

Reading the Newspaper in Colonial Otago

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On 9 July 1884 Archibald Fletcher, the town clerk of Gore and a well-known solicitor as well, read an essay to the Gore Literary and Debating Society on the subject of 'The Local Press'. Fletcher's presentation was substantial and thoughtful. Its argumentative tone was in keeping with the spirit of public debate in Gore in the 1880s, but its reflections on the press were novel and unusually rich, reflecting Fletcher's deep interest in the question of education and his local reputation as a man of 'luminous intellect'.¹ Fletcher's talk, which was published two days later in the *Mataura Ensign*, opened by inviting his audience to take an imaginative journey south along the banks of the Mataura River from Gore to the site of the Mataura paper mill.² Fletcher directed his audience's attention to 'a boiling cauldron' filled with the 'tussac', which 'in its native freedom' grew 'profusely' in the region. In the factory, this humble local raw material was being transformed:

it is boiled, thumped, pounded into pulp – then it is passed on to another vessel, mixed with other chemical substances until appearing as a thick liquid it is passed further on, and still flowing it finds a lower level and reaches a treadle which shakes it and keeps it in proper solution, and even, so as to furnish to the next operation a uniform supply. The laws of heat, motion and force, if these are not essentially one, are seen in active operation – the liquid passes from the treadle under a roller, now coils around it, then passing along another level and over another roller, getting more and more cohesive as the fibres of the substance are getting entwined again, and it is relieved by degrees of the watery element. The moisture dries off, and soon, until after going along and over a series of plains and rollers, we, following along, find ourselves at the further end, call *Finis!* and discover a large roll of paper ready for removal.³

From here, Fletcher drew his listeners and readers back to Gore, to the *Mataura Ensign* print shop, where another set of transformations were enacted. Standing at 'the centre of the floor', an observer beholds 'mechanical skill. Motion, force, wheels – a sheet of paper is carefully placed, the machinery is set in motion, the paper is gradually drawn in, goes winding around, and flies off at the other side where it is received, no longer white, but spotted with letters, dotted with words, and pregnant

with ideas.' Fletcher stressed the tremendous power of the technologies that enabled these transformations and underscored their cultural value. He saw the paper factory and print shop as educative sites: he criticized the local school committee for neglecting the value of 'these two practical halls of education'. '[O]ne such example', he suggested, 'is worth ten precepts, and the ideas and ambitions, that might be here germinated would bear useful fruit in some mechanical form another day.' This failure, he argued, was particularly serious given the constraints of colonial life: 'In this colony want of mechanical skill means to remain dependent.'

Fletcher's essay then directed his audience's attention onto the Gore railway station – 'the local centre of attraction'. In this temple to the transformative prowess of industrial technologies, passengers could purchase a paper and thereby be inserted in a chain of connection:

the newsboy melodiously sings – 'The MATAURA ENSIGN, only three-pence,' and so for the smallest silver coin that circulates in the colony we are able to read on what was last week tussock grass and this week solution in the mill, but to-day firm paper, an epitome of the words spoken yesterday, 12,000 miles away, by the most august sovereign in the world!

But for Fletcher the value of newspapers – which were by 1884 drawing on the marvels of the telegraph and railway – was not that they simply reconnected colonists to 'Home' with such startling speed. More broadly, he argued that the colonial frontiers of America and Australasia had demonstrated that newspapers were elevating, progressive forces: 'where light is there is life and more life and more freedom.' But their value had to be actively embraced: it was possible to ignore newspapers or to remain blind to their benefits.

If there is a man who does not read the papers, the current reviews and magazines, such a man is only partially alive. I do not advocate that a man should spend in the news-rooms the room he should give to his business and family circle, but I do not hesitate to say that a man is far better there than over the card table or in the billiard room.

The responsibility for the improving power of the press ultimately lay with editors. While a newspaper was a 'tree of knowledge', it was up to the editor to ensure that it offered a wholesome diet of reading. The careful editor, ever 'anxious to promote the good name of those around him, and to elevate them physically, mentally, and morally', should be vigilant: 'he carefully eschews the introduction into his establishment of what makes vice familiar.' At the same time, a good editor had to be a firm critic of wrongs. For the sake of the community, the editor had to have a strong pen from which 'the lecture is given unflinchingly, and the whip laid on without fear or favor.'⁴

I begin with this lengthy précis of Fletcher's essay because it is a powerful reminder that some colonists thought critically and innovatively about the media: they were capable of reflecting on both the materiality of newspapers and the cultural work they carried out. Most scholarly writing on the colonial media has suggested that colonists understood the newspaper either as an ideological instrument used by powerful editors to achieve their ends or, more commonly, as an 'index' or 'barometer' of public opinion. Not only does Fletcher's talk expose the limitations of such views, but it also provides a useful starting point for the alternative approach to the cultural history of newspapers that I outline here. Building on Fletcher, I suggest that rather than approaching newspapers simply through the analytical problematic of representation – the common approach of historians of colonial intellectual, political and cultural life – it is more useful to think about them as 'assemblages', the complex product of a conjuncture of a particular set of materials, skills, technologies, financial arrangements and cultural conventions. In the second half of the essay I examine the social life of these assemblages, suggesting that we need to be wary of a simple model of newspapers as vehicles for ideological transmission and instead recognize the ways in which they fashioned social connections and routinely linked individuals into public conversations. I also note the ways in which colonial reading practices actively disassembled and reassembled newspapers, practices that remind us that colonists were active consumers and creative reworkers of the printed word.

In this essay, I want to shift away from the ideological readings of the press that have framed both recent work on Māori niupepa and a longer tradition of work on colonial newspapers.⁵ One of the leading commentators on the development of colonial print culture, Ross Harvey, has questioned the political significance of the press. Harvey has suggested that colonial newspapers were not nearly as influential as colonial editors imagined, arguing that their power was tempered by limited circulation, their commercial priorities and their continued investment in local concerns rather than the great political struggles of cultivating class consciousness or fighting against censorship. This essay pushes against Harvey's formulation by suggesting that an anachronistic understanding of politics moulds his evaluation of the political significance of the press and that he is insufficiently attentive to the ways in which the culture of reading should shape our interpretation of extant circulation figures. More broadly, I do not follow Harvey to see the significance attached to commerce and local questions as signs of the 'failure' of the press, but rather argue that these were some of the features that actually made newspapers a central element of the colonial cultural landscape. In sketching an alternative approach to the history of colonial

newspapers, I want to take a cue from Archibald Fletcher's 1884 talk and suggest that colonial newspapers can be productively understood as complex assemblages. This formulation echoes recent work by scholars like Bruno Latour who see the kind of social action needed to produce a newspaper as consisting of an 'assemblage of heterogeneous entities', which may include machines, objects and tools as well as people, that are brought into a stabilized, if not static, set of relationships.⁶ This starting point opens up a space for historians to think about the interconnections between technology, skill, communications and transportation, material, content and circulation in enabling newspaper production and consumption. Fletcher's image of the printed pages in the *Mataura Ensign* as 'spotted with letters, dotted with words, and pregnant with ideas' captured the newspaper's essential blend of the material and semiotic. To appreciate the cultural meaning of the newspaper in colonial Otago (or more broadly for that matter), we need to appreciate both of these elements.

At a material level, newspapers in colonial Otago were produced out of the marriage of materials (including ink, paper and type) with tools and machinery (from compositors' sticks to the printing press itself), a relationship mediated by the skills of the compositors, printers and other workers. The actual content of newspapers was sourced through a wide variety of networks. Staff from the newspaper would report on major local events, recounting the proceedings of important civic meetings, offering précis of political speeches and public lectures, and recording significant local news, opinion and rumour. Regular correspondents would provide news from throughout the surrounding region, often in weekly or fortnightly columns that provided detailed accounts of farming, church and civic life. The newspapers of rural towns also had correspondents who filed reportage from provincial cities like Invercargill and Dunedin. In turn, newspapers in those cities also had correspondents in the other main centres and in the national capital (Wellington from 1865).⁷ Initially, ships – or postal riders, coach services and then trains in inland districts – carrying other newspapers were a key source of news from other parts of New Zealand, as well as accounts of important events in the Australian colonies, Britain and beyond. From the 1870s, news would frequently be sourced through telegraphic services which were themselves fed information by an increasingly extensive and dense network of telegraph lines and offices. The development of these telegraphic news agencies – some of which had their origins in the aspirations of southern editors to influence the flow of information – never produced complete standardization in reporting.⁸ Telegraphic services did produce a repertoire of news stories that were widely reproduced, but these were always mixed with original reportage on local developments, accounts of meetings, speeches and community occasions, and stories on the politics of

the district to produce distinctive news mixes in the newspapers that served various localities.

Of course, news was only one component of the newspaper. Editorial staff would draft opinion pieces, editorial statements, and responses to major news stories. But they would often also excise smaller interest pieces and literary extracts from a range of other colonial, Australian, American and British newspapers and periodicals; even after the advent of the telegraphic news services, this 'scissors and paste' journalism remained a common practice. This kind of content, together with news and editorial opinion, is the material that historians routinely use, but they generally fail to pay much attention to the other components of the form, including the advertisements that were central to the commercial viability of publication and that played a pivotal role in the development of colonial commercial life.⁹

Editors had always attempted to promote engagement, hoping that their newspapers would be at the centre of public debate. Letters to the editor were a central element that allowed this dialogue, even if editors ultimately controlled the terms of exchange with their readers. From the 1870s onwards newspaper editors worked hard to cultivate the widest possible range of readers and began to offer content that was designed to serve a range of particular tastes, interests and needs. One key innovation was targeting content for women beyond the serialization of popular sentimental and sensational novels that were frequently understood as catering particularly for female literary tastes. The *Tuapeka Times* established a regular ladies' column in 1868, noting that 'Our Colonial Press has not hitherto distinguished itself for gallantry. By way of showing a good example we propose in future to devote a portion of our space to matters interesting to our fair readers.' The editor of the *Times* expected female readers to both read and write for the column.¹⁰ By the early 1870s a 'Ladies Column' was a feature of the *Bruce Herald* and the *Otago Witness*, and then the *Clutha Leader* quickly adopted this innovation.¹¹ These columns, which combined household management tips, parenting advice, and reflections on marriage and parenthood with some light literary material and discussions of fashion, quickly became a standard part of southern newspapers. Their form was refined in the *Otago Witness*, where the pioneering journalist Louisa Alice Baker shaped the ladies' page between 1882 and 1893. Baker actively engaged with readers, producing original copy, considering advice, and eschewing recycled extracts and the use of scissors and paste journalism.¹² Children's columns built on this precedent and they were a feature of the *Otago Witness* from the mid-1870s, and from 1882 framed as 'Our Little Folks' under the editorship of William Fenwick. This page was reshaped as 'Dot's Little Folks' and under Baker's growing influence it was increasingly dedicated to supporting and improving children's composition through a highly interactive column.¹³

Similar initiatives developed elsewhere. In Gore, the *Mataura Ensign* began to intermittently feature a 'children's corner' from the mid-1890s.¹⁴ From 1899 a dedicated children's column was run by William Gilchrist, headmaster of East Gore School, under the guise of 'Uncle Phil', who was also committed to nurturing the writing skills of children.¹⁵

As newspapers widened the range of their content, their nature as assemblages became larger, more variegated and sophisticated: this is perhaps most obvious if the early issues of the *Otago Witness* in 1851, when the paper was a four-page weekly, are compared with the *Witness* in the early twentieth century, when it typically ran to 84 pages and incorporated photographs, between eight and twelve pages of half-tone engravings, a weekly cartoon and a large range of original journalistic and literary content.¹⁶

If we think of newspapers as complete assemblages, the newspaper office itself needs to be thought of as a key junction point where a range of networks – those that conveyed materials, the professional connections and career trajectories that brought workers together, and the various communication systems and patterns of reportage that produced content – converged and were knotted together, enabling the production of a new assemblage of ideas and information in the newspaper's distinctive affordable, light and easily transportable form. But newspaper offices were not only centrifugal sites which drew things in; they were centripetal sites too from which information, news, ideas, arguments, and an endless variety of words were disseminated outwards, carried by newsboys, sent on to booksellers and stationers, to railway news-stands, to libraries, reading rooms, mechanics' institutes and athenaeums, to office desks and kitchen tables in the locality and beyond.

Newspapers in colonial Otago were typically made up of the same elements that shaped newspapers at 'Home' in Britain. But throughout this period colonial newspaper production depended upon imported paper, ink, type and presses, even as it became increasingly less dependent on imported skill. The first two paper mills in New Zealand were established in Otago, first at Woodhaugh and then Mataura in the mid-1870s. Despite the massive capital investment required to launch these endeavours, and despite Fletcher's implication that the *Ensign* was produced using Mataura paper, these plants primarily produced wrapping paper and bags and there was no locally produced paper of sufficient quality for printing.¹⁷ As a result, different grades of printing paper were imported from a variety of sources. Unfortunately, the contours of this trade remain unclear, even though it furnished the fundamental raw material for colonial economic, political and intellectual life.¹⁸ Inks of various kinds were also imported, including printer's ink, and auctioneers, wholesalers and specialist stationers regularly sold these in colonial Otago.¹⁹ Ink that entered southern ports

was initially exempt from customs, but by the 1890s there were complaints about the 20% duty applied to printing ink.²⁰ This reliance on imported ink occasioned some concern amongst colonial commentators. In 1872 the *Tuapeka Times* observed that ‘a great portion of the ink imported into this country is inferior or becomes so from the long sea voyage’. It noted recent accounts of ‘Mr. B. Wells of Taranaki’ who had produced ink from the liquor extracted from the bark of the hinau tree mixed with copperas, gum and alum. The report also suggested that tutu might be a suitable and easily available local ink base.²¹ The hardware of the print trade – including presses, typesetting machines, guillotines and type – was also imported, despite the growing size and technical capacity of Dunedin’s engineering sector.²² Archival limitations make it hard to reconstruct the processes through which printers assembled their materials and these printing-house collections, as Keith Maslen notes, were frequently reordered through a ‘dual process of discard and purchase’.²³ This process of assemblage was, as Maslen notes, ‘the first creative act of the printer’ as they built their ‘stock from the plethora of competing designs’.²⁴ The selection of typefaces, type size and decorative elements gave each printer a distinctive visual repertoire. In the case of the Dunedin printer Matthews, Baxter and Co., the firm had assembled a collection of 89 typefaces produced by European and North American craftsmen by the mid-1880s.²⁵ Printing furniture and presses too were imported, including the demy Columbian hand-press, manufactured in Edinburgh, that was used by Matthews, Baxter and Co.²⁶

In terms of skill, most of the technically proficient staff who manned print shops were initially ‘imported’ like paper, ink and type. The leading newspapermen and printers in early Otago had begun their training and careers in Britain or the Australian colonies. One of the printers who worked on the *Otago Witness* in its early years (1851-52) was Daniel Campbell from Edinburgh, who delighted in the improved wages and terms of labour that his skills won in the colony.²⁷ Before founding the *Otago Daily Times*, Julius Vogel had become a goldfields correspondent, journalist and editor in Victoria where he learnt about the dynamics of the newspaper trade.²⁸ In Britain, Benjamin Farjeon trained as a printer’s devil and then as a compositor on the *Nonconformist*, experience that prepared Farjeon for his work as a contributor, sub-editor and compositor on the *Otago Daily Times*.²⁹ H.A. Reynolds served his apprenticeship on the *Cambridge Chronicle* before taking up a position with the *Otago Daily Times* in 1875.³⁰ Alexander Cameron, a Glasgow-trained lithographer, developed his expertise in the large Melbourne printing house Fergusson and Mitchell before moving to Dunedin in 1862 as manager of its Otago branch, which he ran until 1891.³¹ David Finkelstein has used the career of men like Cameron to argue that Scottish diasporic networks were central in shaping the development of print

in colonial Otago, suggesting that this created powerful linkages between Dunedin, Victoria and Scotland itself.³²

With time, however, skilled workers in the world of print were increasingly locally trained. Most notably, George Fenwick, founder of the *Cromwell Argus*, manager of the *Otago Guardian*, managing director of the *Otago Daily Times*, and moving force behind the establishment of the New Zealand Press Association, initially trained as an apprentice at the *Otago Witness* and then worked in the *Otago Daily Times*'s job-printery in the early 1860s, learning much from Farjeon and Vogel.³³ The two other proprietors who worked alongside Reynolds at the *Weekly Budget*, John Smith and George Davis, were both trained in Dunedin, Smith as a printer at Wilkie & Co. and Davis as a compositor at the *Otago Daily Times*.³⁴ And, perhaps most significantly, John Mackay, who became Government Printer in 1896, learnt his trade during five years working at the *Bruce Herald* in Milton (which was owned by his brother Joseph), and a year's service at Messrs. Mills, Dick and Co. in Dunedin, before he established his own printing firm in that city in 1871. It is important to remember that locally trained men like Mackay were never simply 'Scottish' and were plugged into global trade networks: in Mackay's case travel in continental Europe helped him refresh his skills and extended his knowledge of international materials and techniques.³⁵

Across the length of their careers men like John Mackay worked for a range of firms and in a variety of locations; printers were frequently mobile, and the trade was dynamic. This was one of the manifold pressures on printing enterprises which frequently were challenged by the basic structural parameters of colonial operations: the small size of the colonial market and the cost of imported plant and materials. In this context, many newspaper printeries offered a wide range of services: their job-printery was central in generating income, but this was further supplemented by selling stationery, books, periodicals and newspapers, serving as forwarding agents and operating subscription libraries.³⁶ Even with this seeking of multiple income streams through diversification, printing firms often failed and broke apart. At a commercial level, print shops were tenuous networks; but then again, capital, skills, plant and materials could frequently be reassembled in new endeavours. Traue is correct that failure was a key part of the history of colonial newspapers; but so too was absorption and consolidation.³⁷ By 1899 the *Mataura Ensign*, which had been established in 1878 by Joseph Mackay, operated under the full title of the *Mataura Ensign with which are incorporated 'The Waikaia Herald', 'Southern Free Press', 'Waimea Plains Review', & 'Clutha County Gazette'*, a name that recorded how newspapers serving very small rural readerships were absorbed into better-capitalized concerns centred in larger provincial towns.³⁸

These commercial histories of collapse, consolidation and re-creation were intimately connected with the ability to effectively cultivate, reach and maintain a readership. Harvey has used circulation figures to question the reach of the press: he suggests mean circulation figures for individual titles were 7.2% from the 1840s to the mid-1850s, rising to 11.6% in 1862-63 and around 14% in the 1870s.³⁹ I think we need to be wary of this use of circulation figures as a measure of impact. Kenton Storey's work on the press in colonial Auckland has highlighted some of the very real problems with Harvey's treatment of circulation figures. Harvey measured subscription rates against total population, a strategy that underestimated the reach of newspapers, as gross population figures included children and the significant numbers of colonists who were unable to read in the 1850s and 1860s.⁴⁰ Another problem is that Harvey uses the average circulation of *individual* newspapers as a measure of the *total* reach of the press. Harvey fails to recognize that in many centres there was more than one newspaper and many colonists read not only a single local title – they may have read two or more papers produced in more densely populated localities, as well as reading other significant titles from within their province or beyond.⁴¹ The limitations of Harvey's approach are particularly clear if we look at larger urban centres like Dunedin. In 1878 the circulation rates of individual newspapers when measured against the total population for the city and suburbs (32,792) were as follows: the daily *Evening Star* reached 22.3% while its rival the *Evening Tribune* reached 17.8%, the *Daily Morning Herald* reached 10.7%, a figure that was also about the average circulation of the *Otago Daily Times*, while the weekly *Witness* reached 20% and another weekly, the *Penny Post*, was read by 6.1% of the total population and the *Saturday Advertiser* probably reached around 20%.⁴² Even without considering the circulation figures for other, smaller papers, these figures suggest that individual titles did actually have a significant reach, and when these titles are aggregated it is clear both that there were high rates of readership and that a significant group of readers were taking more than one newspaper.

Such figures do not necessarily allow us to think about how these newspapers operated within cultures of reading. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that circulation figures do not capture the total readership: Harvey himself fleetingly notes that several individuals might club together to share a newspaper and that some copies of newspapers were read multiple times in libraries, mechanics' institutes and athenaeums. In colonial Otago a well-stocked newspaper and periodical table was a central lure of such institutions and many had tight regulations to ensure access to the latest issues: at the Lawrence Athenaeum, for example, readers were restricted to

no more than 15 minutes with a single issue of a newspaper to ensure that all readers were able to read popular titles.

As I have already noted, Harvey's minimizing interpretation of circulation figures allows him to question the political effectiveness of newspapers, stressing that newspapers had a limited social reach and remained preoccupied with local concerns.⁴³ Harvey's concern with 'national influence' is an anachronistic measure, as for the most of the nineteenth century politics in New Zealand was overwhelmingly local and provincial; it was only with the expanding franchise and the political mobilisations of the late 1880s that national politics captured voters' imaginations.⁴⁴ The delayed emergence of the nation as an important level of political activity reflected the reality that local, district and provincial politics had an immediate impact on people's lives. It was town councils, road and drainage boards, local school committees and provincial education boards that made many of the key decisions that shaped the material and cultural framework of colonists' daily experience. These institutions were also the lifeblood of colonial democracy – they were forums where local people could challenge established policies and priorities and put forward their visions of the future. In this context, newspapers played a key role, serving as both a record of local democratic processes (recording the proceedings of meetings, reprinting speeches and reporting on elections) and a forum for political debate. In this regard, colonial newspapers were never solely a vehicle for the transmission of 'neutral information', but rather served as crucial spaces for conversation and contestation.⁴⁵ They were a vital cultural precondition and framework for colonial democracy.

Before 1900 there were no colonial newspapers that were national in outlook or that had a full and consistent national reach. The Catholic *Tablet*, produced and published in Dunedin, overshadowed its Catholic rivals published in Auckland and perhaps came closest to having a truly national reach, but its reportage placed stronger emphasis on the south, even as its editorial position was consistently informed by a kind of Catholic internationalism. The other prominent religious newspapers and periodicals were Presbyterian and these again were primarily regional in their flavour, reflecting the independence of the Synod of Otago and Southland until 1901. Until that point, most other newspapers primarily served a local readership, with the exception of the weekly *Otago Witness* and to a lesser extent the *Southland Times* and the *Otago Daily Times*, which were widely read across the southern portion of the South Island. As Jonathan Culler has observed in a different context, regionally-fragmented patterns of newspaper readership remain a stumbling block for Benedict Anderson's argument that it was the shared experience of reading the newspaper that was a vital element in the production of the 'imagined community' of the nation.⁴⁶ But even

though this reveals one of the difficulties in applying Anderson's theory to colonial New Zealand, it is important to recognize that the growing centrality of national politics in newspaper content in the 1890s, as well as the increasingly rapid reporting of events as a result of the elaboration of the telegraph network and the development of news agencies, did have important consequences. These shifts did not so much produce a national identity, but rather helped consolidate the nation space, joining up more places and integrating them more firmly into the networks that comprised the nation. A coherent or clearly-defined nationalism was not the immediate result of these bonds, but they did begin to trigger an affective shift amongst colonists, enabling the emergence of what John Hirst has termed in the Australian context a 'sentimental nation'.⁴⁷ This gradual identification with the nation is suggested, for example, by reports on the Brunner mine disaster in March 1896: in the south, the *North Otago Times*, *Southland Times* and *Tuapeka Times* all ran the same story filed by telegraph describing the events as a 'national disaster';⁴⁸ the *Mataura Ensign* ran an editorial under the headline 'A National Disaster' which reflected on the 'common sorrow and bereavement' that united the colony; and the *Bruce Herald* editorial also framed the explosion as a 'national disaster'.⁴⁹

But newspapers not only shaped colonial political life, they were also the fundamental infrastructure for intellectual life in colonial Otago. They were venues where books were discussed and debated, ideas were shared and refined, and where colonists developed arguments about the nature of the natural world, human society, the past and the future. Newspapers both recorded and stimulated intellectual activity. Newspapers were, of course, a key source of literature: through their pages readers enjoyed serialized British and local novels of various kinds, from serious 'high' literature to the sentimental and sensational.⁵⁰ In reprinting committee minutes and recounting the proceedings of regular meetings, newspapers documented the operation of a host of learned societies, from the regional philosophical institutes to mechanics' institutes and athenaeums, from libraries to debating societies and the ubiquitous mutual improvement societies. By offering extensive reportage of public lectures and appraisals of touring speakers, newspapers not only kept their readers up to date about the latest public events, but introduced them to new, interesting, and controversial ideas. Reports on the meetings of local agricultural and horticultural societies and farmers' clubs also disseminated valued 'useful knowledge' and shared information about the kind of low-level experimentation and environmental observation that was at the heart of rural life.⁵¹ At the same time, local newspapers were important forums for discussing powerful new scientific ideas that had a global reach: Lyell's geology,⁵² Darwin's theories about the origins of species and humanity's place in nature,⁵³ and Tyndall's claims

about the cultural authority of science in his famous 1874 Belfast address were all the subject of significant coverage and discussion.⁵⁴

Taken collectively, these points underscore the primacy of the newspaper in colonial cultural and intellectual life.⁵⁵ Sir Robert Stout, who had a long-standing interest in the politics of education and reading, noted in his *How and What to Read* (1908) that ‘the reading of serious books is not popular’ amongst colonists, suggesting that ‘newspapers have become a substitute for books’.⁵⁶ Stefan Collini has suggested in the British context that it was the abolition of the stamp tax in 1854 which not only made newspapers of all sorts more affordable, but also enabled the emergence of the influential monthly magazines like *Macmillan’s* and the *Cornhill* as the primary forums for intellectual debate.⁵⁷ In New Zealand, these British periodicals were eagerly cannibalized by colonial editors for literary extracts and opinion. But the reality was that a small and dispersed population of colonists was unable to sustain the regular production of such periodicals locally. At one level, newspapers were ascendant in colonial New Zealand because imported books were expensive and a sustainable local periodical literature was slow to emerge.

Finally, it is useful to remember that the reading practices of many colonists were implicitly shaped by their understanding that newspapers were assemblages, as they effectively disassembled and reassembled them. Readers of course rarely read the whole of a newspaper systematically in the fashion of a novel, from the beginning (the top left corner of page one) to the end (the bottom right-hand corner of the final page). Particular readers might be drawn to specific parts of the newspaper: some might be interested in the advertisements and public announcements; farmers, merchants and moneymen might be especially drawn to market reports; others might be interested in the latest news; others still might be most interested in editorial comment or literary extracts. And the growing range and complexity of the newspaper assemblage encouraged selective and partial reading, where female readers might focus on the ladies’ page, young readers would prioritize the children’s page and farmers might concentrate their attention on market reports and farmers’ column. Thus, in their actual reading practice many colonists would have seen the newspaper not as a single text to be read sequentially, but rather as an open-ended collection of texts to be prioritized and sorted for reading in a particular order (which might, of course, change from day to day).

This practice was itself a kind of extractive reading, where particular elements were consumed from a larger collection and the rest were ignored. The logic of this kind of practice was further extended by a significant cohort of colonial readers who kept clipping books. These included the runholder and pioneering historian W.H. Roberts, the ethnographer and

historian Herries Beattie, the politician and historian Robert McNab, the Genge family in Gore, the Dunedin tram conductor John Craig, the politician William Downie Stewart, the suffragist Lady Anna Stout, the Cromwell horticulturalist Adolf Moritzson, the mayor of Caversham Robert Rutherford, and even the notorious murderer, artist and escapee Lionel Terry.⁵⁸ These clipping books were important resources that individuals used not only as *aides-mémoire* but also as flexible archives that could furnish useful material for speeches and writing of various kinds. More routinely, southern colonists cut out recipes and domestic advice from newspapers and clipped family news and interesting stories to include with their letters. Being cheap, light, and conveniently arranged into narrow columns, newspaper texts almost invited disassembly. Newspapers themselves recommended ways to use back editions: in 1890 the *Tuapeka Times* suggested that readers use back issues to wrap winter clothing for storage, as printing ink could stand in ‘defiance to the stoutest moth’, to lay under carpet, and use as a wrapping to prolong the life of ice.⁵⁹ Two years later the same paper suggested that beyond being used to light fires, sheets of newspaper could be laid across the chest of people suffering from bronchial problems ‘in severe weather’, were useful for a variety of cleaning tasks and were valuable resource for pattern making.⁶⁰ These colonial practices were extensions of the tremendous mobility of paper and the complex patterns of its reuse, recycling and re-creation that Leah Price has identified as deeply embedded in Victorian culture.⁶¹

These examples of the creative reading practices and the multiple uses of newspapers help us move beyond a narrow understanding of colonial newspapers as ideological instruments. Here I have used Archibald Fletcher’s 1884 talk as a foundation for arguing that it is useful for us to think of print-shops as complex networks created by the confluence of capital, plant, materials and skills. I have suggested that colonial newspapers were themselves assemblages of a range of different elements and that these assemblages became more sophisticated and variegated with time. They were never seamless closed instruments that could simply be wielded for ideological ends, as the very nature of their form encouraged cultures of reading that were selective, extractive, and which even effectively disassembled the finished text.

Thinking critically about the nature of colonial newspapers at this particular moment is pressing, as the Māori niupepa project and *Papers Past* have opened up new research possibilities. Digitization and powerful search engines facilitate processing and locating material with breathtaking speed. But digitized texts distance us from the materiality of newspapers as artefacts, and databases can encourage us to think of newspapers as simply

stores of information rather than objects with a complex provenance and rich social life in the hands of readers and users. Even as these potent research tools enable us to fashion new readings of the colonial past, we must not neglect the writings of reflective colonial observers like Archibald Fletcher, which offer analytically productive starting points for thinking about the shape of colonial life.

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- 1 The outlines of Fletcher's public career can be gleaned from the *Mataura Ensign* (ME), 18 May 1883, p.2, 22 July 1884, p.3, 28 March 1890, p.2, 31 August 1897, p.2, and *Southland Times* (ST), 17 September 1883, p.3. The *Ensign's* obituary stressed his intellectual abilities and his prominence in public life: ME, 28 August 1897, p.3. On the argumentative culture of Gore see Tony Ballantyne, 'Thinking Local: Knowledge, Sociability and Community in Gore's Intellectual Life, 1875-1914', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 44, 2 (2010), pp.138-56.
 - 2 For the history of this mill see John H. Angus, *Papermaking Pioneers: A History of New Zealand Paper Mills Limited and its Predecessors*, Mataura, 1976. For a detailed contemporary account see *The Cyclopaedia of New Zealand: Otago & Southland Provincial Districts*, Christchurch, 1905, pp.1091-2.
 - 3 ME, 11 July 1884, p.5. In fact, while some tussock was used in paper production as a local alternative to the esparto grass used in English mills, it was not the sole material used by the mill. The *Cyclopaedia* entry on the mill noted that the main raw materials for paper making were 'bags, rope, flax, rags, old paper, books, telegraph forms, imported jute and wood pulp': *Cyclopaedia: Otago & Southland*, p.1091.
 - 4 ME, 11 July 1884, p.5.
 - 5 The connections between newspapers and ideology have been considered in Patrick Day, *The Making of the New Zealand Press: A Study of the Organizational and Political Concerns of New Zealand Newspaper Controllers, 1840-1880*, Wellington, 1990; Jenifer Curnow, Ngapare Hopa and Jane McRae, eds, *Rere Atua, Taku Manu: Discovering History, Language and Politics in the Maori language Newspapers*, Auckland, 2002; Lachy Paterson, *Colonial Discourses: Niupepa Māori, 1855-1863*, Dunedin, 2006; Tony Ballantyne, 'Teaching Maori About Asia', in Henry Johnson and Brian Moloughney, eds, *Asia in the Making of New Zealand*, Auckland, 2006.
 - 6 Bruno Latour, 'On Actor-Network theory', p.7, <http://www.cours.fse.ulaval.ca/edc-65804/latour-clarifications.pdf>; more generally see Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford, 2005.
 - 7 For a useful overview of the structure of information gathering and news reporting in the 1880s see Rollo Arnold, *New Zealand's Burning: The Settlers' World in the Mid 1880s*, Wellington, 1994.
 - 8 Compare Ron Palenski, 'Making of New Zealanders: The Evolution of National Identity in the Nineteenth Century', PhD thesis, University of Otago, 2010, p.68.
 - 9 There is insufficient space here to adequately treat the importance of advertising: this is something I will be pursuing in future work.
 - 10 *Tuapeka Times* (TT), 19 September 1868, p.5.
 - 11 For example, *Bruce Herald* (BH), 17 April 1872, p.3; *Otago Witness* (OW), 3 October 1874, p.21; *Clutha Leader* (CL), 10 February 1876, p.7.

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- 12 Janet McCallum, 'Baker, Louisa Alice', *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography. Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, updated 1-Sep-10, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/3b4/1>.
- 13 OW, 30 December 1876, p.19, 7 April 1877, p.19, 5 August 1882, p.28; McCallum, 'Baker'.
- 14 ME, 8 February 1895, p.7.
- 15 ME, 12 January 1899, p.4; 26 January 1899, p.4.
- 16 This contrast was drawn in the *Cyclopedia: Otago & Southland*, pp.230-1.
- 17 Angus, *Papermaking*, especially p.21.
- 18 For some reflections on the significance of paper in southern New Zealand see Tony Ballantyne, 'Paper, Pen, and Print: Transformation of the Kai Tahu Knowledge Order', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 53, 2 (2011), pp.232-60.
- 19 *Otago Daily Times* (ODT), 15 May 1862, p.7. In Dunedin, for example, Robert Campbell and Co. were agents for the Melbourne stationers Schuhkrafft and Howell and sold their printing ink. For example, see ODT, 29 January 1862, p.3; ST, 25 January 1867, p.1.
- 20 ST, 22 October 1866, p.2; ODT, 24 May 1867, p.8, 22 September 1892, p.2.
- 21 TT, 11 January 1872, p.6.
- 22 K.A. Coleridge and John Ross, 'Printing and Production', in Penny Griffith, Ross Harvey and Keith Maslen, eds, *Book & Print in New Zealand: A Guide to Print Culture in Aotearoa*, Wellington, 1997, pp.44-69.
- 23 Keith Maslen, *Victorian Typefaces in Dunedin, New Zealand*, Melbourne, 1981, p.5.
- 24 Maslen, p.1.
- 25 *Ibid.*: List of Printing Material etc, Matthews, Baxter & Company, Dowling St Dunedin, AG-074-2, Hocken Collections (HC), Dunedin; Matthews, Baxter and Company, Type & printing specimens, ca.1892, AG-074-3, HC.
- 26 Maslen, p.3.
- 27 Daniel Campbell, letter, undated, MS-Papers-2333, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington.
- 28 Raewyn Dalziel, 'Vogel, Julius', *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography. Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, updated 1-Sep-10, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/1v4/1>.
- 29 Paul Sorrell, 'Farjeon, Benjamin Leopold', *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography. Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, updated 1-Sep-10, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/1f1/1>.
- 30 He was subsequently a moving force behind the establishment of the first penny newspaper established in Dunedin, the *Morning Herald* (established 1875), and later was one of the proprietors of the *Weekly Budget* (established in 1893).
- 31 Nevill Wilson, Edgar Gregory and Elizabeth Gregory, comp., *Gregorys – Camerons, Printers to Dunedin: 125 Years of the Family in New Zealand*, Dunedin, 1999.
- 32 David Finkelstein, "'Jack's as Good as His Master": Scots and Print Culture in New Zealand, 1860-1900', *Book History*, 6 (2003), pp.95-107.
- 33 George Griffiths, 'Fenwick, George', *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography. Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, updated 1-Sep-10, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/2f4/1>.
- 34 *Cyclopedia: Otago & Southland*, p.237.

- 35 *The Cyclopaedia of New Zealand: Wellington Provincial District*, Wellington, 1897, p.1497. Finkelstein places Mackay as part of these Scottish networks, but underestimates the weight of local connections and contexts in his career: Finkelstein, pp.102-3.
- 36 For a discussion of this in Milton see Ballantyne, 'Placing Literary Culture'.
- 37 James Traue, *New Zealand Studies: A Guide to Bibliographic Resources*, Wellington, 1985, p.12.
- 38 ME, 7 January 1899, p.1. Similarly, in Arrowtown the *Lake County Press* grew out of the incorporation of the *Arrow Observer* and *Lakes District Chronicle* and it in turn would be incorporated by the *Lake Wakatip Mail*. Further east at Naseby, the *Mount Ida Chronicle* absorbed the *St Bathans Weekly News* and was then superseded by the *Mount Ida Mail and Hamilton Advertiser*.
- 39 Ross Harvey, 'The Power of the Press in Colonial New Zealand: More Imagined than Real?', *Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand Bulletin*, 20, 2 (1996), p.137.
- 40 Kenton Storey, 'What Will They Think in England?: Violence, Anxiety, and the Persistence of Humanitarianism in Vancouver Island and New Zealand, 1853-1862', PhD thesis, University of Otago, 2011.
- 41 For example, Ballantyne, 'Placing Literary Culture'.
- 42 Harvey, p.144. These figures would of course be even higher if we discounted young children, who would not regularly read the newspaper.
- 43 Robin Marks, 'Lawrence Athenaeum and Miners' Institute: A Fragment of Goldfields History', MA thesis, University of Otago, 1973.
- 44 Tony Ballantyne, 'State, Politics and Power', in Giselle Byrnes, ed., *The New Oxford History of New Zealand*, Melbourne, 2009; John H. Angus, 'City and Country: Change and Continuity; Electoral Politics and Society in Otago 1877-1893', PhD thesis, University of Otago, 1976.
- 45 For a useful discussion of this division in the development of American newspapers and in the history of journalism in America see David Paul Nord, *Communities of Journalism: A History of American Newspapers and their Readers*, Urbana, IL, 2007, pp.11-13.
- 46 Jonathan Culler, 'Anderson and the Novel', in Pheng Cheah and Jonathan D. Culler, eds, *Grounds of Comparison: Around the Work of Benedict Anderson*, London, 2003, p.37.
- 47 John Hirst, *The Sentimental Nation: The Making of the Australian Commonwealth*, Melbourne, 2000. These sentimental connections fashioned in times of crisis or trauma required and in turn fostered a degree of identification within colonists, but did not necessarily produce an enduring or coherent 'identity'.
- 48 *North Otago Times*, 27 March 1896, p.3; ST, 27 March 1896, p.2; TT, 28 March 1896, p.3.
- 49 ME, 28 March 1896, p.2; BH, 31 March 1896, p.2.
- 50 For the connections between newspapers and literature in one locality see Ballantyne, 'Placing Literary Culture'.
- 51 Ballantyne, 'Thinking Local'. Information and knowledge are central themes in Tom Brooking and Eric Pawson, eds, *Seeds of Empire: The Environmental Transformation of New Zealand*, London, 2011.
- 52 OW, 19 September 1868, pp.22; ODT, 13 August 1870, p.3; OW, 20 August 1870, p.3, OW 25 February 1882, p.29; ODT, 18 February 1882, p.2; OW, 24 October 1906, p.70.
- 53 Important accounts and assessments of Darwin's works include: ODT, 9 May 1871, p.3; TT, 20 July 1871, p.7; OW, 31 May 1873, p.5; ODT, 16 May 1876, p.3; OW, 20 May 1876, p.17; OW, 27 May 1876, p.17; ODT, 17 June 1876, p.3; OW, 7 September 1878,

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- p.5; ST, 24 September 1880, p.2; ODT, 4 December 1880, p.3; OW, 1 July 1882, p.22; ODT, 5 July 1882, p.3; OW, 8 July 1882, p.19; ME, 5 June 1894, p.2.
- 54 ODT, 24 October 1874, p.6; BH, 30 October 1874, p.3; ODT, 5 December 1874, p.6; CL, 17 December 1874, p.6; ODT, 19 December 1874, p.2; OW, 6 February 1875, p.10.
- 55 For a similar point see Traue, p.12 and Francis Reid, 'Newspapers as Objects of Natural History?', *ENNZ: Environment and Nature in New Zealand*, 3, 1 (December 2006), pp.7-12.
- 56 Robert Stout, *How and What to Read*, Auckland, 1908, pp.3-4.
- 57 Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain*, Oxford, 1993, pp.51-3.
- 58 W.H. Roberts, Scrapbooks, 1867-1913, Archives 2, Dunedin Public Library; Newspaper clippings album, numbers 150 and 151, compiled by W.H.S. Robert', in James Herries Beattie, Papers, MS-582/F/24-25, HC; Herries Beattie MS-582/A/1-27; John Craig, Newspaper clipping book, MS 95-148, HC; William Downie Stewart, Clipping book 1889-1915, MS-0985-010/006, HC; Lady Anna Stout, Newspaper clippings book, MS-0796, HC; Robert Rutherford, Scrap-Book 3 1883 to 1885, Misc-MS-1614, HC; Lionel Terry, Notebook entitled 'Lionel Terry, His Book, Part III', Misc-MS-0313/002, HC.
- 59 TT, 11 October 1890, p.4.
- 60 TT, 11 June 1892, p.1.
- 61 Leah Price, "'Getting the Reading Out of It": Recycling and Repetition in *London Labor and the London Poor*', in Ina Ferris and Paul Keen, eds, *Bookish Histories: Books, Literature, and Commercial Modernity, 1700-1900*, Basingstoke, 2009, pp.148-68.

