

“New Books, Just Received from London” *Access to New Publications in Colonial Wellington*

KATHLEEN COLERIDGE

Outside the publishing centres of the world, anyone who wishes to own books is dependent, directly or indirectly, on supply by some form of long distance communication. The mechanisms differ considerably, but this was as true in nineteenth century New Zealand as it is today.

When the first settlers arrived in Wellington in the early 1840s most readers brought their private collections of books with them. Some of these settlers had completely unrealistic ideas of what they were coming to; they expected, apparently, all the facilities of an English seaside resort, with lands like the richest parts of Hertfordshire ready for cultivation. These men left within a year or two, often having wasted their ready cash in the taverns or the more select Wakefield Club. Their books were sold, along with their furniture and other household goods, to become part of the general stock available in the community.

The surviving poster for one such sale¹ lists a useful range of furniture and household goods together with ninety-four titles (in one hundred twenty-two volumes). The presence of such potentially useful works as *Loudon's Encyclopaedia of Agriculture* and *Dickson on Live Stock* as well as *Emigration Fields, by Library of Useful Knowledge* and similar works suggests that the vendor, John Edward Collett and his wife Rachel Theresa² had come prepared for permanent settlement. Their “warre and premises” at Korokoro on the footpath leading to Porirua (probably at the end of modern Cornish Street in Petone) may have been on the land he hoped to occupy; three land orders (licences to select land for ownership) were also auctioned.

Few of Collett's books were recent publications; most had been published in the 1820s and early 1830s. There is no record of what became of any of the books, though some may still be among the older books on the shelves of libraries or private houses in Wellington. A few may, at the time, have been gifted to the library of the Port Nicholson Mechanics' Institute which opened in early 1841. This collection of about 300 books was created with gifts from the elite sponsors of the Institute; most were locals, but some were London supporters of the colonisation project.³ Like so many Mechanics' Institutes in Britain, the serious and solid character of the books meant they were of little interest to the majority of ‘mechanics’ and working-men, even though the proportion of ambitious and in-

Script & Print: Bulletin of the Bibliographical Society of Australia & New Zealand
29 (2005): 57-65

tellectually able young men was probably higher than among the population at home in Britain. Although neglected much of the time it remained available to the Wellington reading public under the aegis of successive societies and institutions until the 1880s and the remaining volumes were finally absorbed into the newly established Wellington Public Library in 1893.

The private reader adopted other, more old-fashioned, methods of obtaining books. We know little of the attitudes and reading habits of the working immigrants, but do gain some glimpses from the surviving letters or diaries of the more cultured group. Mary Taylor, writing to her friend Charlotte Brontë in 1848 with her reactions to Charlotte's *Jane Eyre*, said "I lend it a good deal because it's a novel and it's as good as another! ... They are not literary enough to give an opinion."⁴ In a later letter she wrote: "Mrs Taylor's parson (this was Jonas Woodward, the Congregational minister) is the only literary man we know and he seems to have fair sense."⁵ Mary's circle was somewhat restricted; she had no contact with men such as Edward Catchpool, a Quaker-bred merchant and former printer who was the nephew of Edward Betts Hopper, partner of Henry Petre (younger son of Lord Petre) and Francis Molesworth. Catchpool was in many ways the ideal customer for the publications of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, and was able to lecture competently on Ethnology in 1852, by making use of the standard general works of the time.⁶ But like the ideal reader of the Society's publications he gave no sign of being interested in imaginative literature.

Judge Henry Chapman was another reader not in Mary's social circle. Like her, he received his books from family in England; his letters include requests for the legal texts he needed for his position, and for classical texts for his son's education. He also asked for a regular supply of new books, reported that he bought books at auction, and noted "Murray's colonial library has been a great resource" for family reading.⁷ This series was dominated by travel, history and biography — not the imaginative literature preferred by Mary Taylor — but he also referred to Charles Dickens's works, which he treated as social journalism.

At an earlier period, in 1840, Lieutenant Best of the 80th Regiment was seconded to Port Nicholson in charge of the military detachment attending Willoughby Shortland, the Colonial Secretary and Wellington administrator-delegate. In his journal he records some of his reading, with, on 26 September 1840, a comment "The Clergyman has lent me *The life of Frederick the Great* and an account of the Great Plague and a Mr Strang a lawyer some of Miss Edgeworths works and Byron so that I am not as badly off as I might be."⁸

Most serious readers in Wellington adopted similar strategies. Friends or family in Britain included books in the parcels they sent, books were bought at the local auctions of house clearances, and books were lent by friends. When Octavius

Hadfield was recovering from a serious illness in the late 1840s he devoured all the theology, philosophy and history available in Wellington, borrowing from his host, Henry St. Hill, and all St. Hill's friends.⁹ But these were not the only sources of books in Wellington. As Elizabeth Webby and Wallace Kirsop in particular have pointed out for the Australian colonies,¹⁰ books were imported commercially from the earliest years, and these were usually new, or at any rate recent, publications.

It was in late 1841 that Sam Revans, owner of *The New Zealand Gazette*, Wellington's newspaper, wrote to Henry Chapman (then in London), "books of various kinds will now be saleable; persons are beginning to read again..."¹¹ He asked Chapman to arrange for books to be sent "on consignment; for I know nothing of the trade." A shipment received early in 1841¹² had not sold — most were advertised again in late 1844.¹³ These works included, among other titles, *The Poetical Works of Milton, with a Memoir and Seven Embellishments by Fuseli, Westall, and Martin*, at fifteen shillings, the *Life of the Duke of Wellington*, by George Soane, also at fifteen shillings, and *Montacute: or a New Home*, by Mrs Mary Clavers, in two volumes for one pound three shillings. There were few people in Wellington able to pay fifteen shillings for one book only, that being half a week's wages for a labourer. A more specialised shipment received in time for Christmas, "a large collection of books suited for the juvenile branches of a family,"¹⁴ seems to have sold far better. This included *Children of the Abbey*, by Regina Mary Roche, *Aesop's Fables*, the *Life of Captain Cook*, and the *History of Baron Munchausen*, at one shilling each, *Mother Bunch's Fairy Tales*, *Beauty and the Beast*, the *History of Robinson Crusoe*, and *Sinbad the Sailor* at sixpence each, and *Blue Beard*, *Aladdin or the Wonderful Lamp*, *Children in the Wood*, and *Adventures of Tom Thumb* at threepence each, as well as the more sober *Gray's Arithmetic* and *Johnson's Dictionary* (no price given). There were no follow-up advertisements for these works. But in 1842 Wellington, like the whole New Zealand colony, entered a financial crisis that lasted into 1844, and all trade was reduced to essentials only, with much of that not properly paid for.

Nevertheless, trade continued. Consignments, usually called 'invoices,' of books were received periodically and advertised for sale. General merchants would announce the receipt of parcels, packages or cases of books: Wallace, White and Wallace imported school books at the end of August 1841; in March 1842, William Lyon announced a shipment of maps from John Wyld (Lyon was to be the most substantial bookseller in Wellington by the end of the 1850s). Also in March 1842, Hort and Mocatta imported a collection of illustrated books from Fisher and Co of London which were sold through the 'Gazette' office. These advertisements give no details of the titles received.

The imports by various merchants of 'an invoice of books' continued, and gradually increased in number through the late 1840s and the 1850s. The consignments were sent by London specialists such as Edward Lumley, studied by Wallace Kirsop.¹⁵ At any one time there were two or three merchants receiving such consignments from various UK correspondents; from the late 1840s to the mid-1850s Bethune and Hunter was the most frequent recipient, but other merchants such as Johnston and Co. and W. B. Rhodes and Co. were also involved. The specific shippers were sometimes named explicitly, such as Smith and Elder, Darton and Co., or Chambers — the last named being handled in May 1859 by W. and G. Turnbull (the firm of Alexander Turnbull's father),¹⁶ not long after the firm was established in Wellington.

Many of these shipments seem to have been remainders being dumped, as Kirsop noted was the experience in Australia.¹⁷ Nathaniel Cooke was told in April 1855 that some sets he had sent out were incomplete: a life of Napoleon lacked four copies of volume one, two of volume three and two of volume four, while the edition of Boswell's Johnson needed twenty-five copies each of volumes one and two, and two copies of volume four, to complete the sets.¹⁸ This was one of the more egregious examples that can be identified.

Although sources to document these activities are largely confined to the newspaper advertisements of the merchants receiving the shipments there is one period, from mid 1853 to early 1856, for which a number of auction catalogues have survived¹⁹, and these are supplemented by much of the business correspondence of Bethune and Hunter from 1845 to 1866. Since Bethune and Hunter was the most prominent firm engaged in book auctions this provides a very useful insight into the practices of the period.

From the correspondence we can see that these shipments were controlled by the London shipper, the dominant figure in the relationship, and the Wellington firm did little more than receive the goods, arrange for the sale in whatever seemed the most profitable way, and in due course remit the net proceeds by a draft on the London correspondent — the shipping company Henry H. Willis in the case of Bethune and Hunter. They might include comments on the saleability of the goods: on 28 August 1855, they recommended to John Kendrick "put up as varied and attractive an assortment of books as possible and no more than one or two copies of each work unless it has just been published and is in fashion at home." To Reeves and Son, on the same date, they wrote "continue supplying books: small well selected parcels of similar goods will always command a ready sale."²⁰

These comments should have been unnecessary, but the surviving auction catalogue for Kendrick's books suggests that, like Nathaniel Cooke, he was clearing

remainders: "Bibles, prayers and church services" could be expected to be in multiple copies, but twenty-five copies of *Principles of the construction of a breakwater* and one copy only of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is the reverse of the ratio the market could have been expected to absorb.²¹

The Wellington merchant firms receiving consignments had several ways of dealing with the goods, whether selected or dumped. A common solution for the merchant was to take the goods into the warehouse and sell a few items at a time, either to private individuals or to small or general storekeepers especially those in outlying areas. This was most suitable for general commodities such as boots and shoes, pickles and sauces, tools, and liquor. The goods held in warehouses were advertised in the newspapers: stationery is listed frequently, but books very rarely and then in general terms such as "5 cases Books" in a list of many other goods.²²

Another method was to sell the entire consignment to specialist retailers. For books, from the mid-1840s to the late 1850s this was one or other of William Lyon and the *Spectator* Office. Each imported on their own account, through their own correspondents, as Revans had asked Chapman to arrange back in 1841, but they would also take books from other suppliers.

A third method of disposal was by auction. Several of the regular importers held auctioneers' licences and disposed of many shipments of all types of goods in this way. Bethune and Hunter and Johnston and Co. were particularly active in book auctions, as well as James Smith, P. M. Hervey, and Duncan and Vennell at various times. Bethune and Hunter were the most prominent until Kenneth Bethune's death in England in late 1855 disrupted all their business. Their business correspondence for the 1850s shows that they received several consignments, especially in 1855, which they had difficulty clearing. They wrote to H. G. Bohn on 28 August 1855: "so many books have been sent out within the last two or three years that the place is completely stocked and people are getting tired of buying."²³

An earlier letter on 31 January 1851, also to H. G. Bohn, spelled out many of the problems and requirements of the local situation:

The prices obtained [for the consignment being reported on] will serve better as a guide to the class of works most suitable for the present taste here – though one or two may be instances of extreme rates obtained through the competition of rival genius. The whole were sold by Public Auction of two days long and were on view previously laid out according to Catalogue lots. The sales were well attended by buyers (the trade here is limited to two shops) private parties being the purchasers and a great deal of interest existed. We gave every aid in carrying out the sale which from want of the facilities obtainable in other countries occupied much time, and our premises entirely for the time being from

shew until completion of delivery to the numerous buyers. We beg to call your attention to the heavy charge for printing Catalogues — there was necessarily a great deal of correcting Proof and all labor is very high here, although in printing an opposition establishment exists, still they keep the prices up.

Mr Lumley of Chancery Lane has been a shipper of Books to us for some time and has adopted an excellent plan of preparing Catalogues at home and sending them ready printed for distribution along with the Books — which no doubt saves considerable expense. We send you one of his blanks for inspection, and commend the principle. There still continues a laudable enquiry for literature, but as there are several good libraries of Standard & old Works as well as that of the Mechanics Institute &c the run is after modern popular works & the cheaper description of publications neatly bound much in the style of the last lot, which were considered as a really nice assortment of neatly bound books.²⁴

The catalogue of the auction being referred to has not survived, but from later letters it seems that Bohn continued to supply a range of works suitable for the Wellington market.

We have only the advertisements and a few auction catalogues for the other importers. Johnston and Co. seem to have had better suppliers in London. Their auction of 5 April 1854 offered the works of G. P. R. James, (Washington) Irving and Ainsworth, together with such titles as the *Autobiography* of Chateaubriand, Pickering's *Races of Men*, and Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*.²⁵ On the other hand, the consignment from Smith Elder and Co. that was sold on 29 June 1855 is rather mixed in character and may be largely remainders:²⁶ one typical lot (no. 41) offers Ranke's *History of the Popes*, an *Illustrated Book of Poultry* and Thiers' *History of the French Revolution*, and another (no. 114) offers *Flax Grower*, Wordsworth on the *Church of Rome* and *What to do and how to do it*. The catalogue has been put together by someone with little understanding of the book trade, and the whole collection seems somewhat random.

In contrast with these offerings the bookshops, William Lyon and the 'Spectator' Office, do seem to have had definite ideas of the markets they were serving. The 'Spectator' Office imported most of the standard publishers' series such as Murray's Home and Colonial Library, Bohn's Standard Library, Routledge's Railway Library and Parlour Library, along with such middle-brow works as Hallam's *Middle Ages*, Nicholas's *History of the Royal Navy* and the *Works* of Carlyle, Lever and Marryat. These were advertised without interruption in the columns of the *Spectator* newspaper, throughout the 1850s. During the same years, William Lyon advertised selectively in the *Independent*, the rival newspaper. A typical advertisement for a new shipment (received once or twice a year) ran for about a month

and itemised many solid and serious works such as, among many others, Layard's *Nineveh*, T.J. Graham's *Modern domestic medicine*, John Stuart Mill's *System of Logic*, Gilbert's *Elements of Banking*, and William Youatt's *Treatise on sheep*.²⁷ Most of these were standard works which went through several editions, and alongside them, "The latest volumes of Murray's Reading for the Rail, Railway Library, Popular Library . . . &c, &c, &c" were advertised. Both shops also advertised in the almanacs in the same general terms; from these we learn that Lyon was the Wellington agent for Routledge's series and for the Religious Tract Society.

From the mid-1850s, and possibly earlier, Robert Holt Carpenter, the pioneer bookbinder, offered a stock of secondhand and new books for sale, laying the foundation of his later specialist business. He bought at auction but did not import directly, and as he seldom advertised we do not know what he offered, except that it was extensive and eclectic.

The keen reader could also borrow from a commercial library. In September 1848, Bethune and Hunter advertised the receipt of five hundred volumes for a "circulating library," and in January 1849, Edward Roe, a former printer, opened a subscription library with the "best works of Marryat, Ainsworth, Boz [i.e. Charles Dickens] and the other popular authors of the present day."²⁸ This soon disappeared from the advertisements, but in 1855 a new library was established by the Wrigglesworths, who regularly announced the addition of new volumes with such detail as *Little Dorrit*, "A new novel by Grant," "2 new novels by Capt Mayne Reid," Macaulay's *History of England* and *The Daisy Chain*.²⁹

We should not be surprised that the preferred reading in Wellington was little different from that in any English provincial town. Specialist works were bought by individuals, but books which did not sell in London were unlikely to sell well in Wellington. London shippers might hope the colonies and frontier settlements would buy their waste paper, but the appetite was soon sated and it was not just the withdrawal of Bethune and Hunter, the principal Wellington vendor, which halted the trade. Wellingtonians wanted the same light reading as their relatives in Britain, and they showed it in the classic way of the market. Robert Holt Carpenter was a rare exception, in his voracious reading, but he too could be matched in many English towns, then and now.

Endnotes

¹"To be sold by auction by Messrs Wade, on Monday, Feb. 1 . . ." (Wellington: Office of the New Zealand Gazette, [1841]), copy in Victoria University of Wellington Library, Fildes Misc. 3.

²John Edward Collett and his wife Rachel Theresa arrived by the 'Bolton' on 28 April 1840 as cabin passengers; New Zealand Company Embarkation Register, microfilm printout, Alexander Turnbull Library, 16 (New Zealand Company. Miscellanea. Persons. 1839-1850: register of cabin passengers, Colonial Office series CO 208/269).

³Joan Stevens, "'Brother Fred' and the Two Cultures: New Zealand's First Librarian," in *New Zealand Libraries*, v. 31 (1968), 179-181, 194.

⁴Mary Taylor, *Mary Taylor: Friend of Charlotte Brontë: Letters from New Zealand and Elsewhere*, ed., with Narrative, Notes, and Appendices, by Joan Stevens (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1972), 75.

⁵Taylor, 95.

⁶Kathleen Coleridge, "Edward Catchpool, Master Printer in London and Wellington", in *An Index of Civilisation: Studies in Printing and Publishing History in Honour of Keith Maslen*, ed. R. Harvey, W. Kirsop and B. J. McMullin (Melbourne: Centre for Bibliographical and Textual Studies Monash University, 1993), 183.

⁷Henry S. Chapman, "Letters: transcript," v.1, 114, 151-2, 302, 316 (13 June 1844, 10 November 1844, 25 March 1846, 13 May 1846), Alexander Turnbull Library, qMS-0418.

⁸A. D. Best, *The Journal of Ensign Best*, ed. by Nancy M. Taylor (Wellington: Government Printer, 1966), 242.

⁹Barbara Macmorran, *Octavius Hadfield* (Wellington: B. Macmorran, 1969), 52.

¹⁰Elizabeth Webby, "A Checklist of Early Australian Booksellers' and Auctioneers' Catalogues and Advertisements: 1800-1849," in *Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand Bulletin*, no. 13 (November 1978), 123-148, no. 14 (May 1979), 33-61; Wallace Kirsop, "Bookselling and Publishing in the Nineteenth Century" in *The Book in Australia: Essays towards a Cultural & Social History*, ed. D. H. Borchardt and W. Kirsop (Melbourne: Australian Reference Publications / Centre for Bibliographical and Textual Studies Monash University, 1988), 20-36.

¹¹Samuel Revans, "Copies of Letters principally to H. S. Chapman," Alexander Turnbull Library, qMS Rev 1688, [no date, late 1841], 165.

¹²"Just Received at the office . . . The Poetical Works of Milton . . . February 25, 1841," *New Zealand Gazette and Wellington Spectator*, 27 February 1841.

¹³"Books. On Sale at this Office . . .," *New Zealand Gazette and Wellington Spectator*, 4 September 1844.

¹⁴"Juvenile Books," *New Zealand Gazette and Wellington Spectator*, 1 December 1841.

¹⁵Wallace Kirsop, "Edward Lumley and the Consignment Trade," in Wallace Kirsop, *Books for Colonial Readers: the Nineteenth-Century Australian Experience* (Melbourne: The Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand / The Centre for Bibliographical and Textual Studies, Monash University, 1995), 39-58.

¹⁶W. & G. Turnbull & Co., "On Sale ex 'Acasta', 'Alfred the Great', and Late Arrivals," *New Zealand Spectator and Cook's Strait Guardian*, 11 May 1859.

¹⁷Kirsop, "Bookselling and Publishing in the Nineteenth Century," 21.

¹⁸Bethune and Hunter, "Records: Letterbook no. 4," to Nathaniel Cooke Esq., 20 April 1855, Alexander Turnbull Library MS 81-034-20, 40.

¹⁹A collection of 46 auction catalogues bound together are held in the Alexander Turnbull Library (callmark PAM 1853 SAL 314); eight are duplicated in another volume at Victoria University of Wellington Library (callmark Fildes Misc 2). Of these, ten (three at Victoria University) are wholly or partly devoted to books.

²⁰ Bethune and Hunter, "Records: Letterbook no.4," to John Kendrick, 28 August 1855, Alexander Turnbull Library MS 81-034-20, p. 82; to Reeves and Son, *ibid.*, 83.

²¹ Bethune and Hunter. *A Catalogue of 3 Cases of Books from Mr. J. Kendrick, London . . . which will be Sold by Auction . . . July 19th, 1855* (Wellington: "Independent" Office, 1855).

²² W. B. Rhodes & Co., "On Sale Ex 'Sea Snake' and late arrivals . . .," *Wellington Independent*, 27 June 1855.

²³ Bethune and Hunter, "Records: Letterbook no.4," to H. G. Bohn, 28 August 1855, Alexander Turnbull Library MS 81-034-20, 80.

²⁴ Bethune and Hunter, "Records: Letterbook no.2," to H. G. Bohn, 31 January 1851, Alexander Turnbull Library MS 81-034-57, 69.

²⁵ Johnston & Co., *Catalogue of Valuable Books, and Chinese Fancy Goods, to be Sold by Auction . . . Wednesday, the 5th April, 1854* (Wellington: "New Zealand Spectator" Office, 1854).

²⁶ Johnston & Co., *Catalogue of Books, Mercantile and Fancy Stationery, from Messrs. Smith, Elder, & Co. of London. To be Sold by Public Auction . . . Friday, the 29th day of June 1855* (Wellington: Office of the "New Zealand Spectator," 1855).

²⁷ "New Books. William Lyon has just received . . .," *Wellington Independent*, 7 July 1855.

²⁸ "Public Subscription Library. E. Roe begs to acquaint . . .," *Wellington Independent*, 21 December 1848.

²⁹ "Wrigglesworth's Circulating Library Lambton Quay, Wellington," *New Zealand Spectator and Cook's Strait Guardian*, 2 January 1858, and 21 August 1858.