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Completing the Picture:

William Grant, poster production and the lithographer's role

TRAVEL POSTERS FROM the Art Deco period are, today, rightly appreciated for their qualities as works of art, particularly in terms of design and colour. The names of the printing companies who published them, and the names of the artists who created the designs on which the posters are based (usually a modest watercolour sheet) appear regularly on them. However, the name of the one artist essential in the transformation from design to actual poster is routinely missing— a trained lithographer who, at the time, might have been described as a craftsman, or less generously, as a journeyman. At the very least, the process he supervised, described in more detail below, demanded precise and delicate coordination; at best it involved considerable artistry. While such printers were a prominent and regular feature on the payrolls of printing businesses, they are generally impossible to identify today in the wake of the disappearance of business records.¹ This drift into anonymity is not confined to Australia, but equally veils the identity of many European lithographers. August Clot (1858-1936), the lithographer responsible for prints after drawings by Renoir, Fantin La Tour, Cezanne and Rodin, has only recently emerged from this obscurity, even though his contribution to the creation of these posters was essential.²

The survival in the State Library of Victoria's Australian Manuscripts Collection of the records of a Melbourne commercial business – F. W. Niven and Co. – and some family archives, makes it possible to recreate something of the life and times of one such printer in Melbourne, Thomas William Grant (1893-1968). As late as the 1960s, when another printing business, Morris and Walker, shifted to Smith Street in Collingwood, Roland Morris, one of its principals, regarded Grant as possibly the most experienced commercial lithographer in Melbourne, and wanted to employ him, notwithstanding his age.³ It was an offer that William Grant declined, but the appreciation of his abilities that it implies is borne out in various ways by the documentary sources that are the basis of this article. Among other things, these documents offer valuable insights into the commercial conditions in which Niven's and similar printing businesses operated. In the case of William Grant, many of whose posters are held in the Library's Picture Collection, the record of his income shows that the company's owners recognised that his role was a crucial one, and that he was regarded not as a mere journeyman, but in effect, as a master printer. This in turn strengthens the argument that the role and status of such lithographers should be reassessed, a view endorsed by several scholars of printmaking in Australia.

II



William Grant, already a trained lithographer, when he enlisted in the AIF in 1915. Family Archive

In a photograph taken in 1930, when he had been working for Niven's for close to a decade, William Grant appears as a solidly-built, relaxed and affable individual, marked by then with some real experience of the world, in contrast to the slim, handsome and idealistic looking young man who looks out from a photograph taken just after enlisting in the AIF in 1915. The army records from this period already list his 'trade or calling' in civilian life as 'lithographic artist'. William – 'Willie' to family and friends – was the younger of two sons of Thomas Grant (1854-1933) and Mary Ann, née French (1859-1945). At the end of 1920, he described his father's 'quality, trade or profession' as that of 'gentleman', implying (quite correctly by then) that his father derived his income from investments and not as a result of his own work. The home in which William grew up was essentially a prosperous one. His father moved to Ringwood in 1878, purchasing land for an orchard in 1883 in a joint family venture. By 1889 he was a councillor for West Riding on the Lilydale Council, a Justice of the Peace and a vice-president of the Ringwood Progress Association. That same year, along with two of his brothers, he registered a company to sell land. It was wound up in 1892, the year before William's birth, as property and financial markets collapsed and the 1890s depression was setting in.⁴ The family's

orchard became an important ingredient in their recovery as the depression receded. By 1909, a local cooperative in which his father was a founding figure was exporting thousands of cases of fruit to Germany.⁵ Nor had Thomas Grant finished with real estate, as he eventually built and let houses on land he owned in Ringwood Street, now part of the Eastland shopping complex. After World War I, William's father was sufficiently well-endowed to be able to make a gift of a block of land to each of his three children for a holiday home.

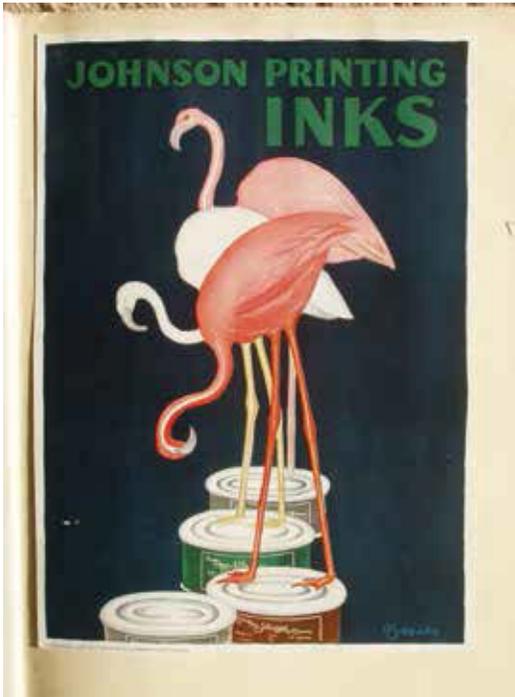
Much of the sense of purpose in the Grant home, including its work and business ethics, derived from Thomas Grant's deep commitment to Methodism (largely in the Primitive Methodist tradition before the Methodist reunion of 1902). Alcohol, gambling and dances were all proscribed.⁶ Although William ceased attending church on his return from the war, largely, in the view of his daughter because of his wartime experiences, the local Methodist church had been important part of his early life. It provided a social

network as well as a regular place of family worship. Just before the outbreak of World War I, William courted Edith Pithie, the daughter of a Methodist minister.⁷ When he married Violet Currie in November 1920, he was relieved to find that the Presbyterianism of his wife's family was much more relaxed and free from most of the prohibitions he had been used to in his family home.

Though he was already working as a lithographer before enlisting, this had not been his father's original intention. After William had completed Grade 8 ('Merit') at the local Primary School, his father wanted him to take up a 'useful' occupation, in his case, to train as a dentist. Not until it had become clear that this was a false start did his father accept that William's future lay elsewhere. Eventually, at a point in time that cannot be precisely identified, he obtained a position in one of Melbourne's many commercial printing businesses. At much the same time, before World War I, he also enrolled in night classes at the National Gallery of Victoria.⁸ Here his principal mentors were L. Bernard Hall and Frederick McCubbin, while his contemporaries included Napier Waller (1894-1972), R. W. Sturgess (1892-1932) and Ethel Spowers (1890-1947). Nevertheless, his home had contributed in its own way to his creative predilections. Like many other middle-class people of their generation, his parents believed that culture and aesthetics could be morally improving. There was a comprehensive home library, largely of works by standard nineteenth-century and contemporary English writers, from Scott, Longfellow and Tennyson to Rudyard Kipling. There was also much domestic music-making. William's older brother, Andrew Edwin (1888-1976) eventually fell in love with and married his music teacher, Mary Chenhall, the daughter of a local Methodist minister. Avid fans of Nellie Melba, they urged Willie as a young man to enrol in singing classes with Emery Gould, a Melbourne protégé of Melba's Italian mentor Mathilde Marchesi.⁹ However, their own lives were another sign of priority of commercial values over 'art for art's sake' in the Grant inheritance. Andrew eventually became a senior executive of Barnet Glass and Co., Ansell's rival in rubber products until the Great Depression.

Even before the outbreak of World War I, the family had accepted that art was William's metier. In 1913, his wedding present for Andrew and his bride was a painting.¹⁰ He displayed competence in working in pastel in conventional still lifes of flowers and fruit, straight from the orchard and home garden. In an ink and wash composition on a page in the autograph-book of his sister Margaret (1897-1981), ships at night are dramatically silhouetted against spotlights in an ink and wash composition. Though not necessarily created from a sense of the impending war, it acknowledged the importance of naval power for the empires of the day, something underlined in the minds of Australians not only by the much-publicised visit of an American fleet in 1908, but also by several visits before World War I by contingents from the expanding Japanese navy.

As a boy, William Grant had enrolled in the nearest cavalry cadet unit and by the time World War I broke out, he was a proficient and experienced horseman.¹¹ He enlisted in the AIF in July 1915, something that caused his parents real angst, as he later revealed in a letter written a year after the Armistice.¹² He embarked for Europe after Christmas 1915,

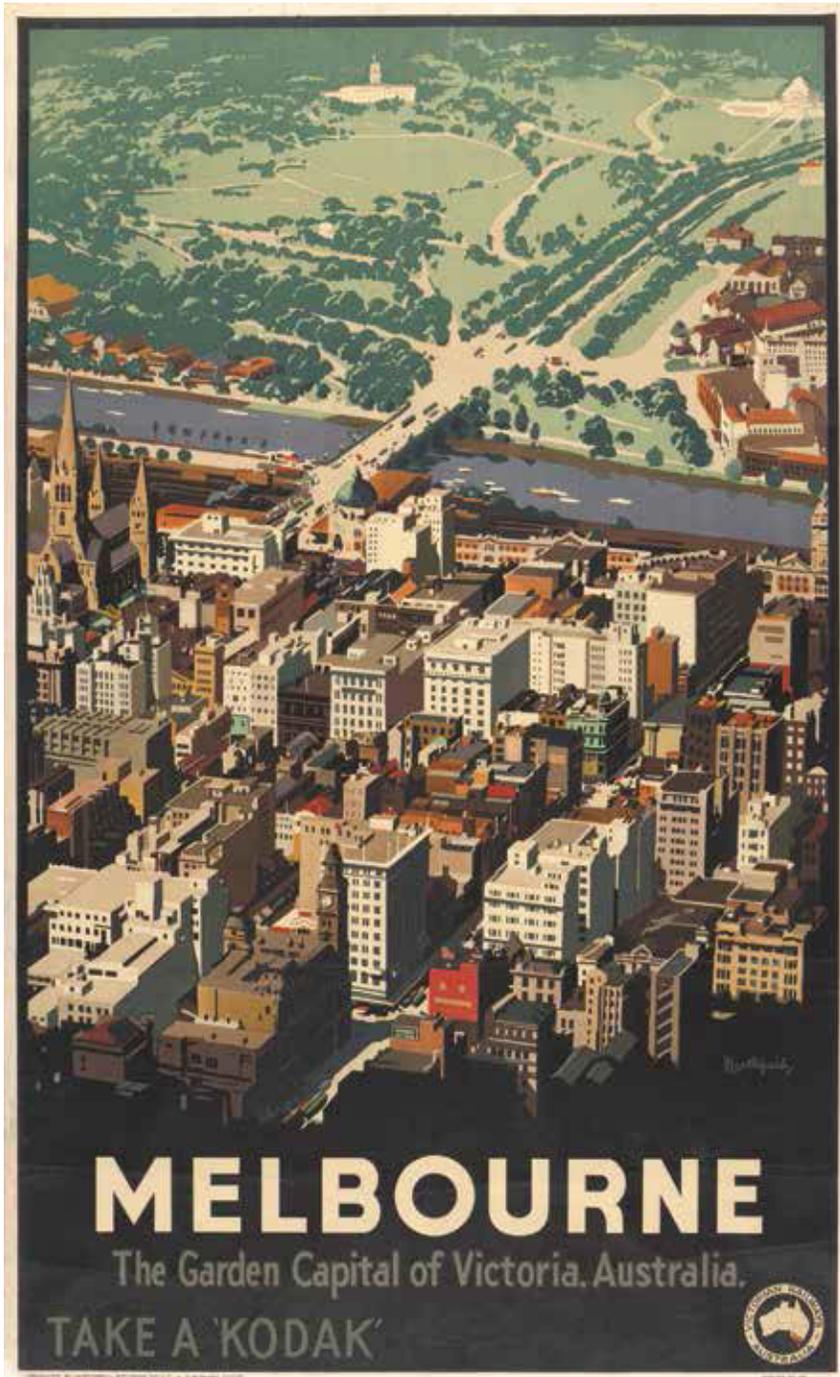


An advertisement by Charles Emeu Johnson and Co., an American firm that supplied Niven's with ink. From a scrapbook which Grant kept examples of design and colour for his work.
Family Archive

and after further training in Egypt was promptly sent to the Western Front. As a member of the 5th battalion in 1916 he saw service at Armentières, Moquet Farm and Pozieres, the last being the scene of some of the heaviest bombing experienced by the AIF. However, by November he had been hospitalised with enteric fever and sent to England. While at the High Street Military Hospital in Manchester, he contributed two full-page cartoons published in the *Jester*, a Christmas anthology created by patients for sale to benefit the hospital's comforts fund. On returning to active service, he distinguished himself and was present at major theatres, including Passchendaele and Ypres, being discriminated against as a 'colonial' by being denied a Military Cross for which he was recommended in despatches to Haig. The citation accompanying the recommendation described action for which others had

been awarded a Military Cross and even a Victoria Cross.¹³

When not involved in active service, he took every opportunity to see France's heritage of architecture and art. From Amiens he wrote: 'it does not matter what town one goes into in France, it is the same everywhere. The church is its best building. I think it is a pity that such beautiful places should be destroyed by the ravages of war'.¹⁴ Here, the quality of the stained glass in the windows particularly elicited comment, and the west end of the cathedral was 'gorgeous'. Just over a year later, in August 1918, he wrote that there were times when he was 'able to go where I want to. Then we have a six-cylinder Wolseley Ambulance, which gets very little of its authorised work but plenty of other work to do, so we are able to do some nice trips. I have a Douglas [Motor] Bike and have just had it overhauled, silencer taken off . . .'.¹⁵ As well as forwarding some of the iconic cards showing the devastation of Ypres to his family in Ringwood, determined to give his family a positive impression of France's cultural and artistic heritage, he sent far larger quantities of cards, sometimes whole booklets at a time, showing historic buildings and architecture. These included Roman sites in Arles and other locations far from the war front.¹⁶



James Northfield, 'Melbourne. The Garden Capital of Victoria, Australia-Take a "Kodak"'.
Colour lithograph, 100.5 x 62.5cm, produced by Northfield Studios Pty Ltd and F. W. Niven Pty Ltd, 1936.
Reproduced courtesy of the James Northfield Heritage Art Trust ©

Instead of returning to Australia soon after the declaration of the Armistice, William Grant remained in London. As part of his preparation for his return to civilian life, the AIF continued to pay him his full officer's income and an additional daily sum to enable him to enrol under the direction of one of Britain's most successful and well-known commercial artists, John Hassall, (1868-1948). Two of his most successful posters were 'The Jolly Fisherman' ('Skegness is so Bracing'), for the Great Northern Railway in 1908, and his 1910 poster for Kodak, featuring a girl in a blue and white striped dress. This design remained in circulation until the 1970s. Hassall also ran two schools of his own, the New Art School and the School of Poster Design, both in Kensington. His work was characterised by the use of flat colours and a heavy black-line border. Though recent secondary sources state that Hassall's first school closed at the outbreak of the War, the influx of demobilised servicemen in 1919 created favourable conditions once more for schools of this kind, and the document detailing Grant's full payment by the army for six months implies that Hassall was running a school again. What is beyond argument is that Hassall's teaching was vocationally-oriented, with a strong emphasis on practical training. In the words of the Department of Repatriation and Demobilisation, 'the experience gained by Lieutenant Grant whilst studying Drawing and Commercial Designing with Mr Hassall should prove of considerable value to him on his return to his pre-war profession'.¹⁷ It was an accurate prediction of what followed.

III

The technique of lithography was first developed at the end of the eighteenth century by the German Alois Senefelder. Its essence lay in printing from a Bavarian limestone, later often replaced by zinc plates, and it depended on the mutually repulsive properties of water and the greasy crayon or ink used in drawing the image on the stone or plate. While the possibilities of a colour process were quickly discovered, it was not until later in the nineteenth century that colour lithography became widely used for commercial art. At the same time, a careful, often patronising distinction was made between commercial and non-commercial work. It included the creation of separate societies for high art practitioners, such as the English Senefelder Club.¹⁸ Notwithstanding these distinctions, a student of commercial lithography in London during or just after World War I was living in a city in which the war itself had given an extra impetus to the popularity of the lithographic poster, as it had been harnessed as a means of instant visual communication in connection with many different aspects of the war effort. Designers of war posters included leading practitioners of high art such as Sir Frank Brangwyn, as well as more obviously commercial artists such as John Hassall. In Australia, the poster had similarly been harnessed in support of the war effort, though some of the best-known examples by Norman Lindsay lacked the aesthetic sophistication of Brangwyn and others.

With his experience in a London art school, Grant was now well-positioned to return to Australia as a commercial artist, where admiration for British and American posters and design was then widespread. At least ten exhibitions of British and

European travel posters took place in Australia in the wake of the war.¹⁹ The attitudes of commercial artists themselves is well represented by the fictional recreation of a Melbourne commercial printing business of the period in George Johnston's novel *My Brother Jack*. Posters by the Beggarstaff Brothers, Frank Newbold and Fred Taylor, Pennell and Brangwyn lithographs, decorate its walls.²⁰ However, it was obvious even to the lay viewer that for the moment, Australian poster and commercial design still lagged behind its overseas models.²¹

Having returned to Melbourne on the hospital ship *Borda* in the summer of 1920, Grant began by setting up his own business, the T. W. Grant Advertising Service. Its letterhead (with 'good advertising the world's greatest selling force' at the bottom of the page) listed posters and lithography among the services on offer. His name first appears in a wages book of F. W. Niven and Co in 1926, but it is most likely that he had been working there for some time already, given both the incomplete nature of some of the company's records, and his role as a property-owning husband and father of an infant daughter, Joan, born in 1924.²² The company's history explains its willingness to employ an artist with Grant's particular combination of practical skills, technical competence and aesthetic flair. Founded in Ballarat in the mid-1860s by Irish-born Francis Wilson Niven (1813-1905), the business expanded to Melbourne as the worst effects of the 1890s depression began to recede. A new purpose-designed building at 40-42 Flinders Street – the premises where William Grant worked – was part of this expansion.

In his entry on Niven for the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Stephen Herrin regarded this move as coinciding with 'a shift in concentration from lithographic work to jobbing and printing' and in Grant's day, they described themselves as 'Bookbinders, General Printers, Engravers, Lithographers, etc'. The commercial emphasis was inevitable, given the depressed economy that prevailed for some time in Victoria in the wake of the 1890s depression. However, high quality lithography had been integral to the company's earlier history. In 1873, F. W. Niven imported one of the first commercial steam lithographic presses in Australia and cooperated with Henry Crisp in new developments in colour lithography, making possible the production of elegant books such as Withers' *History of Ballarat* (1887) and the *Cyclopedia of Victoria* (1903-05). This interest was not confined to the first generation. As a young man in 1891, Henry Ninian Niven (1862-1925), who was the head of the company by the time that Grant returned to Melbourne, had patented an 'improved gelatine plate'.²³

Lists of clients and orders in Niven's account books between 1926 and 1942 indicate the workaday nature of much of the company's business, from the design and printing of labels, letterheads and similar items, to binding jobs for individuals. There are public service bodies, not only large local ones such as the Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board, but outside Australia – the Netherlands Indies Government Printing Works, whose address was in Moray St., South Melbourne. Pelaco, Wittners, Williams the Shoeman, Nugget, Tucker Box pet foods, Kellogg's, the Melbourne Jam Company in North Fitzroy and the Colonial Mutual Fire Insurance Company were businesses that

dealt across the city, the state or beyond. There were also smaller clients such as Swanston St dentist George Nott²⁴ and J. B. McAlpin, Ringwood estate agents, friends of two generations of the Grant family. If the list of jobs undertaken for Williams the Shoeman seems long enough – four pages – the biggest single client was the retail grocery business of Moran and Cato, trading across three states, set up by another family who were as staunchly Methodist as Thomas Grant. For them, the list of jobs extends to nine pages.²⁵ Much of the work they sought did not demand stylistic sophistication, and here Grant could create designs that were in some ways reminiscent of Hassall's work. However, it was certainly not the kind of work that hinted at or foreshadowed the sophistication or style of the travel posters.

Some of this work spilled over into his hours outside Niven's office, and he was able to do this because in a back room in the Parkhill Street home, he had installed a small press on which he could work at night.²⁶ This was an eminently practical way of dealing with small to medium sized labels, and keeping up with demand, especially from Moran and Cato. Commercial labels and advertising for such companies involved designs by several different artists, including James Northfield (1887-1973), best remembered today for his poster designs.²⁷

The travel posters that reveal Grant's artistry as a lithographer all date from the 1930s. A market for such posters developed with the growth of the tourist industry across Australia.²⁸ Of those listed in the surviving Niven's records,²⁹ the earliest are two posters for the Victorian Railways in the second half of 1931, one of the worst years of the Great Depression. One advertised citrus fruit (and perhaps the Victorian Riverland), the other, the attractions of Mount Buffalo. The Victorian Railways continued to be regular clients, with at least twenty-one individual orders for posters until late 1941. Eight orders are on record from the Australian National Travel Association between 1933 and 1937. Niven's and other Melbourne printing businesses had the advantage of being able to deal directly with its head office in Flinders Street in the railway buildings, even though the posters advertised destinations across the country, from Tasmania to the Great Barrier Reef. Lastly, there are at least six significant posters as well as many smaller commercial commissions, in a much longer list of orders from Northfield Studios, the office of designer James Northfield at nearby 114 Flinders Street.

The most avant-garde of all the designs that Grant executed were those of the Estonian-born Gert Sellheim (1901-70),³⁰ who arrived in Australia in the mid-1920s, bringing first-hand exposure to European modernism with him. The simplified shapes and sense of movement in *The Seaside Calls*³¹ or the minimalism of his *Corroboree* poster for the National Travel Association, and the limited colour palette in such images, have no equivalent in the posters of other designers printed by Niven's. *Spring in the Grampians*³² focuses not on the regional landscape, as in a Northfield design, but on the boldly-silhouetted figure of a young woman. Both Sellheim and another able commercial artist, Percy Trompf (1902-64)³³ designed posters advertising the Great Barrier Reef. The contrast in approach is striking. Sellheim creates a diagonal pattern of three fishes

underwater, with a coastline above in which three palms on three dunes echo the larger trio. Sellheim used the most limited colour palette possible, while Trompf's is a riot of rich tropical colours. By comparison, typical Northfield designs are panoramic, three-dimensional, with echoes of earlier and contemporary Australian artists' landscape and city views. However, the colour schemes of his *Blue Mountains*, two different *Geelong* posters, or *Melbourne, the Garden Capital of Victoria* are those of the modern poster, as are the shapes to which the major features have been reduced.

While these and similar posters were printed on the presses at Niven's in the 1930s, they were the culmination of developments that took place in the previous decade. The first was in 1923 when Harold Clapp³⁴ took control of the state's railways advertising. He was already chairman of the Victorian Railways Commissioners, and determined to promote Victoria as a tourist destination. It was through Clapp that Trompf, Sellheim, and Northfield, were all commissioned as poster designers. (Northfield had served an apprenticeship at Niven's.)³⁵ At a national level, the Australian Travel Association also understood the benefits of commissioning high-quality posters. Another element was the accessibility of good models. When Blamire Young gave a lecture on poster art in 1929, he illustrated his talk using examples from a collection that belonged to the Working Men's College. It was a venue that William Grant visited from time to time to view work on display and to maintain personal contact with acquaintances such as Napier Waller.³⁶

If there is one feature in particular that distinguishes the best of Grant's work in the posters printed by Niven's in the 1930s, it is the vibrant, deep colours that appear across extensive areas, alongside other areas of fine detail and considerable delicacy. The areas of broad and dramatic colour, juxtaposed against the tree-lined and shaded hillside in the *Blue Mountains* poster, is a typical example. Work like this is rarely found in the posters of companies such as those listed above, with the exception of Troedel and Cooper, a firm with even longer history than Niven's, whose poster printing was of a consistently high quality. On its own, this bears out the assessment of Grant as one of Melbourne's best lithographers, as quoted at the beginning of this article.

What was Grant's role in transforming a design into a poster? He would begin by magnifying the original design to the much larger poster dimensions, using squared paper. Inks also needed to be chosen from a range available for colour lithography that either matched the shades in original design or worked most effectively on the larger scale of the poster sheet. In his daughter's opinion, this step was one of the most demanding, and one that instantly revealed the more gifted and experienced lithographers.³⁷

The inks available to him at the time included products imported from the United States and the United Kingdom.³⁸ The full-size drawing would then be marked with lines corresponding to the divisions between each separate colour. From this master sheet, outlines would be transferred to a master stone or plate. By this stage, Niven's appear to have been using plates.³⁹

From the master plate, impressions would in turn be made onto the individual

plates used for the separate colours. Not until these stages had been completed could the actual printing take place. The image that was now to be printed would also be the reverse of the original design. (Grant was not using the offset-lithography process, in which the final printed image read in the same direction as the original.) These initial stages took place in consultation with the design artists; Grant's daughter recalls encountering Trompf, Sellheim and Northfield in the course of her Friday afternoon visits to her father's workplace.⁴⁰

When all was in readiness, the first of the plates to be printed from would be thoroughly dampened, and the sheet for the poster, lightly sponged, laid on it. The poster sheet was backed by some spare paper sheets, which in turn were held down by another metal sheet, the tympan, which ensured even distribution of pressure during printing as the scraper-bar of the press moved across it. The inked plate would then be run under the poster sheet from one end to the other. Eventually, the sheet was run through the press as many times as there were separate plates from which to print the different colours. This part of the printing demanded that a sheet be laid precisely in position, so that the registration (colour alignment) was correct and there were no faulty overlaps or blurring with colours. There were several ways of doing this, but for the posters, the most likely method probably involved aligning lines marked in pencil at the top and bottom of the verso of the sheet with crosses or other marks at the sides of the stones or plates. The plates for the different colours each had to be inked all over again for each separate impression, in other words, for each poster.

Some posters, such as Northfield's *Blue Mountains* poster of 1935, were created in two formats, a large poster size and a smaller format, described in the entry as 'posterettes'.⁴¹ To ensure long-term survival, posters often underwent one more process after printing. They were backed with linen. This is itemised separately in an entry for Doylamat Co., a business that was also run by James Northfield.⁴²

According to his daughter, William rarely had an assistant, but the company records indicate that there were others working with or under him. Niven's 1926 records concerning individual employees, which are more detailed than most from later years, lists a second lithographer, Gordon Gray. In 1930, the staff totalled forty-three, and one, J. Glenn, is described, in one of the few instances where staff roles are defined, as a 'lithographic machinist'. Presumably he helped with the inking of the plates and operating of the presses.⁴³ However, the ultimate responsibility remained with Grant, and his daughter recalled that when it came to the posters, his perfectionism meant that many sheets were discarded because they did not measure up to his standards.⁴⁴

After his return to Australia, Grant remained in touch with current trends in poster and commercial design, compiling a small scrap-book, which he labelled 'Poster Style', and in which he assembled colour advertisements, some cut out from contemporary magazines, others a part of publicity from businesses associated with printing. The black paper of the blank pages of the scrapbook further heightens the

colours of these advertisements. The most exotic is a Spanish one for olive oil. Against a black background that highlights the hectic pink of her traditional costume, a Spanish woman, arm upraised, pours a thin stream of oil into a bowl below. A gypsy caravan and the landscape behind it is predominantly a matter of strong reds, with small areas in yellow or black for contrast. Dramatic colour contrasts are equally characteristic of an advertisement for printing inks, in which three flamingos – one white, one pink, one true flamingo – are poised on paint cans against a black ground, with lettering in green. Another is a redolent of oriental exoticism, and features a figure posed like a dancer in a stance repeated in much other work of the art-deco era. If these advertisements all have a whiff of escapism about them, others concentrate on the modern city, the basis for commerce and consumption. The advertisements featuring city buildings and other architecture are all models in their use of a limited range of colours and their reduction of buildings to simple plane surfaces. One features a modern inner-city skyline that includes a multi-storey office-block as well as a crane and an industrial chimney. The buildings in an advertisement for San Gimignano may be historic ones but they have all been reduced to basic cubes. Another composition of houses again reduces all surfaces to a handful of basic shapes, with roofs of red, walls of white or brown, with two blues, one dark, the other light for contrast. Of the Melbourne designers whose work he printed, these advertisements are closest in style to that of Gert Sellheim. They suggest that he was trying to model his own work, including his own designs, on avant-garde British, American and European models rather than on more conservative approaches he had been familiar with in his earlier years.

How did his employers see his role? There is nothing to indicate whether the firm's principals appreciated the aesthetic qualities of his work. However, even purely from a commercial point of view, it was important to them. Quite apart from the steady flow of bread-and-butter designs and jobs he supervised for large businesses such as Moran and Cato, the travel posters represented another source of reliable income during a period of economic uncertainty, commissioned as they were by public service organizations at the state or national level. There is one unambiguous indication of the value William Grant's employers placed on his work: the size of his pay-packet. In the record of weekly payment of staff, only three other staff members were more highly-paid than Grant – the three owners of the company, Wilson Niven (son of Henry Ninian Niven), Richard Harvey and accountant Henry Siminton (d.1954). These last two each owned a third share in the company, which they had purchased from Henry Niven. In 1926, the earliest year from which a record of Grant's salary survives, his weekly pay was £8. A range of other staff, male and female, were paid £6.18.6; a Miss Kennedy was receiving £1.19.0 and one, Harrington, who looks like a young man, £2.10. By 1929, William Grant's weekly pay had risen to £9.0.0, with the triumvirate of owners alone being paid more, and the others with amounts varying between £6, £5, £4 and £2, to £1. Cuts were inevitable as a result of the Great Depression, and Grant's weekly pay packet dropped back to £8.2.0, where it remained until the end of the decade, when it returned to £9 in September 1938. In all of

this, his place in the firm's hierarchy stayed the same.⁴⁵

The tight office hierarchy presented in these records contrasts with the nostalgically warm recollections of the printing business where the young David Meredith worked in George Johnston in *My Brother Jack*. The same records of Niven's point to other harder edges in the workplace. The only time that William Grant took any kind of sick leave, in 1930, is duly recorded. Given his experience of winters on the Western Front, it is remarkable that there was only this isolated episode. It stood out equally in his daughter's memory. It was an episode of quinsy.

A sharp watch was kept on the clocking-in of staff. When a Miss McQuinton's train was late, the three hours that she owed was duly noted. However, it also has to be said that occasional overtime is also recorded in the same way. The same staff records also point to the way that staff reductions were made. In a list of the forty-three staff at the beginning of 1930, the nearest birthday of the twelve youngest – aged between fifteen and twenty – is pencilled next to the name.⁴⁶ For anyone turning twenty-one, the inclusion of a red slip giving them notice was almost automatic.⁴⁷ However, William Grant was untouched through all of this, with a steady and comparatively good income during the Great Depression, a very different position from that of the unemployed servicemen whom his daughter Joan remembers, going from door to door in a desperate attempt to eke out a living by selling safety pins or anything else that suppliers were prepared to offload onto them. He could afford the fees of what was then one of Melbourne's less expensive private schools, MLC in Hawthorn, for Joan's secondary education. As a schoolgirl, she expressed interest in becoming an artist herself after her father had taken her to see a show of student work at the Working Men's College after one of the regular family meetings after work on a Friday evening. His response that art did not pay – something that in his case was not strictly true – did not dissuade her. He would have preferred her to matriculate and take out a university degree, but insisted that she complete her schooling to Intermediate (today's Year 10). She enrolled in the art school at the Working Men's College before World War II, subsequently becoming a designer for Semco, a business that marketed designs for dressmaking and home crafts; outside her work, she developed a reputation as a dedicated and competent artist in watercolour.⁴⁸

The record of work printed by Niven's for James Northfield may well indicate how Grant was perceived by another commercial artist. As we have seen, Northfield, who also ran businesses under his own name, turned to Niven's through the 1930s to print a number of his posters, as well as much other work designed for well-known retailers of ice-cream, jelly crystals, and beer, among others.⁴⁹ Grant resigned from Niven's in August 1942 and between 1941 and 1951, Northfield only approached Niven's to execute four jobs for him, even though he continued to produce commercial designs to order well into the 1950s. Other Melbourne printers whose names appear on posters based on Northfield's designs include Mason, Firth and McHutcheon, Troedel and Cooper, Queen City printers (subsequently W. and K. Purbrick) and J. E. Hackett (the last occasionally

appear as Northfield Studios and J. E. Hackett).⁵⁰ Did Northfield redirect most of his business elsewhere because William Grant was no longer at Niven's?⁵¹ While William Grant was there, he added some lustre to what was essentially a small printing business in a field where there were many competitors. Though Grant continued to work as a lithographer for other firms, including Morrison Walker, in the absence of any detailed record such as those of Niven's, he becomes invisible to the historian.

Niven's continued to operate from its Flinders Street premises until 1954, when they moved to Johnston Street in Fitzroy. They had previously rejected a bid by Keith Murdoch, whose radio station 3DB was next door. Murdoch was annoyed by interference with the radio station's transmission, due to the noise of a Crossley petrol engine from Niven's, which was the printers' alternative for power in an emergency, as well as a source of power for routine machinery.⁵²

IV

Though it is claimed that the arts are appreciated far more today than in any period in Australia's past, the fragile threads on which our knowledge of individuals such as William Grant depend – the commercial records of a printing firm, and what can be put together in other ways from family sources – are reason enough to reflect and ponder. Without them, he would otherwise still be wrapped in the kind of anonymity that surrounded many artists and craftsmen in Europe's Middle Ages. Given that the commercial artists of the first half of the twentieth century worked in a field that was very much the creation of a modern industrialised society, the anonymity into which commercial lithographers and others like them have rapidly slipped seems doubly ironic. By comparison, documenting his record as a serviceman and officer who came close to being distinguished for his conspicuous bravery, is far easier. When it comes to matters of national identity, war and service records are ranked far ahead of artistic or intellectual endeavour in the eyes of the wider community. It can only be hoped that some painstaking research by other historians will reveal the identity of other commercial lithographers of his generation, so that their contribution to the commercial art of Australia can be properly acknowledged.