THOUGHTS ON THE HISTORY OF THE PRINTING AND PUBLISHING OF BOOKS IN NEW ZEALAND.

By Mr. A. W. Reed.

An address delivered at a meeting of the Wellington Branch of the New Zealand Library Association, October 29th, 1940

A few years ago the well-known London publisher, Mr. Geoffrey Faber, when addressing a meeting of the Oxford University English Club on the subject "Are Publishers any Use?" said, "The prospect of addressing the Oxford University English Club has not been purely pleasurable." That is my experience in addressing you to-night. It is not purely pleasurable for two reasons: firstly, because I have discovered my ignorance on the subject—"The History of Publishing in New Zealand," and secondly, because I am surrounded by the evidences, animate and inanimate, of scholarship and erudition—a prospect which would discourage the most courageous of laymen. I hope you may bear with me in what I have to say, for I do feel privileged to be able to give you a few thoughts on the history of publishing in New Zealand in spite of the ignorance I have pleaded.

I should like to say first that I think that the subject as it has been given to me, "The History of Publishing in New Zealand," needs analysis and modification to a certain extent. Let us take the words of the title in order—"The History." I am afraid that you will have to agree with me, when I have finished, that I have given only my own scattered thoughts on the subject—"The History of Publishing in New Zealand," and secondly, because I am surrounded by the evidences, animate and inanimate, of scholarship and erudition—a prospect which would discourage the most courageous of laymen. I hope you may bear with me in what I have to say, for I do feel privileged to be able to give you a few thoughts on the history of publishing in New Zealand in spite of the ignorance I have pleaded.

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In New Zealand there are several kinds of publishers. There is firstly the printer-publisher, the man who is first and foremost a printer and secondly, and almost by accident, a publisher. Then there is the author-publisher of whom perhaps the less said the better. There is the bookseller-publisher; and finally there is the publisher qua publisher. You will understand, therefore, that there is a problem in defining the position of publishing in New Zealand, and that we shall have to consider each of these different types of publishers: author-publishers, printer-publishers, bookseller-publishers and publishers as publishers.

The title of this talk should include the words "of books." I am to talk to you not about the publishing of newspapers, but about the publishing of books. But to you, who are librarians, I must leave the definition of "book."
landers, but primarily books which have been published (which almost implies printed) in New Zealand.

As a result of this preamble, may we then amend our title to “Thoughts on the History of the Printing and Publishing of Books in New Zealand.”

There will be startling gaps because we shall not consider books about New Zealand which have been published in England and elsewhere. Nevertheless the books which have been published in this country are typical of the growth of New Zealand in time and thought and mind. As the country’s social and cultural development has been enriched, it has been done very largely through the medium of books—at least books have accurately reflected this progress and history.

The following is a rough and ready classification of types of books produced in this country:

1. Missionary books. These books were issued in the earliest days by the missionary presses, notably the Church Mission Society one, and mainly comprised books for the Maori.

2. Politics. Politics is somewhat to the fore in the mind of the New Zealander to-day, and in early days it was of great moment to the early settlers. The political situation often merged round the Maori question and was responsible for a torrent of printed works.

3. The Scene of New Zealand. There have been almost too many books published on the New Zealand scene, but they have been valuable in preserving something of the background and local colour.

4. Pamphlets.

5. Publications of the Government. The publications issued by the Government Printer, some in book and some in pamphlet form, are of interest to many sections of the community.

6. Verse. There have been books of verse of all kinds. You will notice that I classify it as verse rather than poetry.

7. Novels.

8. Lectures. More of a previous age than of to-day. Lectures at one time were very frequently issued and published.

9. History. We have seen in recent years the growth of the historical book in New Zealand.

10. Legal.

11. Practical Handbooks.


There are other classifications, but I think this covers the main volume of New Zealand book publications.

Now let us take specific instances at random, as they show sidelights on the history. This is the only way in which one can discuss the progress of publishing in this country, as bibliographies are at present compiled from the point of view of books and not publishers. As we are limited to New Zealand publications, we shall have to pass by Tasman’s Journals, Hawkesworth, Cook, Forster, Crozet, Vancouver and D’Urville amongst the volumes of voyagers; Savage, Nicholas, Earle, Polack, Wakefield and Rutherford, amongst the observers and narrators of the New Zealand scene; Lee and Kendall amongst grammarians. The works of all these men were published prior to 1840.

In 1830 William Yate came to New Zealand, bringing with him the little printer’s devil, James Smith. The first press was set up in the Bay of Islands, and the first printing to be executed in New Zealand was a pamphlet of eight pages, the third part of a Maori Catechism, the earlier parts having been printed in Australia. As it was sewn, I think it can be recorded as a book. It was very badly printed, and after one or two sporadic attempts to do something further with the press, William Yate was compelled to send it back to Australia.

For five years after this no further books were issued in New Zealand until 1835 when the first qualified printer, William Colenso, came to New Zealand. I need not treat at any length of what he did. I suppose most of you know how his press had been selected for him and put together by the Secretaries of the Church Missionary Society, and that he had no choice about what he should bring. Vital articles of equipment such as string and rope had been omitted. The Secretary said very ingenuously that New Zealand was a place where greenstone and flax abounded, so that there would be no need for printer’s stone nor for string. William Colenso arrived in New Zealand on the last day of 1834. On the 17th February, 1835, having overcome some of the earliest difficulties of putting his press in action, he printed and bound 2,000 copies of the first book worthy of the name, printed and published in this country. To be Continued.