My recollections of Walker* Press

By Jack Gilding

This was written in 2025 and attempts to fill in some of the details in Bev and Lyndon's contemporaneous histories. It is based on some source documents but also on my recollections some 50 years later so apologies in advance for any inaccuracies and biases.

Throughout year 12 I was heavily involved in the running the Victoria Secondary Students Union (VSSU). We met regularly at the Student Union Building at Melbourne University and as a result I was very familiar with tertiary student politics of the time and the Australian Union of Students (AUS).

After completing year 12 I did not want to go straight to university and so approached AUS to ask if I could work there. I was employed as a general assistant to the printer, but did not learn much from him. Shortly after I started work I attended the annual AUS conference. At this event the printer fell out with the President at the time and was sacked. I was offered the job although I wasn't really skilled at it and had to teach myself fast. AUS had a Multilith 1250 small offset press and a Gestetner OE1 plate maker.

As described in Beverley's account, we met when she came to AUS to use the platemaking equipment. When she bought her own Multilith 1250 and set it up at home in Montmorency I travelled there to use her press and also to teach her to print.

AUS had also rented a Xerox 3600, a large photocopy machine. They paid for the number of copies made. From watching the mechanics who came to service the machine I learnt how to disconnect the counter which meant we could make copies for free which we did overnight for copying articles for the Education Subscription Service.

When I first moved out of home I rented a house in Rathdowne St North Carlton but at some point we moved to 804 Brunswick St North Fitzroy. We moved Beverley's 1250 there and that was the basis of Walker* Press. The business name was originally established as a partnership between myself, Ted Poulton and Sue Hawke, although neither Ted nor Sue were actively involved in the printing business.

The 'civil crisis' that Bev refers to was a falling out between Ted and myself which led to Ted staying at 804 and some others including myself renting the shopfront and dwelling at 20 Smith St. The printing press was in the front room and several of us lived behind and upstairs.

My recollection is that when we needed to expand we rented the shopfront and dwelling at 23 Smith St (just across the road but in Fitzroy rather than Collingwood). The dwelling at 21 Smith St was rented out separately. One day we woke to find there was a 'For Sale' sign on the building. Long story short, we bought the whole building (see separate History of 21-23 Smith St) and took it over as offices for various groups and the operation of Walker* Press as well as a residence with six bedrooms.

At 21-23 Smith St, Walker* Press expanded with the purchase of a hand operated guillotine, a small Multilith 85 press and eventually the Multilith 2066. The latter was a large and cantankerous machine used mainly for printing posters.

From 1997-1999 I took a break from Walker* Press and was employed by Friends of the Earth as their first 'Alternatives Coordinator' which was basically a response to the criticism 'if you're against brown coal and nuclear power what are you in favour of?'.

Lyndon's account of the history mentions Tony Mangion's role but it is important to emphasise how essential he was to the success of Walker* Press, both in helping us acquire new second-hand machines and in servicing and rebuilding the presses we had. Tony's personal politics were probably totally different to ours but he took enormous pride in his craftmanship and was very supportive in an avuncular way, as well as being very affordable.

At some point late in the 1970s we had a young trainee from the New Hebrides (as it was then) working at Walker* Press and the Vanuaku Party got a grant which enable us to buy a printing press (renovated by Tony Mangion), a platemaker and supplies and ship them to Port Vila. Unfortunately the trainee acquired an

Australian girlfriend and moved to Queensland rather than return to Vila to set up the printing press as planned.

Early in 1980 Mike Parsons was travelling to Vila and we asked him to check on the fate of the printing equipment sent. A slightly cryptic message came back that they want me to come, so some friends paid for a tourist ticket for me to fly to Vila. When I arrived, I discovered that premises had been rented, two trainees identified and the equipment was ready to go. That's another story but I ended up staying in Vila for 18 months with one return trip to Melbourne.

It was while I was away that the new Walker* Press workers took over the business (and eventually sent it broke) as per Lyndon's description.

Lyndon mentions a number of names but Mark Carter and Jenny Hocking were also involved at this stage. Mark produced the wonderful "How to Layout for Walker* Press".

Lyndon mentions that by this stage he was legally a partner in the business but I have no recollection of when Sue and Ted ceased to be legally involved and who else became partners in the business. The legal structure was largely irrelevant to the actual operation of the business (except for when we fell foul of the complex rules for what printed material was subject to sales tax and what was sales tax free).

I cant really add anything to Lyndon's summary of the impact of Walker* Press. It played an important role in supporting a wide range of radical and community organisations. The fact that the building still stands and is housing a community radio station is really the physical icing on the intangible cake.

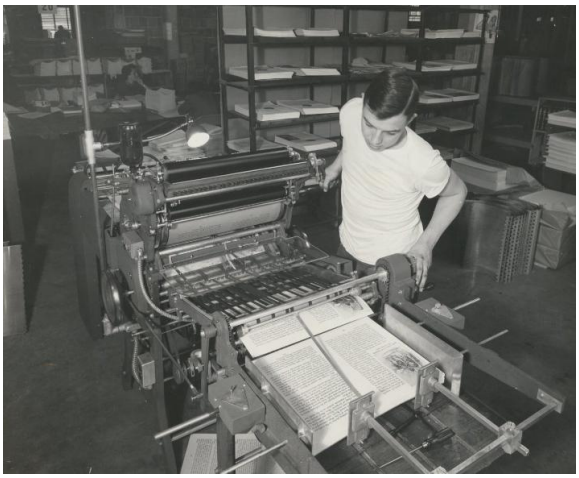
Some extra thoughts on small offset printing technology

[This is an extract from *The technology in my life* which I wrote in 2024.]

In the 1970s small offset printing was a relatively new technology. Before this, printing was dominated by large scale printing presses using photographic metal plates for offset printing. Office copying was dominated by Fordigraph for small numbers of copies and Gestetner and Roneo for multiple copies of typed documents. I learnt how to print on a Multilith 1250 small offset press using the Gestetner OE1 electrostatic paper plate maker at the Australian Union of Students (AUS) after talking my way in as a general office dogsbody. After the main printer was sacked following a falling out with the boss, I was promoted to printer, a position for which I was definitely not quite ready. Beverley Snell used to come in to use the platemaker to make plates for her Aboriginal land rights and anti-apartheid publications. (She had a Multilith 1250 but not a platemaker.) I was roped into helping her print at her house in Montmorency.

A some stage I was introduced to Tony Mangion, a freelance mechanic and renovator of printing presses who had previously worked for Addressograph Multigraph, the manufacturer of the Multilith 1250.

In the early 1970s we started Walker Press in North Fitzroy with Beverly's printing press. As the business expanded Tony Mangion supplied us with additional presses and maintained them. Walker Press moved to 20 Smith St Collingwood and then across the road when we bought the 21-23 Smith St building. We eventually had two Multilith 1250s, the larger Multilith 2066 and the smaller Multilith 85. The 2066 was a very temperamental beast and only Steve Soso really had the knack of operating it. The 85 was less versatile and only really suitable for simple text printing. The 1250 (and the slightly larger Multilith 1250 WLD) were the workhorses of Walker Press. Tony Mangion also supplied the 1250 that we bought and sent to Vanuatu (then the New Hebrides) to form the basis of the Community Printeri project.



Left Multilith 1250. Right Multilith 2066 (neither are Walker* Press ones)

Left Gestetner OE1 plate maker, right fusing drum

Gestetner OE1

At Walker* Press we really pushed the boundaries of what could be done with this cheap technology. Both the Multilith 1250 and the Gestetner OE1 were probably mainly used commercially as a replacement for Gestener/Roneo technology for making multiple copies of typed documents. The OE1 electrostatically charged a paper plate which was then exposed to a projected image from the flat bed above. Then two bars of magnets brushed a metallic powder over the plate, depositing toner on the plate where the plate had not been discharged by the projected image. The toner was then fused onto the plate by a separate heating element. In between these two processes it was possible to 'touch up' the plate by removing toner with a magnetic brush with powder on the end. This was mainly used for removing shadows caused by the fact that the platemaker only shone the light from one direction. This in turn led us to develop a technique of layout with overlapping layers so that shadows were minimised. This was all documented in the "How to layout for Walker* Press" booklet that Mark Carter produced mimicking the layout of a Phantom comic.

Another complication was that fusing the toner could cause the plate to buckle. The heater had a speed control. The slower the speed the more heat was applied. But large black areas fused quickly but fine detail took longer. In order to fuse plates which contained both, we developed a technique of fusing once quickly to fix the larger black areas, then making a mask to cover the large areas and fusing the plate again slowly to fix the finer parts of the image. The paper plates were very cheap but buckling was always a potential problem that led to folds on the plate and hence to marks on the printing.