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# Resplendent Lights of Publicity and Despicable Journals: the Early Newspapers of the Port Phillip District

By Tim Hogan

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In 1883 a prominent Australian newspaper editor and observer on Australian life wrote of Australia, and Melbourne in particular, that, 'this is the land of newspapers', and further that 'the proportion of the population that subscribe to newspapers is ten times as large as in England'. He noted that in Victoria alone there were over 200 different newspapers produced. 'If there is one institution of which Australians have reason to be proud, it is their newspaper press. Almost without exception it is thoroughly respectable and well-conducted'. Melbourne was, in the view of this observer, the only city which could claim to be a literary centre, one which attracted the most able and clever men in literature and journalism.<sup>1</sup> While some allowance for self-promotion and colonial patriotism must be allowed for in this commentary there is no doubt that the state of the newspaper industry in Victoria at this time was prosperous, extensive and confident.

It is interesting and instructive then to examine the origins of this 'land of newspapers', and 'literary centre' that was Melbourne, for they are very primitive indeed. The *Melbourne Advertiser*, the first newspaper in Victoria, was first published on 1 January 1838. This was a mere two and half years after the arrival of the first European settlers in Melbourne. It was published and edited by the redoubtable John Pascoe Fawkner who claimed in the first issue:

We do opine that Melbourne cannot reasonably remain longer marked on the chart of advancing civilization without its Advertiser. Such being our imperial Fiat we do intend to throw the resplendent light of Publicity upon all the affairs of this New Colony.<sup>2</sup>

The means used to throw this 'resplendent light of publicity' upon the affairs of Port Phillip was a handwritten (manuscript) newspaper. It was written by Fawkner himself; the calligraphy was, according to the chronicler of early Melbourne Edmund Finn, aka 'Garryowen', 'the most creditable part of the affair'. Its circulation was estimated to be no more than 30 copies.<sup>3</sup> Aside from the absence of a printing press Fawkner had not obtained a licence from the governing authorities in New South Wales to publish his newspaper. Repressive legislation introduced by Governor Darling in 1827 placed many restrictions on newspaper publishers. One of these required the lodgement of documents and fees of over £300 with the authorities in Sydney. Fawkner was not a man to be deterred easily and after being denied exemption from these requirements he went ahead and published his newspaper before the paperwork arrived in Sydney. Firstly, it was in manuscript form. Then, in early March 1838, after 10 handwritten issues, it was as a printed edition.

Why a manuscript edition? Fawkner had a printing press in Tasmania from his previous ventures in newspapers there. Why not simply wait until this was delivered? The opportunity to advertise his own commercial interests, and to collect money from subscribers, would have been factors, but perhaps more than this was Fawkner's personality, ego and keen sense of history which drove him to produce the first newspaper, albeit one in a very primitive form.<sup>4</sup> To these reasons I would add that a mechanism for disseminating information, whether political, commercial, or social, had become essential in the growing settlement of Melbourne and district, and that Fawkner, energetic and impatient by nature, exploited this opportunity at the earliest possible moment. The *Advertiser*, humble, and in the words of Garryowen 'a miserable rag',<sup>5</sup> did at least provide the inhabitants of Melbourne with a basic composition of news, advertising and public notices. Unfortunately for Fawkner the forces of authority prevailed and he was eventually forced to cease publication of the *Advertiser* on 23 April 1838. He would return to publishing in 1839 with another newspaper, but only after the law regulating newspapers in New South Wales had been amended, to make it easier for publishers in far away Port Phillip, to lodge the necessary paperwork and fees with the authorities in Sydney.

It was not long after this that the second Victorian newspaper appeared. This was the *Port Phillip Gazette* edited by George Arden and printed by Thomas Strode, which began on 27 October 1838. This was a printed and legal newspaper from the start. The proprietors had obtained a licence in Sydney before travelling

to Port Phillip. The *Gazette* proclaimed an optimistic outlook for the infant settlement of Melbourne and the Port Phillip district:

Two years have scarcely elapsed since the site of Melbourne was a wilderness, the echo of the woods answering only to the shrill coo-ee of the savage, or the long wild howl of its native dogs; now the sounds of a busy population, the noise of the hammer and saw knows scarce a moment's cessation, the ground has been cleared, and houses like mushroom are every day springing up<sup>6</sup>

The leader also informed its readers that commentary upon political matters would be held in abeyance as it did not seem reasonable to take such an interest in so infant a colony. Such restraint was to be short-lived. During the early part of 1839 the *Gazette* had already advocated a greater share of revenue for Port Phillip from the government in Sydney and was advocating independence for Australia Felix.<sup>7</sup> The *Port Phillip Gazette* was to have an eventful existence sputtering through a succession of financial and legal crises until it finally ceased in the early 1850s. Its early years, in particular, when Arden was editor, saw a number of libel cases brought against the *Gazette*, most notably by the senior Resident Judge in the Port Phillip District, Judge Willis. Arden was well educated but outspoken and passionate in expressing his views. Sometimes, this was to a point of recklessness, once allowing himself to participate in a duel with one of his critics.<sup>8</sup>

John Pascoe Fawkner re-entered the newspaper business with the *Port Phillip Patriot and Melbourne Advertiser* on 6 February 1839. The *Patriot* was less literary in style than the *Gazette* but was said to present more variety of facts.<sup>9</sup> In today's terminology it might be considered more tabloid than broadsheet. Its prose style was considered racy, spicy and colourful, especially in reportage of court cases.<sup>10</sup> In addition to the spice the *Patriot* was outspoken in its support for small business owners and land holders, and from the outset was a strong advocate for the rights and independence of the Port Phillip district.

Before too long, a third newspaper, the *Port Phillip Herald*, founded by George Cavenagh entered the market on 3 January 1840. This was the forerunner of the *Melbourne Herald* and lives on today as the *Herald-Sun*. George Cavenagh, the son of an army major who served in the British Army in India, immigrated to Sydney in about 1825. After working as a





William Strutt, 1825-1915, artist  
 J.P. Fawkner, Esq., M.L.C., 1792-1869  
 Oil on canvas  
 La Trobe Pictures Collection, State Library  
 of Victoria, H15375

law clerk and briefly as a deliverer of milk, he entered the newspaper industry. In 1836, he began publishing the *Sydney Gazette*. When he arrived in Melbourne Cavenagh was therefore an experienced newspaper proprietor and the *Herald* quickly established itself as a profitable concern.<sup>11</sup> Like most newspapers at the time its opening editorial was full of lofty sentiments about the independence and fearlessness of the press:

Unfettered by obligations to any partner here or elsewhere, we shall studiously endeavour to promote the best interest both sacred and civil of 'the land we live in'. We propose making it a rule as far as practicable to deal not with men but with measures.<sup>12</sup>

While each of these publications proclaimed to uphold the highest standards of impartiality, truthfulness, fearlessness, accuracy, and numerous other noble sentiments the press commonly hold dear, these virtues were not seen by some observers. Lady Jane Franklin, wife of the Governor of Van Diemen's Land Sir John Franklin, after a brief visit to Melbourne in 1839, observed in her diary that the *Port Phillip Patriot* was 'wretchedly printed'; the *Port Phillip Gazette* she considered better presented but the editor, George Arden, she considered bigoted and wrote whatever took his fancy, and she disapproved of the fact that he had taken a

great dislike to Captain Lonsdale.<sup>13</sup> It was not just in good society that there were qualms about the quality of the press. Charles La Trobe, Superintendent of the Port Phillip District, in a report to Governor Fitzroy, written in January 1848, made comment on most of the local press:

The general style, tone and character of the Port Phillip press has been hitherto as discreditable to the District, as the little influence which it may have exercised at home or abroad has been decidedly injurious.

In plain words, ignorance, disregard of truth and a reckless and studied spirit of misrepresentation, often amounting to the most malevolent libel, have been hitherto more or less the distinguishing characteristics of all the principal papers of Port Phillip, whether under their present or past management

On the *Port Phillip Patriot and Melbourne Advertiser* he observed, 'it systematically deals in abuse and gross misrepresentation of persons and facts'. About the *Port Phillip Gazette and Settlers Journal*, after the period of Arden's editorship, 'it seems to possess no distinctive principles or characters'. On the *Port Phillip Herald* he was a little kinder, 'although without talent or fixed principles, is upon the whole more decently conducted; and is admitted into houses where other local papers are excluded'. The *Geelong Advertiser*, already with a reputation as a gentleman's paper, received some mild praise where he notes it, 'contained more useful matter and to be more creditably and decently conducted than any other paper in this District'. Not everything La Trobe had to say was bad about the Port Phillip press and he did recognize that the inhabitants of this underdeveloped settlement were happy enough with a bad press rather than no press. La Trobe also provides a useful summary of the main concerns of the Port Phillip press, which included resistance to 'exile' labour and convict transportation, advocacy of immigration, and political and financial separation from NSW.<sup>14</sup>

If La Trobe's comments seem very critical they are mild in comparison to the commentary the editors dished out to their rivals. In the small community of Melbourne at this time, competition between the three newspapers was intense and personal. The period during March and April 1840 provides plenty of examples. George Arden, of the *Gazette*, wrote

in late March 1840 of the *Port Phillip Herald* as, 'a production so thoroughly imbued with the low impertinence of a vulgar mind'.

Its editor, George Cavenagh, was described as 'venal' and continually derided as 'formerly a milkman in Sydney'. Not relenting in 1841, Arden wrote of Cavenagh as a 'dirty creature' which was, 'busy plastering his leprosy with the exuberant terms of rhetorical sophisms'. Cavenagh in reply to some of these attacks dubbed the *Gazette* as, 'this contemptible rag'.<sup>15</sup>

Fawkner, in the *Patriot*, could not let comments such as these go unremarked upon and accused George Cavenagh of being the editor of, 'the most intolerant, bigoted, and lyingly [sic] censorious journal in the Colonies'. Arden, in turn, did not ignore the *Patriot*, complimenting it as, 'an old woman whose low and impudent vulgarity would do no disgrace to the forensic abilities of a Billingsgate fish-hag'.<sup>16</sup> This verbal war of invective went on for several years and its reflection of the fictional newspaper wars in Dicken's *Pickwick Papers* was uncanny and curious, as a contemporary reader, Louisa Meredith observed.<sup>17</sup> From these observations one imagines reporters from the rival papers at fisticuffs in the streets of Melbourne. Happily, Edmund Finn, an early reporter for the *Herald*, recalls that relations between reporters were competitive but cordial.<sup>18</sup>

Whatever the editors may have expressed about each others publications there seemed to be a market for each of these journals for several years. In less than five years since the settlement of Melbourne and with a population of a little over 10,000 this frontier town was graced with three different newspapers, each one producing a profit. By June 1846 a new publication appeared. This was the *Melbourne Argus*, which began as a radical, progressive journal under the editorship of William Kerr. La Trobe's view of the *Melbourne Argus* under Kerr's editorship was:

The violent and disgraceful party spirit that has sprung up in Melbourne [a reference to sectarian conflicts and local council election conflicts], although it may not have originated with the editor [Kerr] of this paper, has nevertheless mainly been kept alive by his publications, and the general tone of the *Argus* under his management is quite as discreditable as that which distinguished the *Patriot* newspaper, formerly under his control.<sup>19</sup>

In late 1848, Edward Wilson, in partnership with J. S. Johnston, took over the *Melbourne Argus* and through astute management built the renamed '*Argus*' into the largest and most profitable newspaper in the colony. But if La Trobe, who found most of the press 'discreditable' in 1848, was expecting any change in character he was to be disappointed. In Wilson he was to find a critic like no other. One of La Trobe's inadequacies according to his critics was his timid advocacy for a better deal from the government in Sydney, and his failure to advance the cause for separation of the Port Phillip District from New South Wales. These criticisms were often made in the harshest of terms with La Trobe's administration described as, 'utterly indefensible', and his actions as of being a 'traitor to the community'.<sup>20</sup> There was sometimes praise for his actions, particularly his opposition to convict labour for Victoria, but mostly it was a continual stream of criticism in the press for La Trobe.<sup>21</sup>

The strong press criticism which had been building since the late 1840s reached an almost farcical crescendo in the early months of 1853 when the *Argus* regularly ran a column headed, 'Wanted a Governor'. An item from 2 March 1853 is fairly typical. After outlining the need for a, 'real Governor', it asserts that, 'the appointment of one even reasonably honest and able man to that post, would in a month remove nineteen twentieths of the evils by which we are surrounded'.<sup>22</sup> Prominent critics such as John Pascoe Fawkner were given ample space to document the case against La Trobe.<sup>23</sup> The controversy in the pages of the *Argus* only added to its increasing prominence and prosperity. By the early 1850s, exploiting the gold boom with great skill, it quickly came to dominate the newspaper market by absorbing, or forcing out of business, many of its competitors.

The 1840s had seen a number of other newspapers emerge in the district. Some of these, like the *Geelong Advertiser*, founded in 1840, and others in Portland and Port Fairy were to succeed. But the competition in Melbourne was tough and papers such as the *Melbourne Times*, 1842-1843, *Melbourne Courier*, 1844-1846, the *Standard and Port Phillip Gazetteer*, 1844-1845, *Observer*, 1848-1849 and the *Albion*, 1847-1848, all failed to survive, as did the pioneering efforts of Fawkner with the *Port Phillip Patriot*, and Arden's *Port Phillip Gazette*. Some of these papers offered different views. The *Melbourne Times*, for example, presented itself as a, 'journal suited to the means of the labouring classes'.<sup>24</sup> Others were produced for a specific audience like the *Port Phillip Christian Herald* (1846), or the *Illustrated Australian Magazine* (1850). The failure of some of these papers to survive did

dilute the plurality of opinion in Victoria at this time. But the concentration of papers in Melbourne into a few large ones was probably inevitable as the colony continued to grow, especially after the gold discoveries. The era, when small scale operators with little capital could start a newspaper in the metropolis and survive for a period of time, without the threat of overwhelming competition from giants such as the *Argus* and later the *Age*, had passed. The colour, individuality and libellous nature of the early press was replaced by a more professional and sober outlook, although one which still contained a tradition of liberalism and strong support for the growth of democratic institutions for society.

By May 1854, at the end of La Trobe's period as Governor of Victoria, there had been over 40 newspapers produced. Most of these had not survived, but in mid 1854 Melbourne was served by two daily newspapers, with a third, the *Age*, soon to begin in October 1854. In other regions there were newspapers in the long settled western towns of Geelong, Port Fairy, Portland and Warrnambool, and the new gold districts of Ballarat, Bendigo, and Castlemaine. With the onset of the gold rush Victoria was well on the way to becoming 'the land of newspapers'.

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