

# The History of Book Publishing in Australia

A conference to celebrate the 70th birthday of the Melbourne University Press. **Report by Juliet Flesch**

**T**he 100 or so people who attended all or part of this, the first of a planned series of conferences on the history of book publishing in Australia were treated to a varied two days, in one of the most smoothly-run and physically comfortable conferences I have attended in what often seem like a long lifetime of such jamborees. Not a polystyrene cup in sight, none of those wooden tongue-depressors used as spoons, chairs that actually had supports for note-taking and were comfortable to sit in, and air-conditioning that kept the rooms at a comfortable temperature: what more could one ask for?

Interesting speakers, of course, and we got them.

The basic treatment was chronological, with Victor Crittenden (former Librarian of what is now the University of Canberra, proprietor of Mulini Press and garden history enthusiast), Lurline Stuart (historian) and Graeme Johanson (of RMIT) speaking about various aspects of book publishing in 19th century Australia. Crittenden spoke principally of the types of books published in early Australia: books with immediate practical value, such as almanacs, gardening books, etc., and speculated on their readership. A 19th century survey by the Bible Society in NSW suggested a higher level (about 60%) of literacy than one might have expected, suggesting that such books may have passed from hand to hand in the colony, with readership levels much higher than ownership figures would suggest.

Stuart's paper covered the relationship between literary journals

and book publishing and Johanson's discussed the nature of the book culture imported into Australia and the effect of such imports.

Teresa Pagliaro and Michael McKernan (of the War Memorial) took us into the 20th century, Pagliaro with a discussion of the influence of A.W. Jose as chief editor at Angus and Robertson and McKernan with a riveting account of the selling of C.E.W. Bean's monumental history of the first World War, a collection of 10 volumes, which, it seems, almost everyone bought and practically nobody read.

Cecily Close from our own Archives spoke of the effect of the second World War on two Melbourne publishers, Thomas Lothian and the Melbourne University Press. John Curtain (formerly of Penguin and now at RMIT) covered some aspects of post-war publishing, taking as his starting point the Tariff Board inquiry of 1946, witnesses before which read like a cultural who's who of the period: Katharine Susannah Prichard, Frank Clune, Andrew Fabinyi, etc., etc.

The chronological coverage was briefly broken when Philip Grundy (director of Leros Press) and Con Casten from Queensland University spoke of non-English publishing in Australia. Grundy covered all languages before concentrating on the pioneering work of his own press in producing bilingual editions of Australian poets writing in other languages, and Casten covered the vital and energetic history of Greek Australian publishing.

Harold Stein, with his history of Edwards and Shaw, Australia's

notable book designers and printers, gave a talk illustrated by the works of this remarkable team, on their artistic and political aims.

Alexandra Bertram, from MUP, covered various aspects of patronage in postwar Australian publishing, including government and corporate sponsorship and most particularly the personal munificence of Sir Russell and Lady Grimwade which permitted the establishment of the Miegunnyah Press.

The last paper, given by Craig Munro, author of the acclaimed biography on Inky Stephenson, took us to 1960's with a wonderful account of the boardroom battle over Angus and Robertson. The saga of the ownership and direction of Australia's most venerable publishing house lasted ten years. Munro outlined the first shots with a gusto and sense of drama which made us all eager for the TV mini-series.

This was a broad-ranging conference and there was some discussion at the end as to whether future ones should be chronologically or thematically more focussed, to provide for in-depth examination of specific aspects of Australia's book publishing history. Whether they are, or whether they retain the same broad-brush approach, they should not be devoid of interest: the first one certainly showed us that there is much that needs research, exposure and publication.

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