

PRECARIOUS PRINTERS:

Labour, technology & material culture at the
NSW Government Printing Office 1959–1989

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PhD Design
2014
University of Technology Sydney

This dissertation is dedicated to all those who laboured
at the NSW Government Printing Office, 1840–1989.

Certificate of original authorship

I certify that the work in this dissertation has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the dissertation has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research and the preparation of the dissertation itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the dissertation.

Dissertation word length: 88,444 words.

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Many former employees of the Government Printing Office assisted in this project; only some of these people were formally interviewed. The following people generously provided their time, photographs, ephemera, archival materials, objects, recollections and encouragement: Bob Bartrim, Bill Brooks, George Bryant, Jackie Cliffe, Tony Cliffe, Kim Cooper, Peter Crozier, John Cusack, Frank Druery, Ken Duffey, Barry Elborn, Renato Gravagna, Victor Gunther, Tim Guy, Terry Hagenhofer, Alan Hagerty, Bob Hart, Geoff Hawes, Ray Hopkins, Alan Howes, Philip James, Rudi Kolbach, George Larden, Bob Law, John Lee, Alan Leishman, Neil Lewis, Glenn MacKellar, Granville May, Phillip Morehouse, Win Morehouse, Graeme Murray, Stephen Noyes, Pamela Pearce, Noel Quinn, Warwick Richardson, Norm Rigney, Phillip Rhoden, Michael Rubacki, Barry Skewes, Lindsay Somerville, Sandra Elizabeth Stringer, Robert Swan, Stella Tekstra, Allan Townsend, Ray Utick and Don West.

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Record of Oral History Interviews

Thirty-one people were formally interviewed for this oral history research project (25 men and six women). Some oral history participants requested that their identities remain confidential, while most consented to their names being made public. Those who sought the option of confidentiality have been given pseudonyms and some details about their position and duration of service have been withheld so as to de-identify them. In the rare case where the inclusion of details about an employee's gender and apprenticed trade may risk compromising their anonymity, the participant has specifically approved all selected quotes prior to publication. I extend grateful thanks to the following interview participants:

Name	Position and/or trade	Years of service	Date of interview
George Bryant	Despatch Offsider	1959–1961	28 September 2012
Kim Cooper	Bookbinder/Planner	1977–1989	29 November 2011
Colleen Crockett	Compositor (not at the Govt Printing Office)	n/a	8 December 2011
Ken Duffey	Press-machinist (lithography)	1958–1962	11 February 2012
Victor Gunther	Press-machinist (letterpress)	1946–1952	15 August 2012
Tim Guy	Compositor and Computer Specialist	1972–1989	24 July 2013
Terry Hagenhofer	Apprentice Compositor/Camera Operator/Supervisor	1973–1989	5 December 2011
Geoff Hawes	Compositor/Supervisor	1967–1989	16 February 2012
Rudi Kolbach	Compositor (& sales rep)	1957–1963	12 December 2011
Bob Law	Linotype Operator/Supervisor	1968–1989	27 February 2012
George Larden	Press-machinist (Letterpress)	1932–1971	14 March 2013
Alan Leishman	Supervisor Photographic Reproduction/Manager Planning and Liaison	1955–1989	28 October 2011
Neil Lewis	Compositor/Monotype Operator	1977–1989	17 January 2012
John Lee	Compositor/Document Reproduction	1962–1989	2 August 2012
Anna Lyons*	Press-machinist (letterpress & lithography)	1970s – 1980s	28 February 2012
Glenn MacKellar	Press-machinist (letterpress & lithography)	1973–1989	1 December 2011
Granville May	Press-machinist/Manager	1976–1989	8 February 2012
Phillip Morehouse	Reader's Assistant	1963–1989	21 October 2011
Win Morehouse	Reader's Assistant	1963–1976/77	21 October 2011
Graeme Murray	Lithographic dot-etching & retouching	1960s	9 November 2011
Stephen Noyes	Compositor	1978–1984	20 February 2012
Pamela Pearce	Chief of Division – Marketing	1986–1988	23 January 2012
Phillip Rhoden	Paper ruler/Machinist in MSS	1963–1969	27 February 2013
Norm Rigney	Press-machinist/Planner	1964–1989	30 January 2012
Michael Rubacki	Personnel (& Parliamentary Counsel's Office)	early 1980s	17 May 2012
Barry Skewes	Compositor/Proof reader	1978–1989	17 January 2012
Lindsay Somerville	Compositor/Monotype operator	1961–1967	15 December 2011
Sandra Elizabeth Stringer	Graphic Reproduction	1984–1989	17 October 2012
Ray Utick	Press-machinist (letterpress & lithography)	1955–1989	13 November 2012
Don West	Government Printer	1973–1989	12 September 2012
George Woods*	Compositor/Designer/Planner	1960–1989	21 February 2012

* Indicates pseudonym

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Note:

Within this dissertation the NSW Government Printing Office will often be referred to as the 'Gov'. This is partly for the sake of brevity. In the twentieth century, the term the 'Gov' (sometimes spelled the 'Guv') was in wide colloquial use by employees and also by clients, as indicated by oral history testimony and Government Printing Office staff journals.

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Fig. 94 **Lillian Taylor and Gita Hromadka, 1979,** in the third floor women's bathroom. Photograph by Jackie Kitney. Copyright of the Crown, reproduced with permission, courtesy of the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney. SLNSW call no. Government Printing Office 3 – 02733.

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- Fig. 96 **Sid Hampson and Bill Bright, no date.** Photograph by John Cusack, reproduced with permission.
- Fig. 97 **The senior executive team, 1986.** Copyright of the Crown, reproduced with permission, courtesy of the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney. SLNSW call no. Government Printing Office 4 – 44594.
- Fig. 98 **The ground floor front desk of the Government Printing Office, prior to renovation, 1981.** Copyright of the Crown, reproduced with permission, courtesy of the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney. SLNSW call no. Government Printing Office 3 – 14668.
- Fig. 99 **Renovations to the front entrance and foyer, 1986.** Copyright of the Crown, reproduced with permission, courtesy of the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney. SLNSW call no. Government Printing Office 4 – 44277.
- Fig. 100 **The new Government Printing Office front door, 1986.** Copyright of the Crown, reproduced with permission, courtesy of the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney. SLNSW call no. Government Printing Office 4 – 31322.
- Fig. 101 **The renovated Government Printing Office front entrance, 1986.** Copyright of the Crown, reproduced with permission, courtesy of the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney. SLNSW call no. Government Printing Office 4 – 31313.
- Fig. 102 **The renovated Government Printing Office shop, 1986.** Copyright of the Crown, reproduced with permission, courtesy of the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney. SLNSW call no. Government Printing Office 4 – 44606.
- Fig. 103 **The redesigned cover of *Legislation Issued*, one of the design competitions arranged by Pamela Pearce, late 1980s.**

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- Fig. 104 **One of the first female press-machinists at the Government Printing Office, 1981.** Copyright of the Crown, reproduced with permission, courtesy of the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney. SLNSW call no. Government Printing Office 3 – 14659.
- Fig. 105 **Bookbinding apprentice (possibly Janet Rainbow), c. 1974.** Copyright of the Crown, reproduced with permission, courtesy of the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney. SLNSW call no. Government Printing Office 3 – 23450.
- Fig. 106 **The Government Printing Office netball team, 1980.** Copyright of the Crown, reproduced with permission, courtesy of the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney. SLNSW call no. Government Printing Office 3 – 07231.

Chapter Nine

Fig. 107 **Pirate ship depicting members of the Government Printing Office**, published in *The Graphic* (staff journal), December 1985.

Fig. 108 **Alan Whitney mucking up in the Main Pressroom, third floor, mid-1960s**. Photograph by Ray Utick, reproduced with permission.

Fig. 109 **The Batmobile, late 1980s**, designed and ‘powered’ by Jeff Keane and Leo Piplos, with some assistance from Tony Cliffe. Courtesy of Tony Cliffe.

Fig. 110 **Farewell illustration for Overseer Berdj Momdjian, depicting the Government Printing Office as a soon-to-be-extinct dinosaur, c. late 1980s**. Courtesy of Sandra Elizabeth Stringer.

Fig. 111 **Farewell illustration for Sandra Elizabeth Stringer, 1988–1989**, depicting the staff members of the Graphic Reproduction Section. Courtesy of Sandra Elizabeth Stringer.

Fig. 112 **Aquatic scene of imminent danger, 1989**, unauthorised poster by Tony Cliffe. Dimensions: approx. 100cm wide. Courtesy of Ray Utick, reproduced with the permission of Tony Cliffe.

Figs. 113–16 **Selected pages from *A Paradise Lost*, 12-page foreign order booklet by Tony Cliffe, 1989**. Reproduced with the permission of Tony Cliffe.

Conclusion

Fig. 117 **Terry Hagenhofer, 1989**, television interview captured in photograph of TV screen, after the announcement of the closure of the Government Printing Office. Photograph by Ray Utick, reproduced with permission.

Fig. 118 **Cartoon by Vince O’Farrell, 1989**, most likely published in the *Illawarra Mercury*. (Source unknown, unmarked clipping given to me by a worker.)

Fig. 119 **Advertisement pamphlet for the 5-day Government Printing Office auction, 1989**, held at NSW Government Printing Office General Correspondence Files #18/2115, NSW State Records, Kingswood.

Fig. 120 **Sample from the auction lot listings for the NSW Government Printing Office auction, 1989**. Held at NSW Government Printing Office General Correspondence Files #18/2115, NSW State Records, Kingswood.

PRECARIOUS PRINTERS:

Labour, technology & material culture at the NSW Government Printing Office 1959–1989

Abstract

From 1959 to 1989 the NSW Government Printing Office (hereafter ‘the Gov’) was a government-run printing establishment that operated from a centralised factory in Ultimo, Sydney. Over a 30-year period marked by dramatic technological change and political transitions, the Gov was pulled in conflicting directions by traditionalists, unionists, economic rationalists and those somewhere in between. It was also one of the first Australian factories to open printing apprenticeships to women. This combination – technological change, the rising influence of neo-liberal economics and gender-labour tensions – made for an unsettled institution. In mid-1989 the state government abruptly closed down the Gov and 700 people lost their jobs.

This thesis operates on two levels: it offers both an historical and a methodological contribution to knowledge. At an historical level *Precarious Printers* is an exploration of how the Gov’s workers – from labourers to managers – coped with technological, social and political change. This has brought to light many aspects of the Gov’s culture of working life (everyday practices and unofficial stories) and it indicates the important presence of objects, technologies and spaces as they exist in memories of working life.

Two central coping practices are identified: *building alliances* and *unofficial creative production*. Firstly, the Gov’s employees came to grips with their circumstances by developing alliances with people and/or technologies. This involved staking out territories spatially or by developing their skills. Some workers clung to their skills, traditional tools and collective practices. Others enthusiastically embraced new technologies with an individualistic drive for self-improvement. Secondly, many of the Gov’s employees enacted their own narratives – of resilience, belonging and of industrial decline – through unsanctioned creative practices. This came in the form of photographs, film, pranks and the unofficial production of printed materials (foreign orders).

The key theoretical and methodological contribution of this dissertation is a demonstration of how labour history can be effectively drawn together with considerations of material culture. As a case study, the Gov reveals how the politics of work is intertwined with the physical and designed world. This dissertation provides a method for analysing labour, technology and industrial history that retains the voices of the workers and adds a relevant consideration of spaces, objects and embodied experience. Correspondingly, this research draws upon a number of disciplines: labour history, sociology, the history of technology and studies of material culture and design. Primary source materials include oral history, photographs and archives.

Rather than simply aestheticising past technologies and industrial spaces, *Precarious Printers* finds that material culture, technology and spatial dynamics are significant elements in an analysis of working life and in developing an understanding of people’s adaptive responses to technological change and workplace upheaval.

Preface

The oft-lamented ‘death of print’ has been heralded for some time now.¹ The publishing industry has turned its energy to online and electronic media and newspapers continue to shed printers and journalists. Government publishing under the Westminster system – once literally bound by the authoritative presence of the leather-bound printed codex² – is increasingly digitised and immaterial, a ‘pdf’ affair. As the last vestiges of paper-based print culture appeared to disintegrate into ephemeral digital data, I began to wonder about the harbingers of this major shift. My earlier research, originating in the discipline of design history, involved a focus on the introduction of new technologies into hitherto technologically un-colonised contexts. The examination of material culture and its social relations in these contexts involved an unravelling of issues related to domesticity, gender, status and personal computing.³

With this background, I turned my attention to the early days of the digital switch in the printing industry. It is in this industry that the tangible presence of things was a particularly fraught matter. The disruptive manifestation of new computer typesetting equipment, for example, asserted its presence not merely through workflow changes, retraining and retrenchment. The fundamental physical presence of such new technologies also dictated print-workers’ futures. Linotype operators had to retrain their hands and minds, re-learning to type, this time on small qwerty keyboards. Moreover, these boxy, beige computers signalled a new order, one characterised by individualism, seemingly opaque technical systems and the end of strictly delineated and highly skilled trades and crafts.

¹ J.A. Dewar & P.H. Ang (2007), ‘The cultural consequences of printing and the internet’, in S.A. Baron, E.N. Lindquist & E.F. Shelvin (eds), *Agent of change: Print culture studies after Elizabeth L. Eisenstein*, University of Massachusetts Press and the Centre for the Book, Library of Congress, Amherst and Boston, pp. 365–77; A. Marshall (1983), *Changing the word: The printing industry in transition*, Comedia Publishing Group, London; G. Nunberg (1996), ‘Farewell to the information age’, in G. Nunberg (ed.), *The future of the book*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, pp. 103–38; F. Robertson (2013), *Print culture: From steam press to ebook*, Routledge, London & New York, p. 119.

² O. Frankel (2006), *States of inquiry: social investigations and print culture in nineteenth-century Britain and the United States*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, pp. 2, 46, 87.

³ J. A. Stein (2009), ‘Domesticity and gender in the industrial design of Apple Computer 1977–1984’, Masters thesis, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago; J.A. Stein (2011), ‘In memoriam: Domesticity, gender and the 1977 Apple II personal computer’, *Design and Culture*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 193–216.

The period from the 1960s through to the end of the 1980s saw the gradual entry of personal computers into domestic and labour contexts in developed capitalist economies. This transformation has been well documented in sociology and social histories of technology.⁴ The introduction of computerised and automated technologies profoundly transformed the labour conditions and industrial politics in factory and office workplaces. In some cases, automation and computerisation made tasks less dangerous or physically taxing, but in others, the introduction of new technologies made employees' hard-won trade skills redundant. Computerisation often reduced the number of employees required and in many cases it further degraded the workers' connection to the production process.⁵

As sociological and labour history studies have established, printing was an exceptional case; well into the twentieth century it remained a stalwart 'craft' compared to other more automated manufacturing industries.⁶ The labour supply of apprenticed tradespersons was tightly controlled by unions and printers were able to maintain long-standing technical practices (such as letterpress and hot-metal typesetting) by restricting the access to printing machinery through trade demarcation and limiting union membership in skilled printing trades.⁷ By the second-

⁴ See for example: J. Agar (2003), *The government machine: A revolutionary history of the computer*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., and London; P. Atkinson (2010), *Computer*, Reaktion Books, New York; D. Butler (1988), 'Secretarial skills and office technology', in E. Willis (ed.), *Technology and the labour process: Australasian case studies*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, pp. 20–32; E.N. Glenn & R.L. Feldberg (1979), 'Proletarianizing clerical work: Technology and organizational control in the office', in *Case studies on the labor process*, pp. 51–72; S. Liff (1993), 'Information technology and occupational restructuring in the office', in E. Green, J. Owen & D. Pain (eds), *Gendered by design? Information technology and office systems*, Taylor & Francis, London and Washington D.C., pp. 95–110; J. Wajcman, 'The feminisation of work in the information age', pp. 459–74; J. Webster (1993), 'From the word processor to the micro: gender issues in the development of information technology in the office', in *Gendered by design*, pp. 111–23.

⁵ H. Braverman (1998 [1974]), *Labor and monopoly capital: The degradation of work in the twentieth century*, Monthly Review Press, New York, pp. 226–27; D.F. Noble (1984), *Forces of production: A social history of industrial automation*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, pp. 57–78; R. Sennett (1998), *The corrosion of character: The personal consequences of work in the new capitalism*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York & London.

⁶ C. Cockburn (1983), *Brothers: Male dominance and technological change*, Pluto Press, London, pp. 36–55; R. Hill (1984), 'From hot metal to cold type: New technology in the newspaper industry', *New Zealand Journal of Industrial Relations*, vol. 9, pp. 161–75; A. Marshall (1983), *Changing the word: The printing industry in transition*, Comedia Publishing Group, London, pp. 10–14; M. Wallace & A.L. Kalleberg (1982), 'Industrial transformation and the decline of craft: the decomposition of skill in the printing industry, 1931–1978', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 47, no. 3, pp. 307–24; A. Zimbalist (1979), 'Technology and the labor process in the printing industry', in Zimbalist (ed.), *Case studies on the labor process*, Monthly Review Press, New York, pp. 103–26; J. Shields (1995), 'Deskilling revisited: Continuity and change in craft work and apprenticeship in late nineteenth century New South Wales', *Labour History*, vol. 68, pp. 1–29; J. Shields (1995), 'A matter of skill: the rise of compulsory apprenticeship in early twentieth century New South Wales', *Journal of Industrial Relations*, vol. 37, no. 2, pp. 236–62.

⁷ C. Cockburn, *Brothers*, pp. 19–23; R. Frances (1991), 'Marginal matters: Gender, skill, unions and the Commonwealth Arbitration Court – A case study of the Australian printing industry 1925–1937', *Labour History*, no. 61, pp. 17–29.

half of the twentieth century, however, the printing industry – once the high-status bastion of traditional mark-making – was facing dramatic structural transformation and a steep learning curve. The public's demand for printed matter continued to rise. The machinery required to produce printed products swiftly was becoming ever more computerised and automated, making it increasingly attractive to employers,⁸ and by the mid-1980s new and growing economies in Asia provided cheap alternative sources for printing. In addition, the protections that had been afforded to Australian domestic manufacturers had been whittled away in most industries, to be replaced by economic rationalist approaches to political economy.⁹

As a result, the period from the 1960s to the late 1980s saw the virtual extinction of hot-metal typesetting and letterpress printing in developed capitalist nations. This period also witnessed the mainstream introduction into the printing industry as a whole of computerised typesetting and high-speed offset-lithographic printing. This three-decade period saw the almost complete disappearance of traditional printing trades such as stereotyping, electrotyping, dot-etching and engraving, hand-binding, hand-embossing, hand-composing, paper-ruling, Linotype and Monotype operation and pre-press camera operation.

What happened in the printing industry belongs to a larger story; it is part of a global transition in developed economies, a process of de-industrialisation and a shift away from welfare-state models towards neo-liberal free-market economics.¹⁰ Long-standing industrial relationships and deeply ingrained hierarchical processes were altered beyond recognition. This was indeed a case where 'all that is solid melts into air' – to quote Marshall Berman (who himself was quoting Karl Marx).¹¹ In other words, the old certainties of the modern era were disintegrating before

⁸ A. Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 10–14.

⁹ M. Webber & S. Weller (2001), 'Producing Australia, restructuring Australia', in *Refashioning the rag trade: Internationalising Australia's textiles, clothing and footwear industries*, UNSW Press, Sydney, pp. 10–37.

¹⁰ H. Braverman, (1998 [1974]), *Labor and monopoly capital: The degradation of work in the twentieth century*, Monthly Review Press, New York; R. Sennett (1998), *The corrosion of character: The personal consequences of work in the new capitalism*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York & London; M. Webber & S. Weller, *op. cit.*

¹¹ K. Marx, 'Speech at the anniversary of the *People's Paper*', in R.C. Tucker (1978), *The Marx and Engels reader*, second edn., Norton, London, p. 475–76, quoted and discussed in M. Berman (1988 [1982]), *All that is solid melts into air: The experience of modernity*, Penguin, New York and London, p. 21.

workers' eyes. A 'job for life' was no longer guaranteed and the skills of a trade soon became an old-fashioned encumbrance.

What happened when the printing industry was on the cusp of this change, in the awkward 'in-between' stages? Many printers felt their impending precariousness keenly. In this context, many factory spaces combined 'old' and 'new' technologies in cobbled-together arrangements. The status quo was never ideal, however; more often than not, it was the result of compromise and affordability. What can the early stages of this digital conversion tell us about how complex systems evolve and about how people and collectives cope when faced with dramatic (but often clumsy) technological and social transformation?

This is where I began.