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“Growing Pains”
The Queensland Government Printery
1860-1900

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In conjunction with the Printery tour, this paper will undertake a short survey of the growth and operations of the Government Printing Office during the years 1860 to 1900. Despite the appearance of official gazettes in the Australian colonies before the establishment of newspapers, early Government Printers have achieved less recognition than their press counterparts. If relatively little is known about this group, still less is known about the men and women who worked under their supervision. How did their conditions of work and pay compare with those similarly employed elsewhere? Before proceeding to such matters, a biographical profile of early Queensland Government Printers will be attempted from Theophilus Pugh to Edmund Gregory. Sufficient information is available to demonstrate that colonial printing, whether it be for government

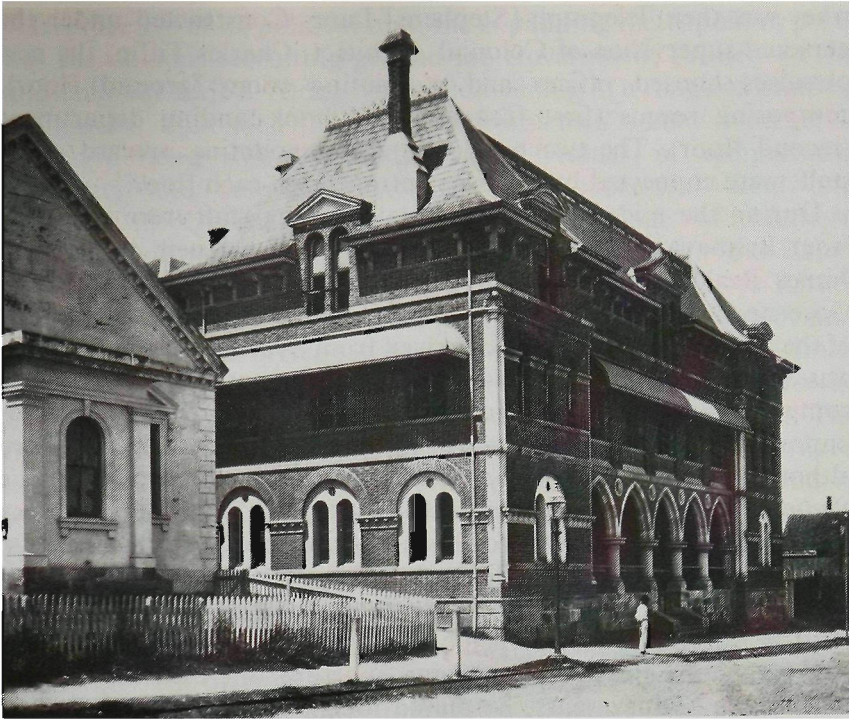
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purposes or for the press, remained a sensitive political exercise, subject to legislative and legal constraints.

Nineteenth-century defamation laws encouraged this situation by placing the onus for irregularities with the printer rather than with the author. The ever present tendency of colonial Governors and politicians to scapegoat the “thick-skulled printer” was still apparent in mid 19th century Queensland. Official printing began in Brisbane with the establishment of a bicameral legislature in 1859 but some time would elapse before Government Printers achieved the status and respect commensurate with their position.

Unlike Sydney and Hobart counterparts the *Queensland Government Gazette* did not make its appearance before the local press. By 1860, six newspapers were already being published in the colony and competition was keen for the early government contracts. Among the competitors were Theophilus Pugh, whose important *Almanac* had begun in 1859, William Fairfax, a nephew of the *Sydney Morning Herald* proprietor, W.C. Belbridge, Fairfax’s partner in the *Queensland Guardian*, and Thomas Ham, a noted engraver who had issued stamps for the Victorian colony in 1850.¹ Pugh was awarded the first contract and, with Thomas Woodward Hill of the *Courier*, undertook to print the first gazette in late 1859. The disadvantages of the contract system soon became obvious. Most printers possessed insufficient quantities of type for government work, which had to be kept standing in forms until corrections were available. Asked to explain why he had not completed the contract during 1860, Pugh stated that he had received double the amount of work he had been led to expect and had to employ two foundries in Sydney to cast type for him. The government anticipated it would have £1,000 worth of work for him but he anticipated it could amount to £6,000 or £7,000 worth for the one year.²

Pugh’s tribulations as first Government Printer were compounded by his simultaneous position as editor of the *Courier*, a paper highly critical of the Herbert Government. In addition to outspoken leaders on political matters, Pugh did not hesitate to insert advertisements in the *Courier* defending himself against what he deemed “a systematic effort on the part of certain members of the House to damage the reputation of my office.”³ In reply to the criticism of printing errors and proof-reading, Pugh alleged that the Colonial Secretary had made a practice of polishing members’ speeches “which an author or compiler would alone be entitled to do.” Time-consuming corrections by members were a constant problem for printers but Pugh’s situation was further jeopardized by political considerations. In July 1861, he was summoned to trial for an alleged libel on the Legislative Council. In the furore over Justice Lutwyche and the limited franchise, Pugh was passed over for the permanent position of Government Printer. He continued to publish and expand his *Almanac*, however, and



Government Printing Office William Street, 1883. The old Evangelical Church was then serving as the Chief Secretary's office.

John Oxley Library

embarked upon a successful parliamentary career which culminated in his election to the chair of the printing committee a few years later.

On 1 October 1861, William Belbridge, printer and part-owner of the rival *Guardian*, succeeded Pugh as Government Printer, a post which he occupied for five years, amid allegations of favouritism from the *Courier*. Belbridge, who had familiarised himself with the latest steam-printing technology, was active in the Brisbane School of Arts and became a director of the Queensland Building Society in 1862.⁴ During his term, the printing complex began as a modest two-storey wooden building which occupied the present William Street site. Belbridge submitted his plans for approval to the Colonial Secretary in September and by early 1862, construction was complete. The “growing pains” of the complex were apparent almost immediately, however, as escalating government business created pressure for expanded facilities. By August 1865, the *Guardian* observed that:

The increase in the amount of Government printing and book-binding required to be done has been so great and so rapid that the press office [is] crowded in every corner with compositors, printers, book-binders and folders, stitchers and clerks and far too small for the Government requirements.⁵

To ease the situation, a more substantial three storey brick building, measuring 50 by 27 feet, was erected behind William Street, along

what was then Telegraph [Stephens] Lane. Constructed under the personal supervision of Colonial Architect, Charles Tiffin, the new premises housed offices and a printing room (ground floor), composing rooms (first floor), and a book-binding department (second floor). The two buildings, accommodating upward of 40 staff, were connected by separate entrances on each floor.

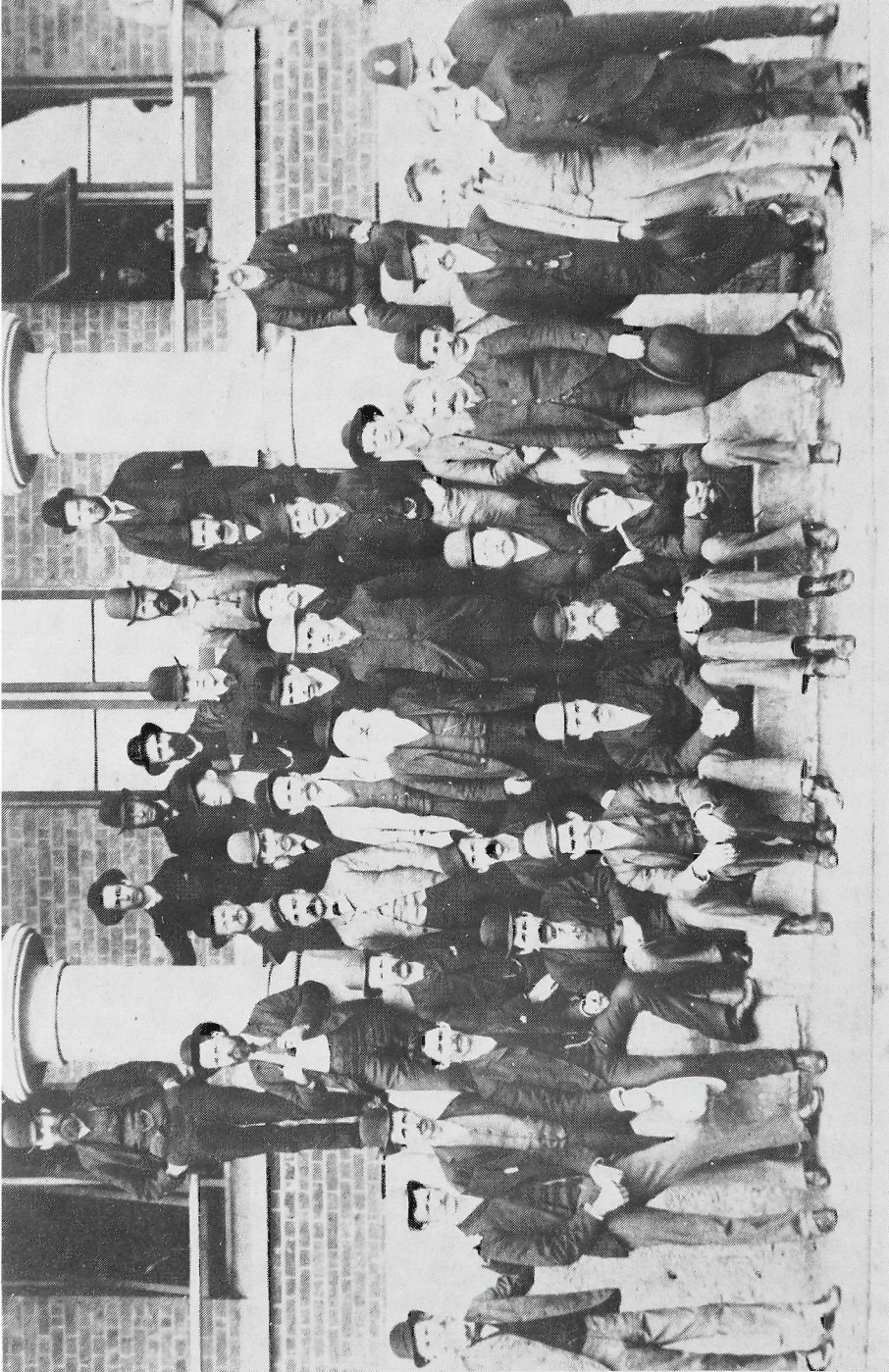
During the mid 1860's managerial printing staff were recruited from Brisbane and southern centres. Two of the new appointees, James Beal and Edmund Gregory, were to succeed Belbridge as Government Printer and manager of the printing office for the rest of the century. J.C. Beal, who arrived from Sydney in January 1862, was to become the father of the establishment. With Gregory's competent assistance, he managed the printery from 1866 to 1893, an unprecedented 27 years. Beal's printing credentials remain obscure although he is known to have served his apprenticeship with Fairfax's *Sydney Morning Herald*.⁶ In both Sydney and Brisbane, Beal was better known to the public for his all-round sporting achievements. In 1862, his first year in Queensland, he won the annual rowing championship and repeated the performance during the following year; he was subsequently made a life-member of the Commercial Rowing Club. Beal's other major sporting interest was cricket. During his Sydney years, he played for New South Wales against Victoria in the first intercolonial match and went on to umpire the Australian team in its first Brisbane game at the Eagle Farm racecourse.⁷ Beal's sporting enthusiasm extended to the workplace where he organised cricketing teams for regular competition. Outdoor exercise was highly recommended for printers to enhance 'esprit du corps' but also because of the craft's unenviable reputation for chest and other work-related complaints.

Beal's confirmation of appointment in December 1866 was a setback for his predecessor, William Belbridge, who had done much to lay the basis for an efficient working department. Less outspoken than Pugh, Belbridge had nevertheless incurred the wrath of the capricious Legislative Council and been ordered to the bar of the legislature for an alleged breach of parliamentary privilege. Belbridge's only error was to obey a directive from the Colonial Secretary to abbreviate the voluminous evidence of a Railway Select Committee.⁸ Like Pugh, he had become a scapegoat in a new round of disputes between the legislature and the Executive. Exonerated as an efficient and meritorious officer, Belbridge nevertheless vacated his printing post and returned to the *Guardian* as manager and printer. Within a year, he was victimised by *Guardian* shareholders and faced flimsy charges of criminal negligence. In consequence of these tribulations, Belbridge ended his career in Sydney where he achieved belated respect as overseer on the *Empire*, *Echo* and *Sydney Morning Herald*.⁹

Irrespective of its political bias, the expanding metropolitan press was the obvious recruiting ground for Government Printers in the mid-colonial period. Along with solid training in a range of printing techniques, such men invariably demonstrated sound managerial skills, founded upon Protestant work values of temperance, regularity and respectability. The more successful—Beal and Gregory in Queensland—enjoyed the patronage of southern newspaper proprietors like John Fairfax and of politicians like Henry Parkes. Edmund Gregory, in a revealing letter of thanks to Parkes at the end of his career, documented his early years in Sydney and Brisbane.¹⁰ He had arrived in Sydney during 1857 as one of a small group of British printers, imported by Parkes to break a strike on the *Empire*, and encountered open hostility from old hands. The militancy of printers in southern capitals during the fifties encouraged men like Gregory and Belbridge to come north to Queensland in search of secure employment. When economic and industrial turbulence erupted in Brisbane during 1866, local printers, desirous of job security, joined the trend to government service.

The recruitment of senior managerial staff and the return of mild economic optimism after 1870 saw further changes to the William Street site. The original two storey wooden building was demolished to make way for the present 3 storey brick structure—the old Printery as it is now known.¹¹ In November 1872, John Petrie's tender for £5,000 was successful. Unlike earlier or subsequent projects on the site, the William Street Printery was constructed without major delays and confirmed the government in its decision to revert to private building contractors. Certainly the protracted wrangling which erupted between John Petrie and the Works department during the 1884 extensions was absent on this occasion. By July 1873, nine months after Petrie signed the contract, the *Queenslander* could report that the right wing measuring 45 by 31 feet, “has been carried up to the level and roofed in” while the main frontage “had been carried to a height of 12 feet”.¹² The same writer estimated that the front walls would be completed by August ready for a large roof. By mid October, the roofing of Welsh slate was well advanced and, before Christmas 1873, staff had begun work in the new building, which now became the centre of the printery complex. The same three-tiered arrangement was adopted with offices and machine rooms on the ground level, composing and bookbinding departments on the first and second floors.

An immediate advantage of the new premises was the increased floor space, 65 by 35 feet in the William Street section, with an additional wing measuring 45 by 31 feet. Other essential features included strong floors to bear the weight of machinery and windows on four sides of the building to allow maximum light and ventilation.



Government Printing staff in 1893 with James Beal (beard) and Edmund Gregory at centre. Note the women workers at right window.
John Oxley Library

These practical considerations were balanced by aesthetic elements which enhanced the government precinct and were clearly visible to approaching river traffic. Journalist W.H. Traill, later of the *Sydney Bulletin*, described the William Street building in 1886 as:

“An architectural curiosity containing romanesque gothic, classic and French elements . . . a solid-looking well-proportioned block of three stories, in brick with stone dressings. The facade is composed with a range of five bays sit back slightly between two end pavilions . . . The end pavilions have round-headed windows. Attached giant colonettes with crocket capitals mark the corners of the pavilions. The top level of the central range contains the suggestion of a classical temple front in brick, complete with a little pediment. The roof is a mansarde and contains dormers.”¹³

Among the noteworthy interior features, installed by Petrie’s carpenters, were the cedar furnishings and fireplace on the ground floor, as well as amber glass windows and elaborate timber rafting on the upper storey.

Occupation of the William Street Printery in 1874 brought only temporary relief to the relentless problem of space. By the early 1880’s, a crisis situation was developing, especially in the machine room of the ground floor where presses were operating at full speed, even in the parliamentary recess, and the men worked continuous shifts from 8.30 in the morning until midnight. In August 1883, the Government Printer urgently requested four more machines but acknowledged that there was no available space to accommodate them. Eventually, plans for three more buildings—a machine room, lithographic office and engine room, were approved but the belated government response, combined with building delays, saw the crisis worsen in 1884-85. By September, 1885, Beal described the situation as ‘desperate’ with machinists “working from 2am to 6pm each day” and added that, “he was not able to push his men any further.”¹⁴

The unprecedented demands made on printery staff created a tense industrial situation as skilled workers organised themselves to bargain for better wages and shorter hours. The Queensland Typographical Association began aggressively in April 1884 with calls for a general strike in the Brisbane printing trade.¹⁵ Government employees, organised into chapels like the newspaper men, were caught up in this campaign. One work practice at the Printery which the Q.T.A. denounced was the use of trained office boys as cheap labour. After serving their five-year apprenticeships, printers’ devils were kept on low wages for an indefinite period without access to more remunerative positions.¹⁶ Another employment practice at government printing offices, along with the use of boy labour, was their dependence upon a large casual work force at peak periods, when parliament was sitting or elections pending. Part-time compositors at the Brisbane Printery earned less than their newspaper

counterparts, receiving around £2 per week or half of the full-time wage.¹⁷ Their recruitment at peak production times meant that casuals worked in cramped and unhealthy nocturnal conditions. They were expected to call daily at the office in search of work and obliged to take inner-city lodgings where rents were high. Low morale and industrial neglect accounted for the substantial incidence of alcoholism and ill-health among this group.

A noteworthy improvement to conditions at the printery at this time was the installation of electric lighting. Prior to this, compositors and readers worked by kerosene or gas lamps. Though cheaper than electricity, gas produced a flickering light and raised room temperatures to unpleasant levels. The first trial of the 'Edison' light in Brisbane took place at the Printery on April 9, 1883 when the staircase, publishing and composing rooms (first and second floors) were illuminated by 50 burners.¹⁸ It was not until 1886, however, that a comprehensive system of 400 lights was operational. The two storey engine room constructed behind William Street for this purpose housed two 40 h.p. steam engines and a dynamo, which provided sufficient power to light the parliamentary building several hundred metres away. The total cost of the electric lighting project was estimated at not less than £10,000.¹⁹ Another contemporary technological innovation valued at the Printery was the telephone, because of the constant need for liaison with other government departments. Until its appearance in the 1880's, offices relied on a combination of message boys and speaking tubes.

While technology could improve working conditions, its effects were by no means uniformly beneficial. During the 1890's, when the government was seeking to reduce staff and wages, the introduction of the telephone and the purchase of printing machines with automatic flyers, displaced run and office boys. By the mid-nineties, skilled workers were also being made redundant by new machinery. The Linotype, an automatic composing machine imported from America, could do the work of two or three hands in an equivalent time. Following the example of the Sydney *Telegraph* and *Brisbane Courier*, the Queensland printery began installing Linotypes after 1895. Reporting on the impact of type-setting machines, Edmund Gregory observed:

“They are not well adapted for a large part of our work—table work; but for plain solid setting, such as *Hansard*, their use would no doubt effect a saving. They will not displace skilful compositors employed on the better class of work, but they must sadly thin the ranks of the rank and file of compositors.”²⁰

Despite the Linotype, the government decision not to revert to an outside tender system meant that compositors continued to make up a substantial 45% of the workforce at the end of the century.

While the printing and lithographic staffs, equipped with the latest machinery and lighting, had vacated the William Street building by 1887, the less prestigious book-binding and machine-ruling sections remained on the first and second floors. Of special interest to contemporary historians are the girls and women of the book-binding department. Unlike newspaper offices, where binding was a small-scale and usually mechanised procedure, government printeries employed significant numbers of females in this capacity. By 1900, this section comprised 36 female workers engaged in sewing, folding, gathering and collating. According to Janet Carey, Printery forewoman for upward of 24 years, many of the girls began their 3 year indenture period as mere children.²¹ While experienced women, aged 23 years and above, received 5/3 per day, younger females earned between 1/3 and 1/8 per day, a tenth of a skilled compositor's wage and a thirtieth of the Government Printer's, yet more than their struggling counterparts in the small printing houses. By a combination of low wages and limited technological change, female printery staff were better able to survive the 1890's than the casuals and boy-labour force. A strict redefinition of women's work enabled this group to extend their range of menial activities without advancing to skilled or classified positions. As one report on the bookbinding section confirmed:

"A lot of work previously done by men is now being done by females and which is properly theirs to do; if the girls are allowed to do such work as the facing of paper for account-books, folding in sections, taking to pieces and mending old books . . . a very great saving will be effected."²²

While newspapers had begun employing women compositors by 1890, none of the 11 listed as working in Brisbane by 1900, were based at the printery.²³

While the workplace was undergoing substantial change, the 1874 building was being subjected to regular repairs and modifications. In 1892, the level of William Street was cut down, exposing the foundations of the Printery to the weather and necessitating its protection by a cement plinth. The most persistent problem was undoubtedly deterioration of the steep roof. The nails, holding the Welsh slates in place, rusted and were dislodged by storms and high winds. After a series of incidents during the 1890's, the Colonial Architect recommended that the entire roof be replaced by one of corrugated iron. Nor was the old Printery, constructed in an age of manual craftsmanship, designed to withstand the rapid technological changes of the late colonial period. Yet it remained the administrative centre of the complex until 1910, when the large George Street wing was added. In the same year, the old brick wing behind the Printery, dating from 1865, was demolished and replaced by an in-fill building in Stephens' Lane. Time does not permit me to elaborate upon the

growing pains of the 20th century government printing complex. It will be sufficient to record the satisfaction of those present that the restoration of the William and George Street wings will, along with the Commisariat, provide an authentic recreation of the old government quarter.

NOTES

1. *A. D. B.*, v. 4, pp. 328-29; J.W. Collings, *Thomas Ham. Pioneer Engraver and Publisher* Melbourne, 1943.
2. Pugh's Evidence to the Select Committee on Government Departments, *Q. V. and P.*, 1860, p. 406.
3. Pugh to the Hon. Speaker, 23 May 1861 in *Brisbane Courier*, 15 June 1861, p. 3.
4. *Pugh's Almanac and Queensland Directory* Brisbane, 1863, p. 170 and 1864, p. 171.
5. *Queensland Daily Guardian*, 17 Aug. 1865, p. 9 (National Trust File, Brisbane 1/58).
6. *B. C.*, 25 Aug. 1904, p. 5.
7. W.B. Carmichael and H.C. Perry, *Athletic Queensland* (Brisbane, Diddams, 1900), p. 102.
8. *Q. P. D.*, v. 3, 1866, p. 660.
9. *B. C.*, 14 June 1892, p. 4.
10. Edmund Gregory to Henry Parkes, 22 Oct. 1889 (Parkes Correspondence, v. 52, p. 610, M.L.)
11. For the remainder of the paper "Printery", when capitalised, refers to the William Street building only.
12. *Queenslander*, 12 July, 1873, p. 3.
13. W.H. Traill, *Historical Sketches of Queensland* (Sydney, Lansdowne Press, 1974), p. 69.
14. Government Printer to Works Department, Sept. 1885 (Q.S.A., WOR/A284). Quoted in B. Buchanan, *Report on the History of the Government Printing Office Site*. (Brisbane, 1986), Section 3.
15. J. Hagan, *Printers and Politics* (Canberra, ANU Press, 1966), p. 83.
16. The *Queensland Blue Book* for 1884 (p. 30) lists 12 apprentices employed at the Printery.
17. Royal Commission into the Control, Management and Working of the Government Printing Office, *Q. V. and P.* 1899, v. 1, pp. 433-35.
18. *B. C.* 10 April 1883, p. 5.
19. Report on the Government Printing Office, *Q. V. and P.*, 1895, v. 1, p. 825.
20. *Q. V. and P.*, 1895, v. 1, p. 826.
21. *Q. V. and P.*, 1899, v. 1, p. 476.
22. Report of the Board of Experts Appointed to Classify and Grade the Various Staffs in the Government Printing Office, *Q. V. and P.*, 1900, v. 1, p. 1218.
23. Report upon the Working of the Factories and Shops Act of 1896, *Q. V. and P.*, 1898, v. 4, p. 601ff.