonial Library* and the *Library of Entertaining Knowledge*, both of which were supplied by Orger and Meryon. Furthermore, book donations, which were carefully recorded in the catalogue, do not include *Bray's Novels*, and there is nothing to indicate, from some 300 surviving volumes examined in the course of this study, that the Library bought books from any other supplier at that time.

Private libraries

The amateur botanist and plant collector, Robert Campbell Gunn, of Launceston, relied on professional colleagues overseas for books and periodicals. He corresponded with Dr William Jackson Hooker, the renowned British botanist and Director of the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew, and, in return for plant specimens and data, built up his substantial private library with books supplied by Hooker. In one letter, in May 1849, he stated:

Really you must suppose me a perfect bibliomaniac, but having few other enjoyments but my Books to keep me up to the progress of matters in Europe I like to get as many as my limited means can purchase and the very great generosity of my British friends will furnish ... We have no public library that can be so

called ... so that I must possess all within myself or go without the information which I so ardently desire to obtain.¹⁸

Gunn's correspondence with Hooker is filled with requests for botanical literature.¹⁹ He also requested books from Hooker for his "friend Dr Joseph Milligan," Commandant of the Aboriginal Settlement on Flinders Island, including Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. Interestingly, Milligan asked that his books be "either half-bound or bound in cloth," given his "moderate income."²⁰ Gunn's correspondence with Hooker, dating from 1847, confirms that his London supplier was Orger and Meryon.²¹

Publishing

During the time William Henty was the president of the Launceston Library Society he was the author of two publications, one published in Launceston and the other in Britain. The first, *On Improvements in Cottage Husbandry*, was published in Launceston c.1849 by Henry Dowling. The twenty-six-page volume reviewed "the prospects for small proprietors in the Australian Colonies."²² Henty proposed that agricultural families were "a necessary consequence" of the cessation of convict transportation and suggested that agricultural workers augment their living by the cultivation of marketable produce including potatoes, hemp, flax, mustard, apples and fruits.²³ The publication was clearly directed towards a domestic readership. Henty's second work, *The Art of Conversation*, a public lecture, was published by Orger and Meryon in 1850.

Interestingly, a copy of a full-page notice (unidentified, probably a press advertisement) for Orger and Meryon is included among Henty's personal papers, now in the archives of the University of Tasmania. The firm describes itself as "Stationers, Booksellers, and Account Book Manufacturers, Wholesale, Retail, and for Exportation." They also state: "Reading Societies supplied with Periodicals and other Works as they appear."²⁴

The Art of Conversation was reviewed in *Bell's Weekly Messenger*, published in London, which the *Cornwall Chronicle*, published in Launceston, reprinted:

The Art of Conversation. — By W. Henty, London: Orger and Meryon. — This is a lecture, addressed to the young, and was delivered at the Mechanics' Institute, Launceston, Van Diemen's Land, in May 1849. It is really a very credible production, and calculated to be exceedingly instructive to young people. It is sensible and judicious in its observations, and highly characteristic of Anglo-Saxon feeling, which is the same all over the world—honest, straightforward, and preserving.²⁵

Whereas Henty's first publication was produced locally by Henry Dowling, who, it may be assumed, he knew well, the second was no doubt published in Britain because of the universal nature of its subject (and to gain personal recognition in Britain). Mechanics' Institutes were well established both in Britain and the colonies, and Henty would have, by then, been familiar with Orger and Meryon's range of activities and their ability to supply both markets.

Similar reasons would have influenced Hugh Munro Hull, author of *The Experience of Forty Years in Tasmania*, published in 1859. Hull was a Fellow of the Royal Society of Tasmania, and Coroner and Clerk Assistant of the House of Assembly in the Tasmanian Parliament. The work, printed in London, lists Orger and Meryon as the publisher, together with J. Walch and Sons, Hobart and Launceston, and Wm. Fletcher of Hobart. It was first presented as a lecture at the Mechanics' Institute in Hobart.²⁶ In the preface, Hull suggests that it was aimed at the middle and working classes and published in Britain as a means of encouraging emigration. Its circulation in Tasmania was so that the people might know what was said of them.²⁷ *Walch's Literary Intelligencer* suggests that its publication in Britain was so that "the book might have the advantage of illustrations."²⁸ Of the 4,000 copies published in a second edition in 1860 (the same number as the first edition) only 500 were sent to Tasmania.²⁹ Of those retained, numerous copies were supplied gratuitously to Mechanics' Institutes in England.³⁰ Clearly, Orger and Meryon enabled Hull to address audiences both in Britain and the colony, using their substantial distribution network.

To conclude, the examples of Henty, Gunn and Hull confirm the role of Orger and Meryon in establishing private libraries in the colony and in publishing Tasmanian works in Britain. In so doing, the bookseller contributed towards the advancement of knowledge and reinforced the links of Empire. Similarly, it is probable that the status and popularity of Scott's *Waverley Novels* extended to *Bray's Novels* in that they were purchased together for the Evandale Library, most probably from the same supplier, possessed common literary characteristics, and were catalogued and, presumably, shelved together. Given that popularity for this series appears unusual in the colony, it suggests that library acquisitions and loans were determined as much by publishing practices and the marketing activities of booksellers (in this instance Orger and Meryon), and library practices, as by the literary merits of books and authors. Finally, this paper demonstrates the marketing reach of British publishers and booksellers to the most remote part of the British Empire, colonial Tasmania, and it suggests that they contributed to the borrowing habits of library subscribers in a manner previously unrecognised.

Endnotes

¹ This paper is a result of postgraduate research into the Evandale Subscription Library, and includes an analysis of the library's catalogue of books and loans register, undertaken in the School of History and Classics at the University of Tasmania.

² "Rules of the Launceston Library Society. Established 1845," Launceston, 1845.

³ Elizabeth Anne Webby, "Literature and the Reading Public in Australia 1800–1850: A Study of the Growth and Differentiation of a Colonial Literary Culture During the Earlier Nineteenth Century" (PhD thesis, Sydney, 1971), vol.2, 361.

⁴ "Minutes of the Launceston Library Society," 8 August 1856. Held in the collection of the Launceston Library.

⁵ *Launceston Examiner*, 20 October 1847. There is no evidence to suggest that Orger and Meryon employed a local representative.

⁶ *Launceston Examiner*, 20 October 1847.

⁷ Shipping manifests from this time have not survived. It is thought that they were lost in the flood of 1929 that inundated Launceston's wharf area.

⁸ Personal communication, 23 January 2003.

⁹ George Paston, *At John Murray's 1843–1892* (London: John Murray, 1932), 39.

¹⁰ For *Murray's Home and Colonial Library* see Graeme Johanson, *Colonial Editions in Australia, 1843–1972* (Wagga Wagga: Elibank Press, 2000), 211–254.

¹¹ Orger and Meryon used both paper labels attached to the inside board papers and blind stamping on the fly leaves of volumes.

¹² See Webby, "Literature and the Reading Public in Australia 1800–1850."

¹³ Quoted from the *Literary Chronicle* in publisher's attachment to Anna Eliza Bray, *Fitz of Fitzford* (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1830).

¹⁴ Quoted from the *quarterly Review* in publisher's attachment to Bray, *Fitz of Fitzford*.

¹⁵ Anna Eliza Bray, *Warleigh: Or, the Fatal Oak* (London: Longman, 1834), 1.

¹⁶ *Van Diemen's Land Census for the Year 1842*.

¹⁷ The *Waverley Novels* were numbered 1834–1882. *Bray's Novels* were numbered 1883–1892.

¹⁸ T. E. Burns and J. R. Skemp, *Van Diemen's Land Correspondents 1827–1849* (Launceston: Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, 1961), 124.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 42, 59, 65, 75, 82, 94, 103, 118, 124. The work of Gunn and Robert W. Lawrence, in collecting plant specimens and sending them to Kew, contributed towards the groundbreaking work of Hooker and others in antipodean botanical studies. For Gunn, see *Australian Dictionary of Biography (ADB)* vol. 1 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1966–1976), 492–493. For Lawrence, see *ADB*, vol.2, 95. For Gunn's library, see *Catalogue of Library of the late Robert Campbell Gunn, at Newstead House, Launceston, Tasmania* (Launceston: Daily Telegraph, January 1921).

²⁰ Burns and Skemp, *Van Diemen's Land Correspondents*, 65. For Milligan, see *ADB*, vol.2, 230–231.

²¹ Burns and Skemp, *Van Diemen's Land Correspondents*, 116, 121, 124.

²² J. A. Ferguson, *Bibliography of Australia*, vol.4 (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1955), 287.

²³ W. Henty, *On Improvements in Cottage Husbandry* (Launceston: Henry Dowling, c.1849), 1. Photocopy held in the Launceston Library.

²⁴ Henty papers, University of Tasmania archives, Hobart.

²⁵ *Cornwall Chronicle*, 26 April 1851.

²⁶ *Walch's Literary Intelligencer*, August 1859.

²⁷ Hugh M. Hull, *The Experience of Forty Years in Tasmania* (London and Hobart Town: Orger and Meryon; J. Walch and Sons; J. Fletcher, 1859).

²⁸ *Walch's Literary Intelligencer*, June 1860.

²⁹ *Walch's Literary Intelligencer*, November 1860.

³⁰ *Ibid.*