

21 Oct 5

Mr Rudyard Kipling
40 Abchurch Lane
London

Dear Sir,

We beg your acceptance of a copy of 'The Man from Snowy River and other verses' which we mail to care of Macmillan today. It is rather like 'Barred Room Rascal' in get up and the influence of the same book may doubtless be traced in some of the verses; but many of them were published before your accession.

We hope their perusal will give you pleasure - it is our first book and it gives us great pleasure to send you a copy.
Yours faithfully
Angus Robertson

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FIGURE 1: Letter dated 21 October, 1895, from George Robertson to Rudyard Kipling to accompany a complimentary copy of *The Man from Snowy River*. (Mitchell Library. ML MSS 3269 75/4, p.16. Reproduced with permission of HarperCollins Publishers Australia).

CHAPTER 1

ANGUS AND ROBERTSON, PUBLISHERS

IN THE MITCHELL LIBRARY IN SYDNEY lies an extensive and remarkable repository of records relating to the cultural, literary and publishing history of Australia. These records are the archives of the Sydney bookselling and publishing firm, Angus and Robertson, and they date almost from the beginning of the firm in 1884. After the first major deposit from Angus and Robertson in 1933, the records in the Mitchell Library have been added to at intervals. Amongst the earliest files there is a small group of miscellaneous trade records, entitled Business Records, concentrated mainly from the early 1890s to the period of the First World War. Among these Business Records are seventeen Press Copy Letter Books containing the outwards business correspondence, in about 13,000 letters, from Angus and Robertson's Publishing Department. The letters were written between 1888 and 1916, with the majority of them dated between 1895 and 1905. The letters are addressed, some to authors and some to schoolteachers, but mainly to other members of the trade, booksellers, suppliers, printers, wholesalers, reviewers, publishers, agents – in Australia and New Zealand and Great Britain. To read through the thousands of letters is to have unfold a whole mental picture of that part of a business enterprise that is usually below the surface and unseen. The picture is that of individuals engaged, year after year, in vigorous, unremitting and exhaustive effort to produce the Angus and Robertson books and to promote and sell them by every means available. These letters, and the vibrant business life they portray, were the inspiration for this work.

There is a tendency for publishing to be regarded in a romantic light, something in the manner of Frederic Warburg's "occupation for gentlemen",¹ leaving the business aspect of the undertaking unacknowledged. The American publisher Curtis Benjamin speaks of the notion of a golden age of publishing before World War I "when publishers of refined taste and sure discrimination published only books of high literary quality or intellectual merit."² He writes that it was left to later times to discover the commercial side of publishing. It is clear, however,

¹ Frederic Warburg's own account of his life in publishing appeared under the title: *An Occupation for Gentlemen*. London, Hutchinson, 1959.

² Curtis G. Benjamin. *A Candid Critique of Book Publishing*. N.Y., Bowker, 1977. p. 3.

that a publisher, unless subsidised, has always needed to remain solvent and this has always involved the understanding and application of business methods. What a publisher publishes is only half of the story and the other half concerns how his business is operated but the importance of the part played in publishing by commercial activities is not often recognised. No doubt publishers themselves have contributed to this mystique of publishing, perhaps not wishing to reveal trade secrets by going too deeply into the mechanics of the books they publish. As well as this, the reading and book buying public is, quite naturally, more interested in authors and the books they write than in production costs and financial statements from the publisher. Peter Mann points up both the romantic view of the publisher and the two sides of the publishing equation:

Successful selling of books into bookshops is absolutely basic to the continuance of a publishing house, yet [it is] rare indeed to find any novel, film or play in which a publisher is depicted as a sales executive.

.....

Publishing is a numbers game. It is based on an editorial flair for picking the right book to publish in the first place, but that decision must be dovetailed into other quantitative decisions about print-runs, pricing, export sales, sales of rights and so on which are essentially business decisions. It is just as important in successful publishing to be able to get rid of books as it is to creating them in the first place.³

The early business files, together with the correspondence from Angus and Robertson's Publishing Department, a great deal of it written by the founding partner, George Robertson, provide an important record of a type which is uncommon in this country. They show at work a publisher with an acknowledged editorial flair who, through the chronicle of his daily activities, also reveals his business flair.

The firm of Angus and Robertson holds a premier position in the history of the Australian booktrade by virtue of the length of operation of the business and the scale and vigour of its three main areas of operation, bookselling, publishing and printing. It began life as a bookshop, opened in Sydney in 1884 by David Mackenzie Angus. In 1886 Angus was joined in partnership by George Robertson. While still maintaining the bookshop, the firm began publishing in 1888, an activity which grew in strength until well after the Second World War, with the result that Angus and Robertson became the country's leading and longest lived publisher. At the close of the 1950s financial difficulties occurred in the firm and, as a result, a series of takeovers and share buy-outs took place in the 1960s and 1970s in which the original nature of the firm was slowly but irretrievably lost. In 1970

Angus and Robertson was finally taken over by Ipec Insurance Ltd leading to the eventual dismemberment of the firm. In 1972 the printing arm, the Halstead Press, which Angus and Robertson had owned since the 1920s, was broken up and sold. In 1979 Angus and Robertson (Bookshops) Ltd was sold to Gordon and Gotch (Australasia) Ltd. In the mid 1990s the bookshops were owned and let as franchises by Whitcombe and Tombs, one of Angus and Robertson's bookselling rivals at the turn of the century. Now, in 2008, the bookshops are, as part of A&R Whitcoulls Group Holdings, included in the current portfolio of Pacific Equity Partners. In 1989 as a result of the merger of Angus and Robertson (Publishing) Ltd, William Collins (UK) and Harper & Row (USA) the publishing company HarperCollins (Australia) came into being. Angus and Robertson still remains a separate imprint of this company. Thus Angus and Robertson is now severely diminished but it was for many years a prosperous bookselling and printing business and, for the best part of a century, a dynamic, influential and successful publisher, mainly of the work of Australian writers and with a great reputation as a literary publisher.

The Angus and Robertson authors include a host of familiar names, from the early writers, A.B. (Banjo) Paterson, Henry Lawson, Victor Daley and Will Ogilvie to Norman Lindsay, Miles Franklin, Mary Gilmore, C.J. Dennis and Zora Cross. Later writers include Ion Idriess, Frank Clune, Vance and Nettie Palmer, Arthur Upfield, E.V. Timms, Jon Cleary, Ruth Park, Xavier Herbert and poets Dorothea Mackellar, Rosemary Dobson, Francis Webb, Douglas Stewart and Judith Wright. Children's books include Ethel Pedley's *Dot and the Kangaroo*, Norman Lindsay's *Magic Pudding* and works by Louise Mack, May Gibbs and Dorothy Wall. Non-fiction works range from popular titles, such as Colin Simpson's *Adam with Arrows* and Neville Cayley's *What Bird is That?*, through numerous school and other textbooks to substantial reference works, the first *Australian Encyclopaedia* of 1925–26 and its ten volume revision in 1958, the twelve volume *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918* and the seven volume *Bibliography of Australia* by Sir John Ferguson.

A number of the authors mentioned above and many other Angus and Robertson authors have achieved literary fame and popular regard and have had articles, critical studies and biographies written about them. However, little attention has been paid to what links them all—the original publisher, George Robertson, and the firm he built and guided and which continued to publish successfully for many years after his death. The contribution of Angus and Robertson publishing to the Australian commercial scene and to Australian life and letters is immense yet this contribution has been largely unexamined and unrecorded.

Although there is a considerable amount of anecdotal material about Angus and Robertson and its publishing there has not been, up to date, any attempt to provide a consistent narrative and examination of that publishing—what was published, who was concerned in this, how the publishing business was carried

³ Peter Mann. *From Author to Reader*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982. pp. 64 and 89.

on, what resulted from it. There is no complete and available listing of the firm's publications.⁴ In a larger sense, the story of Australian publishing cannot be told without the story of Angus and Robertson. An objective of the present study is to make a start on the examination of Angus and Robertson's long publishing history, to fill a gap in the record and to complement other studies of Australian publishing companies such as those on the New South Wales Bookstall, the Lothian Publishing Co, Penguin Books and Oxford University Press in Australia.

THE WORLD OF ANGUS AND ROBERTSON

David Angus and George Robertson

Short, factual accounts of the life of David Mackenzie Angus and George Robertson are to be found in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.⁵ Although Angus was the founder of the firm he spent only fifteen years in it and for a deal of this time he was absent because of ill health. This contrasts with George Robertson's nearly fifty years with the business. Because of this Angus presents a somewhat shadowy figure in comparison with Robertson.

David Angus was born in Thurso in Scotland in 1855. His family moved to Edinburgh in the 1870s, perhaps for the children's education. In Edinburgh, Angus was apprenticed to the bookselling firm of Maclaughlin and Stewart and after completing his training worked in the bookshop of William Brown in Princes Street.

In 1882 Angus followed his eldest brother to Sydney. This move was dictated by Angus's health which was failing because of tuberculosis. After his arrival he worked for a year and a half in the Sydney branch bookshop of George Robertson & Co of Melbourne and in 1884 opened his own shop at 110 Market Street with a capital of £50. Much of the stock for this venture was supplied from Edinburgh by Angus's former employer and by his friend, Young J. Pentland, who had been a fellow apprentice with Angus and who was to become successful as a medical publisher. Pentland was also to become a valuable and much used agent in Britain for Angus and Robertson. Soon after the opening of his shop Angus's health broke down once more and because of this, in 1886, he took into partnership George Robertson.

Robertson was born in 1860 at Gosfield near Halstead in Essex, to Scottish parents. His father was a minister of the Unitarian church who died when Robertson was seven years old. This led to Robertson, his mother and his six siblings moving

⁴ The La Trobe Library in the State Library of Victoria possesses, in typescript, at MS 11600: *Angus and Robertson. List of Publications in the Record Section 1888-1957*. This is a listing of Angus and Robertson's file copies of their own publications. The list is incomplete, especially for the early years, and sometimes inaccurate.

⁵ The entry for Angus is in Volume 7, pp. 71-72 and that for Robertson in Volume 11, pp. 414-415. A further source of information, which is in some respects fuller, is James Tyrrell's *Old Books, Old Friends, Old Sydney*. Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1987 and, additionally, for Robertson, George Ferguson's *Some Early Australian Bookmen*. Canberra, Australian National University Press, 1978.

to live in Glasgow. In later years Robertson named after his birthplace, Halstead, the family home he built at Blackheath in the Blue Mountains, 114 kilometres west of Sydney, and also the printery, the Halstead Press, which Angus and Robertson purchased as the Eagle Press in the 1920s.

Robertson began his schooling in Halstead and later attended the South-western Academy in Glasgow. Academies were schools which appeared in towns in Scotland during the nineteenth century and were meant to offer a high level modern education. The subjects included in the curriculum were commonly Latin, French, geometry, algebra, English history, English literature and physical science.⁶ Probably because the family's circumstances were poor, Robertson left school at the age of twelve which was, however, a fairly common leaving age at the time.⁷ In 1872, Robertson's first job, as recounted later by James Tyrrell, was at his uncle's engineering works where he remained for only part of a day.⁸ Later he managed to secure for himself a position and apprenticeship with the Glasgow bookseller, James MacLehose, with whom he remained until 1877. As with Young Pentland, Angus's contact in Edinburgh, the firm of MacLehose in Glasgow was to prove a valuable overseas connection for Angus and Robertson, particularly regarding publishing matters.

Robertson left Britain with one of his brothers for the Canterbury district of the south island of New Zealand where two other brothers had established a sawmill. In February 1882, after three years working with his brothers, Robertson arrived in Sydney from New Zealand. He, also, secured a job with the Sydney branch of George Robertson & Co, where he met David Angus. In 1886 Robertson left George Robertson & Co to join Angus's business at 110 Market Street and thus the bookselling partnership of Angus and Robertson was formed. Robertson's contribution to the firm's capital was £15. The partnership flourished and in 1890, when more space was needed, the business moved around the corner from Market Street to much larger premises at 89 Castlereagh Street. This was to remain the firm's address for the ensuing 81 years.

Late Nineteenth Century Australia

When George Robertson arrived in 1882, Australia was a country consisting of six separate, flourishing, self governing colonies, with some tariff walls along their borders. After the gold discoveries in the 1850s the country's population had increased immensely. With a larger population there was increased activity of all kinds; the wool, beef and mining industries expanded and the economy grew. This

⁶ R.D. Anderson. *Education and Opportunity in Victorian Scotland*. Oxford, Clarendon, 1983. pp. 16 and 127.

⁷ In 1871, in Scotland, school attendance for boys was 90% at age ten, dropping to 41% at age thirteen and 23% at age fourteen. These figures are quoted in R.D. Anderson. *Education and the Scottish People 1750-1918*. Oxford, Clarendon, 1995. p. 125.

⁸ James R. Tyrrell. *Old Books, Old Friends, Old Sydney*. Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1987. pp. 39-40.