'THE ROMANCE OF THE BLUE BOOKS':
GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS AND POPULAR LITERATURE IN COLONIAL NEW SOUTH WALES

NANCY WRIGHT AND A.R. BUCK

Studies of book production in colonial New South Wales customarily begin with the press of the first government printer, George Howe, who from 1801 to 1821 produced not only government publications but also the colony's first newspaper, first monthly magazine and first book, The New South Wales Pocket Almanac.1 The idea that the role of the government printer diminished as the history of Australia advanced has remained a consistent theme of studies of the book trade. For example, in two lectures presented to the Library Association of Australasia in 1896 and 1898, Adam G. Melville presumes a growing dissociation of the government press from books printed and published by private presses and booksellers in Australia.2 Melville divides his history of the book trade before federation into three distinct periods: 1801 to 1824, the period that the government press and censorship dominated the book trade; 1824 to 1860, the period that London presses printed most books sold in the colony; and 1860 to 1895, the period that readers in Sydney could obtain books printed in England and Australia from sixty-seven booksellers in the city. Melville, and other historians of the book trade, are correct in tracing a progressive dissociation of the government press from the books produced for, and read by, what he describes as, 'a leisured class of book-buyers'.3 What our paper will reveal is that books printed and published by the government continued to be affiliated, in unexpected ways, with books and newspapers produced by private, commercial publishers in colonial Australia.

This paper traces the distribution and reception of a 'Blue Book', produced in Sydney during 1857 by the government printer, William Hanson. Like other Blue Books printed in British colonies after 1837, it was printed in accordance with the


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requirements of the Colonial Office. It has a standard blue binding, for which the volumes are named. Like other volumes of Blue Books, which, R.B. Pugh explains, reported 'mainly the proceedings of the legislative and executive bodies and administrative reports', this 1857 Blue Book reported accounts of government expenditure and legislation as well as reports by committees of inquiry. One such report was "The Second Progress Report from the Select Committee on Administration of Justice and Conduct of Official Business in County Districts." This Select Committee, as the Blue Book documents, heard the petition of one Joseph Wilkes relating to an accusation of judicial incompetence. Wilkes filed this petition in order, he claimed, to secure redress of specific grievances resulting from the investigation of the murder of his wife and two of his children. His testimony and other evidence, in due course, made the Select Committee suspect Wilkes of the crimes. The Select Committee learned that mysterious and unresolved murder cases had occurred previously where Wilkes had lived; in fact, as the Committee discovered, Wilkes was implicated in the deaths of two men in the 1830s and the death by poisoning of his two daughters in 1853. The Select Committee in their Report recommended further investigation of Wilkes, resulting in his conviction for murder.

The report of the Select Committee in 1857 became the basis of two different works of fiction by Charles De Boos. The historical novel Fifty Years Ago: An

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5. R.B. Pugh The Records of the Colonial and Domestic Offices (London, 1964), p.41, explains: 'The instructions upon which the 'Blue Books' after initial experiments were eventually drafted may be studied in the Report of the Select Committee on Colonial Accounts of 1837.'


7. This Blue Book is indexed in Checklist of Royal Commissions Select Committees of Parliament and Boards of Inquiry, Part IV New South Wales 1835-1960, ed. D.H. Borchardt, La Trobe University Publications No. 7 (Bundoora, 1975), p.6. Borchardt explains that 'The Second Progress Report' was not the only report produced by this particular Select Committee. 'Salaries of district officials are discussed in the first Progress Report, and reallocation of duties is recommended to provide a reduction in the number of Commissioners for Crown Lands and an increase in the number of Stipendiary Magistrates. Three separate cases involving allegations of injustice are considered in the second Report, and the SC's decisions as to the need for further action are given' (pp.6-7).

8. See the Select Report, pp.16, 28-29 and 34.

9. Wilkes was sentenced to hang but was reprieved. See the letter to the editor titled 'The Convict Wilkes,' The Sydney Morning Herald, 3 June 1858.
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Australian Tale, by De Boos, included plots and characters that adapted the circumstances of Wilkes's murders.10 Gordon & Gotch, Sydney, published that novel, first, in a series of fourteen paper-covered booklets during 1866 and 1867 and, then, as one volume in 1867.11 Subsequently, Fifty Years Ago was serialised by The Australian Journal, Melbourne, from April 1869 to February 1870 before being published in 1906 by the NSW Bookstall Company in a posthumously revised and abridged edition titled Settlers and Savages.12 Prior to the serialisation of Fifty Years Ago, De Boos 'revisited' the scene of Wilkes's crimes in a true crime serial, titled 'The Romance of the Blue Books', published by The Sydney Mail from 30 May to 4 July 1868. The history of the distribution of the Wilkes case, first as an official publication produced by the government printer, and subsequently as different genres of writing, by commercial colonial publishers, provides a means to re-evaluate the conditions of book production in colonial New South Wales.

It is not surprising that Charles De Boos brought to colonial readers two works of literature drawn from documents in a government publication. De Boos began his career as a writer in the colonies when he became the parliamentary reporter for The Sydney Morning Herald in 1856. He continued to write for the Herald as both a parliamentary reporter and special reporter from the goldfields throughout the 1860s. He was also the author of more than 18 pseudonymous political satires and anonymous political columns, serialised in The Sydney Mail and The Sydney Morning Herald, from the mid-1860s to the 1880s.13 His career during and after the 1860s exemplifies that of a 'professional writer', an occupation that Melville, in his lecture to the 1898 meeting of the Library Association of Australasia, identified as a phenomenon of the book trade during the period from 1861 to 1898. The careers of Sir Walter Scott and Charles Dickens, Melville suggested, were isolated and atypical examples of professional writers who had lived by their pens prior to 1860. After 1861, Melville believed, a representative

12. Healy, 'The Treatment of the Aborigine,' p.246 n.26a, comments upon Rowlandson's revision of the abridged edition of Fifty Years Ago that intended to make the novel fit a 'wild west' formula derived from American novels, such as those of J.F. Cooper.
group or 'class' of professional writers became a mainstay of the book trade.\textsuperscript{14} The substantial and consistent output of serialised short fiction and novels written by De Boos from the 1860s to the 1880s identifies him as an important colonial professional writer whose works linked publications by government and commercial presses. It is his work as a parliamentary reporter that explains his knowledge of, and reference to, official government publications like the Blue Books. De Boos was well established as a writer knowledgeable about politics, legislation and law before 1866 when Gordon & Gotch, Sydney, published his historical novel that adapted topical issues raised in 1857 before the Select Committee on Administration of Justice and Conduct of Official Business in the Country Districts. As we shall see, of particular interest in this study of the relationship between government publications and popular literature is the comparison between the sensationalism of the story as printed in the government publication and the analytical sobriety of the story as retold in popular literature.

The evidence given by Wilkes before the Select Committee in 1857, De Boos astutely recognised, contained subject matter well suited to fiction.\textsuperscript{15} In fact, Wilkes's testimony in the Report strikes a reader as a well-crafted yarn and, on occasion, as a tall tale. His evidence initially appealed to the paternal sentiments of the committee who heard about his last meeting with his wife. Wilkes testified:

On the 9th of April, I left my wife and family all in good health and proceeded to the bush, at about eight o'clock in the morning, with my sheep. About two hours afterwards ... I thought I saw a man named Lynch, that lived at a station about four and a half miles from me, going towards my hut. ... I then hed home with my sheep. It was quite dusk when I got there. When nearing the fold one of my children, aged two years and four months, came crying through the sheep. I called to the mother to fetch the child away. Getting no answer I became alarmed. Seeing no smoke out of my hut, I called for my two sons; getting no answer from them I run to the child and asked him where his mamma was. He said "Pa! Pa! Mamma dead." I picked him up on my arm and run to the hut with him. On arriving there my wife was lying at the back door with her head literally smashed to pieces. The axe was lying against the jamb of the door all smothered in blood.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{14} Melville, 'The Book Trade in Australia Since 1861,' pp.107-8.

\textsuperscript{15} On 19th-century editors' ideas about the importance of producing 'strong sensations' in instalments of serial fiction see Elizabeth Morrison, 'Serial Fiction in Australian colonial newspapers,' in Literature in the Marketplace, ed. John O. Jordan and Robert L. Patten (Cambridge, 1995), p.306 and 308.

\textsuperscript{16} 'Second Progress Report ... ', p.1.
Wilkes continued this sad and horrifying narrative in which he asserted that Lynch impeded his search for his two oldest sons. One son, found with a serious head injury, according to Wilkes, lived long enough to identify Lynch as the murderer. Wilkes insisted that the police not only bungled a clear cut case against Lynch but also denied his dying son medical care. These sensational statements, however, paled in comparison to Wilkes's assertion when examined on 22 January by the Select Committee. He confirmed to the members what he had previously communicated to his gaolers in a written statement—that he had seen and conversed with his dead wife and children since the murder. The Chairman's questions about Wilkes's written statement elicited a fantastic tale.

The Chairman asked: 'Will you tell us what passed that night?' Wilkes replied: 'I can, partly. I asked my wife, I think, who was the murderer? and she said that Lynch was the murderer; and she desired me, in particular, to take care of her infants; she said she should have an eye on me.' Wilkes was shortly afterwards asked whether he had had 'any other vision of a celestial nature?' Wilkes responded: 'No; I never saw anything after the second night. ... I know that my wife and four children appeared to me on that night, in the company of an assembly of angels.' In response, the Committee was forced to ask: 'You saw them in company of an assembly of angels?' To this question, Wilkes replied: 'Yes; and one appeared to be the blessed Virgin, and had hold of my girls' hands.' At this point, the Chairman interjected: 'I think you say here (referring to a paper) that you saw the Son of God, sitting on a chair of gold?' Wilkes responded: 'Yes, I did ... I saw the Son of God, sitting on a chair of gold, and the Virgin Mary leading my family to his feet.' In response to this and many other commonsense questions, Wilkes provided information concerning the 'visitation' that he experienced — right down to details of the angels' wings. Despite the scrupulous and professional conduct of the investigation of Wilkes's petition, the content of the report, when printed by Hanson in 1857, resembled more the stuff of sensational and romantic fiction than the findings of a government committee.

De Boos's treatment of the subject, however, entirely departed from the norms of sensationalism. The theme that binds the four books of Fifty Years Ago together is the need to renounce a code of revenge, used to rectify wrongs in the colony around the first decade of the 19th century, in order to secure justice, represented by the developing role of the colonial police and legal system. The circumstances of the murder of Wilkes's wife and children, recounted in the Report of the Select Committee, provide the framing tale of Fifty Years Ago, with a significant exception. Whereas Wilkes, who blamed alternately another shepherd and some aborigines, in fact, murdered his family, in De Boos's novel, the father; George Maxwell is innocent. George and his surviving son, who is injured in the massacre, take an oath of revenge upon the killers. Each book of

17. 'Second Progress Report...', p.27.
the novel provides another illustration of how the oath of vengeance circumvents, rather than implements, justice. The role of the law in the colony is also addressed in Book III, in which the murder of a sawyer, Black Harry, by a white man, Ironbark Jack, fails to be resolved by the authorities because they cannot accept the testimony of aborigines who can give circumstantial evidence about the crime. This plot alludes clearly to a defect in the system of justice in colonial Australia, illustrated by the Wilkes case; the Report of the Select Committee notes that evidence implicating Wilkes was not recorded because aborigines were unable to take an oath and, as a result, were unable to offer relevant testimony in a court of law. This defect in the law of evidence was emphasised by the example of Wilkes, who was found to be a serial murderer, as De Boos’s true crime serial ‘The Romance of the Blue Books’ recounts accurately.

An obvious question that arises when examining De Boos’s use of the Wilkes case in his historical novel and true crime serial is: Why did the author ignore the obvious sensationalism of the subject matter? Nineteenth-century editors and writers assumed that ‘strong sensations’ were necessary, especially in serial fiction that needed to sustain the interest of a reader from instalment to instalment.

De Boos did include Wilkes’s ‘dream vision’ of his family in his true crime serial but only to undercut its sensationalism. The authorial narrator of ‘The Romance of the Blue Books’ asks the reader to consider Wilkes’s motives for writing such a tale and confirming it before the Select Committee. The ironic tone of De Boos’s narrator insists that readers take into account the strategies of fiction, in a court of law or society. A reader might easily, but mistakenly De Boos argued, assume that a ‘man like this could hardly be the murderer of his wife and children – I mean a man who could write in so religious a spirit. One would think not.’ In other words, he asks readers to consider the response that Wilkes may have intended to produce by narrating his religious vision.

In order to expose Wilkes’s role as a manipulative, self-fashioning author of a sensational fiction, De Boos demanded that his readers examine critically the role of fiction – particularly the role of romance – in constructing the truth. De Boos

20. See Morrison, *Serial Fiction*, p.356, who refers to this statement attributed to George Manville Fenn, a magazine editor and popular writer.
approaches this topic indirectly by casting himself in the role of reader rather than the author:

I was recently searching through an old volume of the Votes and Proceedings of New South Wales for traces of a political matter which at that time engrossed public attention. In turning over the leaves, a passage in print accidentally caught my eye. I read the passage as well as several others which followed. I became interested, and read on and on until I made myself acquainted with the whole circumstances of the case detailed.

The whole thing seemed to me so extraordinary that I could not rest satisfied until I had followed the matter up to its ending. ... I think the story will be found interesting. I am sure it has a moral, which I would wish to be better recognised than it is.22

In this manner, De Boos comments directly on the subject of what, in literature, elicits a reader's attention and what purpose reading serves. The authorial narrator also directly addresses readers to guide and reprimand romance readers whose interest may be diminished by the fact that the serial is based upon the contents of a Blue Book:

I fancy then that I see some of your readers turn up their noses at so unpromising a title, and exclaim, "What! Romance out of our Parliamentary papers! Bosh!" Looking at those long formal lines of dusty tomes that decorate the Parliamentary shelves, I must own that the prospect is not encouraging. ... And yet, it has been long ago acknowledged that "truth is strange, stranger than fiction;" and there are after all some very strange truths hidden amongst those dusty volumes, truths that some future historian of New South Wales will pounce upon with delight, and over which the novelist of some hundred years will revel in ecstasy.23

By addressing the relation of 'fiction' to history, De Boos encourages readers to consider their assumptions about literary genres and trends. He addresses two subjects of debate in the colony, namely, the social purpose of literature and whether literature should guide, rather than be guided by, colonial readers' expectations.

The printing of the Wilkes case as a Blue Book in 1857 and its dissemination in De Boos's writings as both historical novel and true crime serial a decade later delimit a period in which the role of literature and printing were subjects of popular debate in the colony. John Norton, in 1857, for example, urged his

22. De Boos, 'The Romance of the Blue Books,' The Sydney Mail, 30 May 1868. The passage begins: 'One of these romantic truths came upon me by accident, or else my attention would never have been turned in so unpromising a direction for literary pabulum wherewith to feed a somewhat romantic taste.'

contemporaries in New South Wales to understand the role of literature in advancing the colony politically, socially and morally. Norton typified literate members of the colonial elite who assumed that literature should foster ideas about morals and culture in order to unify the diverse interest groups in the colony. At the mid-nineteenth century, other readers addressing this issue specifically voiced their suspicion of novels as a genre, which they believed lacked a ‘solid instructive character’, that is, the kind of subject matter considered effective as a means of educating members of the colony. In his historical novel and true crime serial about the Wilkes case, De Boos attempted to mediate suspicion of romance novels by integrating historical subject matter that adapted the genre. Fifty Years Ago and The Romance of the Blue Books directed readers to topical, historical matters of direct relevance to politics and law in the colony. By incorporating the history of settlers in New South Wales and the history of the legal system into his fiction, De Boos’s narratives recorded events that instructed readers by criticising the norms of romances and sensational fiction.

De Boos’s novel and serial based upon the report of an official inquiry made in 1857 provide insight into the values and development of a literary culture within colonial Australia at the mid-nineteenth century. We suggest De Boos’s work also indicates that government publications continued to have a relation to literature produced and distributed by private, commercial publishers. Like De Boos’s 1871 novel Mark Brown’s Wife: A Tale of the Gold-Fields, based on the 1870 Report of the Gold Fields Royal Commission of Inquiry, his historical novel and true crime serial about the Wilkes case document how government printers


27. Healy, ‘The Treatment of the Aborigine,’ p.246, comments that De Boos ‘wrote his novel with the massive intention of bringing together the strands of early Australian life. In terms of the native tradition this would link De Boos to the historians who were attempting this job in this and the preceding decade.’

and publications continued to have a role in the growing and changing book trade. In the case of fiction by De Boos and his contemporaries, however, Blue Books and other government publications were received by readers not only as intended by the government, that is, as documents recording matters of law and state in conformity with the procedures of the Colonial Office, but also as popular fiction. The unexpected affiliation of government and private, commercial publications is an important, but neglected, factor in narratives about the book trade in colonial Australia.