



Tale of a THEATRE PLAYBILL

the First Fleet, on an inhospitable shore lacking familiar facilities—the small community was already lively and sociable enough to enjoy such a sophisticated pleasure as going to the theatre. Granted, the theatre was small and the audience limited, but the very fact of its existence presents a different view to the usual perception of, as Watkin Tench put it: 'dreariness and dejection' in a land far from home.

Robert Jordan's book, *The Convict Theatres of Early*

Australia, 1788–1840 (2002), gives a comprehensive account of theatrical activity in Sydney in the early years, including the information that the very first theatre performance in Australia was in 1789, only a year after the landing. This was a production of George Farquhar's comedy *The Recruiting Officer*, performed with a cast of convicts to mark the birthday of King George III on 4 June 1789. It took place 'in a mud hut fitted up for the occasion' and with no aim greater than 'humbly to excite a smile'. However, the 'Theatre, Sydney', as named in the new-found playbill, was not a hut but a small purpose-built theatre erected by Robert Sidaway, an ex-convict become prosperous citizen, with the assistance of 'some of the more decent class of prisoners'. This theatre opened on 16 January 1796, under management of one John Sparrow, playing Edward Young's melodramatic tragedy

left:

George Hughes, printer (active 1796–1800)
For the Benefit of J. Butler and W. Bryant: at the Theatre, Sydney on Saturday July 30, 1796 ...
 broadside; 20.0 x 12.0 cm
 Rare Book Collection
 nla.aus-vn4200235

below:

Greg Power (b.1974)
 The National Library's Director-General, Jan Fullerton, and the Canadian High Commissioner, Michael R. Leir, admire the 1796 playbill

Sylvia Marchant tells how Australia's earliest printed document recently came into the National Library's Collection

The National Library's newest treasure is a small theatre playbill printed in Sydney and dated 30 July 1796. At 211 years old, it is the earliest surviving document printed in Australia.

The playbill was presented by the Prime Minister of Canada, the Right Honourable Stephen Harper, to the Prime Minister of Australia, the Honourable John Howard, at a ceremony held at Parliament House on 12 September this year. It advertises performances of three plays at the 'Theatre, Sydney': *Jane Shore*; *The Wapping Landlady*; and *The Miraculous Cure*. The playbill, now part of the National Library Collection, will be exhibited in the Library's new Treasures Gallery.

The playbill is compelling evidence that in Sydney—only eight years after arrival of





from the collection of an Englishman, Dawson Turner (1775–1858). Banking was Turner’s profession, but he had many interests—mainly botany, on which subject he wrote several books. He also maintained an extensive library which held nearly 8000 volumes and over 34 000 manuscripts and letters.

Turner’s scholarly pursuits took a turbulent turn after his first wife, the mother of his 11 children, died in 1850. Only a year later he married a younger woman, carrying her off to that Scottish village of romance and elopement, Gretna Green.

The new marriage shattered the family harmony and Turner moved with his new wife to London, where he died of a stroke on 20 June 1858. Much of his extensive collections was sold, some in 1853, and the rest in 1859. Material from these scattered collections can be found in the British Library, the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, and Trinity College, Cambridge—and now, it seems, in locations as far away as Canada. The LAC even holds a catalogue of the 1859 auction sale of Turner’s manuscript library, which lists among other items ‘upwards of forty thousand autograph letters’. The path of the playbill from Australia to Canada is still being sought, but perhaps it was one of these sales in the 1850s that began the playbill’s journey from England to Canada.

A clue to the playbill’s journey from Australia to England comes in some intriguing handwritten jottings on the back of the bill. The jottings read:

1. Play acted at Port Jackson, June 4th 1789 The Recruiting Officer

1. Play performed at Norfolk Island, December 1793 Richard 3 Poor Soldier

PG King
To George Chalmers Esqr

The handwriting and signature have been identified as that of Philip Gidley King, a First Fleet marine officer, and Lieutenant Governor of Norfolk Island, 1791–1796. From

above:
Philip Gidley King’s handwritten annotation on reverse of playbill
Rare Book Collection
nla.aus-vn4200235

above right:
Unknown artist
Governor Philip Gidley King, from a Miniature in the Possession of his Grandson, the Hon. P.G. King, MLC
coloured photomechanical print
21.7 x 14.0 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an9631735

opposite:
James Heath (1757–1834)
A Direct South View of the Town of Sydney Taken from the Brow of the Hill Leading to the Flag-staff
(London: Cadell & Davies, 1798)
engraving; 20.5 x 24.3 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an7570278

The Revenge (1720), and the entertainment *The Hotel*. Performances apparently took place in the new theatre with some regularity, and though it is not known how long the theatre lasted, playbills exist advertising productions up to the year 1800.

Though small, the playbill is of major significance because of what it can tell us about early Sydney, Australian printing history, and the Australian theatre. Its significance to the story of Australian publishing and printing, as the earliest surviving example of a document printed in Australia, is undeniable. Previously the earliest existing example was a Sydney broadside entitled *Instructions for the Constables of the Country Districts*, dated 16 November 1796, and now held by the New South Wales State Records Authority. Broadside, informing the public of upcoming events and activities, are one of the oldest recognised forms of printed ephemera. On a single sheet of paper, printed on one side only and ranging markedly in size, they were intended for conspicuous public display.

The discovery of this new rare playbill is a story of luck and happenstance. It was found in late May of this year by Elaine Hoag, rare books specialist at Library and Archives Canada (LAC). An old scrapbook containing theatrical memorabilia and printed ephemera, including playbills and advertisements for performances in nineteenth-century England, had contained the treasure for 150 years. The scrapbook was given to LAC by the Canadian Parliamentary Library in 1973. It came

1793, King had sanctioned performances of plays on the island about once a month, before withdrawing the privilege as a result of a riot at one of the performances in January 1794. Later, from 1800 to 1806, King was third Governor of the colony of New South Wales. The inscription suggests that it was King who took the playbill to England when he returned there in October 1796, but how the bill came into his possession, and the significance of the inscription, are matters for conjecture. George Chalmers, the other name in the inscription, is also a mystery, though it is possible he was the British antiquarian and prolific writer on a wide range of subjects who is listed in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

The playbill's printing history is clearer. It was produced in Sydney on the first printing press seen in Australia, a small wooden screw press brought to Port Jackson by Captain Arthur Phillip. The press was not used until 1795, as there was initially no suitable paper or printers' ink, or even a craftsman printer. The *Australian Dictionary of Biography* tells us that the printer in 1795 was George Hughes, given charge of the press because he had 'some abilities in the printing line'. Working in a small printery behind Government House, Hughes printed some 200 government orders and several broadsides. Probably he printed playbills for most performances at the Sydney Theatre, from the first performance on 16 January

1796, as well as the National Library's playbill for 30 July 1796.

The actors in the plays were convicts, and Hughes performed with them; quite probably he was a convict too, though there is no actual evidence. Hughes' career as a printer came to an end with the arrival of George Howe (1769–1821), 'transported to Sydney on the *Royal Admiral*' on 22 November 1800. Howe was a more experienced printer, who had worked on *The Times* in London, and was 'immediately brought into employment', whereupon Hughes vanished into obscurity. Howe remained Government printer until his death in 1821, and was responsible for printing the first Australian book, *New South Wales Standing Orders*, 1802, and the first Australian newspaper, the *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, on 5 March 1803.

So, behind one small piece of paper lie several stories of triumph and tragedy, not only that taking place in the advertised plays themselves. We gain glimpses of the troubled close of antiquarian Dawson Turner's life, the successes of ex-convicts Sidaway and Howe, of the scenes behind Gidley King's military career, and of burgeoning Sydney society and its facing of the challenges before it. Together we get a many-sided view of the early days of Australian settlement: a rare treasure indeed.

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TECHNICAL DETAILS

The playbill is of a lightweight handmade 'laid' paper, which has a ribbed texture from the manufacturing process. The 'countermark' tells us that it was produced by Curteis & Sons—paper millers in England from the 1780s to the 1800s. Their paper, generally regarded as of good quality, was exported to the US in the 1790s and probably also to Australia.

Playbill's wording:

By Permission of His Excellency.
 | FOR THE BENEFIT OF J. BUTLER
 | AND W. BRYANT. | At the
 THEATRE, SYDNEY, | On Saturday,
 July 30, 1796. will be Performed
 | JANE SHORE. | [8 lines, cast list
 in 2 columns] | After the Play |
 The Wapping Landlady. | Sailors
 Hughes and Evans. | And Mother
 Doublechalk W. Pokes. | To which
 will be added | THE MIRACULOUS
 CURE. | Front Boxes 3s. 6d. Pit 2s.
 6d. Gallery 1s | Doors to be opened
 at Half past Five, begin at Six. |
 Tickets to be had of Mrs Greville, of
 W. Bryant | and a Saturday at the
 House adjoining the Theatre

Paper: 195 x 115 mm. Handmade laid paper. Watermark not visible. Visible portion of countermark located in lower left-hand corner, appearing upside-down, and reading from right to left: 'CURTE 1 17' 17'. Chainlines vertical, 27 mm apart

Type: Caslon in various point sizes, including: Great Primer, English Roman and Double Pica Roman

TREASURES GALLERY

The Theatre Sydney playbill will be one among an array of Library treasures to feature in the National Library's Treasures Gallery, scheduled for opening in late 2009