

## ANDREW SCHULLER

# A history of the Croft Press

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In 1974 Jim Walker, a young Australian, was visiting his wife's aunt and uncle in England.

Geoff Etherington, the uncle, observed Jim's interest in his small 'model printing press No. 3' 1870 hand press and offered it to him. The offer was accepted and the press transported to Melbourne by sea. The Croft Press was born, named after Etherington's house. Its first book was published in 1979.

Why should a busy Australian want to ship a heavy letterpress machine across the world? On his first trip to England in 1964, Walker had stayed for a couple of weeks with family friends who had a jobbing printing business and he had spent some time with a composing stick in hand. Although before studying at Sydney University he had spent two years as a jackeroo (station hand) in remote Queensland, the young man was already an experienced bookman before his first trip to England. Walker's father, an engineer, had had an extensive library and was a friend of the artists Ray Lindsay and William Dobell, and Walker himself had been enthused by an inspirational literature teacher, Colin Bell, at Cranbrook. After his time in Queensland he worked for 18 months for the bookselling and publishing firm Angus & Robertson, then for Phil Cresswell as a salesman specialising in imported titles. Sacked after falling out with Cresswell's wife, Walker set up his own business, but this soon ran out of capital, forcing him to take a sales job with Brian Stonier at Penguin Australia in 1961. Always a reader, he had the good luck to gain more

experience of the visual arts while at Penguin, where he undertook to visit galleries and private collections to negotiate permission to reproduce specific works that Robert Hughes wanted to feature in the history of Australian art he was writing.<sup>1</sup> Walker was also a friend of Mike Kitching and, through him, met most of Sydney's younger artists of the time including Leonard French and Elwyn Lynn.

In 1964, Walker left Penguin and travelled to England to compete in the world OK Dinghy titles and to work in British publishing. After the sailing competition, he joined Holt, Rinehart and Winston, initially as an export representative and later as sales manager. He had always hankered to handle the Faber & Faber list in Australia and, late in 1966, he was approached by Faber to do just that. He spent six months at Faber's office in Russell Square familiarising himself with the list, which included Oliver Simon's books on printing and John R Biggs's *Basic Typography* (1968).<sup>2</sup> At that time, David Bland was designing the books and Berthold Volpe the distinctive Faber Paper Covered Edition jackets. Since Penguin handled Bodley Head books in Australia, Walker had already been exposed to more finely designed books – many of them worked on by John Ryder of *Printing for Pleasure* (1955)<sup>3</sup> fame – and had developed an interest in the book as a physical object.

Returning from England to Melbourne, the Sydneysider started visiting antiquarian bookshops and added to his collection of private press books. Inspired by William Morris and Emery Walker and helped by booksellers like Kenneth Hince, Margareta Webber and Gaston Renard, Walker bought books printed by such presses as Ashdene, Doves, Golden Cockerel and Nonesuch. He had also developed a taste for woodcuts. Lionel Lindsay's were his favourites but he acquired works by Thea Proctor, Margaret Preston, Mervyn Napier Waller and Christian Waller and Hall Thorpe and also *ex libris* plates by Adrian Feint and others. Japanese woodblock prints, especially from the 19th century, became an important part of his collection. He also moved the Faber list to Macmillan where he quickly became sales manager and hired Richard Griffin, with whom he shared an interest in finely produced books.

Thus, by the time Walker joined Oxford University Press in 1974 and was sent to Oxford for orientation, he was ready to jump at the offer of a printing press of his own. To supplement Etherington's gift, George Anderson of the printing firm Brown Prior Anderson (later BPA) gave him a Chandler & Price platen press that had been motorised.

During 1976 Griffin and Walker met Eric Thake at a gallery event. Walker had already bought a number of Thake's collectable Christmas cards, which he found attractive because of the quintessentially Australian nature of



Jim Walker at work, Croft Press Archive, State Library of Victoria

the work: the medium (lino), the content (classic Australian characters in scenes from the bar to the outback) and the execution (large, bold, angular images) were uncomplicated yet sophisticated, striking and humorous. It was not long before it was agreed that Walker and Griffin should print and publish a series of them as the first book from Croft Press, Walker having spent time learning how to use the press by printing ephemera. There were to be 35 cards originally, cut between 1941 and 1975.

The original linocuts proved unusable, so metal blocks had to be made from original edition proofs and, even then, acid etching had bridged some of the fine lines, which had to be cleaned out. A separate block had to be made for each of Thake's handwritten captions, which were printed in silvery grey to resemble the original pencil. Printing the blocks was not easy given the expanses of solid black broken by very fine lines; the roller guides on

the Chandler & Price were worn and needed to have type-high rules locked on either side of the chase to allow even inking on the solid black, and the thin lines separating the solids tended to fill in, requiring frequent cleaning of the rollers and ink plate. Help during the initial phases of the work was forthcoming from Alastair Rust of Brown Prior Anderson.

The cards were printed in early 1977 but the project was seriously delayed due to difficulties with the introduction. Walker wrote a brief preface describing the inception of Croft Press, but he had asked Sonia Dean, curator of prints at the National Gallery of Victoria, to write an introduction to Eric Thake's work. By July 1977 there was still no text; in September 1977 Ron Radford, then curator of the Art Gallery of Ballarat, agreed to write 2000–2500 words and to be paid with a copy of the leather-bound edition, but in December 1977 there was still no introduction. Doves Bindery had been holding the sheets of the printed plates for seven months and was demanding payment. In January 1978, Radford delivered a 5000-word text. A dispute over his compensation was resolved a month later when he accepted that he could not have more than a single copy since all the others had been pre-sold. At one point Thake wrote announcing that he had found mistakes in the introduction but this issue, too, was cleared up. It was not until July 1979, however, that Walker could write to Thake with the news that he had taken receipt of all the books from the binder. The edition of *The Christmas Linocuts of Eric Thake* was 300, of which 50 were bound in leather and 250 in buckram with the linocuts printed and tipped in by Jim and Ruth Walker. It is a striking book.

Walker was still working as sales director at Oxford University Press in Melbourne and only had time to print one book a year 'as a hobby activity', as he described it to Eileen Chanin of Macquarie Galleries in Sydney.<sup>4</sup> His next venture was prompted by Harry Muir of the Beck Book Company in Adelaide, who Walker had met in the course of his duties managing Faber & Faber. Muir sent him a chapbook called *The Life and Surprising Adventures of Blue-Eyed Patty: The Valiant Female Soldier* (c. 1805) and he passed it on to Donald Friend, thinking that the amusing and quirky text might appeal to him. Friend responded with enthusiasm and, within a week, had produced a set of illustrations and vignettes on scraperboard. Maintaining the original small chapbook format determined the scale of Friend's illustrations. Their strength of line suggested an equally strong typeface so the text was set in Plantin 10 and 12 point. The book was printed on a Furnival stop cylinder press, recently acquired by Walker from the newspaper in Koroit, Victoria. The Hahnemuhle paper was so fluffy that the sticky ink picked up the top fibres



*The Christmas Linocuts of Eric Thake, 1941-1975, South Yarra, Victoria, Croft Press, 1978*

of the paper, lifting the image and depositing fibres on the rollers so that only 220 of the advertised 250 copies were produced and published in 1979.

Another Donald Friend book was to follow in 1981. Richard Griffin, who had been so excited by the experience of collaborating on the Eric Thake book that he had resigned his job at Macmillan and set up Gryphon Books, commissioned Friend to draw letters for an alphabet and to write an accompanying text for each letter. *An Alphabet of Owls et Cetera* was handset in Plantin 14 point and printed by Walker on the Furnival in Rubicon red. Friend designed the title page and Walker was presented with the text and artwork. Again the paper was problematic. It had been made by Alan Walker who, having studied papermaking in the United States, had returned to Australia to start making paper in the old butter factory at Bemboka, in New South Wales. The sheets turned out to differ in thickness. Nevertheless, both Friend books succeed in conveying the artist's uniquely personal style.

By then Walker had resigned from Oxford University Press to follow a long-held desire to retire to a farm. In 1980 he and Ruth had moved their family to Cobargo in southern New South Wales. The first Croft Press (Cobargo) book was *Rainbow*, a children's book written and illustrated by Irena Sibley. This required no typesetting – blocks to accompany 20 linocuts were made from Sibley's text, which had been written out by the calligrapher Dennis Edlin. The linocuts were printed in black and Sibley coloured them by hand. While 67 copies were printed and sold, yet again the printing was not straightforward. Because of the large format (55 x 38 cm) the sheets had to be run through the Furnival press folded and the impression lightened to accommodate the double thickness of the paper, though it would be difficult to discern that this had occurred from viewing the finished copies.

The Croft Press book for 1982 was commissioned by the NSW Guild of Craft Bookbinders, which ordered 200 copies to distribute to its members for their annual binding competition. The text was an article *Building 'Purulia'* by W Hardy Wilson describing the building of his house and published in a special number of *Art in Australia* in 1919.<sup>5</sup> There was also a preface and introduction by Philip Lewis, secretary of the guild, but no illustration. Walker designed and set the text in Plantin 14 point. Again he struggled with the paper; not only was Alan Walker slow in making it, but he also laid a special watermark of a threaded needle as a symbol for the bookbinders. The paper was thinner where the watermark appeared and the printer could not adopt the usual trick of extra padding because of the slight irregularity in the deckled edge of all handmade paper.

Startled at the stillness broken by reply so aptly  
spoken,  
'Doubtless,' said I, 'what it utters is its only  
stock and store,  
Caught from some unhappy master whom  
unmerciful Disaster  
Followed fast and followed faster till his songs  
one burden bore—  
Till the dirges of his Hope that melancholy  
burden bore  
Of 'Never - nevermore.'

But the raven still beguiling all my sad soul  
into smiling,  
Straight I wheeled a cushioned seat in front of  
bird and bust and door;  
Then, upon the velvet sinking, I betook myself  
to linking  
Fancy unto fancy, thinking what this ominous  
bird of yore—  
What this grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and  
ominous bird of yore  
Meant in croaking 'Nevermore.'

This I sat engaged in guessing, but no syllable  
expressing  
To the fowl whose fiery eyes now burned into  
my bosom's core;  
This and more I sat divining, with my head at  
ease reclining  
On the cushion's velvet lining that the lamp-  
light gloated o'er,  
But whose velvet violet lining with the lamp-  
light gloating o'er,  
She shall press, ah, nevermore!

Then, methought, the air grew denser, perfumed  
from an unseen censer  
Swung by angels whose faint foot-falls tinkled  
on the tulle'd floor.  
'Wretch,' I cried, 'thy God hath lent thee - by  
these angels he hath sent thee  
Respite - respite and nepenthe from thy  
memories of Lenore!  
Quaff, oh quaff this kind nepenthe, and forget  
this lost Lenore!  
Quoth the raven, 'Nevermore.'



Rick Amor, *The Raven* by Edgar Allen Poe, Cobargo, New South Wales, Croft Press, 1990

In the volatile agricultural economy of the mid 1980s it was difficult to devote resources to printing fine books, so Walker concentrated on jobbing printing for the Cobargo/Bega region. While this was not exciting printing, the volume and complexity was certainly good for developing printing skills. He had expanded his equipment to include a Vertical Miehle and a Monotype Supercaster and matrices that he bought from Brown Prior Anderson.

Croft Press's next run of fine printing came in the early 1990s. Richard Griffin was still active with his Gryphon Press and was working with Rick Amor on an illustrated edition of Edgar Allan Poe's poem *The Raven*. Griffin was diagnosed with cancer and Croft Press took on the publishing as well as the printing of the book although Griffin, in remission, was involved in the binding. The tall, narrow format of this book (39 x 23 cm) fitted both the short lines of the poem and Amor's six woodcuts, for which he had used

plywood. Its grain created a shadowy grey effect, which matched the gloomy poem. A Korrex proofing press that had been acquired from J Sands, one of the administrators in charge of sorting out the affairs of Alan Walker's Bemboka Paper enterprise was used to print 100 copies.

Walker printed again for Rick Amor two years later, in 1992. This time Amor approached Walker directly for the printing of *Mirrored Images*, a series of blocks cut out of pine that he had made to accompany poems by Gary Catalano. The poems were set handsomely and spaciouly in Caslon Old Face 48 point and were put together as a boxed set with the starkly formidable woodcuts.

In 1991, before embarking on *Mirrored Images*, Walker printed a selection of poems and illustrations by Geoff Etherington, who donated the Croft Press's first press in 1974. Etherington had been a graphic artist and designed book jackets for publishers. Some of the poems were dedicated to members of his family; the illustrations were a mixture of etchings, lino and woodcuts and scraperboard. Croft Press's husband and wife team wrote the preface, designed the text, handset it in Garamond 12 point, printed 103 copies on the Vertical Miehle and bound them all, apart from eight special copies that were bound in leather by Griffin.

The last book printed at Croft Press (in 1993) was a commission from the widow of Harry Muir, the Adelaide bookseller who had owned one of Australia's best collections of private press books. Marcie Muir, an expert in children's literature, had written a memoir that was too long for Croft to undertake to set in-house. Instead, it was set in linotype by a commercial firm, with only the title, colophon page and the headings set at the press. Walker printed 220 copies on the Vertical Miehle as well as two of Harry Muir's bookplates, which were tipped into each volume; he and Ruth bound the whole edition.

There were a number of putative book projects that never came to fruition under the Croft Press imprint. When, in 1977, Macquarie Galleries had introduced Walker to Roy Davies and his lino and woodcuts, he liked them and was keen to produce a book of them to accompany Davies's account of an epic journey he made from Melbourne to Sydney in the 1920s. Unfortunately Davies died suddenly and the project ran into the ground. In 1980, there was a project for a book of Allan Jordan's bookplates that fell apart over Harry Muir's introductory essay. In 1987, there were discussions between Croft Press and Brian Stonier about starting a series of limited editions of Australian literature. Walker gave serious thought to this, suggesting that Harry Muir might be the series editor or advisor and that they would need a stable of



graphic artists to illustrate the books that would be classically designed and printed following the Golden Cockerel model. He produced detailed costings and plans for marketing, but the project did not proceed.

In 1988 Helen Wadlington, a Canberra bookbinder, was behind a proposal for a children's book about a goat called Odilly, written and illustrated by Lorraine Holmes. Walker had blocks of the illustrations and the calligraphy made but he stored them wrapped in newspaper, which damaged the blocks so badly that the printed result satisfied neither printer nor binder.

In September 1987, another Canberra bookbinder, Ron Eadie, wrote to Croft Press asking Walker to quote for printing a book of linocuts he had made to illustrate the ninth, tenth and eleventh of the stories contained in Richard Burton's *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*<sup>6</sup> in a book to be called *Ladies of Baghdad*. Walker provided a quote, but noted that the job of setting text to fit around linocuts that spanned two pages would be tricky. Discussions were still going on in November but, by February 1988, Eadie announced that he was going to Europe for some time. Although he conceded that he would consider changing the shape of his linocuts, the plans were never revived.

One book Walker would have like to print was CJ Dennis's *Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* (1915).<sup>7</sup> He planned to have black-and-white images from the film version reduced as blocks by an artist and then printed along with the text. This project never got started and, in 2000, the Walkers sold the Cobargo farm and disbanded the press.

Where does Croft Press stand in the history of private presses and book arts in Australia? Walker had no formal training in art, design or printing, although he did take a course in bookbinding at the Melbourne College of Printing and Graphic Arts. He read many books on the principles of typographical design and, as a young man, had developed a taste for the traditional private press book in which text is a major and often primary element. As he puts it, he was interested in 'the art of the book rather than art in the book'.<sup>8</sup> Given that statement, it is perhaps ironic that in his first book the emphasis is on Eric Thake's artwork rather than the text.

Walker started printing at a time when fine printing in Australia was being kept alive by only a few people. John Kirtley, who abandoned printing in the early 1950s, had died in 1967, Rolf Hennequel had done some good printing at his Wattle Grove Press but had stopped work by Walker's day, as had Ron Edwards at The Rams Skull Press. Gerald Fischer was printing small pamphlets at his Pump Press in Adelaide, but he was more interested in the content than in the quality of his printing. So, in a way, were the

'bibliographic' presses attached to university libraries – Piscator at Sydney, Ancora at Monash and New Albion in Hobart. James Dally's Sullivans Cove Press and Dan Sprod at Blubber Head Press in Hobart were essentially booksellers who commissioned commercial fine printing for limited edition work. Alec Bolton was perhaps the only active private press printer in the 1970s, having started his Brindabella Press in 1972. Edwards and Shaw, a commercial printer with its origins in the Barn on the Hill Press founded by Edwards and Shaw in 1939, continued to do fine work. By the time that Edwards and Shaw closed in 1984, however, there seems to have been an upsurge of interest in fine books. In 1978, the Locks' Press printed its first book in Brisbane. In 1984, James Taylor played a major role in establishing the Australian Printing Historical Society and a single issue of the society's journal *Wayzgoose* was produced, but simultaneously, in January 1985, *Outline* was launched. This was the journal of the Calligraphy and Book Arts Studio, which had been founded in Sydney 'in recognition of the growing appreciation and consequent demands for guidance and instruction in the neglected crafts associated with communication through the written word.'<sup>9</sup> It provided a range of courses, forums for teachers and professionals, lectures, demonstrations and exhibitions. In 1984, the first National Conference of Craft Bookbinders was held in Canberra. Jadwiga Jarvis and Mike Hudson had arrived in Australia in the late 1970s but it was not until the mid 1980s that they moved to Katoomba and developed their Wayzgoose Press into the impressive press that it became. Inspired by his teenage son, Bob Summers was learning to print and was to produce interesting and fine work at the Escutcheon Press.

Walker was a member of the Australian Printing Historical Society but was somewhat isolated out in Cobargo, and printing fine books was never his main source of income. Given that his list was accordingly small, sporadic and sourced in various ways – some were initiated by Walker himself, some were undertaken in association with Richard Griffin for Gryphon Press and some were printing commissions – it is not surprising that there is no recognisable Croft Press style. Some artists he chose (Eric Thake and Donald Friend), others chose him (Rick Amor and Roy Davies) and some were thrust upon him (Irena Sibley). It would be hard to detect anything stylistically common to the artists he printed: Thake was strikingly modernist, using fine lines on solid black; Amor was bold and strong in his use of wood; Friend and Sibley were raw and relied on heavy outlines; Geoff Etherington was traditional in his use of delicate line work. It seems that substantial discussions with his artists about the design of the books were rare, although Walker was involved with Friend's projects. There was perhaps more discussion about the materials to be

used – typeface for text, paper and binding. This does not mean that Walker was indifferent to his artwork – far from it; he was concerned to ‘produce finely crafted books pleasing to the eye and to the touch’ and ‘incorporating a harmonious mix of graphics and text at a reasonable price.’<sup>10</sup> As such, he was continuing a tradition, not perhaps as meticulously as Alec Bolton, nor as innovatively as Wayzgoose, but his work was nevertheless valuable. It is sad that Walker claims he was never fully satisfied with any of his books. In his eyes, none achieved the late-19th-century private press movement’s ‘beautiful cohesion of illustration, literary content, design, fine printing and binding’<sup>11</sup> that first attracted him to the printed book. At least the editions of all his books sold out, and some now command considerable sums in the market.

### Checklist of Croft Press books

| YEAR | TITLE  |
|------|--|
| 1978 | <i>The Christmas Linocuts of Eric Thake</i> , Eric Thake<br>Illustrations by Eric Thake, foreword by Jim Walker, introduction by Ron Radford   |
| 1979 | <i>The Life and Surprising Adventures of Blue Eyed Patty: The Valiant Female Soldier</i><br>Reprint of a chapbook originally produced by J Hatley at Wolverhampton c. 1805, Illustrations and vignettes by Donald Friend |
| 1980 | <i>Rainbow</i> , Irena Sibley<br>Story, text and illustrations by Irena Sibley   |
| 1981 | <i>An Alphabet of Owls et Cetera: With a Text Suitable For All Children, Grown-ups, Non Readers, Ornamental Hermits et alia</i> , Donald Friend<br>Illustrations and text by Donald Friend                               |
| 1982 | <i>Building ‘Purulia’</i> , W Hardy Wilson<br>Reprint of a 1919 article from <i>Art in Australia</i><br>Published by the NSW Guild of Craft Bookbinders  |
| 1990 | <i>The Raven</i> , Edgar Allen Poe<br>Illustrated with six woodcuts by Rick Amor   |
| 1991 | <i>A Collection of Simple Verse</i> , Geoff Etherington<br>Poems and illustrations by G Etherington  |
| 1992 | <i>Mirrored Images</i><br>A folio of prints by Rick Amor and poems by Gary Catalano<br>Printed for Rick Amor   |
| 1993 | <i>Harry Muir Bookman: A Memoir</i> , Marcie Muir<br>Commissioned by Marcie Muir   |