SOME ASPECTS OF QUEENSLAND PROVINCIAL JOURNALISM

[By ALLAN A. MORRISON, M.A., President of Historical Society of Queensland, Lecturer, History Department, University of Queensland, at a meeting of the Society on 24th July 1952]

We are indebted to A. G. Davies and Clem Lack for surveys of the Brisbane press in general and to J. J. Knight and Spencer Browne for the story of the "Courier" in particular, but so far as I know the story of the Queensland provincial press remains to be written. The way in which Queensland was settled and the difficulty of communication among the scattered settlements created an extremely strong sense of local consciousness which was fostered by the establishment of local newspapers which set out to voice the feelings of the settlement which gave it life, and, not infrequently, to lead those settlements in the creation of opinions. Sometimes these local journals fostered a sense of separateness, but in other ways they tended to break down the feeling of isolation both by bringing news from elsewhere in the far-flung colony and by calling into their service journalists who had served on other papers elsewhere. Hence it will never be possible to write the full history of Queensland unless we can gain some conception of the ideas expressed in those local journals, and some knowledge of those who inspired their publication.

Such a task, I know, presents tremendous difficulties, for so many of the journals have disappeared, and those that remain are widely scattered. Two important collections that are relatively easy of access to the recognized research student are in the Queensland Parliamentary Library and in the Mitchell and Public Libraries in Sydney, and to the staffs of those institutions I express my thanks for their generous assistance. I do not pretend that my research is in any way complete, but I have taken the opportunity presented by a temporary gap in our programme to open the whole question, by presenting to you some of what I have so far gathered, and asking you to contribute by adding from the store of your own knowledge whatever additional information you may have.

Before I offer any details of any particular
journal allow me to present to you somewhat tenta­tively a few of the impressions I have received. The first is the remarkably early appearance of newspapers. Brisbane had led the way with the “Moreton Bay Courier” in 1846, Ipswich followed with the “North Australia” in 1855, and then came the “Darling Downs Gazette” in 1858. Connected with all three was A. S. Lyon, who might truly be described as the Father of the Queensland Press. From that time on no settle­ment of any size was in existence for long before it had at least one newspaper of its own. Maryborough in 1860, Gayndah and Rockhampton in 1861, Clermont and Bowen in 1864—but the list is too long to give in full.

In some instances a false start occurred. For instance, on 6th March 1860, Thomas White produced the first issue of the “Wide Bay Times” at Mary­borough, but it lasted only for a few months before closing. But it was soon replaced by C. H. Buzacott’s “Maryborough Chronicle” which appeared first on 21st November 1860 and is still with us. In Warwick the same occurred, for a Mr. Morrissey in September 1862 established the “Warwick Mail.” This lasted for only a few months. Soon after it closed the residents of Warwick felt the need for a permanent journal and invited Patrick Ritchie of the “Tenterfield Mail” to open a newspaper in Warwick. He accepted and came to Warwick bringing with him in a bullock waggon the printing press he had used for the “Tenterfield Mail” and founded the “Warwick Argus,” which appeared first in November, 1864.

Some of these early journals had to face many difficulties. For instance, when H. F. Morgan estab­lished the Croydon “Golden Age,” no buildings were available, and the premises consisted of two tents, one being the editor’s room and residence, the other the machine room. Newspapers complain today of the shortage of newsprint but they do not have to use the same expedient as Morgan had in 1887, when floods prevented the carriers from reaching Croydon with his supplies of paper, and he had to scour the whole town for every scrap of paper of suitable size—the colour did not matter, though the subscribers were somewhat startled by the variety of colour. The “War­wick Examiner and Times” had similar experiences in delay in the arrival of supplies: on some occasions the
issue of the journal was delayed, and once they bought every piece of wrapping paper from the local store.

One who had his share of troubles was Thomas White, whom I have already mentioned. While he was at Gayndah producing the “Burnett Argus” he had much financial trouble. Supplies of currency were still short in the colony and White accepted payment in I.O.U.’s or in notes on local persons, apparently including shinplasters or calabashes. But not all of these were of equal value, and some had no value at all, so he lost a fairly large sum. Later in Mt. Perry, he had an experience which came before both Parliament and the Executive Council. Apparently he was rather outspoken in his journal—the local Police Magistrate A. W. Compigne, complained that he had made insinuations against almost all the women in the town and that he had also offended the Wesleyan community by including in his report a personal description of “the fair organist,” and ending his report with the remark that it was a very successful entertainment. Compigne also claimed that White had urged some German timber getters to do him personal damage and as a result he had to go armed. The Magistrate also said that in January 1874, three persons had wanted to horsewhip White and had been restrained by Compigne only with difficulty. (I suspect the full story yet remained to be told.) The upshot was a discreet enquiry from W. P. Morgan, a solicitor of Mr. Perry, to the Prothonotary of the Supreme Court in Brisbane, and a resultant information laid in court by James Best, Morgan’s clerk, that White was publishing a newspaper without obtaining a certificate as required by the Act. The P.M. then invoked the punitive provisions of the act, and sent a policeman to take possession of the movable type. In other newspapers, including the “Wide Bay News,” he attacked the police and the magistrate, claiming that they had demolished the office had seized the press as well. Complaints went to the Colonial Secretary, and the Executive Council ordered the return of the type. But when White demanded it, he was referred to the police who at first would not act not having any advice from the Police Commissioner. Finally they handed over the type to White who had to go to the lock up to collect it. Compigne breathed a sigh of relief, but then to his horror another information was laid by
William Hewitt. When the P.M. refused to do as he was asked, Hewitt took him to court, in an effort to force the P.M. to act. Hewitt was acting in collusion with White, who had by now registered his paper.

But, Mr. White cannot yet be dismissed, for a brief account of his career will draw attention to another feature of the Queensland provincial press, namely its peripatetic nature. As already mentioned he began a paper in Maryborough, but when that failed he moved to Gayndah and set up the “Burnett Argus,” its first issue appearing in April 1861. In December 1869 he brought the whole paper to Maryborough, where it was issued as the “Maryborough Mail.” At the same time W. S. Lambert arrived with a press to begin the “Tribune.” Hearing of the imminent arrival of White, Lambert raced to bring out the first issue, and although the printing press was not landed until Thursday, his first issue appeared on Saturday, no mean feat of journalism. (I am reminded here of the performance of the Ipswich “Herald” which had not yet commenced publication when the announcement of the separation of Queensland was made. Its proprietors immediately rushed out an extraordinary issue, and thus the first newspaper announcement in Queensland of the separation came from a journal which was technically not yet in existence.) But to return to Mr. White. He apparently soon took over the “Tribune” and its printing press, disposing of his old press to Ebenezer Thorne who started the “Wide Bay and Burnett News” in July 1870. In 1872 the combined “Mail and Tribune” moved to Mt. Perry to become the “Mt. Perry Mail,” and in 1876 it went to Bundaberg as the “Bundaberg and Mt. Perry Mail.”

Another peripatetic journal was the “Patriot,” first published in Maryborough in 1892 by three members of the A.L.P., W. Adam, W. Mitchell, and J. Murray, who were joined by Irvine (Jack) Perel in 1893. Three years later Perel, now in control took it to Bundaberg, and in 1900 to Brisbane. The Ipswich “Observer,” established in June 1870, was moved to Brisbane late in 1878.

Presses too moved around the country. The “Gladstone Observer” press was sold in 1872 to James Smith Reid who took it to Charters Towers for the production of the “Northern Miner” in 1872.

Journalists moved continuously and no better
example can be given than Spencer Browne, who after working on the "Townsville Herald," went to the "Cooktown Herald" of which he subsequently bought a share. He was brought from there to the "Brisbane Observer" in 1881, and later was on the staff of the "Courier." He also did some work for the "Gympie Miner." C. H. Buzacott started the "Maryborough Chronicle" and the "Gladstone Observer," as well as being prominent in the development of the "Rockhampton Bulletin." He was part owner with E. J. Fried of the "Peak Downs Telegram" from 1864 till 1869, when he took over the "Gladstone Observer." Other names we shall find later.

These newspapers almost all had a high sense of their mission, and perhaps the best illustration available is the words of Richard Belford, who took over the "North Australian" in September 1861, really on behalf of Bishop Quinn. The objects of this journal under his control were to be "To decry class legislation and oligarchic monopoly of rights that should be common to every citizen, and every attempt at undue violence by ANY interest, made for the purpose of controlling the executive government of the colony.

"To conserve and defend every existing right and its full employment so long as it contributes its fair share to the income of the state.

"To assist in bringing about such legislation and electoral reforms as shall place the people of Queensland on a parallel with their neighbours in the southern colonies in all that is desirable and to confirm to them powers sufficient to stay ill-advised legislation, or the maladministration of the public estate.

"To judge with caution all proposed alteration of existing laws or innovations based on uncertain theories of political science having a tendency to protect interests, debar commercial freedom or repudiate existing agreements.

"To watch closely public accounts and expenditure with a view to economy in the civil service, and a fair distribution of the revenue on public works in various districts of the colony.

"To give no factions support to the present or any future administration, but judge their acts by their utility and impartiality in accordance with the principles we profess dealign wherever practicable with measures rather than men."
"To support and defend, should the necessity arise, the political rights, the religious equality and freedom of opinion by every section of the community."

From this it should be quite obvious that politics was to be a very important subject in the press—in fact it most commonly dominated, though in some of the northern papers at first little interest was taken in many details of politics, for they assumed that separation was just around the corner, and so concerned themselves almost entirely with local issues. But everywhere the papers became more and more involved and most of the major towns had at least two journals in hot political rivalry. Many of the important proprietors of newspapers appeared directly in politics, e.g., C. H. Buzacott, P. J. Leahy, Andrew Dunn, Irvine Perel, W. O. Hodgkinson and W. H. Groom, though the last was a politician before he acquired a newspaper. Notice that these were proprietors and not editors—it was claimed that editors were then regarded as of lesser importance.

But the community was not large enough to carry many newspapers, and as the century wore on newspapers began to combine, and we also have the appearance of chains of newspapers. P. J. Leahy and Andrew Dunn are two of the names that spring to mind in this connection. As the rivalry decreased among the older established newspapers, and as the political scene altered with the rise of a working class movement, a new challenge came in the Press that described itself as democratic, and all over the country sprang up newspapers that were Labour or advanced Radical in sympathy and policy. Finance was evidently one of the troubles of these new groups, for they were specially anxious to gain an increased share in government advertising, with the result that almost every year came a keen debate when the amounts spent on advertising were before the Assembly. This was not really new because all the smaller papers had always been anxious, but now it was made the subject of charges of class discrimination.

So much for a general account of the position in the provincial newspaper world. Perhaps if we turn to consider the press in some areas we may be able to find useful amplification of these general issues, and perhaps some mention of a few more of the persons
associated with the press may stimulate your memories.

[The lecturer then went on to discuss the history of the press in most of the important provincial towns of Queensland. Collection of data is still proceeding, and when complete the material will be available for inspection at Newstead House.]