

## From Botany Bay to the NLA: the 200 year odyssey of our oldest printed document

(Note: This is an edited version of the speech given by Andrew Sergeant at the playbill celebration event at the National Library on 25 June. Andrew would like to acknowledge the research of Elaine Hoag, Rare Books Bibliographer at the Library and Archives Canada and the author of *The Convict Theatres of Early Australia*, Robert Jordan, in the preparation of his speech).

Last year, in the rare book collection at Library and Archives Canada, an extraordinary discovery was made. Lying loose in an old scrapbook was a playbill, advertising an evening's entertainment at "the Theatre, Sydney" on Saturday 30 July 1796. It consisted of two plays, one a tragedy by Nicholas Rowe, *Jane Shore*, the other a farce by Colley Cibber called *The Miraculous Cure*, punctuated by a pantomime dance, or sailor's hornpipe, called *The Wapping Landlady*.

The interest of Elaine Hoag, the Library and Archives of Canada's Rare Books Bibliographer was engaged, and some checking quickly showed that this was the earliest surviving document to be printed in Australia, a unique copy that was unknown to scholars and collectors. It was brought to the attention of Canada's National Librarian and Chief Archivist, Ian E. Wilson, and the rest, as they say, is history.

But how did the playbill wind up in Canada in the first place? Where had it been during those 211 years since it came off that printing press in Sydney Cove? Who had owned it and what significance was it to them? These are questions that have been pondered and largely answered by Elaine Hoag.

When Arthur Phillip brought the First Fleet in to Sydney Cove in January 1788, one of the ships was carrying a second-hand printing press with a small supply of worn-out type. However, in what seems to have been a fairly typical planning oversight, none of those sent out to found the colony could actually operate the press, so it lay idle for the next seven years!

It wasn't until 1795 that, according to Lt David Collins, "a very decent young man, one George Hughes, of some abilities in the printing line", was put to work on the press to issue proclamations and orders from the Governor. Prior to this, all official notices had been handwritten and posted up in only a few places around the colony. Now, with the printing press, multiple copies could be run off and distributed widely, giving much more public exposure to the Governor's orders. And as we can see here, the press could also be used for other purposes.

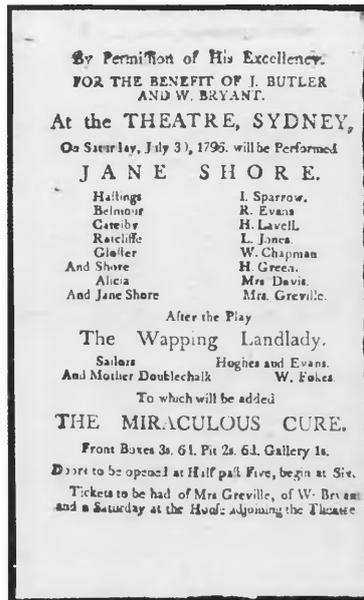
Hughes was a convict about whom we still know very little for certain. The transportation records don't show anyone by the name of George Hughes, and we're not even sure what happened to him after his sentence was served. There is a John Hughes who arrived on the Pitt in 1792, and who was convicted in the Old Bailey of stealing cloth, getting a seven year sentence to transportation. Our printer appears in the cast of the playbill, as one of the sailors in *The Wapping Landlady*.

What we do know however, is that Hughes managed to produce a considerable number of government orders (some estimates put it at a couple of hundred), and several other playbills similar to this one, but very few of which have survived. Two of these playbills, dating from 1800, are in the Mitchell Library, and two of the early orders from November 1796 are held by the NSW State Records Authority. It's a sad fact that material of this nature was not meant to last long, and usually didn't! So we are very fortunate that this and the other few remaining pieces have come to us at all.

The playbill passed from the printer into the hands of the then Lieutenant Governor of Norfolk Island, Philip Gidley King, who would of course later become the third Governor of NSW. King's handwriting is on the back of the sheet, addressing some notes on the first plays performed in both Sydney and Norfolk to "George Chalmers Esquire". King wanted see the colony develop as more than just a place of punishment, and he allowed the performance of plays during his time in charge of Norfolk in the hope that they would act as a civilising influence for both convicts and gaolers alike.

King left the colony for England in October 1796 for a spot of recuperation from severe gout, taking the playbill with him and delivering it to George Chalmers. Chalmers was a bureaucrat, the Secretary of a government committee on trade and foreign plantations for 40 odd years. He was also an antiquarian, a member of the Royal Society, a prolific (though not very interesting!) author on all sorts of topics, and a collector of books and manuscripts, including 17th and 18th century theatre. He was also a close associate of another serious collector, one with a rather stronger connection to Australia – Sir Joseph Banks. It's presumably in this capacity as a collector that King sent him the playbill, and it was sold off in 1841 as part of his estate.

It then had a brief and uneventful time in the hands of a London antiquarian book dealer, Joseph Lilly, who sold it to another major collector of books, ephemera and signatures, Dawson Turner. Turner was a banker by profession, and his success let him indulge his passions. He was a gifted amateur botanist, artist and an even bigger collector than Chalmers, whom he would have known through the Royal Society.



The front of the 1796 playbill. Image courtesy of National Library of Australia RBR5 N 686.2099441 F 692

Two of his main collecting areas were printing ephemera, which was unusual for his day, and autographs, so this piece would have been of interest to him on both scores. He had his autographs and other pieces of ephemera bound up into scrapbooks and meticulously labelled with the dates he acquired them.

Turner died in 1858, but in 1853 he'd sold off half of his collections of books and autographs in an auction that took 13 days to complete. One of the lots was the scrapbook, which was knocked down to another book dealer, George Willis, for 15 shillings. Willis then sold it in 1855 to Canada's Parliamentary Librarian, Alpheus Todd, who was visiting Europe to replenish the Parliamentary Library's stocks after a fire. This and two other Turner scrapbooks bought at the same time subsequently appeared in the Parliamentary Library's catalogue, but although there were other playbills (including another one for an earlier performance of *Jane Shaw* in 1768), the cataloguers must have decided that the trade and commerce contents took precedence over theatre, because that's how the scrapbooks are described in the catalogue. An Australian printing or theatre historian would never have guessed that there was anything relevant in them.

In 1973, the Parliamentary Library transferred a large amount of material, including the scrapbook, to the National Library of Canada, which had had a new building erected in 1967, and had taken over the role of collecting, preserving and promoting the printed heritage of Canada.

Because the scrapbooks contained no Canadiana and the rare books staff didn't want to dismantle them, they remained in a storage vault until last year, when the vault had to be cleared out. It was then that Elaine Hoag saw that several items in the scrapbooks were laid in loose, and in danger of being lost or damaged. The playbill was one of these, and her research quickly uncovered its significance.

Ian Wilson then began the process of repatriating the playbill to its country of origin, in a generous display of the value that both our nations place on preserving our cultural heritages. In the longest but definitely quickest leg of its two century odyssey around the world, it was flown over from Ottawa to Canberra and presented by Canadian Prime Minister Harper to then Prime Minister Howard on September 11th 2007.

\* *Elaine Hoag has published an article on the playbill and its provenance, The Earliest Extant Australian Imprint, with Distinguished Provenance, in the Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand's journal Script and Print, Vol. 31 No 1, 2007, which is held in the National Library.*

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## Gold Coast City Council Heritage Expo

It's amazing how much interest the 'old' has in the 'new age' on the Gold Coast!

Vintage cars and caravans, oral histories from the 1960s, pictorial displays, free antiques' valuations, old fashioned washing machines and farming tools were a definite draw card in Council's recent Gold Coast Heritage Expo at Robina Community Centre.

Organised by Council's Office of the City Architect and Heritage, it was a hit with the young, nostalgic and curious. Crowds rolled in – some to relive and others to experience – the vibrant sixties on the Gold Coast.

Families were fascinated by the 'old-fashioned' washing machines and farming tools, filling their 'showbags' with historical information from each display.

Fifty-two photographs, contributed by Council's Local Studies Library, made up the '100 years ago: 1908' pictorial display about the communication, transport, education, church, clergy of the era.

Typical queries fielded by library staff fielded were the verification of an old photograph the Coolangatta Town Council.

Staff investigated details about the Aldermen of the time and matched them up with named images, confirming the identity of three people in the photograph – a promising start.

A painstaking search of the old Coolangatta Town Council minute books for 1914 to 1924 raised a conundrum – only four of the individuals named on the back of the photograph were referenced in the minute books. By consulting biographies of the aldermen we picked up on their various interests. One was an avid surfer. By researching yearbooks of the local surfing clubs the other names on the photograph were tracked down. It turned out to be the committee of the Kirra Surf Life Saving Club.

Our Local Studies collection contains books, photographs, newspapers, newspaper clippings, serials and manuscripts. The family history material includes births, deaths, marriages microfiche and CDs for most states, shipping lists, council minutes, postal directories, maps and oral histories. About 60 display kits on various themes are available to local schools and community groups for a monthly loans – particularly popular with students. The adage 'a picture says a thousand words' is definitely relevant where history is concerned.

Local history libraries and societies from other areas often send us material outside their collection parameters. In return, we forward anything that may be of value to them. Recently we received some unique photographs from the Toowoomba City Council library service sent to them from a bequeathed estate.

Sharing is a wonderful idea - thanks to everyone who helps in this way.

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