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“Sidelines” and Trade Lines: 
Publishing the Australian Novel, 1860 to 1899

By Katherine Bode

The history of the book in Australia may be characterised as the movement of durable cultural goods over very large distances. Raw material was dispatched to Britain in the form of stories and other texts to be converted into books at the industrial heart of Empire. These were then shipped back to the Antipodes along with numerous other books to satisfy the prodigious appetites of Australian readers. Local publishing was a sideline undertaken by enterprising printers and booksellers.¹

As has been the case globally, book histories have been at the forefront of the internationalization – or “transnational turn”² – in understandings of Australian literary culture, especially for the nineteenth century. Where earlier literary histories sought in this century the origins of a recognizable national literary tradition and canon,³ histories of the book (and of publishing and reading) in Australia emphasize the fundamental importance of British publishers and books for colonial authors and readers. This recent scholarship highlights Australia’s position as a major export market for British books, “the largest … from at least 1889 until 1953”⁴ British publishers are described as not only the main source of books for colonial readers but, as Craig Munro and John Curtain state in the epigraph, essentially the only avenue of publication for Australian authors. Another major renovation of this transnational turn is the emphasis placed on colonial readers’ lack of interest in local fiction. Martyn Lyons and Tim Dolin make this argument based on analyses of the records of different Australian lending institutions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,⁵ while Elizabeth Webby, drawing on the minutes of three Hobart reading groups, argues that Hobart’s cultural elite, “[l]ike most Australian readers of the 1890s … were not especially interested in Australian literature.”⁶ Taken together, these studies of publishing and reading propose, as Webby writes elsewhere, that “for much of the nineteenth century and indeed afterwards, Australian readers were mainly interested in books by English authors, and Australian authors were largely dependent on the English publishing industry.”⁷

But were Australian publishers and authors really so marginal, if not largely irrelevant, to colonial readers? Based on a quantitative analysis of trends in the place and form of publication of Australian novels from 1860 to 1899, I argue that local publishing and writing were significantly more important to colonial literary culture than these accounts allow. In fact, from the 1860s to the 1880s, most Australian novels were first published in Australia, and in many cases, only ever read there. Although the number of nineteenth-century Australian novels published – locally or in Britain – was small in comparison with the number of British books imported in this same period,⁸ analysis of this local publishing activity yields important insights into the operations of literary and print culture in the colonies, as well as the movement of fiction between Australia and Britain.

This argument builds on the results shown in the following two graphs: Figure 1, depicting the form of publication of titles (specifically, whether they were published only in book form; as serials and – in most cases, subsequently – as books; or only as serials) from 1860 to 1899; and Figure 2, depicting the place of initial book publication for Australian novels in these same decades.⁹
As Figure 1 shows, from the 1860s to the 1880s, half of all Australian novels were serialized – the vast majority in local periodicals – and an increasing proportion only appeared in serial form. Figure 2 clearly supports, in respect to the Australian novel, the main argument about book publishing in this period: the dominance of British publishers. However, it also demonstrates that local book publishers were responsible for significantly more Australian novels than has been previously acknowledged, especially in the 1870s and 1880s (when 36 per cent of titles published as books were first – and in most cases, only – published in the colonies).

The prevalence of local publication of Australian novels signaled by these graphs challenges the prevailing view that there was essentially no publishing in
Australia in the nineteenth century. Especially in light of the large circulations of colonial periodicals, such publishing indicates a substantial readership for local fiction. Such fiction predominantly circulated within colonies, rather than across them; however, local serialization also played a role in facilitating British publication of Australian authors. This capacity of serial publication has long been recognized as important in the careers of certain authors, but this is the first analysis of the extent of this practice, and also the first to locate the rise of serialized fiction in Australia in the early 1860s, more than a decade earlier than has been proposed. As well as providing a new perspective on the nineteenth century Australian novel, and the conditions under which it emerged, the local readership for Australian fiction demonstrated by this study helps to explain why, when seeking increased access to the colonial market in the 1890s, British publishers substantially increased their publication of Australian novels. Instead of colonial readers and authors completely dependent on British authors and publishers, I emphasize the importance of local practices in shaping colonial literary culture, including the activities of British publishers in this market.

Before analyzing publishing trends for the nineteenth-century Australian novel, it is necessary to discuss the source, characteristics, and construction of the data from which these trends are gleaned. This study is based on data in *AustLit: The Australian Literature Resource*. Created in 2000, this online bibliographical record of Australian literature merged a number of existing specialist databases and bibliographies. Since that time, it has received considerable government and institutional support, and involved well over a hundred individual researchers – from multiple Australian universities and the National Library of Australia – directed towards “correct[ing] unevenness and gaps in bibliographical coverage” and continually updating the collection, which now contains details on hundreds of thousands of works and authors. Due to this large-scale and longstanding investment of money and scholarly energy, and the relatively recent origins of “Australian literature,” Australia is unique and world leading in the scope and comprehensiveness of its online bibliographical archive. *AustLit* is also well suited for quantitative analysis because of its comprehensiveness and its construction according to established bibliographical standards and fields.

None of this implies that the data in *AustLit* is complete or perfect. I concentrate on novels because they are the most comprehensively recorded fictional form in the database, yet inevitably, not every title is included. In particular, indexing of periodicals – including local ones – is not complete, so it is likely that some serial versions of Australian novels have not been identified. My dataset is also not identical with the one in *AustLit*. As an online (rather than print) bibliography, *AustLit* is updated continually; there are also instances where I have excluded from my dataset titles *AustLit* includes, such as entries for “Non-*AustLit* Novels.” Even leaving aside these issues, in a fundamental and important way, it is impossible for any bibliographical record of the Australian novel to be complete because, as *AustLit* acknowledges, “[t]he definition of ‘Australian’ and ‘Literature’ moves according to current debates and changing reading, teaching and research patterns”. *AustLit*, in other words, is engaged in an ongoing process of representing and constructing the category of Australian literature, including the Australian novel.

For the nineteenth century, the complexity of this construction is most apparent in relation to the vexed question of who or what is an Australian author. *AustLit* lists a set of parameters for defining an Australian author, which incorporates such considerations as where they were born, where they spent their formative years, and the content of their fiction. Drawing on these parameters, the decision about
which texts and authors to incorporate is made on an individual basis, with the result that, in certain cases, some of an author’s titles are included in AustLit while others are not (as is the case, for example, with Fergus Hume and B. L. Farjeon).  

Such acknowledgements of the constructed nature of data and its limitations are, as Priya Joshi notes, often “pounce[d] upon” by “quantitative history’s detractors … as ‘further’ evidence of the dubious value of statistical methods.”18 Rather than disallowing quantitative approaches, such acknowledgements signal the need to interpret data carefully, with keen attention to its historical context, and to take the results of quantitative analyses as indications, rather than proof, of literary historical trends. In Robert Darnton’s words, “In struggling with [literary data], the historian works like a diagnostician who searches for patterns in symptoms rather than a physicist who turns hard data into firm conclusions.”19 The following is a reading of data that, like any reading, involves a subjective process of selection and decision-making; however, as is the prime advantage of and rationale for all quantitative book historical research, in contrast to a reading of particular texts or publishers’ records, this approach enables a broad, historical, and comparative perspective, not otherwise achievable.

Serial Publication, 1860s to 1880s

There has been important bibliographical and editorial research on Australian periodicals, highlighting their role in publishing nineteenth century Australian fiction.20 Toni Johnson-Woods, for instance, describes “colonial periodicals” as “de facto publishers [that] offered many colonial writers their only publishing outlet.”21 However, in contrast to America and Britain, where major studies have foregrounded this publishing trend,22 this Australian scholarship has had little impact on dominant conceptions of literary and publishing history.23 Certainly, it has not had the effect of insights regarding the role of British book publishers for colonial literature and literary culture. As a result, the full significance of the serial in the history of the Australian novel and its readerships, especially from the 1860s to the 1880s, has not been fully appreciated.24

As Figure 1 indicates, half of all Australian novels published in these decades were serialized (52 percent in the 1860s, 46 percent in the 1870s, 51 percent in the 1880s), and an increasing majority of these only appeared in serial form (57 percent in the 1860s, 63 percent in the 1870s, 70 percent in the 1880s). Most serialized Australian novels first appeared in local periodicals (84 percent in the 1860s, 86 percent in the 1870s and 93 percent in the 1880s), with almost all of the remaining titles in British publications. Given the ephemeral nature of serial publication,25 it is likely that these statistics underrepresent the importance of this type of publishing to the history of the Australian novel.

With 35 titles, the Australian Journal, a magazine established in 1865 as a weekly, becoming monthly in 1870, serialized the most Australian novels in these three decades. The other major periodical publishers of Australian novels in this period were all weekly companions to daily newspapers, long recognized by literary historians and bibliographers as the “earliest group of Australian colonial newspapers to publish serial fiction”.26 The Sydney Mail, launched in 1860 as a weekly companion to the Sydney Morning Herald, was the second largest publisher, with 33 titles. The Australian Town and Country Journal (established in 1870 as a companion to Sydney’s Evening News) published 22, while the Australasian (founded in 1864 as a companion to the Melbourne Argus) published 20. The Leader (created in 1856 as a companion to the Melbourne Age) published 16. Including the three titles in the daily
Age, these five periodicals were responsible for publishing 62 per cent of serialized Australian novels, and 31 percent of all titles, between 1860 and 1889.

The high rate of serial publication of Australian novels in these decades corresponded with a period of pronounced growth in the overall number of novel titles. While only 30 and 38 Australian novels were published in the 1840s and 1850s respectively, in the 1860s the field more than doubled to 84 titles, increasing to 142 in the 1870s and 195 in the 1880s. The fact that periodicals consistently published around half of all titles, even as the number increased, suggests that serialization, and local periodicals in particular, were major contributors to the “rise” of the Australian novel. The circulations of these periodicals indicate the large local readership accessed by Australian serialized novels. By 1853, 20,000 copies of the Argus were sold daily; the owner of the Australian Journal claimed monthly sales of 12,000 in 1870. In 1888 approximately 18,000 copies of the Australasian (weekly) and 80,000 of the Age (daily) were sold. For nineteenth-century newspapers the “usual estimate” of readers for copies sold is three to five. However, given the isolation of life in the colonies, the scarcity of available sources of print, and the comparatively higher rates of literacy in that population, it seems likely that this estimate could be revised upwards for the colonial context. In any case, these sales figures indicate a considerable, albeit potential, readership for serialized Australian novels in the colonies.

Data on these titles provides the basis for further consideration of the nature of this publishing trend and the readership (or readerships) it indicates. Regarding the first of these issues, my analysis shows that serialization became an important avenue of publication of Australian novels at least a decade earlier than has been previously acknowledged, a finding that urges a reassessment of the origins and causes of this publishing phenomenon. Earlier studies, though few in number, identify the twelve-to fifteen-year period from the second half of the 1870s to the end of the 1880s as the major juncture for local serialization of local fiction. This timing is linked to the arrival, in the mid-1870s, of the print and distribution technologies that enabled the expansion of the British periodical industry. Thus, Eggert describes a window of opportunity for local periodical publication of Australian novels from the mid-1870s – when colonial “newspapers and magazines … were striving to extend their circulation in the period immediately after the introduction of the fast rotary presses” – to the late 1880s – when “literary agents … saturated the market with imported serials.” Similarly, although she deals with all novels in colonial newspapers rather than just Australian titles, Morrison locates the expansion of colonial periodicals and their publication of serial fiction in the 1870s and 1880s, arguing that this trend was:

closely related to technological developments: in printing, the high-speed, web-fed rotary press, which enabled first the Age and then other dailies to cater for a mass-market; in communications, the overseas cable linkage, which hooked the colonial press system to a global network [in 1872]; in transport, the railways, which facilitated efficient distribution.

The actual appearance of serialization as a major mode of publication for Australian novels before the arrival of the technologies commonly seen as driving this process – in the early 1860s instead of the mid- to late 1870s – challenges this technological explanation of the trend. Figure 3 shows the number of serialized titles published from 1860 to 1899, with the dotted line indicating all titles and the unbroken line depicting those published locally. Two surges in publication emerge:
the first from the early 1860s to the mid-1870s, preceding the boom Eggert and Morrison describe from the mid-1870s to the end of the 1880s. Admittedly, the larger number of titles in this second surge, and the obvious peak in the mid-1880s, to some extent justifies the existing critical focus on this period. But in terms of the proportion of Australian novels published, the two periods were comparable (with 48 percent of all Australian novels serialized between 1860 and 1874, and 51 percent from 1875 to 1889). Instead of driving social and cultural change, it appears from the timing of these two rises, that technological innovations in print, transportation, and communication strengthened (or led to a resurgence in) an already prevalent approach to publishing Australian novels.

![Figure 3: Number of Serialized Australian Novels, 1860 to 1899 (two year moving totals)](image)

The timing of the original growth in serial publication of Australian novels means that the Australian trend predates the appearance of novels in London newspapers, which Graham Law asserts were “rarely found … until the later 1870s.” Studies by Law and William Donaldson show that, as in the colonies, novels were prominent in regional English and Scottish newspapers from the early 1860s, a trend attributed to the repeal of taxes imposed on British newspapers since the eighteenth century. Law argues that these changes in taxation did not lead to the immediate inclusion of fiction in London newspapers because penny weekly magazines, “which contained no news and thus escaped the tax,” already met the metropolitan market for serialized novels. Colonial governments regulated the press, but they did not impose the heavy taxes levied by the British government to inhibit radical publications, so the growth of fiction publication in Australian newspapers cannot be attributed to changes in taxation.

The rise of local serialization of Australian novels did occur in the immediate aftermath of the strongest period of population growth in Australia’s history. From 1840 to 1850, the non-indigenous population of the colonies more than doubled from 190,408 to 405,356. By 1860, following the discovery of gold, it more than doubled again to 1,145,585. It was in this year that the Sydney Mail was established as a weekly companion to the Sydney Morning Herald, publishing one Australian novel in its first year of operation and two in its second. Melbourne’s Leader soon followed,
publishing its first such title in 1863 and its second in 1864. In 1865, the *Illustrated Sydney News* started serializing Australian novels; and in Melbourne, the *Australian Journal* began its first issue with a local serialization and, in the following issue, initiated another. The *Australasian*, also in Melbourne, published its first Australian novel in 1866. Sydney’s *Evening News* was created in 1867, and in 1870 established its weekly companion, the *Australian Town and Country Journal*, which published three Australian novels in its first year. Even excluding this late arrival, by 1866 the two major metropolitan centers, Sydney and Melbourne, had at least two periodicals competing with each other for readers, in part by serializing local novels. As Morrison notes, “The featuring of serial fiction in newspapers has to be understood in the context of campaigns for mass readership; these, in turn, need to be seen as part of the deeply political purposes of Australian colonial newspapers.” But where Morrison associates this campaign with the late nineteenth century, the correlation between population growth and the emergence of locally serialized novels, in the leading periodicals of the most populous colonies, suggests such competition began significantly earlier.

This returns us to the nature of the readership (or readerships) indicated by the circulation of these colonial publications. Existing analyses of locally serialized colonial novels (again, though few in number) align this publishing trend with growth in national sentiment or identity. Johnson-Woods describes the “intensely local” tales of convicts, squatters, and gold diggers serialized in the colonial press as new, uniquely Australian genres that “fulfilled a literary need in Australia at a time when colonials wanted to read about their country.” More broadly, she aligns the “high percentage of local fiction in new colonial publications” with the emergence and development of “distinctive national feeling,” arguing this was strongest before the 1850s and declining (due to a bourgeois “calm-down”) by the 1870s. While Webby draws the same association as Johnson-Woods between growth in the serialization of original Australian fiction and in “[n]ational sentiments” regarding literature, she identifies such sentiments as “increasingly dominant in the 1870s.”

These analyses support the established association of both the novel and the newspaper with national space, and the high incidence of “Australia” in these periodicals’ titles resonates with these claims. However, these publications predominantly circulated within particular colonies, indicating a regional and colonial rather than national readership. Victor Isaacs and Rod Kirkpatrick’s account of the regional territorialism exhibited by newspaper proprietors and politicians alike highlights the separation of the colonies and the explicit role newspapers played in forming and defining regional identities. The first early-morning train in the colony of New South Wales, designed specifically to meet the distribution needs of the Sydney newspapers, was introduced in May 1887 “for political reasons,” with the colonial government subsidizing the train to insure that residents of the Riverina (closer to Melbourne, the Victorian colonial capital, than Sydney) did not receive Melbourne papers before Sydney papers.

The late date of the establishment of this distribution system accounts for the prominence throughout the nineteenth century of small-town newspapers (some of which may include novels not yet identified). But it also highlights that it was the weekly companions to the daily newspapers – “designed as much for the country as the city reader” – that published the most local fiction. These companions were created with colonial distances and lack of distribution infrastructure in mind; they did not go out-of-date as quickly as their daily counterparts. While similar characters (convicts, squatters, and gold diggers) might have populated locally serialized
Australian novels, viewed in the context of the periodicals’ circulations, this publishing trend suggests a tension between colonial and national forms of identification, rather than the direct alignment of the nation, the newspaper, and the novel.

**Serial and Book Publication, 1860s to 1880s**

In Australia, then, serialized novels circulated largely within rather than across the colonies. At the same time, local serialization played a role in the movement of Australian novels between the colonies and Britain. While there is general acknowledgement of the importance of serialization as a steppingstone to British book publication for certain writers – like Ada Cambridge and Rolf Boldrewood⁵¹ – there is little sense of how (or whether) this publishing cycle operated for colonial authors and texts more broadly, both within the colonies and between the colonies and Britain. This data show that book publication was by no means an inevitable consequence of serialization; however, when it did occur, it was predominantly via British publishers, emphasizing the prevalence of the interlinked system of serial and book publication in Britain, and the relative absence of this publishing approach in the colonies.

More than a third (35 per cent) of Australian novels serialized between 1860 and 1889 were also published as books. Ideally, one could compare the incidence of book publication of serialized novels in Australia to that in Britain, where “the cycle of serial and book publication” is widely acknowledged as a core feature of that publishing industry.⁵² But a lack of comprehensive bibliographical data on nineteenth-century British novels precludes this possibility: as Robert Colby asserted, “[t]he only safe generalizations one can make about the Victorian novel are that it was popular and that it was abundant.”⁵³ While serialization is commonly described as the “standard initial mode of publication” for “so many [novels] of the Victorian era,”⁵⁴ it is not clear whether, in Britain as in Australia, there were many novels only published in periodicals, or whether this publishing cycle was such a finely tuned advertising and sales device as to capture most titles in its purview.

Although direct comparison is impossible, the significantly greater chance an Australian novel had of making the transition from serial to book in Britain indicates that this process was much more frequent there than in the colonies. Of the small number of Australian novels initially serialized overseas in these decades, 75 per cent (15 of 20 titles) were also published as books. In comparison, of the novels serialized in Australian periodicals, only 32 percent (60 of 189 titles) were published as books, most of these (73 percent or 44 of 60 titles) overseas (predominantly in Britain). To put these results another way, a novel serialized in an Australian periodical between 1860 and 1889 had a three in ten chance of becoming a book, but only a one in four chance again of that occurring via a local publisher. No titles were published as books in Australia after overseas serialization. While the high rate of local serialization, combined with the large proportion of titles that did not make the transition from serial to book, emphasizes the extent to which the primary readerships of serialized Australian novels remained within the colonies, these results show that serial publication facilitated access to a wider audience for some colonial authors.

As British book publication had the benefit of international distribution,⁵⁵ and was almost certainly sought out for this reason, the transition from (local or overseas) serial to British book is commonly seen to indicate a title’s success and, more specifically, its quality. However, the correlation between the place of publication and the author’s location complicates this interpretation. With three exceptions – Ada Cambridge, Maud Jeanne Franc, and W. H. Timperley⁵⁶ – authors of novels that were
These exceptions do not exclude quality as a factor in the conversion of serialized titles to British-published books. But rather than debating the relative merits of different authors, I want to highlight the systematic features of the cycle of serial and book publication in this period: the ways in which the British publishing industry, in contrast to local publishers, explicitly promoted this transition, and how (above and beyond the “quality” of individual titles) this business model facilitated the circulation of Australian novels between the colonies and Britain. My point is not that quality is irrelevant to whether a colonial author was published overseas. But if quality is perceived as the only determining factor in the “conversion” of “stories” to “books” at the imperial center, we ignore the commercial processes and imperatives involved in this movement of fiction.

Serialized titles that became books overseas were implicated in established systems for facilitating this transition. In Britain, it was common for serial and book versions of a novel to be published by the same company, with in-house periodicals publicizing their firm’s book list through serialization as well as reviewing and advertising. More than half of the Australian novels published as serials and books overseas were implicated in this practice, including titles by Cambridge (*Cassell’s Family Magazine* and Cassell; *The Churchman’s Companion* and Joseph Masters); B. L. Farjeon (*Tinsley’s Magazine* and Tinsley); Timperley (*Boy’s Own Paper* and The Religious Tract Society); Franc (*Crystal Stories* and Richard Willoughby); Eliza Winstanley (*Bow Bells Weekly* and John Dicks); and Henry Kingsley (*Macmillan’s Magazine* and Macmillan). British publishers also formed relationships with particular authors of serialized novels. For instance, Macmillan published ten titles serialized in Australian periodicals between 1860 and 1889 (nine by Boldrewood), while Sampson Low published seven (all by Franc) and Richard Bentley six. In some cases, most notably with Boldrewood, the transition to book occurred many years after initial serialization. But even this belated instance indicates how these British publishers sought out authors already proven popular through serialization, and how the cycle of serial to book contributed to their business model.

The strategies used by British publishers to enable and encourage the transition from serial to book were absent in the colonial context. Only two authors are represented more than once: Clarke had three novels serialized and published as books locally, though not in the same periodical or by the same publisher; Cambridge had two novels published serially in the *Australasian* and as books jointly by Melbourne-based Melville and Mullens and London-based Heinemann (the joint publication raises the possibility that this transition from serial to book was organized by the British publisher).

The patterns that emerge in the book publication of serialized Australian novels in Britain, in contrast with the irregularity of this process in Australia, reinforce the centrality of this practice to the Victorian publishing industry. While demonstrating the role that this British practice played in the overseas publication of Australian novels, these findings also raise the question of why local publishers did not employ this approach, particularly given the apparent popularity of serialized novels in the colonies, the local publication (as I will show) of one in three Australian novels as books, and the involvement of a number of these local companies in publishing.
periodicals.

**Book Publishing: 1860s-1880s**

The most likely answer to this question lies in the nature of local book publishing, specifically its status as a “sideline” for companies that pursued a range of print-related and (in some cases) non-print-related activities. This “sideline” was in fact more prevalent than has been recognized, and it has important implications for understanding the readerships of these titles. As noted earlier, the quantitative results shown in Figure 2 clearly indicate that the nineteenth-century colonial book market was dominated by British publishers. Of the Australian novels published as books, 64 percent were published in Britain in the 1860s, declining to 50 percent in the 1870s and 49 percent in the 1880s. But this British dominance was not as absolute as recent Australian literary and book historians claim. While only 17 percent of book editions of Australian novels were published in the colonies in the 1860s, this proportion increased significantly to 34 percent in the 1870s and 37 percent in the 1880s. The last two figures become 38 and 41 percent (respectively) if the sample is limited to books that were never serialized, reflecting the greater tendency for British publishers to source their Australian novels from (predominantly colonial) periodicals. It is important not to overstate the contribution of local publishers to the history of the Australian novel: local periodicals published substantially more titles, as did British book publishers, and both of these other forms of publication enjoyed more extensive circulations. Nevertheless, the local publication of more than one in three book editions of Australian novels in the 1870s and 1880s (rising to two in five if only non-serialized titles are considered) refutes the established view that book publishing only occurred elsewhere.

While the distribution of Australian novels between colonial and British companies is not as unequal as is generally claimed, the two groups differed markedly in their degree of specialization. The major British publishers of Australian novels – including Sampson Low, Richard Bentley, Chapman and Hall, Tinsley, John Dicks and Macmillan, together responsible for 20 percent of Australian novels published as books from 1860 to 1889 – were all dedicated publishers as well as major competitors in their home market. In contrast, no local companies were dedicated publishers, from the most prolific, George Robertson, down to the 34 companies responsible for only one title. Instead, these predominantly Melbourne- and Sydney-based enterprises were also booksellers, printers, bookbinders, stationers, paper merchants, newsagents, distributors, libraries, periodical publishers and, in most cases, a combination of these.

Rather than an activity in direct competition with major British companies, local book publishing was probably more akin to what today we would call self-publication: that is, publication entirely or partly funded by the author. Although copayment for publication also occurred in Britain, this practice was significantly more common in the colonies. Copayment in Australia explains the lack of involvement of local companies in the cycle of serial and book publication, in that most of the authors whose novels were published as books locally were either unsuccessful in attaining serial publication or, in the few cases where titles were originally serialized, unable to translate this initial publication into book publication in Britain. This status of local book publication as a form of self-publication is also reflected in the absence of strong relationships between local book publishers and colonial authors: while all the major British publishers of Australian novels named above were connected with a particular author or authors, there were limited
examples of such connections in the colonies, though authors and publishers were often in the same city. Given the requirement of financial contributions from authors, the fact that one in three book editions of Australian novels were published locally is remarkable, and suggests the desire of colonial authors to engage in local literary culture (even if they did so because other avenues were blocked). At the same time, the nature of local book publishing raises questions about the extent to which these titles circulated in the colonies, and of their local readership. To my mind, the perception of subsidized titles as limited in circulation (as well as culturally worthless) has contributed to the neglect of local publishing and to the corresponding focus on British publishers. But there are important reasons not to overestimate the availability of British published books in Australia, or to underestimate the availability of locally published titles.

Munro and Curtain’s account of the publishing history of Australian stories implies that all were “shipped back to the Antipodes.” But from the 1860s to the 1880s, approximately a third of British-published Australian novels were multivolume (predominantly three-decker), a form of publication designed and intended for the British subscription library market. There was essentially no market in the colonies for such books, due to their greater cost (including shipping) and the scarcity of British-style subscription libraries. Such titles were unlikely to have travelled to the colonies unless reissued as single volumes by British (or in some cases colonial) publishers, which was the case with less than half of the multivolume Australian novels published in Britain in the 1860s and 1870s. Moreover, Graeme Johanson’s claim that colonial readers were also “not interested in buying … 6s editions”, and that until the 1880s “[o]nly major wealthy publishers like Murray … Macmillan, Bell and Methuen could afford” substantial trade with the colonies, questions the extent to which even these single-volume titles were available in Australia.

Where Australian novels “converted into books at the industrial heart of Empire” might not have returned to the colonies, all locally-published titles (none of which were published in multi-volume formats) were at least available, even if they were author-funded. Presence does not necessarily signify readership, but the involvement of local publishers in bookselling indicates a sales outlet for these locally published titles, even if availability was limited to the city where the bookseller/publisher was located. Local book publication does not mean that local readership was necessarily less than for Australian novels published in Britain. We must therefore consider the implications of the local publication of Australian novels, particularly the economics of this practice, for prevailing conceptions of colonial publishing and reading.

The Costs of Reading
The supposed absence of local publishing of Australian literature is generally attributed to the low price of books imported from Britain. As Dolin says, “Because ‘Australia’s book trade and readers were … part of an imperial cultural space, dominated and defended by London publishers’, fiction was cheaper here than almost anywhere else in the world; for the same reasons, it is held, Australian writers, publishers, and readers found it all the more difficult to establish, develop, and support a national literary culture.” In fact, there is evidence to suggest that both forms of local publication of Australian novels (serials and books) were cheaper than imported fiction. This is certainly the case with serialized fiction: as Johnson-Woods writes, “One of the attractions of colonial periodicals was the price.” The Age cost
only one penny and, as Morrison says, “was reasonably accessible to anyone who could read.” While most colonial periodicals cost sixpence, these publications provided colonial readers with relatively cheap access to fiction, as well as other forms of entertainment and information.

British books, sold to booksellers on “Colonial terms,” were often cheaper in the colonies than in Britain, especially after the growth in colonial editions from the mid-1880s. While it is not possible to assert definitively that local books cost still less (as Johanson writes, there is an “absence of local evidence of specific prices charged by booksellers generally”), some evidence suggests this conclusion. Locally published titles did not incur shipping costs from from Britain and were often subsidized by authors. They were not issued in expensive multi-volume formats but were often published in installments, which spread out the cost of purchase. Moreover, Eggert notes that, in contrast to British readers, most colonial readers “probably … had insufficient or inconvenient access” to lending libraries. As Hobart bookseller and publisher J. Walch wrote in the Intelligencer in 1895, because the “Library system is not established” in the colonies, “readers of books must of necessity be also their owners.” Therefore, price necessarily played a substantial role in determining what fiction was purchased and read.

This issue of pricing and purchase helps in turn to explain the tension between existing studies of colonial reading practices – which assume colonial readers’ lack of interest in local fiction – and the high rate of local publication of Australian novels. As noted earlier, Dolin, Lyons, and Webby draw their conclusions about local reading preferences from institutional traces of reading: the holdings of lending institutions or minutes of reading groups. Webby’s acknowledged “elite” focus, and the small number of readers with access to lending libraries, suggest that these studies omit, or at least marginalize, much reading activity in the colonies. I argue that they disproportionately emphasize imported over locally produced fiction, given that the latter were largely excluded from libraries and reading groups. This is not to say that Australian readers were primarily interested in Australian fiction. Certainly much non-Australian fiction was available in the colonies, including in local periodicals. However, the widespread local publication of Australian novels, and the extensive circulations of serialized titles, indicate that the readership for these works was substantially larger than studies of institutional reading practices would suggest.

**The 1890s**

When serial and book publication are combined, between 1860 and 1889, 61 percent of Australian novels were first, and in many cases only, published in the colonies. But from the mid-1880s, this situation began to change. British publishers increasingly reissued, in single volumes, Australian novels originally published in more expensive multivolume formats. This trend paralleled the growth of cheap colonial editions from 1886, which comprised an increasing part of British book exports to Australia. In the 1890s, there was a marked decline in local, and substantial growth in British, publication of Australian novels. These factors point to the growing importance of the colonial market for British publishers, and to the expansion of the Australian novel in this market. However, they may seem to negate these connections I have traced between local publishing and reading practices. In fact, this existing reading culture helps to explain these trends. Specifically, I argue that the growth in British publishers’ involvement in Australian novel publishing was part of their response, in seeking access to the increasingly lucrative colonial market, to local reading practices.
The 1890s witnessed a dramatic reduction in the proportion of Australian novels published serially, and in local serialization. Where 51 percent of Australian novels were serialized in the 1880s (93 percent in local periodicals) in the 1890s those proportions fell to 17 and 85 percent respectively. Morrison has attributed this trend to the rise of imported literary supplements, which were increasingly prevalent through the 1880s and “saturat[ing] the market” in the 1890s. Whatever the cause of this decline, this decade marks the end of the period when serial publication, especially in colonial periodicals, played a major role in the circulation of Australian novels.

According to Morrison, the “damage to local colonial endeavours” caused by imported literary supplements was “more than offset” by a series of “fundamental changes in the modes of cultural production” at this time, including “the development of Australian publishing houses” and superseding of “the hegemony of the three-decker … by a plentitude of cheap imported books.” Trends in British book publication of Australian novels concurrent with this decline in serial publication reinforce Morrison’s claim of a fundamental shift in modes of cultural production in the 1890s: specifically, these trends uphold the connection she describes between the decline in the serial novel and the availability of cheap imported fiction. There was a four-fold increase in the number of Australian novels published in Britain (from 55 titles in the 1880s to 225 in the 1890s) which occurred in the context of a shift by British publishers away from multivolume books to cheaper single editions. Where 28 percent of the Australian novels published in Britain in the early 1890s were multivolume, in the second half of that decade the proportion fell dramatically to 2 percent (or 3 titles). From 1897, all of the Australian novels published in Britain were single volume.

Although the declining “hegemony of the three-decker” was concurrent with the demise of serial fiction in the colonies, as Morrison proposes, my results do not support her association of both trends with “the development of Australian publishing houses.” In fact, they suggest the opposite: that the increased involvement of British publishers in the Australian novel field was related to a decline of local book publishing. Of the Australian novels published as books in the 1890s, only 21 percent were published in the colonies (down from 37 percent in the 1880s), while 64 percent were published in Britain (up from 49 percent in the 1880s). The fact that most of these locally published titles were from a single company (George Robertson) emphasizes the general reduction in local book publication suggested by these proportional results. With 22 titles (as well as 12 published jointly with British publishers, mainly Swan Sonnenschein) George Robertson was actually the most prolific publisher of Australian novels overall in this decade; no other local company published more than three titles, and most published only one or two. At the end of the 1890s, George Robertson’s involvement in this field declined rapidly, with that company never again investing so heavily in publishing original Australian novels.

George Robertson’s approach to Australian novel publishing in the 1890s differs from that of the major British publishers of such titles in ways that indicate the continuation of a nonspecialist local print industry. British publishers of Australian novels included Routledge, Remington and Co., Macmillan, Ward, Lock, F. V. White, Hutchinson, and Chatto and Windus (with ten to twenty titles); and T. Fisher Unwin, Sampson, Low, Heinemann, Methuen, Cassell, Digby, Long and Co., and Richard Bentley (with five to ten). As was the case previously, each house was associated with a particular author or authors and/or with the cycle of serial and book publication. In contrast, none of George Robertson’s titles were previously
serialized, and no two were by the same author. However, for this local company, as for many of these British publishers, the 1890s were marked by concentrated involvement in the Australian novel field. Some of the British publishers listed above (Ward, Lock, Hutchinson, Cassell, and Methuen) went on to publish many more Australian novels during the twentieth century. But for the majority (including Routledge, Remington and Co., Macmillan, F. V. White, Chatto and Windus, T. Fisher Unwin, and Digby, Long and Co.), as for George Robertson, this decade (and in some cases the next) represented a peak in publishing Australian literature.

The publishing trends I have outlined for the 1890s – the fall in local serialization of Australian novels, the retreat of most local companies from this field, the decline in George Robertson’s publishing activities at the end of that decade, and the substantial growth in British publication of Australian novels – might seem to suggest a “foreign invasion,” with local book and periodical publishers crowded out of the market by British imports. Beyond the growth in British publication of Australian novels, there is clear evidence of “accelerated interest concerning Australia in the British world of print.” Some firms opened branches in the colonies: Collins in Sydney in 1872 and Ward, Lock in Melbourne in 1884. According to Alison Rukavina, “by the late 1880s, British publishers … were offering their books, often deeply discounted,” to colonial distributors like George Robertson as a way of gaining “a larger share of the booming Australian market.” However, viewed in conjunction with the prior existence of a local market for Australian fiction, publishing patterns in the 1890s indicate a process distinct from blunt Imperial domination of the colonial market.

As recent accounts (including Rukavina’s) demonstrate, British publishers did not simply flood the colonial market with cheap imports; they also worked to understand and respond to that market. Rukavina argues that British publishers and authors felt “their financial success depended upon their direct engagement of foreign and colonial wholesalers and distributors,” and describes letters from British writers (Helen Mathers and Mary Francis Cusack) expressing a desire for good sales in the Australian colonies. Mathers made a point of “specifically including Australian content to attract Australian readers.” Luke Trainor cites the 1886 report of the British Royal Commission on the Depression of Trade and Industry, which concludes that “our supremacy is now being assailed on all sides … we must display greater activity in the search for new markets and a greater readiness to accommodate our production to local tastes and peculiarities.” Trainor argues that Macmillan incorporated a high proportion of popular fiction in their Colonial Library Series because, in visiting Australia in 1884 and 1885 “to explore marketing possibilities,” Maurice Macmillan observed “that there was a great interest in popular fiction, of which Macmillan had little on their list.”

Rukavina and Trainor highlight ways in which British publishers responded to the Australian market, but neither relates this responsiveness to the publication of Australian fiction. Beyond the two British authors she cites, Rukavina makes no mention of whether the books imported into the colonies by George Robertson were by British or Australian authors, nor does she explore George Robertson’s role as a local publisher as well as a bookseller, wholesaler, and distributor for overseas companies. Using the case study of Macmillan, Trainor explicitly distinguishes British attention to the Australian market from the publication of Australian fiction: such “series were not generally a showcase for Australian writers.” These analyses resonate with the claim, in recent accounts of colonial literary culture, that Australian readers had little if any interest in local writing.
However, without recognizing such interest, it is difficult to explain the four-fold increase in British publication of Australian novels, especially as this occurred in the context of British publishers’ growing interest in the Australian market and attempts to “accommodate … production to local tastes and peculiarities.”

If British publishers like Macmillan were interested enough in the colonial market to recognize the demand for popular fiction and incorporate it in their lists, then the local circulation of Australian novels cannot have escaped their notice. More particularly, if British publishers were encouraging “Australian content to attract Australian readers,” there is every reason to suppose that they would have welcomed Australian novels with local content for the same reason. The surge in British publication of Australian novels can be seen, from this perspective, as part of British publishers’ response to local conditions, and another means (along with opening colonial branches, publishing popular fiction, and encouraging Australian content) to gain entry into the increasingly lucrative colonial market.

The dynamics I am proposing resonate with those Eggert describes in a recent article on the demise of the triple-decker in British publishing and the rise of the colonial edition as the linchpin of the book trade between Britain and Australia from the late 1880s. The shift from multi- to single-volume books (a trend, as I have shown, that effected Australian novels) has been widely attributed to conditions internal to the British book trade, especially the relationship between publishers and lending libraries like Mudies. While acknowledging the importance of these conditions, Eggert argues that the colonial market also motivated this shift. Specifically, because of the importance of the colonial market for British publishers, and the power of local booksellers to define and defend this market, British publishers responded to the colonial demand for cheap fiction (created by the lack of borrowing facilities) with the colonial edition. I suggest that trends in the publication of Australian novels indicate that this British response to the colonial market extended beyond price to the source and content of the fiction published.

Even if British publishing activities were a response to local conditions, their involvement in the Australian novel field in the 1890s had dramatic consequences for colonial book publishers. The high proportion of book editions of Australian novels published in the colonies – especially in the second half of the 1880s (when 40 percent of titles were published locally) – and George Robertson’s position as the major publisher of such titles in this decade, indicates that local publishing, while remaining a “sideline,” was an extremely active one. As British publishers surged into the Australian market, embraced (for a short time) the Australian novel, and turned to cheaper single-volume editions of these titles, local book publication dropped off, immediately for most local companies and ultimately for George Robertson as well.

There seems little doubt that the late nineteenth century was a period, as Rukavina asserts, of “competition and negotiation as British publishing houses worked with their colonial counterparts to create a space for their publications outside Britain.” Trends in the 1890s suggest that one result of this competition and negotiation was the turning away of local companies from publishing towards sales and distribution. Faced with the mass import of books – including Australian novels – from Britain it was “simpler and more economical for the local trade,” as Richard Nile and David Walker say of the early twentieth century, “to organise itself to be importers and retailers rather than publishers with an eye for local talent and new forms of literary expression.”
This conclusion may seem unremarkable, in that the configuration of local bookseller and British publisher is a well-established feature of Australian literary history. What is remarkable is that this relationship only really solidified in the 1890s, at the very end of the official “colonial” period. We are accustomed to thinking of colonial literary culture in terms of local booksellers and readers forced to await the arrival of books shipped from the “heart of Empire.” In fact, while many Australian novels were published in Britain, most of the titles read in the colonies were published there. As a result, local publishers played a much more important role in the emergence, development, and circulation of this literary form – and in the shaping of colonial literary culture – than has been hitherto acknowledged. Analyzing local publishing also brings into view the importance of colonial reading communities to the history of the Australian novel and the complex relationships between fiction, print culture, colonial identity, economics, and politics in this period. Alternatively, at least in the late 1880s and 1890s, British publishers, instead of simply imposing their titles on the colonies, awaited information from the colonies in determining the form their lists would take.

While the growing scholarly interest in the history of publishing and reading in Australia has motivated a necessary and productive internationalization of nineteenth century studies, the focus on British publishers and authors (as well as the longstanding preoccupation of Australian scholars with the book as the vehicle of literary culture) has overshadowed important parts of this history. I would go so far as to say there is a pattern in existing studies of colonial publishing and reading created by a view of that culture as always and inevitably derivative of Britain. Thus local serialization is assumed to follow the importation of printing technologies and the rise of the newspaper novel in London, when in fact it preceded both. Despite the rarity of libraries in Australia, book borrowing (a practice far more common in Britain) is used to study colonial readers, and to claim that they did not read local fiction. The neglect of colonial book publication might also be understood as an effect of its assumed inferiority to the British model.

I am not suggesting a move in the opposite direction, to claim all local activities as better than those in Britain; this would be a return to the cultural nationalist framework that recent scholarship has done well to challenge. But always assuming colonial practices were derivative is just as unwarranted. It is also self-perpetuating: if we only look for publishing trends in Australia after they occurred in Britain, we will only find them then; if we only attend to publishing approaches equivalent to those in Britain, we will perceive local practices as lacking or absent. Instead, what is needed is a middle ground, as I have attempted to present here. Acknowledging that local as well as British publishers and authors played an important role in the development of colonial literary culture and its reading practices – and that influence moved in both directions – provides a standpoint from which to perceive what was distinctive, as well as derivative, about writing, publishing, and reading in Australia in the nineteenth century.

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The relatively high proportion of Australian novels published in “Other” countries and in America – especially in the 1860s and 1870s (when 10 percent of titles were in this category) – challenges the prevailing understanding of colonial literary culture as formed through a direct and, for the colonies, exclusive relationship with British publishers. While this other movement of Australian “stories” deserves more attention, I concentrate on the two main sites for book publication of Australian novels in this period: Britain and the colonies. The category of “Other” in this graph also includes a small number of titles (one each in the 1870s and 1880s, and five in the 1890s) published jointly by British and non-Australian publishers, or by a British, an Australian, and another national publisher.


Most “Non-AustLit Novels” are by well-known authors (such as George Eliot, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Charles Dickens) deemed to have profoundly influenced particular Australian writers. I have also excluded authors included in AustLit if they only had a novel serialized in an Australian periodical.


26 Australian novels were serialized prior to 1860, but overseas publication was the norm, and one individual (John Lang) was responsible for more than half of these titles.


30 The reliability of this claim is brought into question by George Massina’s corresponding assertion that when Marcus Clarke took over the editorship of the journal, monthly sales immediately fell from 12,000 to 4,000. See Ronald G. Campbell, *The First Ninety Years: The Printing House of Massina, Melbourne, 1859 to 1949* (Melbourne: Massina, 1950), 82.


34 Eggert, “Robbery Under Arms,” 129.


Armstrong (New Castle and London: Oak Knoll Press and British Library, 2005), 188. See also Law, Serializing Fiction, 45-7, 51.


39 Law, “Imagined Local,” 188.


41 Campbell, The First Ninety Years, 53.


43 In 1866, New South Wales had a population of 428,167 compared with Victoria’s 633,602. By 1870, New South Wales and Victoria’s populations had grown to 497,992 and 723,925 respectively (Australian Bureau of Statistics, “3105.0.65.001”).


48 Donaldson and Law make this same argument in relation to local novels serialized in regional English and Scottish newspapers in this period (Donaldson, Popular Fiction; Law, “Imagined Local”).

49 Isaacs and Kirkpatrick, Two Hundred, 11.


52 Brake, Print in Transition, 3.


57 Marcus Clarke and George A. Walstab, Long Odds: A Novel (Colonial Monthly, 1868-1869; Melbourne: Clarson, Massina and Co., 1869); Marcus Clarke, His Natural Life (Australian Journal, 1870-1872; Melbourne: George Robertson, 1874).


60 Timperley, Bush Luck.

61 Fran, Fern Hollow.

62 Eliza Winstanley, For Her Natural Life (Bow Bells, 1876; London: John Dicks, 1881).


67 Eggert, “Robbery Under Arms,” 129.

68 Clarke, *Chidiock Tichbourne*; Clarke, *His Natural Life*; Clarke and Walstab, *Long Odds*.

Cambridge, *Not All in Vain*; Cambridge, *The Three Miss Kings*. Cambridge also had two novels serialized and published as books in Britain (*My Guardian and The Two Surplices*), and a number of novels published as books overseas, after first being serialized in Australia: *A Black Sheep* (Age, 1888-1889; London: Heinemann, 1890); *A Little Minx* (*Sydney Mail*, 1885; London: Heinemann, 1893); *A Marriage Ceremony* (*Australasian*, 1884; London: Hutchinson, 1894); *A Mere Chance* (*Australasian*, 1880; London: Richard Bentley, 1882); *In Two Years Time* (*Australasian*, 1879; London: Richard Bentley, 1879).

69 In the 1860s, 39 Australian novels appeared in local periodicals, and 38 were published as books in Britain, compared with 11 local book publications. In the 1870s and 1880s, respectively, 57 and 92 titles were published in local periodicals, and 48 and 55 by British book publishers, compared with 33 and 42 by local book publishers.


71 According to John Holroyd, “[m]any” of George Robertson’s titles “were published on commission, i.e., at the author’s expense; other titles were issued on a profit-sharing basis” (John Holroyd, *George Robertson of Melbourne: Pioneer, Bookseller and Publisher* [Melbourne: Robertson and Mullens, 1968], 44).

72 For instance, eleven of the fifteen titles published by Sampson Low between 1860 and 1889 were by Franc; of Chapman and Hall’s ten titles, five were by Praed and two were by Arthur Locker; Richard Bentley’s thirteen titles included two by Catherine Helen Spence, two by Cambridge, and five by Praed (including two novels she co-authored with Justin McCarthy); and Macmillan’s five titles included two by Kingsley and two by Mary Anne Broome.

73 Two of the ten titles published by George Robertson between 1860 and 1889 were by Marcus Clarke, and two were by J. R. Houlding; Alex McKinley, J. J. Moore, J. Richards and Sons, and R. Mackay also published two titles by a single author (Edmund Finn, Harold W. H. Stephen, James Richards, and William Bowley respectively).

74 Munro and Curtain, “After the War,” 3.

75 In the 1860s and 1870s, 32 per cent of Australian novels published in Britain were multivolume, rising slightly to 35 per cent in the 1880s.


78 *AustLit* shows that, in the 1860s, only 5 of the 12 multivolume Australian novels published in Britain were reissued in single volume by British or colonial publishers; in the 1870s, this was the case for only 6 of 16 titles.

While colonial book publishers issued two- and three-volume editions (as well as single and part issue publications) in the 1830s and 1840s, from the 1850s no locally published books were multivolume.


Johnson-Woods, Index, 4.


Johnson-Woods, Index, 4.

Holroyd, George Robertson of Melbourne, 42.

Johanson, A Study of Colonial Editions, 10.

Ibid., 231.

From the 1850s, all locally published books were issued in parts or single volume; 86 percent were single volume in the 1850s, 82 percent in the 1860s, 97 percent in the 1870s, and 100 percent in the 1880s and 1890s.


Considering the period from the mid-1870s to the end of the 1880s, Morrison estimates that only one fifth of the novels in colonial newspapers were by local authors (Morrison, “Serial Fiction,” 315).

In contrast, only 30 percent were first published in Britain; one percent were jointly published by Australian and British presses.

Of the 19 Australian novels published in multivolumes in Britain in the 1880s, 15 were reissued in single volume.

Colonial editions existed before this date. In 1843 Murray’s Colonial and Home Library was launched, but contained no fiction and was unsuccessful outside Britain. Bentley issued its first series of colonial editions, with 16 titles, from 1878 to 1881, beginning again from 1885. However, it was in 1886, when Macmillan’s Colonial Library Series was launched, that the colonial edition achieved its recognized and enduring form, and only “[f]rom the late 1890s onwards [that] the … colonial edition … became commonplace” (Johanson, A Study of Colonial Editions, 36).

Eggert, “Robbery Under Arms,” 129; see also Johnson-Woods, Index, 5.

George Robertson published six Australian novels in 1898 alone (as well as four published jointly with Swan Sonnenschein), but only one each in 1899 and 1901 (none appeared in 1900). No other first edition Australian novels bore the George Robertson imprint until the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. A consideration of all first edition books published by George Robertson included in AustLit – ranging from children’s fiction to autobiography to drama to essays – reveals this same peak in production in the 1890s followed by a retreat from this activity. (The notable exception to this pattern is poetry collections: George Robertson published more of these in the 1880s and 1910s than in the 1890s or 1900s).

For example, 17 of the 21 Australian novels published by Routledge in the 1890s were by Nat Gould, including one also serialized in an Australian periodical. Digby, Long and Co., which published five titles in this decade, is the only exception: that is, the only British publisher of five or more titles not connected with a particular author or authors and/or with serial fiction.


Alison Rukavina, “‘This is a Wonderfully Comprehensive Business’: The Development of the British-Australian and International Book Trades, 1870-1887,” Script and Print 32.2 (2008): 92.

Eggert, “Robbery Under Arms,” 142.

Rukavina, “‘This is a Wonderfully,’” 81.


Munro and Curtain, “After the War,” 3.