

The Commercial Function of Historical Book Reviews: An Interrogation of the Angus & Robertson Archives

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THROUGHOUT the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the public was reliant on the newspaper and periodical press for entertainment, news and information. Even before mass literacy, newspapers were being read aloud by the literate members of a community. By the mid-nineteenth century high literacy rates, reduced regulations, and the emergence of new print, communication and transportation technologies resulted in the mass circulation of print media and a commercialisation of the press (Raven; Steinberg). More newspapers and periodicals were being produced, and they were being read by larger and more diverse audiences than ever before. The press had become an indispensable part of daily life, described by S. H. Steinberg as ‘an instrument of mass-information and mass-education’ (161) and by Alan Lee as ‘the most important single medium of the communication of ideas’ (18).

In Australia, the first colonial newspaper, the *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, was established in 1803 by convict and printer George Howe. The paper was authorised by Governor Philip Gidley King and was produced on a printing press that had arrived with the First Fleet, so was subject to significant government oversight (Blair 10). The *Gazette* contained official reports on the front page, shipping information, general news and other miscellaneous content. From the 1820s the Australian press rapidly diversified. As in other countries, the expansion of the metropolitan press and establishment of the country press was aided by communication and transportation advancements, namely railway networks and telegraph. Newspaper ownership in Australia was also relatively accessible following the removal of inhibitive regulations and

taxes (Walker, 'The Newspaper Press' 6–20). By the 1880s Australia had more newspapers per capita by number of titles than Britain (Arnold 255–57). At this time Richard Twopeny declared Australia was 'essentially the land of newspapers', stating 'if there is one institution of which Australians have reason to be proud, it is their newspaper press' (221).

Australians quickly became avid newspaper consumers. Literacy rates were relatively high, particularly after the establishment of universities in the 1850s, introduction of compulsory education in the 1870s and the expansion of mechanics institutes, schools of arts and libraries (Alison 9–10). Furthermore, much of the population had the financial capacity to purchase newspapers, and the geographic isolation of the colonies increased demand for print news. Following the introduction of the eight-hour workday and gas lighting, they also had more leisure time. The Australian press continued to expand into the twentieth century with a burgeoning market for specialist journals and magazines as well as an increasing number of metropolitan, regional and country newspapers (Arnold 255–57). In the 1960s – almost a century after Twopeny's observations – the press was still a large and influential force, with Henry Mayer finding 'Australians are eager newspaper readers . . . [ranking] tenth among the nations of the world for the reading of dailies' (32).

Throughout this period, the press was not just a source of information. It was also a source of entertainment, including literary content. Metropolitan and country newspapers – even early papers like the *Sydney Gazette* – carried original and reprinted creative works including essays, poetry and serialised fiction, as well as book reviews and advertisements. There were also specialised Australian literary and book trade journals, including the *Review of Reviews* (Melbourne), the *Bookfellow* (Sydney) and, later, *Southerly* and *Meanjin*, as well as literary supplements, most famously the 'Red Page' of the *Bulletin* (Sydney). In the nineteenth century, when the local book trade was still stymied by economic and industry conditions, the press was the dominant local publisher. The role of press-as-publisher in Australia has been addressed in recent scholarship, notably by Elizabeth Webby and Katherine Bode. Webby, for example, emphasises the significance of the press in the establishment of a national literature:

Nineteenth-century newspapers and magazines contributed to the development of Australian literature in two basic ways. Firstly, they provided virtually the only outlet for local writers at a time when publication in book form was prohibitively expensive . . . secondly, along with libraries and Mechanics' Institute lectures, they were a means of disseminating literary culture. (Webby 4)

There has, however, been limited consideration of more commercial types of literary content and the relationships that existed between the press and the local book trade. Advertising exploded at the turn of the twentieth century, providing the press with a much-needed source of income. In the Australian context, total advertising accounted for 60–70 per cent of newspaper revenue in 1920–1945 (Walker, ‘Yesterday’s News’ 229). Book publishers were quick to adopt this form of promotion, but the actual value of press advertising for the book trade was unclear. Firstly, the cost of print advertising, particularly in the popular dailies, was increasingly prohibitive (Dickens 41). In *The Truth about Publishing*, British publisher Sir Stanley Unwin states the rate went from 15 shillings per inch in 1913 to £15 per inch in 1958 (245). With these costs, the economics of publishing generally did not extend to paid advertising. Secondly, the book reading public is only ‘an infinitesimally small percentage of the advertisement reading public’ (Michael Joseph, qtd. in Gross 381). As Dickens points out, newspapers did not necessarily attract book-interested audiences, so advertisements only appealed to a small proportion of the paper’s readers, further reducing the cost-effectiveness of this strategy. Finally, unlike other commodities, there was little possibility for cumulative sales as a result of advertising. That is, it was not possible to employ a standardised advertisement. Every book required a bespoke strategy and advertisements were tied to a specific edition of a specific book so did not generate long-term sales of books in general as they might for other products.

Given these circumstances, press advertising did not have a measurable effect on sales and most contemporary publishers decried this type of promotion. Unwin described dailies as the ‘most costly and least successful medium of all for the advertising of some kinds of books’ (244). His contemporary, Robert Sterling Yard, argued ‘a large part of all advertising expenditures is wasted’ (qtd. in Gross 72) and Michael Joseph simply declared ‘advertising does not sell books’ (qtd. in Gross 379).

To overcome the barriers to advertising, many publishers turned to book reviews to place their books before the attention of audiences. These reviews were not necessarily sustained literary criticism. Since the beginning of modern reviewing in the mid-eighteenth century with the *Monthly Review* (established 1749), the *Critical Review* (1756) and later the *Edinburgh Review* (1802), there was conflict between the two primary communicative functions of the review. As Claire Squires questions, ‘was its purpose to provide readers with notification and information of new titles, or to be more selective and evaluative?’ (122). Many print reviews, particularly of new books, tended towards the first of these functions, providing descriptive information to guide consumer choices, rather than seeking to provide any real evaluative assessments of literary quality or

‘cultural worth’ (Squires 118, 121).

These reviews acted as indirect advertising because they could make audiences aware of a book without a large cash outlay, hopefully stimulating interest in reading or buying it. Walter Hines Page, for example, writes that reviews ‘have value as they tell the public that the book is published and can be bought and as they tell something about it which may prod the reader’s curiosity’ (qtd. in Gross 40). Joseph similarly discusses the importance of reviews, even unfavourable ones, in providing a ‘good start’ by telling readers what the book is about and thereby informing reading lists (qtd. in Gross 368–88). Publishers had to produce and post the review copies that were sent to the press but in most cases the cost of extending the print run was relatively insubstantial. For Unwin, producing complimentary copies was only an ‘exceptional handicap’ in the case of small editions of expensive books (237–38). As with advertisements, reviews did not necessarily result in direct sales, but they were a far more detailed and cost-effective choice given the conditions.

Even before they reach readers, reviews therefore operate between publishers and the press within the interactive book trade and – beyond any literary considerations – can therefore evidence commercial or economic operations of historical print cultures. Recognising this, Gail Pool describes reviewing as ‘slippery’, pointing out that it ‘refers at once to a literary field and a business, a system and an individual endeavour, a process and a multitude of very different products’ (7). Yet in existing scholarship reviews are generally only cited as evidence of reception in literary studies of authors, books and genres, or in histories of the literary review journals, with limited analysis of reviewing as part of a publishing and marketing nexus despite the significant potential of this approach. As Tara Moore argues, ‘seeing a review in the context of its own genre rather than in the light of the author’s work elucidates the purpose of the review and the ways in which that genre was tied to selling rather than evaluating books’ (60). Robert Thomson and Leigh Dale similarly discuss the ways in which reviews reveal how ‘books are represented as cultural and commercial objects’ (120). In this area, Claire Squires’s aforementioned work provides an important examination of the role of reviews in the reception and circulation of books, including constructions of cultural value, as well as the business of publishing. Squires’s research does address the historical development of reviewing but is primarily concerned with UK reviewing in the twenty-first century, leaving the commercial function of historical reviewing largely unexamined in current scholarship.

This absence is particularly apparent in the Australian context. It mirrors the state of Australian newspaper scholarship in the mid-twentieth century

when R. B. Walker remarked ‘although historians have made considerable use of newspapers as sources, they have not yet studied the newspapers for themselves’ (Walker, ‘The Newspaper Press’ xi). In discussing the limited research on Australian reviewing, Melinda Harvey and Julieanne Lamond emphasise the lack of attention that has been paid to the historicity of reviews, the ‘institutions within which book reviews are produced, and the historical, social, economic and geographical contexts of the periodicals in which they are published’.

The Australian publishing house Angus & Robertson offers an invaluable avenue for researching historical book reviewing. Angus & Robertson was the largest Australian publishing house throughout the twentieth century and the firm carefully preserved their business records, forming a vast archive of over one million items that is now held at the State Library of New South Wales.¹ This collection is unrivalled within the Australian book trade. Within the archive are several ledgers tracking the firm’s extensive distribution of review copies to the press and an associated set of scrapbooks containing clippings of their book reviews from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.²

These materials have not been thoroughly investigated in existing Angus & Robertson scholarship, partly because of the scale of materials and current lack of digitisation.³ For this study, a relational database (working title *Angus & Robertson Book Reviews Database*) was constructed using Heurist software, and reviewing records from the distribution ledgers and scrapbooks of clippings were then manually processed into that database.⁴ At this time the database contains 58,609 reviews (dating 1895–1950) and 63,933 review copies (dating 1897–1924 and, more sporadically, 1924–1933) as well as 2,669 newspapers, 1,931 books, 1,241 authors, 1,750 reviewers, 788 places and 745 booksellers associated with those review records. Constructing a database of the records enabled distant quantitative analysis of the firm’s promotional activities and the identification of areas worthy of closer examination.

¹For histories of Angus & Robertson, refer to George Ferguson, *Some Early Australian Bookmen*, and Jennifer Alison, *Doing Something for Australia*.

²The distribution ledgers (referred to as Review Books) are held in the Angus & Robertson Archives at MLMSS 3269, Boxes 23–24. The scrapbooks of clippings (catalogued as Book Reviews in Bound Volumes) are held in the Angus & Robertson Archives at MLMSS 3269, Boxes 478–531.

³Digitisation efforts by the State Library are ongoing but at this stage are focused on the correspondence files.

⁴For the reviews, base fields were created for archive volume, newspaper/periodical, book title, review date and title, and reviewer name, with additional fields to record the length of the review, whether the review mentioned the source of the review copy (i.e. via a bookseller or direct from the publishers), the presence or absence of visual material in the review, and a plain-text field for other relevant information. For the review copies, base fields were created for archive volume, book title and newspaper/periodical, with a plain-text field for any other relevant information, and a relational field to link reviews related to that review copy. Records were enriched using secondary sources, including the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, *Trove*, *Papers Past* and *AustLit*. Once complete, the database will be published online.

As with all archival sources, the records are incomplete but the depth and detail of those sub-series reveals Angus & Robertson's deep-seated commitment to promotion. The firm evidently invested a significant amount of time, energy and resources – rather than just money – into actively engaging with the press, believing the power of the press would give their books the best chance of success. The importance of cultivating these relationships was articulated in 1923 by the firm's co-founder George Robertson:

But for the generous assistance given us by the newspapers of Australia and New Zealand we should not have achieved the measure of success which has been attained.⁵

Yet Angus & Robertson could not afford extensive advertising, writing 'our small margin of publishing profit does not permit newspaper advertising'.⁶ To compensate, the firm developed a mass-review strategy, distributing complimentary review copies to the press on an extraordinary scale. The ledgers, illustrated in Figure 1, meticulously list the names of newspapers and periodicals and record which papers were to receive a review copy of a specific title.

⁵George Robertson, letter dated 1923, MLMSS 3269, Box 495, Volume 65.

⁶F. S. Shenstone, letter to Bartlett Adamson, 11 Mar. 1927, MLMSS 314/2, p. 39.

The distribution of review copies is an important function of the publisher. Just because it is a partly mechanical task there is a tendency in some offices to make it entirely mechanical and to delegate the work to a junior. This, I am sure, is a mistake. It does not follow that the publisher need necessarily make out each list himself, but he certainly should cast his eye over most of them. (Unwin 227)

Under this mass-review strategy, Angus & Robertson distributed hundreds of thousands of review copies during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Across just a thirty-year period from 1895–1924, the firm distributed 57,250 review copies of 441 books (averaging 129 review copies per book). This encompassed 29,575 review copies of non-fiction and educational publications (mostly military handbooks, history titles and biographies) and 26,446 review copies of literary publications (mostly novels and poetry). On 18 April 1918 alone they sent a total of 1,566 review copies to the press, including 705 copies of *Doreen* (C. J. Dennis) and 718 of a new edition of the popular *Common-Sense Hints on Plain Cookery* (NSW Public School Cookery Teachers' Association). In the same month they distributed 628 parcels containing *The Charm of Sydney* (Sydney Ure Smith), *The City of Riddle-Me-Ree* (Zora Cross) and *Wattle Babies* (May Gibbs), and 784 copies of *The Mud Larks* (Crosbie Garstin). They even used this process for new editions of books. They sent out 791 review copies of various editions of Henry Ford's biography, *My Life and Work*, with 515 of those coming from the 1924 reprint rather than the first Angus & Robertson edition in 1923. In a four-month period from November 1923–February 1924 they distributed 4,738 copies of 17 reprinted titles in their Platypus series (averaging 279 copies per book), including 471 copies for *Sydney Cove* (J. H. M. Abbott) and 463 copies for *Piebald, King of Bronchos* (Clarence Hawkes).

The review copies were typically accompanied by some form of promotional material, allowing the publishers to emphasise features they wanted the press, booksellers and readers to know about and to direct the content of the review. This material typically took the form of a trade circular, a press extract, a publisher's blurb, or excerpts from the book. Several of these documents survive in the archived scrapbooks. In September 1918, a trade circular was distributed to announce the publication of a pocket edition of *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* (C. J. Dennis) and the release of two new poetry volumes, *The Australian and Other Verses* (Will Ogilvie) and *The Moods of Ginger Mick* (C. J. Dennis). The circular describes the price and format of the books, indicates what people may expect from the books and outlines the 'trade terms' (discount rate for large orders).¹⁰ Promotional material often emphasised Australianness, forming part

¹⁰Trade Circular, 30 Sept. 1918, MLMSS 3269, Box 487, Volume 48.

of Angus & Robertson's consciously nationalistic branding of their books. In 1923, for example, the first set of Platypus books were accompanied by a letter that exalted the virtues of the series and Angus & Robertson's commitment to Australian literature.¹¹

Overburdened reviewers, who usually did not have the time to read all of the books that came to them, mined this promotional material. As a result, many reviews tended to be descriptive, rather than particularly evaluative. In some instances, the utilitarian tone of the review was signalled by column titles such as 'Thumbnail Reviews' and 'Books in Brief', indicating the intent was to provide a summary of published materials rather than sustained literary criticism. Almost 20 per cent of the preserved reviews for *The New Henry Ford* (Allan Benson) replicate entire sections of a promotional flyer without acknowledging it was not their own text.¹² Sometimes, as in the case of the *Australian Christian World* (Sydney) and the *Toowoomba Chronicle*, reviewers allowed the flyer's blurb to stand on its own as a review.¹³ The heavy use of supplied material was particularly apparent for standardised books (such as the military handbooks and Christmas books) and reprints (including the Platypus series and cookery books).

Often Angus & Robertson was sending these review copies and promotional materials directly to the press. Eighteen per cent of reviews (10,576 reviews) opened or closed with an acknowledgement that their copy had been 'received from the publishers' or that the paper was 'grateful' to Angus & Robertson for supplying them with a complimentary copy.

In other cases, local booksellers were used as intermediaries in the distribution of review copies. Across the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Angus & Robertson engaged with at least 600 Australian, 100 New Zealand and 80 international booksellers as part of their mass-review strategy. These stores were often stationers, newsagents, general stores, fancy good stores, or even tobacconists that also sold books. Angus & Robertson would send sellers a copy of the book and ask them to distribute it to a newspaper or periodical. Rather than simply requesting that sellers hand the copy to the leading local paper, the publishers retained control over the process by designating the nominated paper on the flyleaf or in an accompanying letter. Separate letters would then be sent from Angus & Robertson to the newspaper editors informing them to expect the copy from the bookseller. They encouraged the editors to name the bookseller in the review, presumably in an effort to incentivise sellers as it ensured

¹¹Angus & Robertson, letter to newspaper editors, no date, MLMSS 3269, Box 495, Volume 65.

¹²Flyer for *The New Henry Ford* (Allan L. Benson), MLMSS 3269, Box 490, Volume 56.

¹³Reviews of *The New Henry Ford*, MLMSS 3269, Box 494, Volume 63.

their name appeared in the press without direct advertising. Of the reviews examined in this study, 5.5 per cent (3,218 reviews) named a local bookseller as the source of their review copy, usually in the final sentence of the review, or otherwise encouraged readers to purchase their copy from a particular seller. Further, the Angus & Robertson Archive contains lists of booksellers that the firm used for different papers in Australasia and the United Kingdom, and some of the distribution ledgers even record the name of a bookseller alongside the name of the newspaper.

The use of booksellers was partly an effort to streamline distribution. Angus & Robertson could include the review copies in parcels that were already being sent to booksellers. However, they were still sending separate introductory letters to newspapers, duplicating correspondence costs and labour. According to letters by Angus & Robertson staff, the distribution system was actually designed to allow booksellers to see the book early and, hopefully, place immediate orders for it:

Our reason for forwarding press copies of new books through the local bookseller is that it gives him a chance of seeing and ordering them earlier than he otherwise might.¹⁴

In order that you may have the advantage of seeing them and ordering a supply before the review appears, we are sending the Press copies of the following new books through you.¹⁵

Beyond this, the use of booksellers, particularly domestically, may have been part of Angus & Robertson's espoused aim of fostering a more collegial, cooperative Australian book trade. By sending free review copies via booksellers and asking editors to name the local bookstore – and therefore maintaining contact with each stakeholder – they encouraged closer relationships between sellers and editors and strengthened their own relations with each of those actors.

The use of booksellers as distributors was not without its disadvantages. In writing to E. R. Bartholomew in 1917, Robertson suggested the system had fostered 'heartburning' amongst competitive sellers:

Hitherto we have sent out review copies through booksellers in different places; but it is a troublesome thing to do, and leads to a good deal of heartburning among the booksellers – all of whom think they ought to have the copy for the leading newspaper.¹⁶

¹⁴Angus & Robertson, form letter to newspaper editors, 3 Oct. 1916, MLMSS 3269, Box 487, Volume 48.

¹⁵Angus & Robertson, form letter to booksellers, 3 Oct. 1916, MLMSS 3269, Box 487, Volume 48.

¹⁶Angus & Robertson, letter to E. R. Bartholomew, 3 Feb. 1917, MLMSS 3269, Box 488, Volume 50.

This discontent would have been particularly apparent in the post-war environment when the domestic print industry was experiencing a contraction (Nile 57–61; Ward 35–38). Banjo Paterson's *Saltbush Bill* (1917) was the test subject for an alternative system, with reviews for that book being sent directly to the press. Paterson's fame would have guaranteed orders, rendering it unnecessary to show sellers a copy of the title in advance. For most other titles, however, Robertson does not appear to have been deterred by the apparently 'troublesome' system and disgruntled sellers. The practice actually peaked in 1918–1923, then waned from 1924 as Angus & Robertson's publication output increased and the firm started sending more review copies directly to the press.

Having distributed the review copies, Angus & Robertson actively collected the reviews that appeared in the press. Sometimes authors would send their local reviews back to Angus & Robertson. Doreen Puckridge collected the South Australian reviews for her *King's Castle* (1931),¹⁷ and a Western Australian review of Katherine Susannah Prichard's *The Wild Oats of Han* (1928) states it was supplied with 'the author's compliments'.¹⁸ It is also possible that local booksellers were again acting as intermediaries, collecting clippings from the papers they had distributed the review copy to and sending them back to Angus & Robertson, although there is no specific evidence of this in the archival materials examined thus far.

In some cases Angus & Robertson used a press clippings agency to collect the reviews. These agencies – which supply clients with clippings of relevant newspaper content – emerged in the mid-nineteenth century when the proliferation of the press made it difficult and time-consuming for individuals to track coverage in all outlets. Within the Angus & Robertson Archive several reviews – mostly from UK papers – are pasted onto letterheads for Romeike & Curtice or Durrant's Press Cuttings. Other reviews were returned from a Victorian agency called Australian Press Cuttings. The operation of these agencies, particularly the domestic ones, have had scant attention in existing scholarship and provide a fascinating avenue for further research.

The majority of the reviews, however, were returned directly from newspaper editors. When distributing the review copies, Angus & Robertson explicitly requested editors send them back a copy of the paper or at least a cutting of the review, writing:

¹⁷Doreen Puckridge, letters to Angus & Robertson, 19 Mar. 1931, MLMSS 314/40, p. 457–459; and 11 Apr. 1931, MLMSS 314/40, p. 463.

¹⁸Review of *The Wild Oats of Han* (Katherine Susannah Prichard) in *West Australian* (Perth, WA, Australia), 3 Nov. 1928, MLMSS 3269, Box 501, Volume 76.

We particularly wish to have the issue of your paper containing your notice . . . and beg you to favour us by sending us a copy.¹⁹

Will you be good enough to post us a copy of the issue of your journal containing the review, addressed as per attached label?²⁰

Editors tended to comply with this request. Hundreds of reviews in the scrapbooks contain handwritten or typed annotations that the cutting had been supplied ‘with the editor’s compliments’. This was especially common for Australasian reviews, but even international clippings from the *Natal Mercury* (Durban, South Africa), the *Cape Times* (Cape Town, South Africa) and the *China Weekly Review* (Shanghai, China) carried this annotation. Some reviews even seem to have been returned by editors who had not initially received a review copy. The preserved review of *Rose-Growing Made Easy* (J. G. Lockley) from *Annals of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart*, carries a scribbled note reading ‘I did not send it here’, seemingly written by Angus & Robertson staff.²¹

Regardless of the method by which they arrived back at Angus & Robertson, the returned clippings were pasted into a series of scrapbooks, generally arranged by book title. In 1895–1950, Angus & Robertson collected almost 60,000 print reviews of their publications, stored in over one hundred volumes. According to Unwin, collecting reviews was a fairly typical process for contemporary publishers:

Publishers expect to receive voucher copies of papers containing notices of their books, and in most publishing offices fairly complete sets of Press cuttings are available for inspection. (Unwin 235)

The collected clippings were used in several ways. Authors could inspect the reviews to understand how their books were being received and to observe Angus & Robertson’s promotional efforts, stemming any concerns authors may have had about the firm’s commitment to their book. There are frequent notes throughout the scrapbooks that the ‘author has seen the reviews’. The publishers even had a form letter they used when mailing the reviews out to authors, writing: ‘You might like to see the reviews of [book title] which we have to date. As they are required for advertising purposes, will you please return them when finished.’²² In some instances, the author failed to return the reviews, leaving

¹⁹Angus & Robertson, form letter to newspaper editors, 5 Mar. 1917, MLMSS 3269, Box 488, Volume 50.

²⁰Angus & Robertson, form letter to newspaper editors, Oct. 1916, MLMSS 3269, Box 487, Volume 49.

²¹Review of *Rose-Growing Made Easy* (J. G. Lockley), in *Annals of Our Lady of Sacred Heart* (Kensington, NSW, Australia), Feb. 1928, MLMSS 3269, Box 500, Volume 75.

²²George Robertson, letter to Doreen Puckridge, 26 Mar. 1931, MLMSS 314/40, p. 461; and GH to Kay Glasson Taylor, 31 Jan. 1931, MLMSS 314/82, p. 207.

noticeable gaps in the scrapbooks. The index to one volume explains reviews for *Worshipful Masters* (1929) had been ‘taken out and sent to Judge P’, presumably the author A. B. Piddington, and that ‘Napier has all the reviews’ for his *Walks Abroad* (1929).²³

For the publishers, the reviews provided a general idea of the book’s early reception, which could be an indicator of future sales or the need for reprints. Angus & Robertson also regularly mined favourable or significant reviews for extracts to use in future promotional material. This process is evident in the preserved records with desirable extracts underlined or circled and other passages being crossed through. Sets of favourable extracts for a particular book were then assembled, generally arranged ‘in order of merit’. One scrapbook contains several of these documents, each consisting of five to fifteen extracts that the publisher could easily call upon when needed.²⁴ These extracts were sometimes used on dust jackets of new print runs or editions. The general uptake in this practice in the early-twentieth century is addressed by Squires, tied to the move away from apparently objective, journalistic standards towards the star reviewer and ‘overexcitable’ reviewing (123–24). At Angus & Robertson this was not a particularly common practice except for the standardised reprint series from the 1920s onwards, when extracts were often included on the inside flap of dust jackets.

It was more common for Angus & Robertson to use assembled sets of extracts in circulars and catalogues that were distributed to the trade and the firm’s mailing list to further promote the book. Reviews from international periodicals were particularly valued as evidence of the book’s quality. The April 1921 issue of their ‘Publications and Announcements’ catalogue – taken as a sample of their regular trade catalogues – is 34 pages in length and lists 293 books.²⁵ This included announcements for 26 forthcoming books, generally advertised with lengthy descriptions. For their list of regular publications, 70 per cent were advertised using one or more review extracts, compared to 9 per cent advertised using publisher’s blurbs, and 21 per cent that were listed without any supplementary information.²⁶ Of the 224 reviews quoted in that catalogue, 61 per cent were from Australian papers, 16 per cent from New Zealand papers, 19 per cent from British papers (mostly London and Glasgow) and 4 per cent

²³Index, MLMSS 3269, Box 501, Volume 77.

²⁴Assorted circulars, MLMSS 3269, Box 497, Volume 69.

²⁵Catalogue of Publications and Announcements, MLMSS 3269, Box 484, Volume 42.

²⁶This statistical analysis excludes the 80 educational and military books which were listed without any excerpts or descriptions, and 68 market books where reviews and descriptions were drawn from the original publisher not from any of Angus & Robertson’s own promotional activities. Market books were first published by overseas publishers and Angus & Robertson had then obtained the Australasian rights.

from other international papers. Considering New Zealand papers returned considerably more reviews than London, this reflects the significance that Angus & Robertson attributed to international reviews.

Importantly, the distribution records could also be used by Angus & Robertson to ensure efficiency in the promotion of future books. Unwin, in describing a similar strategy at his own firm, outlines the usefulness of such records:

My own firm keeps a statistical record from which it is possible to see at a glance what books any particular paper has received, and exactly which of them it has noticed. If the proportion noticed by any paper becomes unreasonably low, fewer books are sent. Should notices cease to appear the paper is dropped from the list . . . if the proportion noticed is considerable, there is a natural tendency to send more books to that paper, even though it is not one of first-rate importance, because a review in print is worth two in prospect. The maintenance of such a record means trouble but unquestionably saves wastage. (Unwin 235)

Angus & Robertson used their ledgers in similar ways. By comparing the collected clippings to the ledgers, they could identify which editors had not returned reviews and subsequently contact those editors, asking whether the paper had reviewed the book and, if they had, where the cutting was. This practice was contrary to Unwin's assertion that publishers 'cannot be expected to bombard editors with letters asking when they are going to review the book, or inquiring why they have not done so' after distributing the review copy (227).

The publishers then used the records to adjust their mailing lists, crossing out certain papers in the ledgers. In some cases this indicates the paper had become defunct, as with the *Australian Teacher* (Sydney), the *Hay Standard* and the *Watchman* (Warialda) which were all marked 'dead' in the ledgers from ca.1902.²⁷ Sometimes the paper in question simply did not print reviews, as with the *Red Funnel* (Dunedin), and Angus & Robertson could stop sending them copies.²⁸ In other cases papers were crossed out – and stopped receiving review copies – due to a low rate of return. The *Temora Star* received 82 review copies from 1914–1924 but initially did not return any reviews. It is unclear whether the paper was not reviewing the books, or just failing to send clippings back to the publishers but either way Angus & Robertson staff scrawled 'doesn't send reviews' against the paper's entry in the ledger.²⁹ Some form of

²⁷Publishing Review and Complimentary Copies, MLMSS 3269, Box 23, Item 2.

²⁸Publishing Review and Complimentary Copies, MLMSS 3269, Box 23, Item 2.

²⁹Review Book 2, MLMSS 3269, Box 23, Item 4.

punitive action seems to have occurred, likely a letter to the editors, as reviews started appearing, with 18 *Temora Star* reviews from 1923–1928 preserved in the archive. Similarly, *Capricornia* (Rockhampton) received 47 review copies from 1915–1924 but did not return a single clipping in this period and was then struck from the ledger.³⁰ Papers were also removed if the relationship between the editor and Angus & Robertson deteriorated. A press cutting of *Honour or Dollars* (Frederick Peabody) in the *Murray Pioneer* (Remark) has a handwritten note that Angus & Robertson had not sent the paper a copy due to ‘unpleasantness’ with George Robertson.³¹ Indeed there is no evidence of that paper receiving any review copies after 1925, though they had received 47 copies from 1919–1924. In another case, the ledger entry for *Western Herald* (Bourke) is crossed out from ca.1908 with a note to stop sending copies due to a ‘dispute’.³² There was a brief interlude in 1908–1912 when that paper received no review copies, but then the dispute was apparently resolved, or a new editor was appointed, as by 1914 the paper was again on Angus & Robertson’s mailing list.

That Angus & Robertson could expect an outcome from errant editors, and abandon papers with a low rate of return, is an illustration of their market power. In the saturated British and American markets, the press could perhaps afford to ignore follow-up correspondence from publishing houses because any number of other publishing houses were also providing books. In Australia, however, Angus & Robertson was dominant publisher at this time, and therefore held significant soft power over the rest of the Australian print trade. If editors wanted to continue to receive free review copies, it was in their interest to review the books sent to them, return the clippings in a timely fashion and, failing that, act on any follow-up correspondence from the firm (Ward 84). This power dynamic is embodied in the tone of the reviews. Many reviewers stated they were ‘indebted’ to the publishers for the review copy, and others regularly praised the ‘enterprising’ firm and their commitment to Australian literature. To take just two instances: a British review of *Love and Longitude* (R. Scot Skirving) described the firm as ‘one of the most enterprising of the younger Australian publishing firms’,³³ and an unattributed review of *At Dawn and Dusk* (Victory Daley) declared ‘the formation of an Australian literature is progressing under the stimulus afforded by Messrs Angus and Robertson, a firm

³⁰Review Book 2, MLMSS 3269, Box 23, Item 4.

³¹Review of *Honour or Dollars?* (Frederick Peabody) in *Murray Pioneer* (Remark, SA, Australia), 4 May 1928, MLMSS 3269, Box 501, Volume 76.

³²Publishing Review and Complimentary Copies, MLMSS 3269, Box 23, Item 2.

³³Review of *Love and Longitude* (R. Scot Skirving) in *North British Advertiser* (Glasgow, Scotland), 8 Feb. 1902, MLMSS 3269, Box 482, Volume 35.

of enterprising publishers'.³⁴ Other papers expressed subservience to Angus & Robertson in different ways. The *Goulburn Evening Penny Post*, for example, failed to name the publishers in their review of George Boxall's *History of the Australian Bushrangers* (1916) and, when returning the clipping to Angus & Robertson the next week, sent an apologetic note, expressing their 'regret' for the omission.³⁵

Angus & Robertson's strategy was therefore highly labour-intensive. It was also diverse, reflecting the firm's underlying business acumen. Leading papers in the Australian capital cities and large regional centres unsurprisingly predominate (led by Sydney papers which account for 18 per cent of all reviews, followed by Melbourne at 9.5 per cent). But Angus & Robertson did not just focus on densely populated areas. Aided by expanding railway networks, they were also targeting smaller regional areas and country towns across Australia. These smaller papers returned dozens, sometimes hundreds, of reviews. The *Wingham Chronicle* returned 223 reviews to Angus & Robertson from 1916–1942; the *Maryborough Chronicle* in Queensland returned 178 reviews from 1901–1940; and the *Warwick Daily News* returned 99 from 1919–1939. Gold rush towns that had experienced large population increases in the mid- to late-nineteenth century (such as Bathurst, Castlemaine, Ballarat, Bendigo and Kalgoorlie) were particularly strongly represented. Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of reviews for children's literature across New South Wales, revealing deep penetration into rural areas of the state.

³⁴Review of *At Dawn and Dusk* (Victor Daley) in unlisted paper, no date, MLMSS 3269, Box 480, Volume 24.

³⁵*Goulburn Evening Penny Post* (Goulburn, NSW, Australia), letter to Angus & Robertson, 28 Mar. 1917, MLMSS 3269, Box 485, Volume 45.

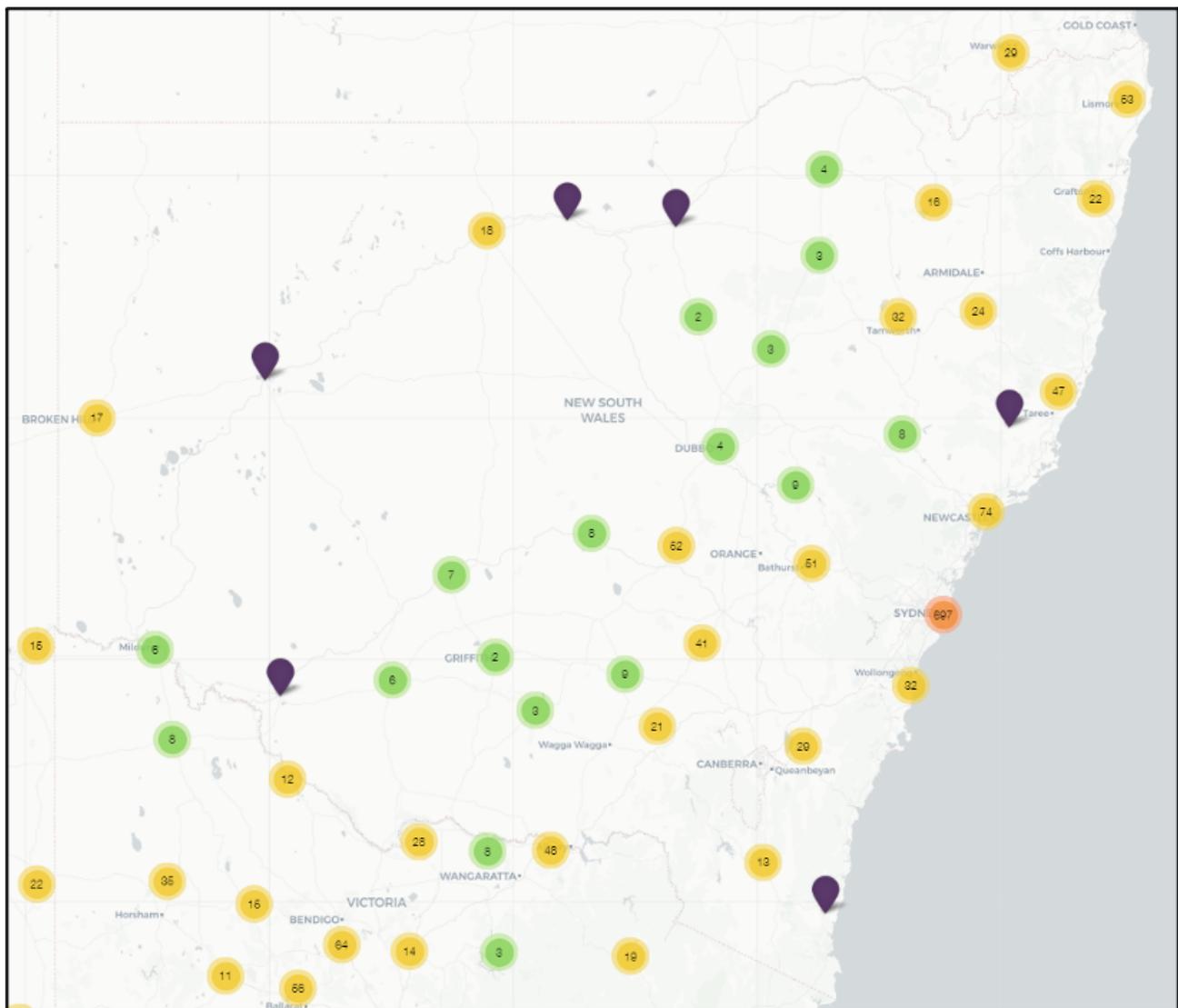


Figure 2: NSW reviews for children's books published by Angus & Robertson from 1897–1933. The numbered circles illustrate how many reviews were returned from that location, with density represented by colour (green being low density areas, and orange being the highest density areas). Purple pins represent a single review.

Despite significant transportation costs, Angus & Robertson's strategy was not constricted by domestic borders but also operated as part of a transnational book trade. From the outset they sent significant numbers of review copies to the neighbouring New Zealand. The relative proximity of the two countries, their shared status as Dominions of the United Kingdom and the primacy of sea transport at this time allowed Australia and New Zealand to operate as a co-operative, interactive Australasian market. They were referred to as the 'seven colonies of Australasia' in the nineteenth century and this philosophy continued even after the Federation of Australia in 1901 (Hempenstall et al.). This close association was evident in the book trade, with Helen Bones describing the existence of an interdependent 'trans-Tasman literary world' through the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. For Angus & Robertson, New

Zealand papers returned as many reviews as the Victorian papers, and these reviews are largely interfiled with domestic reviews, suggesting the firm did not delineate the two markets.

As early as the 1890s, reviews for Angus & Robertson books – including non-fiction, literary and children’s titles – were also appearing across the British Empire, particularly in the United Kingdom and South Africa, as well as in the United States of America, Southeast Asia and continental Europe. Angus & Robertson’s presence in these markets was admittedly limited, as they were competing against large British and American publishing houses, but for a small Australian firm their capacity to gain any foothold overseas is significant. Participating in the colonial and transnational book trades allowed them to secure ‘greater access to an enlarged book buying public and the larger critical world’ (Alison 44). It also improved the local reputation and sales of their books as securing reviews in leading London newspapers and literary periodicals resulted in increased attention from the domestic press. When reviewing *While the Billy Boils* (Henry Lawson), the reviewer for the *St Arnaud Mercury* referenced international coverage, writing ‘judging from the favourable notices the majority of their publications have received from the leading English reviews, [Angus & Robertson’s] enterprise must have proved profitable’.³⁶ A review of *The Journal of Thomas Williams* in *All About Books* (Melbourne) is titled, ‘Times Praises Australian-Fijian Book’,³⁷ and multiple Australasian reviews of *Australia and the War To-Day* (W. M. Hughes) referenced the attention the book had received from the London press.³⁸

Angus & Robertson also showed significant creativity in their promotion, sending their books to unexpected locations and an enormous variety of periodicals. Of the papers referenced in the Angus & Robertson scrapbooks and ledgers, 46 per cent are journals or magazines (1,220 different journals or magazines, compared to 1,330 newspapers and 118 unclassified papers). Importantly, these periodicals and magazines tend not to be digitised in the National Library of Australia’s *Trove* database so would be missing from any studies of reviewing that rely on that resource. Many of these were literary journals or educational, religious or women’s magazines that may be expected to carry literary content. My relational database currently contains 56 literary journals, 55 educational journals, 144 religious publications and 14 women’s periodicals. The educational periodicals frequently reviewed children’s literature, especially books like

³⁶Review of *While the Billy Boils* (Henry Lawson) in *St Arnaud Mercury* (St Arnaud, VIC, Australia), 20 Nov. 1917, MLMSS 3269, Box 479, Volume 14.

³⁷Review of *The Journal of Thomas Williams* (Thomas Williams) in *All About Books* (Melbourne, VIC, Australia), 12 Sept. 1932, MLMSS 3269, Box 498, Volume 71.

³⁸Reviews of *Australia and the War To-Day* (W. M. Hughes), MLMSS 3269, Box 503, Volume 81.

Teens (Louise Mack) that were deemed appropriate for school prizes, as well as school-books and textbooks. Journals known for literary content such as the *Bulletin* (Sydney) and the *Book Lover* (Melbourne) often offered longer, more critical reviews of the 'literary' titles, mostly adult novels and poetry. Religious journals tended to review theological and ecclesiastical publications and 'moral' literary titles.

More surprisingly, a range of professional and secular industry journals were reviewing the books. My database currently includes over 80 agricultural journals, 90 scientific and engineering journals, 90 medical journals and 40 economic journals, as well as journals in fields as diverse as motoring, politics, business, history and the Armed Services. In some cases there is a clear justification for these journals reviewing specific Angus & Robertson's books, usually non-fiction titles. For example, *Open Road* (Sydney), the official journal of the NRMA, reviewed *Then and Now: Historic Roads Around Sydney* (1937) and *Fisherman* (Melbourne) reviewed *Wonders of the Great Barrier Reef* (1936). Medical journals reviewed relevant textbooks as well as *Flynn of the Inland* (1932), a biography about the Royal Flying Doctors service, while the *Farm and Station Handbook* (Perth) reviewed *Sheep Dogs: Their Breeding, Maintenance and Training* (1948). The *Accountant in Australia* (Sydney) reviewed 6 Angus & Robertson books in 1931–1932, all about commerce or economic policies. Armed services journals in Australasia and the United Kingdom reviewed the military handbooks as well as war histories, political titles, and even some war fiction such as Glassop's *We Were the Rats* (1944). This was also true for international papers. *An Atlas of Population and Production for New South Wales* (1931) was reviewed by *Geography* (London), the *Journal of the Geographical Society of Berlin* (Berlin), *Geographical Magazine* (London), *Geographischer Literaturbericht* (Gotha, Germany) and *La Geographie* (Paris). In these cases there is an obvious correlation between the journal and the book. Angus & Robertson was thinking carefully about what books might suit the specific audience of a specialist periodical and sending a copy to those papers.

This correlation was not always apparent. Many periodicals reviewed books that were far beyond their purview. The *Australian Financial Gazette* (Melbourne) and *Bank Notes* (Sydney) were regular reviewers of Angus & Robertson books including fiction, poetry and biographies in addition to the expected economic textbooks. The *Medical Journal of Australia* reviewed most of the Angus & Robertson children's books, beginning with May Gibbs's *Gum-Nut Babies* (1916). The editor of that paper was initially confused as to why Angus & Robertson was sending them children's literature but came to see the value of the firm's approach, writing:

At first we failed to understand why they had been sent to us. There is nothing medical about them . . . We had nearly decided that a review would be out of place in a medical journal, when a bright idea struck us. Of course, Messrs. Angus & Robertson, who are good judges of human nature, recognized that an absorbing distraction is medicine to a sick mind. We can warmly recommend May Gibbs's beautiful flights of fancy to a medical practitioner who wishes to prescribe this form of sedative. But we also recommend him to enjoy the pictures himself before he hands them on to his patient.³⁹

Several of these unlikely periodicals were not just casually reviewing books. They had dedicated literary columns. In some cases, the columns would name the occupation associated with that journal's readers. For example, the *Official Record of the Stock Exchange of Melbourne* had a column entitled 'The Investor's Library', the *Farmer and Settler* (Sydney) had 'The Farmer's Library', *Modern Schoolcraft* (Sydney) had 'The Teacher's Bookshelf', and *Rydge's Business Journal* (Sydney) had 'Businessman's Bookshelf'. Other periodicals, predominately business journals, had columns describing reading as a leisure activity to be undertaken after work such as 'After Business Hours' in *Australasian Manufacturer* (Sydney), 'Off the Job' in *Builder* (Adelaide) and 'Leisure Hour' in *Steering Wheel* (Brisbane).

As the *Medical Journal* reviewer acknowledged, Angus & Robertson had indeed become 'good judges' in their promotional activities. Driven by a deep-seated desire to make their books succeed and an understanding of the important role the press played in public life at this time, but faced with high advertising costs, the firm developed a mass-review strategy. The strategy was highly labour-intensive but it allowed their books to be seen by as many people as possible in the most cost-effective fashion. They were targeting leading metropolitan newspapers and literary journals, as well as regional and country newspapers, industry periodicals, and diverse magazines across Australia, New Zealand and even international markets. At the same time, they were working hard to establish a collegial domestic book trade, cultivating strong relationships with the press and booksellers. This analysis of the Angus & Robertson publicity records therefore evidences the firm's mass-review strategy as a promotional tool and contributes to understandings of the firm's leading position within the Australian book trade. The reviews also offer an important but currently underused resource for further understanding the development of a national (and nationalistic) print culture, including how publishers were

³⁹Review of *Gum-Nut Babies* (May Gibbs) in *Medical Journal of Australia* (Sydney, NSW, Australia), 17 Nov. 1917, MLMSS 3269, Box 489, Volume 55.

involved in constructions of Australianness.

Examining book reviews through the lens of a publishing house provides broader insight into the practical processes of book promotion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the functional significance of the newspaper and periodical press to book publishers. The depth and richness of the vast Angus & Robertson Archive and the centrality of the firm in the Australian market, makes it a particularly valuable case study for interrogating such understudied practices. Reviews were never just intended to evaluate the literary or cultural value of books. Reviewing was also fundamentally a commercial activity, grounded in marketing and business practices, and operating between publishers and the press within an interconnected book trade.

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