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Amateurs: hobby histories of the Australian press

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Abstract

The essay looks at a particular kind of design history writing that has emerged in Australia around traditions of printed typography. This form of *writing* (understood to loosely incorporate all forms of historical presentation) is embedded in a process of design and production with letterpress printing, being largely performative. The figure at the centre of this method I will call the *Amateur*, because he is an individual who draws at once from traditions of the amateur historian, and the amateur/hobby printer. The essay enquires into this Amateur's historiographic persona, finding him to be driven by a hedonistic ideal of personal pleasure. Examples of the Amateur's historical publications and museum spaces illustrate the effects that he has had on the reception of Australian printing history. The Amateur proposes a different way of investigating and presenting the past, connecting past and present figures through the re-enactment of mechanical processes and engaging with the subject of historical empathy. The method is not without its problems, as the Amateur avoids historical fact in favour of historicised tacit experience. The Amateur is a figure who can be found in any country, but in the Australian context he is isolated, having greater influence on historical knowledge in the absence of a contemporary body of local professional history.



Introduction

This essay describes a historiographic personality that I will call the 'Amateur' and his work in typographic and printing histories in Australia. The title is in no way derogatory; the Amateur is a dilettante, who has chosen to investigate the past for his own personal enjoyment. His investigation of the past is inseparable from its presentation through the letterpress printing methods of the small press. The Amateur writes, preserves artefacts, organises museums, and works in the studio that he has constructed. The Amateur's relationship to the methods of printing is essential to his identity, as he explores the history of printing by performing it himself.

The work of this figure came to my attention during archival research into Victorian-era printing. In the collections of the Mitchell Library in Sydney I came across a body of late twentieth-century works from various practitioners; these were curious small books and pamphlets of varying quality that had been hand-made by hobby printers, and dealt with matters of Australian printing history. These works have been printed in small editions and this rarity alters their status. They are secondary sources but in the library collection they are treated as preciously as their rare original source material. It is this relationship between these modern works and their historical sources that characterises the Amateur's production of history: not aiming to preserve the past, but aiming to live it.

The Amateur is the historical persona of the hobby printer, a specialised hobbyist's practice that explores and educates others about the practical history of printing. The Amateur presented in this essay is throughout addressed through the pronoun 'he,' as his has been predominantly, though not exclusively, a masculine activity. It is likely that one contributing factor to this is the status of many Amateurs as former workers in the printing trade, a trade whose unions once made such determined efforts to exclude women and other lower-paid employees from their ranks (Frances 2001, 119). But what this essay describes is an archetype. In reality the Amateur also has a professional persona; he or she may be a librarian, writer, artist, or tradesman, or may continue a small press practice wider than the trade history presented here. The Amateur is an identity adopted through practice to reflect a connection to the technical history of typography.

The Amateur can be found internationally - there are hobbyists and printing museums in many countries- but this article looks specifically at the Amateur's involvement with typographic history in Australia. This is because Australia today generally lacks a strong professional history of this discipline, so, in this context, the Amateur has greater influence in shaping the field for anyone who approaches it.



The Amateur

Calling someone an 'amateur' is usually dismissive of their work. While it is probably true that the Amateur I describe here has been disregarded as a writer of printing history, he does provide a contribution to its practice of writing and presentation. But this is not without posing certain historiographic problems.

The Amateur combines a historical practice with a technical process of printing. In part he is the *amateur historian*: someone unversed in processes of historical representation, and for whom history is simply understood as the 'truthful' reconstruction of the past. He is also the *amateur printer*: the hobbyist, or operator of the small press. Geoffrey Farmer, an Australian writer on the subject of the hobby press, has set out a series of criteria with which to define the 'amateur printer,' or the 'private press' in his terminology (1972, 1). These presses are employed for personal enjoyment and the furtherance of an interest in typography. They maintain artistic control over their creations, and importantly, their work never becomes their livelihood (Farmer 1976, 2). Another historian of the amateur press, Philip J. Parr, defined the hobbyist purely in economic terms as a printer who does not earn money from his work, printing only for 'communication with like-minded people' (1980, 13). The Amateur's historical investigation is therefore driven by hedonistic ideas of *pleasure* and *enjoyment*, found in his physical engagement with printing. Farmer later characterised one of these hobbyists in this way when he titled the biography of G. L. Fisher of the Pump Press in Adelaide *For Personal Pleasure* (1993).

Both Farmer and Parr have appropriately published their own writing on the hobby printer in small-press printed volumes: they are Amateurs themselves. Investigations into this practice usually come from within. This is not so unusual, since printers were themselves commonly the authors of early typographic printing histories in Europe. For example, the British historian C. H. Timperley wrote that it was his desire for knowledge that led him to become a printer, and it was then only natural that he should also want to know about the history of his own trade, leading him to the research and publication of his *Encyclopaedia of Literary and Typographical Anecdote* (1842, ii). The Amateur is likewise a printer (though not a professional printer) who has a personal desire for knowledge about his trade's history, and it is this particular interest in historical subjects that distinguishes him from other hobbyists.

The Amateur's 'writing'

The Amateur tells one of the most conventional stories about typography, explaining it as a technical process where all design decisions are determined by the mechanics of type composition. The history is defined by interchangeable types and standardised spacing, and the fitting of these into what Eric Gill called the 'procrustean bed' of typography: the physically limiting setting-stick (2007 (1936), 88). Robin Kinross described mechanical study as one of the core branches of printing history, in which the technical operation and material restrictions of the press are emphasised (2004 (1992), 16–7). This branch is distinct from the bibliographic or cultural interpretations of the



historical role of the press. The mode through which the Amateur relates his mechanical printing history is the arrangement of his studio.

The Amateur's studio becomes the presentation of his historical argument through the regional printing museum. These museums can be found in suburban Melbourne and Sydney, and in some rural centres where they are attached to larger museums. These printing museums all have similar layouts that replicate working studios, and in some cases they also become working studios [Fig. 1]. For example, the Melbourne Museum of Printing, curated by Michael Isaachsen, is planning to join the tradition of open-air museums and historical theme parks by allowing its visitors to experience the past by simulating an old printing office. The museum, which already operates occasionally as a studio to artists and designers, plans to use the artefacts in its collection to compose and print a newspaper, generating a new experience and a new printed object as its visitors perform the actions of the past.



Fig. 1 - Melbourne Museum of Printing curator Michael Isaachsen working at a proofing press (above); and the working studio at the Melbourne Museum of Printing (below). Courtesy of For The Love Of Type, photographed by Gemma O'Brien 2009.



The presentation of history in these spaces is driven by utilitarian needs and the desire for the physical experience of the past. With these intentions the Amateur's museum explains typographic history as a mechanical process in the way its artefacts are spatially arranged. Artefacts are ordered in such a way that they can be used most practically in the printing process. Conventional storytelling techniques of museum design are not applied: plaques or story-panels would only get in the way; chronology would disrupt the order of practice.

The result is a studio where artefacts from different time periods commingle into a single workplace that is an immersive atmosphere of many pasts. This leaves the museum visitor, who is attempting to experience these pasts, open to interpret what part of history they have travelled to. In the same space one can see the electrified Ludlow and platen presses of the early-twentieth century, or the hand-operated foundry types and two-pull press of the eighteenth-century. The period that the museum represents, though, is generally not important when the Amateur tells a mechanical history, because the basic principles of typographic printing changed so little over its first four hundred years.

The Amateur's condensing of multiple historical periods into a single space shows similarities to what the urban historian Philip Ethington describes as the condensed *topoi* of history, in his shaping of a spatial theory to history (2007, 484). Ethington's works will serve as an example to illustrate the Amateur's approach to the spatial representation of the past, and how multiple periods can be read in one place in the printing museum. As Ethington describes, every event occurs in physical space, and leaves a mark on it: 'all human action *takes* and *makes* place' (2007, 465). The result is a place of inscribed historical meaning, for which he uses the term *topos* (483). Because physical geographic spaces endure over time, we can expect many *topoi* to be generated over the same terrain, the inscriptions of which endure in the present.

Ethington offered a definition of history: 'All history is the study of artefacts that exist only in the present,' meaning that history is the analysis of *topoi* by a contextualised historian (2000, 6). Historians co-habit space with the inscriptions of the past, having the potential to modify and re-organise them. The participating visitors to the Amateur's museum have the same relationship with their surroundings. They engage with the inscriptions of the past, which are the artefacts of the printing trades, and re-organise them to form a personal interpretation. Depending on how the museum visitor views these inscriptions, multiple interpretations of time are possible. They may perhaps construe an image of the early twentieth-century, or perhaps one of the nineteenth-century. Twentieth-century types are used on a nineteenth-century press (or vice-versa), or maybe an electric proofing press is operated by hand so that it evokes a hand press. The museum space is a blurring of time. It is interesting, then, that the Melbourne Museum of Printing should aim to use its collection to produce a newspaper – an artefact that is always linked to a specific date, from a studio that is linked to no specific time.



The comparison with Ethington's spatial description of historical method is helpful in explaining the printing museum's commingling of artefacts and periods. It also turns the museum visitor into an historical investigator, who has the ability to evaluate and interpret the artefacts that they are using within the broader argument of mechanical process offered by the Amateur. But there is one important difference between Ethington's condensed *topoi* and the Amateur's studio. The studio is created in the present through the collection and combination of artefacts rather than through the accumulation of inscriptions of events over time. These were never working printing shops, only recent constructions. The space is therefore authored; it is not the traces of the past but a historical text. The stories and periods that the visitor can extract from the museum space, or the times they can go back to, all have their roots in the historical mind of the Amateur who arranged one thing next to another.

The Amateur's empathy

When he described the activity of typographic punchcutting, type designer Fred Smeijers argued that not all aspects of a technical activity can be explained verbally, instead being better understood through the body: 'the only thing I could do ... [was] to make the experience my own' (1996, 57). It is through the provision of tacit knowledge that the printing museum extends on the core mechanical narrative of typography. The reader of this history (the museum visitor, often current graphic designers) does not just imagine history: by acting in the museum-studio their body experiences the same gestures and exertions that produced typography in the past.

This tacit knowledge enhances the participant's understanding of the making of design, and being able to perform this activity in the present also generates a bond between the design practitioner today and the tradesperson of the past. Through this mechanical process, it allows the contemporary graphic designer to connect with an antecedent industry, creating a history that is profession-oriented. The studio, therefore, includes the possibility for an anthropology of the typographer. The motives that drive design in this case remain material, but by looking through the museum-studio at the worker, the space contributes to the modern notion of historical empathy for use in graphic design history.

'Intellectual empathy' was central to the construction of the historian's task for the modernist R. G. Collingwood, who concluded that it is the human motives behind events that constitute history (1994 (1946), 115). In this model of practice, the historian is required to re-enact in their own mind the situations and motives of past figures, and to understand their actions without passing the judgement of the present. As Collingwood argued it, this was not intended to be just a case of objectively speculating on the motives of other people, he considered it a case of actually re-constructing their thoughts (115).



Attempting to prove that thoughts can be reproduced from one person to another and one time to another, Collingwood illustrates an example of a mathematical idea from Euclid (his consciousness of the equality of base angles in an isosceles triangle). This example was perhaps not the most apt, considering Collingwood's intentions; he is able to show only that a technical thought can be reproduced, rather than a subjective or emotive thought, which can prompt a person's actions. But isn't the mechanical logic of letterpress printing one such technical thought? The connotations of value surrounding this activity may be different today, but the way the participant intends to operate the studio physically is no different from the worker of the past. If I am to think today 'I will now justify this line of type,' it has the same meaning as when a nineteenth-century compositor thought 'I will now justify this line of type.'

Following on from Collingwood's ideas, the participant at the print museum is performing a series of actions in an historical process that the Amateur has argued/narrated from a technical/mechanical point of view. The visitor is reproducing within themselves the same thoughts as the compositor and printer of the past to produce a deeper understanding of this process. Their empathy is not just a re-enactment in the mind, but in a physical state. The idea in history of *res gestae* (things done) is understood literally, and therefore re-enacted literally.

The Amateur's publication

So far I have described the effect that the studio performance has on the museum visitor, but in the pursuit of *pleasure* the Amateur also intends to use the studio for himself. His own personal performance does not just result in embodied knowledge of past actions, but also produces the hobbyist's pamphlet. It is with this form of publication that the Amateur begins to explore the specific events of local Australian printing history.

In 1963, Brian Donaghey's small press self-published a broadsheet arguing for the amateur printing enthusiast to take on the cultural task of documenting local histories that would not otherwise be published through commercial interests (Farmer 1976, 2). The history of the Australian printing industry, the Amateur's own trade past, is one such local history. Some of the printed works of the Amateur are written essays printed in small edition, others are facsimile reproductions of original artefacts. For example, in 1982, J. P. Wegner at the Officina Boronia in Sydney re-produced a copy of the 1861 pamphlet *The Art of the Printing in its Various Branches* by the Sydney printer John Degotardi, coupled with a biographical pamphlet about Degotardi [Fig. 2]. In the category of reproductions there is a strong sense of preservation, but as we saw with their museums, not all hobby works intend only to save aspects of the past.

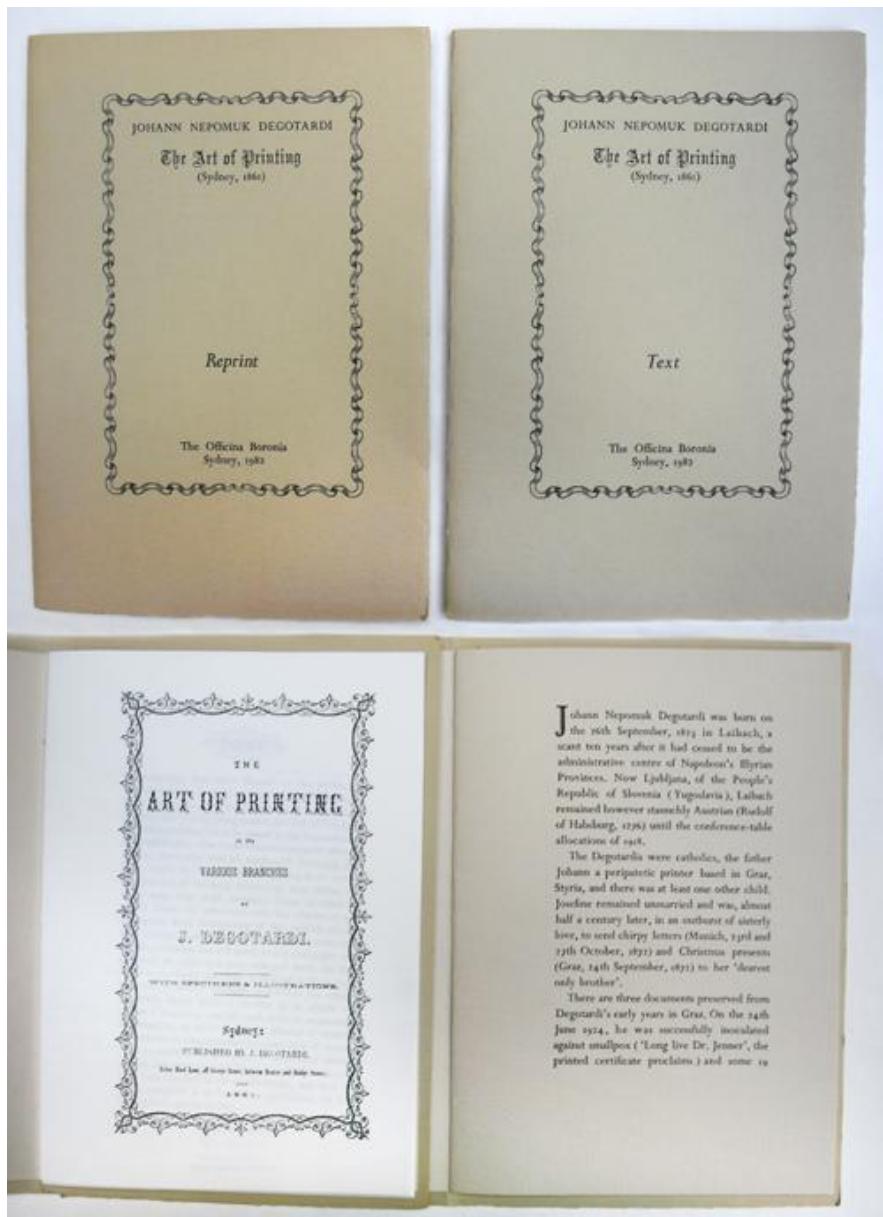


Fig. 2 - The two volumes of 'The art of printing' (1982. Sydney: Officina Boronia,) 'Reprint' (facsimile reproduction) and 'Text' (biography). Courtesy of Jürgen Wegner, Sydney. Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW. 686.20924/D319/1

Viewing the Amateur's work through his aim of personal engagement, some of his attempts at 'preservation' re-imagine the original artefact. Instead of promoting the object from the past, the use of antiquated printing methods mimics the artefact's rare status. The Amateur replaces the original with his own simulation, his attempt to live the past results in the replacement of the past with the present. In his pamphlet *South Australia's First Printing Press* (1968), the Amateur printer G. L. Fischer re-designed and re-printed a newspaper article from the *South Australian Register* of May 8th 1893 [Fig. 3]. The article is a description of the technical operation of the earliest press in South Australia, imported by the newspaper publishers George Stevenson and Robert Thomas in 1837. The article was



written to commemorate the acquisition of a new powered web press by the newspaper. In the process of its reproduction, with a new printed form, the voice of this text is changed. The original 1893 article was written by someone removed from such old-fashioned techniques of printing, the operation of a hand press was alien to them. Fischer, on the other hand, was much closer to this way of working because the Amateur uses the simplest hand-powered techniques: the Amateur and the Australian pioneer printer have a great deal in common. With Fischer's reproduction the article is being presented by someone explaining an activity that they love rather than someone explaining a foreign practice, and it is published on a press similar to that described in the article rather than on more advanced machinery. Through his studio work, Fischer imaginatively relives the past, travelling backward to become the author of this artefact himself. This replaces the original with a simulation, and the original creator with the Amateur.



Fig. 3 - Spread from *South Australia's First Printing Press*, (1968. Adelaide: Pump Press). Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW. 681.62099/1

The Amateur's history

In Australia's print history there are several local heroes. These are the pioneering printers from the early nineteenth-century, who established presses in the early colonies. These men, such as George Hughes, George Howe, Andrew Bent, and Robert Thomas, have had no exposure internationally, but they are the subjects of the Amateur. Another publication from J. P. Wegner is *Splendid Chaps: Some Special Australian Printers* (1984), which



provides a collection of short biographies about some of these early pressmen. The frontispiece of the edition shows an illustration of George Hughes, Australia's first printer, who began his work in convict Sydney in 1796 [Fig. 4]. Hughes has played the mistreated hero of Australian printing history since the printer-historian H. W. H. Huntington first wrote his story in 1903 (12); Hughes' character is often overlooked in favour of his successor George Howe.

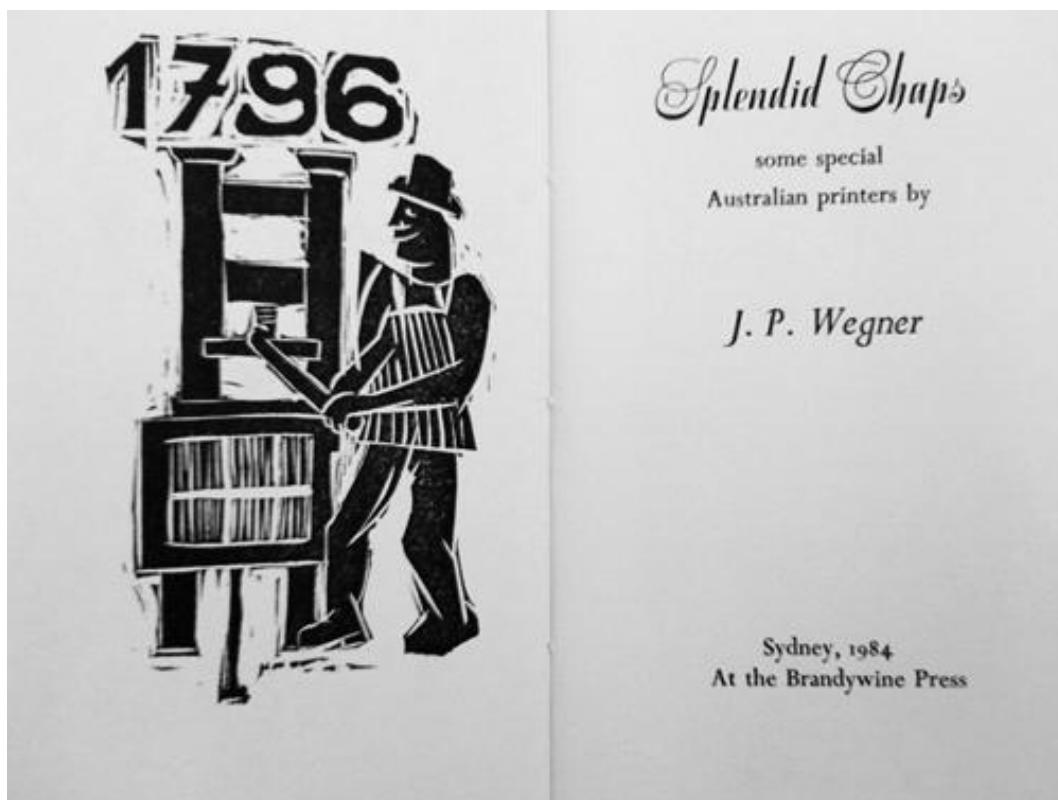


Fig. 4 - Title and frontispiece from Wegner's *Splendid Chaps*, (1984. Sydney: Brandywine Press). Courtesy of Jürgen Wegner, Sydney. Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW. 686.20922/1

The pioneer Australian printers represented in Wegner's booklet struggled, or at least they did according to history. 'Struggle' became the most common theme of Australian printing for late nineteenth-century authors, in particular for James Bonwick, whose *Early Struggles of the Australian Press* (1890) placed this as a central theme. Due to their geographic isolation the colonial pressman endured technical *struggles* to produce their work and sometimes they *struggled* with the colonial government censor. Beyond these early figures there is actually little that has been traditionally produced on early Australian printing, a fact that I attribute to the historiographic strength of the Amateur in this context.

That the Amateur searches for his own experience, and considering that this is a pre-requisite condition of the Amateur, it is easy to pull apart his biases in the writing of history. He has a preference for the early printers, who



worked alone and with hand presses, much like himself. Having turned the facts of the past into a scene for his own activity, the Amateur's studio is always limited in its materials because these are out-dated and out of production. The Amateur falls into one of the clichés of Australian history: 'making-do', or getting by with only the resources at hand. The operators of the Wayzgoose Press, one of Australia's few commercial private presses, have described this isolation as one reason that they enjoy working in Australia (Hudson & Jarvis 2005, 29). Being separated from the usual exhibitions and supplies of letterpress equipment prompts ingenuity in their technical responses; this is a reworking of the 'tyranny of distance' as a thematic device in Australian history. Isolation and a limitation of materials is also the story applied to the pioneer printers, but in their case it often brought their work to a halt, rather than providing inspiration. The early government printer George Howe, for instance, was prevented from printing Sydney's only newspaper for almost a year in 1807–8 simply because he could not find the right paper to print it on (Bonwick 1890, 6).

Seeking out his own experience in the past, the Amateur finds an affinity between himself and the pioneer printer. His own working conditions reflect those of the colonial early nineteenth-century. In a recent review of this field for the History of Printing in Australia project, Ian Barry identified that the period of Australian printing that had been given the least historical attention was actually the early to mid twentieth-century (2005, 48), a period of large industry and powered machinery, conditions that the Amateur could never reproduce himself and, therefore, to which he therefore feels no personal connection.

Publications in Australian printing history have been sporadic, and the History of Printing in Australia project has yet to produce any results. If it weren't for the local printer/authors and the private presses there would be virtually no history of this topic locally. In saying this I am opening the definition of the Amateur to include the commercial private presses, such as Mike Hudson's and Jadwiga Jarvis' Wayzgoose Press, which adapted the story of the van Diemen's Land newspaper printer Andrew Bent (1996) [Fig. 5], or the mid-century typographer John Gartner who wrote and self-published the early history of the press in Melbourne (1935). Both of these examples follow the principles of the Amateur: the subjects of study are from the history of the trade of these authors and the act of writing history is inseparable from the author's own self-initiated practice of printing, which gives them the power to publish. Naturally the method of publication as letterpress printed volumes restricts the size of these editions, which in turn has limited the scope of their work. On average the Amateur's publication ranges from only several pages to two-dozen pages in length.

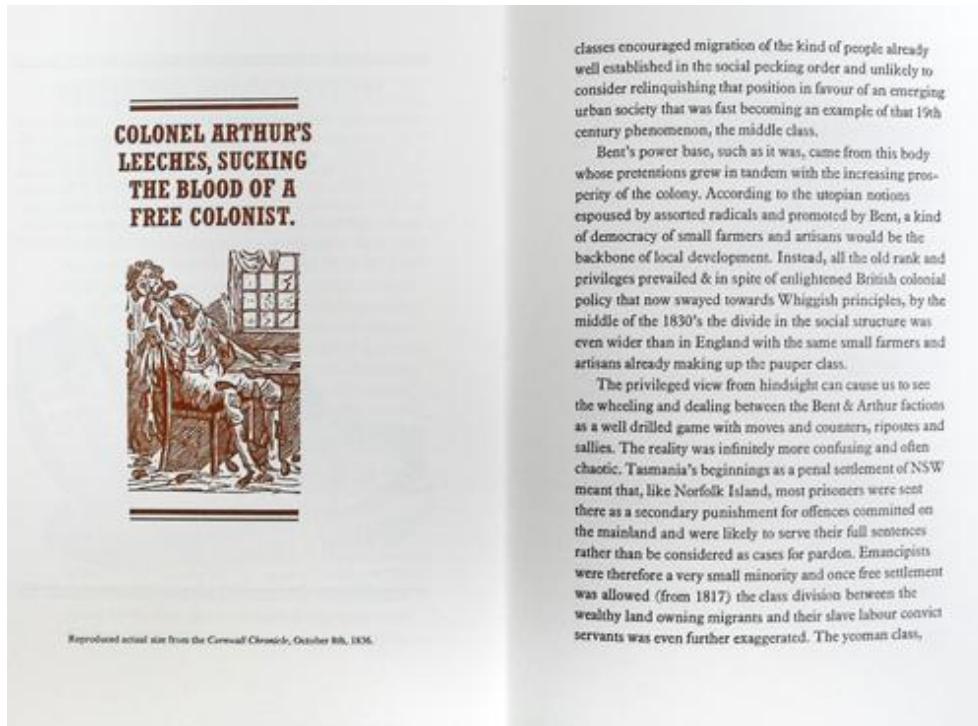


Fig. 5 -spread from "Printers and politics" (1996. Katoomba: Wayzgoose Press), showing a reproduction from the Cornwall Chronicle of 1836. Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW. 686.20994/7

An understanding of the Amateur explains the current state of Australian print history – high on experience at the expense of analysis. The Amateur's motivations for publishing explain why a preference has been given to the pioneer over the later anonymous industrialist (who cannot reflect the Amateur's conditions), and why Australian printing history is shaped, as it has been, as an investigation of material processes.

An Amateur conclusion

The hedonistic and self-interested Amateur forms his own history according to the possibility for personal experience, condensing traces of the past into a present studio. By authoring his studio the Amateur allows for the transmission of experiential knowledge about past printing practices. By re-enacting the physical exertions of typographic printing the current graphic designer who visits this museum-studio understands its core mechanical logic, but is also put in a position where they associate with the anonymous figures of the past who once performed these activities. The graphic designer can empathise with this past industry model because the historical performance allows them to understand and experience past practitioners' motives in design. The process therefore engenders a connection between the current profession and antecedent industries. It is in this way that the Amateur operates within the international history of printing; enhancing the mechanical and profession-oriented studies of typography, and expanding on our understanding of history 'writing' and communicative form for an audience of designers.



In Australia though, the Amateur has been largely unsupported by a professional historian. As such, his reflections on local histories, which are produced during performance in the studio, are responsible for shaping the local canon of print history. The artefacts that he chooses to reproduce become the most visible historical sources, and the stories that he chooses to tell become the most well known examples. This local canon is dominated by the Australian pioneer printer of the early nineteenth century, a figure that shares a number of commonalities with the Amateur, including technical practices and issues of isolation. The Amateur, who attempts to foreground the bodily experiences of the present, and who finds a place for himself in his version of the past, has become the Australian authority on printing history.

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