

FREE LIBRARIES AND OBJECTIONABLE BOOKS

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On Saturday May 15th, 1869, under the headline "The Bishop of Saluzzo on Bad Books", Australian readers of the Catholic periodical *The Advocate* were urged to:

Avoid ... as much as possible, books, journals, and every kind of publication, in which things appear opposed to faith and Christian morals. We are, indeed, inundated by a deluge of publications in every form, and volumes filled with blasphemy and impiety, with infamy and abomination, with calumny and obscenity, calculated to deceive and corrupt the heart, and to demoralize every class of people in the most fearful and disgusting manner. The liberty of the press has become such unbridled license, that it is impossible to imagine anything worse or more fitted to excite horror in the minds of those, who amidst the universal corruption of all ideas of order and justice, still preserve some remains of reason and conscience. And you, fathers, heads of houses and masters of schools, never forget the terrible responsibility which will rest upon you when you appear before the tribunal of the eternal Judge, if you allow any such books or journals, in which religion or modesty, or any other virtue, is offended, to enter your houses, or to come into the hands of your children, your scholars, or your servants.¹

The reprinting in Australian periodicals of such articles from overseas sources is indicative of the range of international material offered to the Australian reading public as a matter of course in the second half of the nineteenth century. While the tone of the Bishop of Saluzzo's address is perhaps more energetically censorious than many, the religious and ethical bias of the periodicals of the time is emphasised by the sheer volume of such reprints from all manner of sources, and nowhere is it more evident than in the debates surrounding the nature of 'suitable' literature for the general reading public.

The ever popular twin themes of moral responsibility and public duty combine particularly in the heated debates surrounding the suitability of publications available to patrons of the libraries that were changing the nature of public education in this period, by making a huge and diverse range of material available to an equally wide and diverse audience. Two weeks after the Bishop of Saluzzo's comments on the duty of private censorship of all reading materials by individual fathers and guardians, *The Advocate* specifically linked this duty to the wider arena of public library holdings when, on Saturday May 29th, 1869, it published, under the heading "Library Selections", a long exhortation by The Right Reverend Dr Daniel Murphy, Lord Bishop of Hobart Town, on the obligations of Catholics to purchase and promote the works of Irish authors in the cause of Catholic education. Having praised the effect of "...the assertion of Irish genius and the cultivation of Irish literature at home..." in producing patriotism, he moves to condemnation of the ascendancy of Protestant texts in Australia. Here is a little of his argument:

... if no positive evil results from the circulation of Protestant works not condemned for their intolerance or misrepresentations of our Faith, this effect at least is produced by the injudicious selection (in collections which do not specifically include works by Catholic authors): Catholics do not learn to know and respect themselves as they should do. There have been for years past reviews, magazines, periodicals, histories, essays and works of every other kind by Catholic writers not inferior in character to those usually to be found on the shelves of the libraries of our Catholic and Irish Societies, and yet not even the names of these works are known to the Catholic readers of Protestant authors.

... if a tone of thought Catholic and Irish is to be cultivated in these colonies it can only be done successfully through the agency of a Catholic and Irish literature. Men of genius who devote themselves to our vindication and instruction are neglected whilst we help to promote the prosperity of men from whom the most we can expect is that they will not abuse us ... Surely we should first read the works of our friends, even though we should be determined to also read those of our enemies. From a sense of gratitude we should do so, and there are even higher motives which should encourage us to the preference. Very many Catholic and Irish publications may

now be purchased in Melbourne, and we do hope that we shall soon acquire such a good reputation among our friends at home as will encourage them to forward to us their best works with confidence in our appreciation of them.²

The bishops, however, were not unopposed in their drive towards a wider control of public reading matter: the true hallmark of the early Australian press was a vocal liberality. The national literary culture which began with the theoretical lifting of political censorship in Sydney in the 1820's encouraged the development of an eclecticism of debate which survived long after equivalent English periodicals had shifted to a much more narrowly defined base, with the emphasis on fiction and reviews. There was in fact considerable discussion in the early Australian periodicals as to what might constitute 'appropriate' reading matter, and for what audiences.

When local debate began in the 1820's, the position of the Australian settlements as colonial dependencies was unequivocal, and in this situation it is hardly surprising that the question of censorship was perceived as being of paramount importance - particularly during the draconian governorship of Ralph Darling (December 1825 until his recall in 1831). As early as 1826, Edward Smith Hall, editor of the struggling independent newspaper *The Monitor*, despaired of the colonial 'cultural cringe' he detected in his readership: "The people of NSW are a poor grovelling race...their spirit is gone - the scourge and the fetters and the dungeon and the Australian inquisition have reduced them to a level with the negro".³ The debate concerning publication in the colony was a bitter one, with Darling insisting that a free press was dangerous in a 'servile community', and Hall demanding the 'birth right' of free speech for the free half of the community.

Faced with his lack of power to impose direct local censorship, Darling responded to Hall's criticisms by imposing prohibitive stamp duties designed to control the sales of journals, and then by depriving Hall of crown lands and convict servants. His next step was to harass editors by bringing a number of actions for libel and defamation, relying on the quasi-military structure of colonial government for success. As Michael Pollak points out, "When [Hall] was able to bring a case before a civil jury ... he won his case, whereas in criminal libel cases brought before military juries he inevitably lost".⁴

At a more academic level, the first number of *The Australian Quarterly Journal of Theology, Literature and Science*, published in 1828, addresses itself to both English and Australian publics, and

clearly acknowledges the colonial relationship with "the Mother-country". However, in an early example of what would become a consistent theme in relations between Australia and England, the editor bemoans "how utterly and deplorably ignorant the public in England are of the present state of Australia, and the degree of advancement to which she has attained".⁵

Within a decade, attempts at direct control of the politically outspoken local press had been abandoned, and attempts at justification of the colony to its parent had given way to a much more local orientation. By 1836, *Tegg's Monthly Magazine* was introducing itself to an Australian readership without reference to British opinion, saying "There is evidently a growing taste for reading in the minds of our colonial public; and to foster and supply that taste is the object at which we aim".⁶ Though the policy of reprinting overseas materials side by side with local contributions continued, and was even expanded, as access to regular sources was assured, by 1850 the editor of *The Australian Era* was confident enough to lay claim to the development of an independent Australian culture, claiming that: "It is a grand and glorious spectacle to watch a young and aspiring community casting from it the thralldom of its infancy, and asserting its own nationality and independence".⁷

Predictably, such assertions could not always be sustained in practice: The *Era's* optimism turned eventually to disillusionment as the periodical struggled with the problems inherent in the role of promoting literary culture in a developing nation with little leisure for writing. This was compounded with the difficulties of maintaining a readership in widely scattered, diverse and isolated urban communities, and the paper eventually folded in a peculiarly Australian fashion, when contributors and subscribers alike decamped, *en masse*, to the goldfields.

The first gold rushes contributed to a major change in the nature of Australian publishing and reading. The sudden surge in population that began in the 1850's combined with marked improvements in the technology of communication and travel to create a rapid expansion of both product and market. Demand became so buoyant that respected overseas journals, such as *Harper's Weekly*, *Scribner's*, and *Centenary*, sought to penetrate the market with special Australasian editions, while increasing confidence and stability allowed Australian editors the opportunity to implement their long-expressed desire to bring local publishing and reading habits more into line with those in England and America.⁸

Simultaneously, the very mixed educational composition of the transient communities of goldseekers created ideal conditions for the growth of lending libraries. Gold townships soon boasted such bodies as The Mechanics Institutes, which encouraged 'self improvement' by providing their members with the widest possible range of reading materials, including the locally produced periodicals. The power of the lending libraries from the mid-nineteenth century onwards should not be underestimated: with an increase in adult literacy, the low subscription rates and family memberships meant that readers could borrow a number of volumes for less than the purchase price of one volume. The purchasing power of the libraries was such that they could dictate terms to publishing houses. For the novelist, the number of novels taken by a library could and did determine individual market worth and negotiating power: selection by the libraries meant at least a regular income. The downside of this was the libraries' inherent power of censorship - the decision to refuse to buy or circulate a particular work could do irreparable damage to an author's career, and the financial threat to publishers was enough to influence their selection of material for press. In England, the most powerful of the lending libraries was Mudie's, and, as Peter Keating points out in *The Haunted Study*, "The adjective 'select' in Mudie's title had been carefully chosen to reassure timid subscribers that they had nothing to fear from the books they ordered, and the moral control that the word 'select' promised was continuously exercised".⁹ Keating also reminds us that the guarantee of 'safe' reading materials became the standard criticism of the libraries: "it was what the *Daily News* had in mind in 1871 when it described England as a 'Paradise of inefficient and unknown novelists'".

Although the circulating libraries never attained quite the same stranglehold on the book trade in Australia, there were other factors which helped direct the availability of 'suitable' material. Ernest Hoben, writing in the *Review of Reviews* in 1897, noted approvingly that "... the Australian has better opportunities of choice in fiction than the Englishman ... for the books which find their way to the colonies have undergone a winnowing process".¹⁰ He also applauds the decline of the 'sex novel' - those novels, often by female writers, which failed to dedicate their emotional content to the purposes of high seriousness, and which were favourite fare with female readers. Again he is approving of Australia's superior taste in the matter, noting - a little sadly - that "the Australian girl, as a class, is almost exclusively a reader of fiction. But this much has to be said to her credit, that she

has shown much less appreciation of neurotic fiction than her English cousin. The sex novel never got the hold on her that it did upon others of her sex. She probably lives too healthy an outdoor life for the miasmatic vapours of the decadence novel to be congenial to her" *Mens sana in corpore sano*.

In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, even large scale production by local publishers and contributors could not meet Australian demands for reading matter, and by 1886 *The Publisher* calculated the value of imports of literature at "over half a million sterling".¹¹ Francis Adams in his 1886 volume *Australian Essays*,¹² commented on the sheer volume, if not the 'superior quality' of books available in Cole's Melbourne Emporium, reputedly one of the largest bookshops in the Empire. While the whole question of 'Australianness' continued to exercise many Australian reviewers, an increased emphasis on fiction in local periodicals, and increasing contact with the more 'refined' tastes of overseas publishing markets, led to an editorial desire to encourage a concomitant 'refinement' of Australian reading habits. One effect of this evolution was the development of the critical review as a tool of editorial policy in encouraging 'appropriate' reading habits.

The often vigorous nature of the local literary culture had drawn frequent criticism from visiting English commentators for its perceived lack of refinement,¹³ and indeed the robust competition between periodicals of every kind, at every price, and aimed at every possible level of the market, is one of the identifying characteristics of early Australian difference from the essentially middle and upper class periodical culture that dominated Britain at the time.

But as public demand for reading material increased, so too did attempts to exert moral control over what was being read. Not only did bishops and public luminaries exhort private censorship - there was support in some periodicals for the imposition of censorship by the state. For example: on July 17, 1889, the *Melbourne Age*, a newspaper with a reputation for liberalism, denounced Emile Zola as "not only filthy but revolting" and generalized how "probably every sane person" would agree that literature would "lose very little if almost all the productions of the so-called realistic school ... were burned on the pyre that consumes confiscated cigars at the Customs House".¹⁴

The Publisher joined the growing chorus of demand for 'selectivity' on the overseas model, noting in 1886, in an article entitled 'Free Libraries and Objectionable Books', that:

Some American librarians of public libraries are making a stand against the circulation of what they regard as "unclean books, full of fornication and filth." Some of these are the so-called "classics," such as Smollett's and Fielding's novels and an appeal is made to the "healthy morality of a whole community against the demands of a few prurient literary dirt-eaters." It is claimed that a free public library is an educational institution, and its first requisite is that it should be useful, and do good. The business of teaching immorality it ought not to practice at all. It is no more right that the library should circulate dirty books than that a school should instruct in criminal practices, profane swearing, obscene language, and vulgar habits. The fundamental rule in the choice of fiction, it is said, should be to exclude vicious books and to admit as few as practicable of silly ones. These views are suggestive and salutary, especially at a time like the present, when libraries are being extended in our own country and largely recruited by cheap reprints of old authors, some of which are entirely out of harmony with the tone of the present day morals.¹⁵

The grounds of objection are significant here. 'Classical' status is no protection against a charge of immorality, and the developing didactic role of fiction, once reserved to a relatively limited field of 'serious' literary endeavour, is given a much broader interpretation, in keeping with the growing market that followed on public education. *The Melbourne Review*, commenting on the release of *The Vagabond Papers*, a three-volume journalistic expose of a number of "public and charitable institutions", is generally approving. Its main criticism is reserved for what is seen as an inappropriate failure to condemn divergence from the norms of acceptable behaviour:

When we turn to [the Vagabond's] papers on Pentridge, we are simply astounded to find the extent of his sympathy with such scoundrels as Power and others, who are made to appear like the heroes of Byron's more meretricious poems. Looked at calmly and dispassionately, and with every desire to make allowance for untoward circumstances, any man who, in a young country like this, deliberately takes to a life of crime and violence, is a dangerous social pest, and should be treated accordingly ... This sympathy ... with crime and criminals is becoming so unpleasant a feature of current literature, that it

is difficult to pass by, without a protest, so glaring an instance as that afforded by the "Vagabond Papers".¹⁶

The very fact that such serious remarks should be addressed to the task of bringing publications into line reflects the changed status of literary endeavour. A couple of decades earlier, *Walch's Literary Intelligencer* had felt it necessary to argue the case for fiction as a socially useful form, saying "The time was, when to read a novel was to be accounted of the ungodly, and even now there are some who look upon those who read Dickens and Thackeray as reprobate and lost". This blanket condemnation, the *Intelligencer* argues, is inappropriate:

We do not approve of the sentimental stuff, which floods the cheap book shops, and whose paper covers are seen in the hands of our nurse- house- and cook-maids, - still, the family must have recreative reading - the hard-worker and writer must sit down to something mentally refreshing ... He who loves literature, progress and advancement, will rejoice even in the light leaves of our serials, and wish them God speed, and success, in their task of humanizing, enlightening, and instructing the great mass of society.¹⁷

The familiar theme, of the patriarch relaxing from his task of supporting the family structure - including servants - dependent on him for everything from sustenance to moral guidance, echoes the wider picture of a population being gently guided to enlightenment by their social and moral superiors. Sentimentality, emotion not directed towards a 'higher' goal, is dismissed.

The debate, however, was far from one-sided. Equally vocal was the opposition to those advocates of literary repression, dubbed 'wowers'. Journalist Michael Pollak lists some wonderful definitions, including, from Roy N. Connolly, the description of wowers as "overwrought zealots who regretted that Moses had brought only ten commandments down from Sinai", and, from William Holman, the definition of a wowser as "a man who, being entirely destitute of the greater virtues, makes up for their lack by a continuous denunciation of little vices", and, from Cyril Pearl, the definition of a wowser as "a hypocrite, or more specifically, a Wesleyan".¹⁸ Pollak also notes that coinage of the term was claimed by the notorious yellow journalist, John Norton: "... to me, John Norton, alone belongs the sole undivided

glory and renown of inventing a word, that does at once describe, deride and denounce that numerous, noxious, pestilent, puritanical, killjoy push - the whole blasphemous, wire-whiskered brood ..."

But despite the characteristically Australian vigour of expression, and the underlying humour, it was the cult of high seriousness, the Eurocentric vision of a hegemony of social and moral improvement, which grew to dominate, rejecting larrikinism, irresponsibility and personal freedom in favour of devotion to a centralised imperial cause. Australian Federation, restored to the political agenda in the 1870s, was soon linked to the potent myth of a world-wide British nationhood. In 1885 *The Queensland Review* called colonial federation "the stepping stone towards Imperial Federation and the unity of the great Colonial Empire of Queen Victoria".¹⁹ The dominance of a 'British' imperial culture, lauded by Australian periodicals as much as by their English counterparts, came, despite the protests of the Catholic bishops, to be identified with ethical and moral responsibility, and - in that vague and humanist association favoured by Charles Kingsley but rejected by John Newman - even with the concept of Christian duty.

One year later, in 1886, *The Publisher* was representing Australian federation as a patriotic duty, one which would allow the creation of a strong southern nation which could both defend itself and supply troops for England when called upon. Such duty was, to the serious-minded public voices of the new establishment, a practical diversion of otherwise unacceptable individual energies towards officially useful purpose.

Duty, responsibility, sacrifice, underwritten by the quasi-religious myth of imperial common cause: it was a powerful combination, absorbing much of the irreverent energy of Australian popular culture. The alignment of imperial interests and Australian national identity might appear paradoxical to a modern audience, but with the achievement of Federation the association, so long desired by the censoring voices of public debate, finally became official. It was an association that was to cost Australia dear when the first troops landed at Gallipoli.

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