

1803

FIRST NEWSPAPER

It was, appropriately enough, a convict who produced Australia's first newspaper, the *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, on 5 March 1803 using a flatbed printing press 'worth £2' and less than 10 kilograms of type which had been brought to the colony thirteen years earlier by the First Fleet.

The convict was writer-editor-printer-publisher-salesman George Howe, aged thirty-four, who had been an apprentice in the printing trade in the West Indies, where his father was Government Printer at Basseterre, capital of St Kitts. Educated and well read in the Classics and European literature, Howe at twenty-one went to London where he worked as a printer on *The Times* and other newspapers. He married, and then in 1799, when his son was four years old, he inexplicably turned to crime and was convicted - as 'George Happy, alias Happy George' - of shoplifting, and sentenced to death. This was soon commuted to transportation to New South Wales for the term of his natural life. In November 1800 he arrived in Sydney with his son, Robert. His wife had died during the long voyage on board the convict ship *Royal Admiral*.

Howe's experience soon procured him the position of Government Printer,

and in 1802 he printed the first book in Australia, the *New South Wales General Standing Orders*. The following year he obtained permission from Governor King to publish a weekly newspaper which, for the next twenty-one years, was to provide the only journalistic record of events in the penal colony.

The first issue of the *Sydney Gazette* had four pages, and was about the same size as a modern magazine. It was 'Published by Authority', which meant that every word had to receive government approval.

The task of producing a newspaper single-handed week after week was indeed a formidable one. Howe had to collect all the news, either first-hand, or by lifting material from English newspapers which he thought would interest his readers. He then had the task of setting the pages in type and printing by hand one side of a sheet at a time using ink he had to make himself. Howe also had to deliver the newspaper to subscribers.

The *Sydney Gazette* was a success from the start. Even at the high price of one shilling, Howe was soon selling more than 300 copies a week. He achieved this through a skillful blend of sensational news and educational material to offset the dry Government General Orders which, not surprisingly in an official publication, were given most prominence. Thus the first issue contained a thrilling account of 'violence and atrocity' committed by a group of fifteen 'licentious banditti'; a fire at an ammunition dump; an extract from an 'Account of the Advantages of a Cottager keeping a pig'; weather and market reports; as well as general advertising and official notices. For someone untrained in journalism Howe did a remarkable job — under differ-

ent-circumstances he may well have become a Press baron.

Emancipated in 1806, Howe opened a stationery shop and worked as a private tutor in addition to running the newspaper. This provided him with an income in 1807 and 1808 when the newspaper ceased publication for almost nine months during the period of bitter strife surrounding the Rum Rebellion which deposed Governor Bligh.

In 1812 Howe married a wealthy widow, Sarah Wills, who bore him two children. He was still running the *Sydney Gazette* when he died nine years later, leaving a thriving newspaper and an estate of £4000, a considerable sum at the time.

Robert, who as an eight-year-old, had helped his father put to bed the first issue of the *Sydney Gazette*, took over as editor and publisher. Although he lacked his father's liberal education and was something of a religious zealot, the newspaper continued to prosper, appearing twice weekly from September 1825, daily for a brief period during 1827, and thereafter three times a week.

Using the newspaper as a platform from which to rescue his fellow New South Welshmen from what he saw as the 'depths of utter depravity', Robert incurred several libel actions, as well as more personal attacks, including a public horsewhipping from Dr William Redfern, a respected emancipist and medical doctor. In the first issue George Howe had pledged that 'Information is our only purpose'; under Robert the emphasis was on propaganda.

As historian J. V. Byrnes put it, 'The main difference between George and

Robert was that whereas George Howe advocated reason and common sense, Robert fostered religion.'

Robert Howe drowned in January 1829, only shortly before news arrived that he had been accorded the title of 'King's Printer'. He left the newspaper to his widow, who retained Ralph Mansfield as editor. Mansfield was a former Wesleyan minister who had only recently joined Robert as co-editor.

The split between the owner and editor proved fatal for the *Sydney Gazette*. Mansfield left in 1832, later to become editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and was followed by several other editors before the *Sydney Gazette* ceased publication on 20 October 1842.

But the Howe legacy lives on, for even today the musty files of Australia's first newspaper provide some of the best glimpses into the everyday lives of the men and women who helped to settle a continent and nurture a nation.