

## Searching for George Hughes: A First Report on a New Investigation

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Elaine Hoag's discovery in Ottawa of what now appears to be the oldest surviving piece of Australian printing raises two questions that bibliographers and book historians will have to try to answer more precisely than in the past. Who was our prototypographer and what exactly did he produce? By a curious coincidence Monash University's Centre for the Book received a donation from interstate in late 2004 to examine the early volumes, pamphlets and broadsides struck off at the press of Sydney's second printer, George Howe. Our benefactor must have been prescient, because, in the course of research that has already involved libraries in Hobart, Dunedin, London, Sydney and Canberra, we were coming to the conclusion that the search for Howe imprints should go beyond the locations recorded in Ferguson's *Bibliography of Australia* and explore, in particular, what may be held in Britain's National Archives (formerly the Public Record Office) at Kew. In this we were mindful of the fact that all the Garrison and General Orders printed by Matthew Power at Sorrento, Victoria, for Lieutenant-Governor David Collins between 16 October 1803 and 27 January 1804 are preserved almost exclusively in the Kew repository.<sup>1</sup> The Canadian find, now safely in the National Library of Australia, was an incentive to go backwards in time from George Howe's tenure of the post of Government Printer, to grapple with the George Hughes mystery and to look at the Kew records.

Historians are aware that the documents concerning the early British settlement of Australia are contained—imperfectly—in the series *Historical Records of New South Wales*<sup>2</sup> and then—more reliably—in the thirty-three volumes of *Historical Records of Australia*.<sup>3</sup> Many Government and General Orders attached to governors' despatches to the Colonial Office are transcribed *in extenso*, but, in line with a strange reluctance to be precise about the medium used, it is not clear whether the archives hold manuscript or printed versions. The microfilms completed for the Australian Joint Copying Project between 1948 and 1993 do not suffer from this disability, so they allow us to do an initial verification of claims such as the one by Ferguson that “the Historical Records of New South Wales contain more than two hundred Government Orders printed on the Government Press between the years 1796 and

<sup>1</sup> See John Alexander Ferguson, *Bibliography of Australia* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1941–69), no. 381 (hereafter, cited in the form “Ferguson 381”) and *Garrison and General Orders Sullivan Bay 16 October 1803* (Monash University, Melbourne: Ancora Press, 2003) with its historical note by John Currey.

<sup>2</sup> *Historical Records of New South Wales*, 7 vols. in 8 (Sydney: Government Printer, 1892–1901).

<sup>3</sup> *Historical Records of Australia*, 33 vols. (Sydney: Government Printer, for the Library Committee of the Commonwealth Parliament, 1914–25).

1799, all the work of George Hughes.”<sup>4</sup> Assertions of this kind are plausible. Indeed a much more recent account states that Hughes “up until 1802 printed over eight hundred orders and notices, five hundred under Governor Hunter until October 1800.”<sup>5</sup> Alan Atkinson assumes<sup>6</sup> that an order of which Hunter sent a copy to the Duke of Portland on 12 November 1796 had been printed when it was made on 29 September 1795,<sup>7</sup> thus establishing an early date for the beginning of Hughes’s official activity. Yet the microfilm shows the material in manuscript form, thereby inviting other questions about attitudes to scribal and print culture.

If these few examples suggest some uncertainty about the length of time Hughes occupied his post and about the extent of his work, they do no more than reinforce our present inability to provide a carefully delimited account of his career. The earliest unreported printed document in the Colonial Office papers is a notice distributed on Norfolk Island after its promulgation on 12 July 1798. As can be seen from the facsimile derived—with due acknowledgement—from the Australian Joint Copying Project microfilm, this is a fair sample of Hughes’s rather rough-and-ready printing with the material evoked in a 1911 lecture quoted by Ferguson.<sup>8</sup> Here then is an item to be added to the tally now including, in addition to the two orders and two playbills held in Sydney and carefully recorded in the *Bibliography of Australia*,<sup>9</sup> the *Jane Shore* playbill of 30 July 1796 repatriated from Canada and various announcements of performances reprinted in the British press in 1797 and later from originals now lost.<sup>10</sup> Despite Hughes’s own participation in many of the performances, it is something of a paradox that these outside jobs have apparently survived better than his official work.

The Norfolk Island “Information”<sup>11</sup> is one of very few printed items in the Colonial Office volumes of despatches dated before 1801.<sup>12</sup> If one excepts a handful of promissory notes and forms there is virtually nothing anterior to the administration of Governor King. It seems, therefore, that Hunter preferred to send manuscript copies of his Government and General Orders to London rather than the printed versions prepared by Hughes and circulated in the colony. Why? Is this

<sup>4</sup> J. A. Ferguson, Mrs Arthur G. Foster and H. M. Green, *The Howes and Their Press* (Sydney: Sunnybrook Press, 1936), 19.

<sup>5</sup> Gwenda Robb, *George Howe: Australia's First Publisher* (Melbourne: Arcadia, 2003), 37.

<sup>6</sup> *The Europeans in Australia: A History*, vol. 1, *The Beginning* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1997), 264–65.

<sup>7</sup> *Historical Records of Australia*, ser. 1, vol. 1, 674–78.

<sup>8</sup> Ferguson, Foster, Green, *The Howes and Their Press*, 16.

<sup>9</sup> Ferguson 245, 246, 319 and 320.

<sup>10</sup> See Robert Jordan, *The Convict Theatres of Early Australia 1788–1840* (Sydney: Currency House, 2002), *passim*.

<sup>11</sup> National Archives CO 201/14, f. 164 (reel 7 of the Australian Joint Copying Project series covering these papers).

<sup>12</sup> I am most grateful to Felicity Henderson for spending a day at Kew inspecting CO 201/15–22 and photographing the printed items—essentially from 1801 and 1802. Her notes on the watermarks of the papers used are particularly useful.

a tacit expression of preference for the written word? Or are there copies of the printed orders to be found in other archival series? In any case the transmission of Hughes's then Howe's work becomes a more or less regular procedure under King. What remains uncertain is the point at which the new printer takes over, since there is no break in continuity. The exceptional character of the Norfolk Island notice is explained by Hunter's insistence in his antedated 1 July 1798 despatch to the Duke of Portland that he is enclosing "the copy of a printed paper I have sent there for the information of the inhabitants in general."<sup>13</sup>

Unavoidably one comes up against the problem of Hughes's identity and of the date at which he left New South Wales. While it can be conceded that, after nearly half a century, the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entries on Hughes and Howe need to be revised and augmented, there appears to be a consensus that the actor George or George Henry Hughes,<sup>14</sup> the printer George Hughes and the convict John Hughes transported on the *Pitt* in 1792 are the same person.<sup>15</sup> However, the details available in the convict indents and in the records of the Old Bailey trial on 13 April 1791<sup>16</sup> are sparse, to say the least. Hughes's alleged lodging between 1787 and 1791 in Phoenix Alley, off Long Acre, to the west of Drury Lane and near Covent Garden, fits better with a theatrical rather than a printing background. Was he the George Hughes apprenticed to Charles Simpson on 7 May 1782 and then turned over to Jonas Davis on 5 December 1786?<sup>17</sup> Davis was quite a substantial printer, responsible, in 1787, for John Pugh's *Remarkable occurrences in the life of Jonas Hanway*, and, ten years later, for the three quarto volumes of Sir Frederick Morton Eden's *The state of the poor: or, An history of the labouring classes in England, from the conquest to the present period*.<sup>18</sup> The age one can suppose for Hughes in the light of such an apprenticeship backs up David Collins's subjective impression of "a very decent young man."<sup>19</sup> None the less, we are in the realm of hypothesis, and, for all these early book-trade figures, we need sober calendars of documents rather than biographies that are too hard to flesh out from meagre and scattered facts.

Similar austerity is required in approaching the bibliography of Hughes and of George Howe. We cannot now know why—so long ago—Ferguson did not attempt to give London-held ephemera the same treatment in the *Bibliography of Australia*

<sup>13</sup> *Historical Records of Australia*, ser. 1, vol. 22 (1914), 158.

<sup>14</sup> Jordan, *The Convict Theatres of Early Australia*, 223.

<sup>15</sup> See Robb, *George Howe: Australia's First Publisher*, 37, and Roger Butler, *Printed Images in Colonial Australia 1801–1901* (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2007), 21–22.

<sup>16</sup> See the transcript in the online *Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, <http://www.oldbaileyonline.org> (accessed 3 December 2007), Ref.: t17910413-26.

<sup>17</sup> See *Stationers' Company Apprentices 1701–1800*, ed. D. F. McKenzie (Oxford: Oxford Bibliographical Society, 1978), 103, 318.

<sup>18</sup> See Ian Maxted, *The London Book Trades 1775–1800: A Preliminary Checklist of Members* (Folkestone: Dawson, 1977), 62.

<sup>19</sup> *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, ed. Brian H. Fletcher (Terrey Hills, NSW: A. H. and A. W. Reed, 1975), 1:364.

## I N F O R M A T I O N .

IT is with much astonishment and displeasure, that the Governor has been informed of the very unwarrantable Association entered into by the Settlers and other Persons upon Norfolk Island, and which he understands they have in the most Seditious manner termed, the Fraternal Society of Norfolk Island.

No complaints or grievance whatever, can be admitted as a sufficient reason for a step so pregnant with danger to the tranquillity of the Inhabitants of that Island, nor can there be the Shadow of an Excuse for such an Association. It is the duty of the Inhabitants if they feel themselves laboring under any grievance, whether real or imaginary, to lay their Complaints respectfully before the Commanding Officer upon the Island, and this representation should be made by one or two persons chosen for that purpose, and not by a Numerous Body of People: If the Complaint should be of such magnitude as cannot be completely redressed by the Commandant, it will be by him forwarded to the Governor in Chief, who will pay every attention the Circumstance may require. Every other mode of obtaining redress is highly illegal, and can only serve to expose those who may be concerned to a very considerable degree of danger. As every step which is in our circumstances practicable, will at all times be taken, to remove any thing which can be considered as oppressive or distressing to the Inhabitants of Norfolk Island, they must recollect that their representations are expected to be made in the most peaceable, Decent, and Moderate manner.

The Governor hopes he may understand from the the Commanding Officer, that such Persons as were concerned in this unwarrantable Association, have since shewn a proper degree of Contrition for their highly Censurable Conduct in this instance, and that they endeavour by proper attention to the peace and quiet of the Settlement, to convince him that this improper step has proceeded more from Ignorance than from any want of that respect which is due to the Commanding and the other Officers upon the Island.

By Command of His Excellency.

Given at Government House, Sydney,  
the 12th. day of July, 1798.

RICHARD DOLE, Sec.

Searching for George Hughes

as he granted to slight early productions in the Mitchell, in the Dixon and in his own remarkable collection. In 2007, in easier material circumstances, it is possible to be more ambitious and to think of a new bibliographical catalogue of the New South Wales press to 1821. The Centre for the Book has—not too rashly!—assumed the mission of co-ordinating a new effort. It has already been helped by librarians and institutions almost too numerous to mention individually, and it knows it can rely—in its study of types and of paper, amongst other things—on the co-operation of dedicated scholars.<sup>20</sup> Ferguson and his contemporaries gave us a fine start, but it is up to us to go further in mapping this aspect of the national heritage.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> I welcome, in particular, the input of Dennis Bryans and of Andrew Sergeant. The work of John Currey on the Collins settlements is a further inspiration.

<sup>21</sup> As this number of *Script & Print* was going to press, *Margin*, no. 73 (November 2007) arrived, with Victor Crittenden's article "Australia's First Printed Document and First Theatre," (*ibid.*, 22–29), with further remarks on the Hughes–Howe problem.