

## Paradise: Your Own Castle, and Books from a Catalogue

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Five years ago, I was exploring in the area north of Wellington, New Zealand, looking for traces of one family's paradise. Only part of the building's foundations remain now, but would-be printer Angus McCurdy from Birmingham built a landmark home here by the Hutt River, which he called "Bonnie-Glen," and which his neighbours across the river later called "McCurdy's Castle."

Aloysius John Thomas McCurdy was among many young people from Great Britain who sought "Paradise" in the colonies. Born in 1860 and having grown up in Birmingham, by his own account he first trained as a teacher, then as a telegraphist and electrician. He had been working for six years at the Birmingham Post Office when he responded to a recruitment offer from the Telegraph Department, and came to New Zealand at his own expense at the age of twenty. He resigned in 1887, but an attempt to set up a printing firm ended in bankruptcy, and he returned to the Department until his involvement with a workers' deputation led to being sacked in 1902 (ostensibly for his involvement as Honorary Secretary of the New Zealand Farmers' Union in Upper Hutt, where he had bought a small farm and had settled his family). The Farmers' Union, a newly formed and so-called non-political lobby group, supported McCurdy by making him first their Colonial Organiser, then their General Secretary; this included travelling the country to encourage local branches, putting out publicity material and acting generally in close correspondence with the President, James Glenn Wilson of Bulls. At this time, McCurdy was working from home, and beginning the three storey wooden house which he called "Bonnie Glen" on the banks of the Hutt River. From 1906 however, when McCurdy was forced to resign his Farmers' Union position after publicly criticising the executive, his focus shifted to local entrepreneurial activities and to local politics. He was Upper Hutt Town Clerk in 1908, set up the first newspaper and the first cinema, which also functioned as a dance-hall, lobbied for telephone and gas connections and was involved in establishing much of the local infrastructure. Eventually he went onto the Town Council, served on the School Board, represented Upper Hutt on regional bodies, and became the first Mayor when the town was constituted a Borough in 1926. He died at the age of eighty-one — reportedly from catching cold helping to clean out the school swimming pool.

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Through 'print moments' it is possible to trace McCurdy's constant financial struggles, his complex personality (there is evidence that the "Mac" who wrote in Scottish brogue was actually the son of an Irish Catholic schoolteacher and re-invented himself after emigrating) and involvements in the printing/publishing industry.

McCurdy has been viewed through different lenses in several historical works. To union historian Bert Roth, he was a longstanding supporter of the Post and Telegraph workers, a "marked man," sacked unfairly from the Department after 22 years of service with reprehensibly little support from the workers' Association. To academic Les Cleveland, McCurdy was an early public relations campaigner, who retired to "querulous obscurity" in Upper Hutt, where he carried on a "spirited and often defamatory warfare with personal enemies" in the columns of his newspaper the *Upper Hutt Independent*. He turns up briefly in the biography of James Glenny Wilson, President of the New Zealand Farmers' Union, who found ways to support McCurdy financially. And most local histories of Upper Hutt devote as much time to McCurdy's colourful character as to his career in local politics and business.

To be a telegraphist in 1880 was to work at the edge of a new, popular technology, in a field almost akin to today's listservs, since telegraphists were in constant and almost immediate communication with their colleagues around the country. McCurdy was reputedly good enough to send with one hand and receive with the other — he was very proud of his technical skills and experience. To be a telegraphist was also however to work under strict Government control, and at least in New Zealand, in a restrictive and autocratic environment. A strike in January 1880 drew a severe punitive response from Departmental officials, which continued for years against those concerned.<sup>1</sup> McCurdy, arriving after the strike had been dealt with, would not have had to pay a five pound fine and write an apology to get his job back, but his attitude was very likely one of support for the strikers — his letter of acceptance had noted "I beg leave to state my entire satisfaction at the conditions mentioned in your communication, marked as they most undoubtedly are by an honest desire of fair play and no favour" and he had been involved with the Liberal Association in Birmingham.<sup>2</sup> He must have blotted his copybook somehow, for it is surely no coincidence that on the same date as his wedding (to Mary Ann Jones who had just joined him from Hammersmith, London), McCurdy was sent a telegram appointing him Postmaster at Kaitoke, an isolated spot in the Upper Hutt valley, with a salary loss of fifty pounds a year.<sup>3</sup> He had to let out a four-room house at Lewisville Terrace in Wellington, and six months later was still trying to establish his position.<sup>4</sup> This may explain his desire to leave the Department in 1887 — his printing business in Tinakori Road was not successful however and his plant was seized under a Bill of Sale; a job in a

photographic studio was similarly short-lived, and McCurdy ended up having to ask William Gray, the Secretary, for work in the Department again,<sup>5</sup> and then having to file for bankruptcy.<sup>6</sup>

1891 was a bad year. As well as bankruptcy, he was (according to family memory) called up to serve in some form of military operation, and on returning found that his father, coming to join the family in New Zealand, had died on the voyage out.

Back in the Department, McCurdy took part in the independent workers' Post and Telegraph Association, and in 1891 he designed a new masthead for their journal *The Katipo*, so-called because "the katipo only asserts its dreaded power as a means of defence, or when greatly irritated..." The design is clearly of New Zealand with raupo and silver fern elements, it shows the three sections of work — telephone, mail, and telegraph, and was presumably engraved by McCurdy himself.

In the 1890s McCurdy had bought a small piece of land outside Wellington, and wrote in deferential terms to the Department requesting assignment to a permanent night shift so that he can spend more time with his family: "...I respectfully ask that you will permit me to work permanent night duty, in order that I may spend some part of my spare time daily with my family; instead of being, as at present — 'the man who comes to dinner on Sunday.' In making this application, I desire to point out wherein it will be advantageous to the Dept., and afterwards, how I also benefit..." However the level of detail, the references to Government policy, and the way McCurdy researched and recorded the views of other staff first, indicate that despite the deferential language he expected a struggle. In part, McCurdy's activism for the workers' Association may have been spurred by the fact that his son Donald had followed him into the Department — certainly Angus was later careful to distance his son from any suspicion of involvement in McCurdy's politicking. It is unlikely that he got his permanent night duty at this time, as he was one of the leaders of an operators' deputation in 1901, which went outside union channels to request improvements to working conditions. Union historian Bert Roth says that McCurdy was a "marked man" after this, and is critical of the workers' Association for not supporting him when the Department found a way to give McCurdy the sack. However the story is more complex — there appears to have been some coolness between the new workers' Association President Joe Avery over the editorship of *The Katipo*, which McCurdy had sought and Avery took over; more importantly, McCurdy's correspondence shows exhilaration at the prospect of leaving for a popular reason. Illustrated is a far more typical piece of correspondence — one of thousands pumped out on his typewriter, saying

"Dear King, ...Saw Wilson on Thursday last — had long korero with him re Union matters...He said to me — 'You're the one man in the world for the job!! I am a couple of inches taller since then!...The only thing which may upset the cart in the meantime is for the Dep't to back down...Am getting in a lot of work at home — I shall not under any cires come back to lightening jerking — we can rub along OK."

McCurdy's sacking is described elsewhere;<sup>7</sup> he was in fact rescued by the New Zealand Farmers' Union President but his work for the Union, which was exhaustive, and heavily reliant on print, more than re-paid the effort. By one analysis, he supplied twenty-five thousand words of material to newspapers, and wrote one hundred sixty-five letters and reports to Wilson alone over 1902-1906.<sup>8</sup> He also handled the printing of several items for the Union, notably the pamphlet *Why every farmer should join the Farmers' Union*, by Wilson, and documented the costs for a print run of 30,000:

Quotations received for printing 16 pp. pamphlet by J. G. Wilson 'Some reasons why every farmer should join the Farmers' Union', 1903

		Per 10,000 extra	Extra pages
Wright & Carman	£55	£16	55/-
Evening Post	£62	£17.10.0	10/- (typesetting only)
N.Z. Times	£50	£12	40/-
Whitcombe & Tombs	£55	£15.10.0	7s 8d (typesetting only)
Keeling & Mundy 'bedrock quotation'	£39.15.0		32/6 for 30,000 21/8 for 20,000 (advertisements)

The quotes from the five businesses are fairly close, except for that from Keeling who described it as a "bedrock quotation" as he is loth to lose the Farmers' Union business. While Keeling & Mundy did get this contract, other printing work over the next few years goes to Wright and Carman, the N.Z. Times, Buick & Young, and others.

Quotations received for printing pamphlet, 24 pp demi 8vo + 4 pp. cover, 1905

		Extra pages
Brett Printing & Publishing	£60	pro rata
Horace Weeks Ltd.	£55	35/- per page
Lyttelton Times	£55	at same rate

Christchurch Press	£2.15.0 per 1000	at same rate per page
Buick & Young (PNth)	£55	50/- or special quote
Herald Printing Works	£48	4 pp. £9; 8 pp., £14
Blundell Bros. (E. Post)	£45	£1.15.0
Evening Star, Dunedin	35/- per 1000	24/-
Wright & Carman	£45	27/6
N.Z. Times Co. Ltd	£45	35/-
Otago Daily Times	£38.10.0	£1.7.6
Whitcombe & Tombs	£38	27/6 or 35/- for advert. display work

Analysis of a further set of printing costs, which McCurdy sought in 1905 for a pamphlet of twenty-four pages, twenty thousand copies, shows he was evidently knowledgeable and canny. When the successful and growing Farmers' Union took over an existing newspaper<sup>9</sup> to run for themselves, McCurdy supported this, and there is a certain amount of evidence that he would have liked to edit it, although in the event the union retained the existing editor and style of publication. However they did put McCurdy in as manager, and again he did a good commercial job — "during its first 13 weeks the paper was losing at the rate of £13 19s 6d a week, but by the end of the first year McCurdy had reduced this to the very small amount of £2 1s 8d a week."<sup>10</sup> His thorough approach extended to making notes on all the advertisements around railway stations as he travelled the country, which he then, to judge by his correspondence files, used to approach firms to advertise in Farmers' Union publications.

So far as his own design work goes, there are a few ephemeral items — posters for advertising his own meetings (there is a version without the portrait), a "Happy New Year" card, membership forms, a questionnaire circulated to support his visits to the branches — they have a professional look. But when in 1906 McCurdy parts company with the Farmers' Union and with Wilson, over McCurdy having sent out an unauthorised circular to do with the dominance of the large landowners in decision-making, he uses a lithographic format for his consequent circular of justification to NZFU members. Lithography was particularly suited to the handwritten look, helping to convey that the written matter was personal, and sincerely felt.

Two more items from McCurdy's use of print at this time — firstly a card sent to his wife Mary Ann, in morse, which says I think just that he'll be home on Sunday afternoon, and secondly a poster from 1909 for a company McCurdy tried

to set up with other farmers from the Upper Hutt valley. This is rather sad in its optimism (though typical McCurdy) because the company folded the same year — but of interest because the printing is done by Watkin, Tyler and Tolan in Wellington, a company which McCurdy hadn't been using for Farmers' Union work.

I turn now to McCurdy's last major venture into the print world, his newspaper the *Hutt Valley Independent and Upper Hutt Advertiser*, published weekly from January 1911 until 1926, and then sporadically until 1933. The first issue was "Printed...by Blundell Bros., Ltd., of Willis Street Wellington, and published by Angus John McCurdy, at the office of the Proprietary, Upper Hutt." The next and subsequent issues, however, were "Printed...and published by Angus John McCurdy of Upper Hutt at the Registered office" and show that McCurdy has taken over control, and there is a noticeable diminution in quality. There is little evidence concerning the press and equipment at this time, but the five hundred copies weekly were said to have been produced by himself and his daughter Flora, at the back of the hall where he ran his other business, a cinema. McCurdy had an ongoing relationship with The Wellington Publishing Company Ltd, publishers of the *Dominion* newspaper, and there is documentation showing a regular transfer of metal between the two<sup>11</sup> from which it appears that until 1915, McCurdy was having copy for the *Hutt Independent* set in linotype by the printers at the *Dominion*, collecting the results and printing from them, then returning the metal for re-use. This practice must have been prevalent in Wellington, since The Wellington Publishing Company sent out a circular letter in February 1913 advertising "our intention to charge for linotype setting at the rate of 1/- per 1,000 ems."<sup>12</sup>

The *Hutt Valley Independent* cost one penny, the annual subscription including postage was six shillings, and the paper consisted of four pages 13 x 20 inches; five 13-em columns with a length of 17 inches. Regular content included a business directory, train timetables, reports of local body meetings, and copious and highly coloured local and personal news. There was very little illustrative matter — Staples Ales was the only advertising block used for years. From the beginning McCurdy was the best advertiser — he used the *Hutt Independent* to advertise his own services as a road engineer, electrical engineer, land and insurance agent, job printer, and cinema proprietor. He also used it to advertise his three-storey home "Bonnie Glen" as a resort for jaded city-dwellers — in terms that sound conveniently enough like Paradise: "bathing, boating, fishing, shooting, botanising, waterfalls, caves, ferns, pure air, water, food, and a photographic darkroom." The later film news and advertising, which eventually took up its own page, would have come through association with McCurdy's other business — the Record Hall cinema. No commercial printing jobs are known at this time.<sup>13</sup> The lack of

revenue this implies is borne out by financial difficulties in 1914; McCurdy was in court in July 1914 being sued by The Wellington Publishing Company. They seem to have been forbearing however — it is not until January 1915 that further serious action is contemplated and then McCurdy tries to gain credit by selling them back more metal than they require.<sup>14</sup>

By May 1915 Mac's daughter Flora was formally registered as the proprietor,<sup>15</sup> though as there were very few changes style or content-wise his was evidently still the dominant influence. A detailed letter to his son in 1923 gives the following information:

I am printing 650 copies of the Independent...I have advertised for a man to overhaul the Wharfedale and the Linotype. I got the heater for the metal pot from USA for the Linotype. It takes me nearly 12 hours to print the paper each week. It is taking on well. Nearly every house in the whole district is taking it. Have not a dozen refusals, and all who take it ask for it if I happen to be a day late in printing. I get it lino'ed in town until my own lino' is running. The advts have so far paid the cost of setting, and the job-printing has paid the cost of the bale of paper I got. With the Wharfedale we can print a paper double the size in half an hour with 650 copies eight pages present size page.

I have posted the first set of papers to date. I did not print on Dec'r 30<sup>th</sup> as my type-setter was put in hospital for an operation and his chums on the Post, Dominion and Times did not care about working extra for him during the holidays. I enclose last Saturday's issue and also a copy of our Power Board report. I get a guinea a meeting...

[complaints re improvements to the cinema being required by the Dept. of Health, and re the quality of sheep on the farm managed by his other son Ken]

It's bad enough to have these worries without having the family playing the dickens every chance it gets. I've tried my best to get things running smoothly but they simply won't try to make things go well. Sulks, sneers, delays and deliberate neglect to do the proper thing at the proper time simply disheartens one. It takes me eight hours to deliver my papers. Neither Flora nor Ken care to even throw the Pine Avenue papers over the fences on their way home. I do it myself now to avoid sour looks.

...Am promised a fair amount of Film Exchange business in the way of job printing from Selznick, N.Z. Films and Universal Films, as soon as Lino' and Wharfedale are going. N.Z. Picture Supplies may also pass some business our

way. If could get them steadily on the job-work, I could take on an apprentice under the Award...

Notice the ink on all but the 'ONCE MORE' copy of the paper. It's 'Arabian Black' made in Australia. I had to import six pounds to turn out a decent job...<sup>16</sup>

This shows a typical McCurdy flair for optimism, for the few issues from 1924 to 1933 which contain chiefly political advertising for McCurdy's re-election campaigns were published by the *Hutt and Petone Chronicle*.

A last look at McCurdy from the print culture stance, is an examination of his reading. We know that he was an active user of the Social and Literary Institute's Library in the Post and Telegraph Department, because there are irascible letters to the librarian about displaying out-of-date journals.<sup>17</sup> We know that he was in the process of buying a set of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* in 1902, because he had to negotiate a gap in payments when he was sacked. He was subscribing to a number of magazines in 1908 — another time of financial worry; there is a letter asking him to collect his orders. We know that he made folders and scrapbooks of printed items for his children at "Bonnie Glen," because they're described in the holdings of the Alexander Turnbull Library. Reading was one of the chief occupations in the evenings — certainly Mrs. McCurdy's hobbies, reported on her ninetyeth birthday at "Bonnie Glen" included reading in the evenings by the light of a kerosene lamp. When the family left the Castle, they would have taken their favourite books. Nevertheless, in 1968 when the house known as "McCurdy's Castle" was described in the local paper, there were said to be hundreds of printed items still lying around. Sadly, vandals got to work, the house burned down, and there are now only traces of the gardens and buildings left. However, a few items from the McCurdys' personal library have survived. They include poetry and classics from the Penny Poets series, a few religious stories, some technical manuals, and many catalogues — this one a catalogue of journals. There are catalogues from the USA, Britain, Germany, Canada and Australia as well as from New Zealand, and they range from telephones to roofs to sawmills to harvesting machinery. McCurdy once stated that he believed he was safe in asserting that "in no farm in the Old Country is there such a collection of labour-saving and uptodate implements as on ours"<sup>18</sup> (family memory discredits this completely — McCurdy's grand-daughter recalls no electricity and no labour-saving devices except a crystal radio set).<sup>19</sup> Many of these are gorgeous examples of printing and one could speculate that would-be printer McCurdy kept them for that reason.

McCurdy's life is a patchwork of ironies. If you're going to be sacked for belonging to a union — a farmers' union is the last one you'd expect it to be. He



goes from Government Department, to unionist, to entrepreneur, to establishing local body infrastructure, to local politics. He's a "techie" who wants all the latest tools, but also moves out to an isolated paradise across a river with no road access. He presided over the family table like a dignified patriarch, but his Scottish persona appears self-made, and he kept a file of anonymous letters vilifying his character.<sup>20</sup>

McCurdy's search for "Paradise" led to private endeavour and local environment, rather than the national and organized roles he took on when based in Wellington. His choices of media and format provide insight into the personality and activities of this interesting and complex man.

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*Endnotes*

<sup>1</sup> Roth, Bert. *Along the line: 100 years of Post Office Unionism* (Wellington: New Zealand Post Office Union, 1990), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Statement by McCurdy in *Hutt Valley Independent and Upper Hutt Advertiser*, 29 April 1933.

<sup>3</sup> Memo dated 7 December 1883 from Chief Postmaster Wellington to the Postmaster Kaitoke 'I am desired by the Secretary to hand you the enclosed letter appointing you Postmaster at Kaitoke from the 29th ultimo at a salary of 70 pounds a year which is paid to you monthly through the Railway Dept.'

<sup>4</sup> Telegraph form 18 July 1884 "For the time being you are a railway servant and amenable to the regulations but you are still an officer of this dept. Have you not been officially appointed stationmaster Kaitoke. No good would be served by sending on yours of 14th to Mr Ashcroft. W. Gray. 1.30 pm." Telegraph form 18 July 1884 1.30 p.m. "to Secretary, Wellington 'Have heard nothing yet officially from railway — only appointment I hold is one as postmaster from G P M Wellington' A McCurdy"

<sup>5</sup> The government employee lists record that McCurdy resigned from the Telegraph Department in May 1887, and was re-appointed in April 1893.

<sup>6</sup> Bankruptcy file: Archives New Zealand reference AAOM W

<sup>7</sup> See Note 1, also Roth, H. 'The McCurdy Affair,' *Public Service Journal*, May 1961, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Cleveland, L. 'An early NZ Farmers' Pressure Group,' *Political Science* 18.2 (September 1966), 49-67.

<sup>9</sup> The Farmer's Advocate

<sup>10</sup> Cleveland, 58.

<sup>11</sup> For instance:

Copy of letter 2 March 1911 to Manager, 'Dominion'

"Mailed: Wednesday March 1, 1911

One side — 10 pt Doric caps

Eight sides — 8 point Roman numbered red 1 to 8

46 sides — 10 pt Roman numbered blue 1 to 46

Mailed Thursday March 2, 1911

41 sides — 10 pt Roman numbered blue 47-87 both inclusive

Metal Returned: March 3<sup>rd</sup> 1911:- 118 inches”

Undated letter to Manager, ‘Dominion’ No. 5

[To] Manager and Foreman Printer ‘Dominion’, Wellington.

Please find herewith copy for this week’s issue of above paper — type wanted for printing on Friday afternoon.

8 point Roman on 12 ½ em slugs:

4 sides numbered in blue from 1 to 4.

10 point Doric on 12 ½ em slugs:...”

Letter to Manager ‘Dominion’

“1 Nov 1911...

‘Directory’ matter

12 point Gothic indented lines

10 point ditto

8 point ditto

All matter 12 cms on 13 em body viz indented one em, continuation lines indented three ems.”

<sup>12</sup> Letter from Manager A. Blanbon, The Wellington Publishing Company Ltd., 14 February 1913, to Mr. A. McCurdy, Upper Hutt. Private collection.

<sup>13</sup> However there is some evidence that McCurdy may have sought quotes from other Wellington printers in March, though for ephemeral, not newspaper printing

<sup>14</sup> Letter from Archibald Sands, Manager, The Wellington Publishing Company Ltd., ‘Your debit note for 10/6 representing 21 lbs Lino metal returned on the 22nd December last, has not been accepted. From the enclosed statements you will see that only 11 ½ lbs was required to square your metal account. And it means you have now returned to us 9 ½ lbs of metal in excess of the actual weight supplied to you. We cannot purchase this excess metal from you at the rate of 6d. per lb., but we are prepared to credit you at the rate of 3d. per lb or if you prefer it, the metal will be returned to you. In the meantime we enclose our credit note for 2/4.”

<sup>15</sup> *Hutt Valley Independent* ... 8 May 1915, “Printed and published by the registered printer and proprietress, Flora Mary McCurdy, at her registered office Record Hall Buildings, Princes’ Street, Upper Hutt.”

<sup>16</sup> Letter to Duncan McCurdy, 8 January 1923 (private collection).

<sup>17</sup> For instance “I am getting fatigued. Why? Oh! Why? Do you put a NZ Mail of 10th September on the table, and try to delude the members that it is this week’s issue? Yours truly, A J McCurdy 10/10/02”

<sup>18</sup> *Evening Post*, 10 September 1968.

<sup>19</sup> Conversation with Cicely Tulloch, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> There were four letters — they may have been kept for amusement as in addition to the usual accusations for this type of document, McCurdy is accused of being a ‘road peg shifter’! (Private collection).