

New Zealand

Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand, Auckland City Libraries, Dunedin Public Libraries, John Kinder Theological Library, St John's College, Auckland

Australia

New South Wales

State Library of New South Wales, University of Sydney Library, The Franciscan Friars - Province of the Holy Spirit

Australian Capital Territory

National Library of Australia, National Gallery of Australia, The Classics Department at the Australian National University

South Australia

State Library of South Australia

Victoria

Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, National Gallery of Victoria, University of Melbourne, Baillieu Library

Rare books boring – never: attaining a Charles Eaton rarity

Who said dusty old books were boring!

They may not have many pretty pictures and their covers may be uninspiring – but sometimes they hide incomparable treasures! Especially the unrecorded ones!

Not finding a work in any standard or specialised bibliography is unusual – and defines the work as being extremely rare. Add to that experts, publically doubting the item's existence even though it is listed in the National Library of Australia's Booksearch (wants list), and idle curiosity turns to something more concrete.

One such item was the first hand account of the Charles Eaton massacre written by survivor John Ireland. One of the most violent and bloodied incidents of its time, the Charles Eaton was forced aground in July 1834 in the Torres Strait. Most of the crew and passengers aboard were subsequently massacred by the Indigenous inhabitants. The rescue of three survivors including two children in 1836, was the stuff of sensationalism and was front page news in nineteenth century Sydney, London and the United States.

When the publication trail revealed another Australian origin with the first published accounts of the tragedy by two rescuers Brockett (Sydney, 1836) and Phillip Parker King (Sydney, 1837) then the excitement became palpable. But of the Ireland account, there were only two known to be in existence worldwide and none held in Australia. Armed with that knowledge the Library decided that it must buy a copy of Ireland's account of the tragedy for the nation.

So what is this account and why did it get lost in the mists of time thus making it such a rarity?

It is the London ed. [1838] of:

The shipwrecked orphans: a true narrative detailing the shipwreck and sufferings of John Ireland and two little boys George and William Doyley, who, with their father and mother and thirty-two other persons, were wrecked in the Charles Eaton in the year 1834, on an island in the South Seas, inhabited by savages / written by John Ireland [1838]

Written for children, John Ireland, the ship's steward and survivor, wrote the only first hand account of the event and is the true source for all publications relating to the Charles Eaton tragedy.

The Ireland work was known from its various Connecticut editions (1844, 1845) and it had always been surmised there must have been an earlier edition most probably published in London, as Ireland and the boy survivor William Doyley returned there in 1837.

Because of the great interest in the story in Sydney the Brockett and King accounts were published in London in 1837 and here the publication trail becomes even more exciting – as conjecture and coincidence collide!

William Doyley the boy survivor (the other rescued boy George died) had Thomas Wemyss write a second hand account on his behalf which was published in London in 1837. These three accounts were published in the same year and the public's reaction might have spurred John Ireland to write and publish his account around the same time.

At this point the work disappears strangely from view. Perhaps only a few copies were published. Perhaps being a children's book it suffered at the hands of children and copies perished. Perhaps the Ireland work wasn't a bestseller and copies were pulped! Perhaps the publisher was having problems!

The work re-surfaces in the United States in the 1840s some six years later being published by S. Babcock in New Haven. These editions are identical to the London ed. even down to the same plates. Perhaps the American editions are pirated ones. Perhaps John Ireland went there. The mystery may one day be solved.

To add to all this hoo-ha the Library had to place a bid at auction. It could not be known whether the work would attract great numbers of antiquarian collectors, investors with lots of money but the antiquarian market was certainly quite excited about this unique find.

Was the estimated price a realistic one or not? How much should the Library bid? All these questions needed answering as the auction date drew near. A bid was placed, fingers were crossed, and breaths were held waiting the verdict.

The Library was successful! We had the Ireland and it was the third known copy in the world, the first copy in Australia and the first in the southern hemisphere!

All the work and sleuthing was worth it – and who said rare books were boring!

Wanda Horky
Australian Collection Development
whorky@nla.gov.au