Scanned, OCRed and edited 2024-12-23 by Jack Gilding from a typed original

Editing notes. I have changed “Walker+ Press” to “Walker* Press”

I have left “Jak” unchanged. I sometimes spelt it like that at the time.

A Very Short History of Walker* Press

by Lyndon Shea

The first Multilith 1250 was bought by Bev Snell in 1973. Jak Gilding had learnt how to operate a similar machine at AUS, so he taught Bev and together they were the founders.

By early 1974, the press had been installed in a house in Brunswick St., Nth. Fitzroy and started operating as a business. From the very first, the prime function was to produce material around campaigns in two areas: racism in Africa and radical education, the former being Bev's speciality while the latter was Jak's particular interest, the-organisations being respectively the Africa Research and Information Centre and the Victorian Secondary Student Union. Officially, the first partners in Walker* were Sue Hawke and Jak. Ted Poulton was closely involved in the early stages; his Bourke's Store Education Shop was one of the first big customers.

About this time, Caroline and I started coming along because Jak was offering free access to the press to those who were interested enough to learn themselves how to operate it. My aim was to print my own book of poetry, something I never suite got around to doing. Another-essential ingredient in the whole operation was Tony Mangion - he was the mechanic, an ex-employee of Multilith who had gone out on his own to the business of not only maintaining these old machines, but buying them and completely [rebuilding] them so they were, in his own words "better than new". Tony also had a particular affection for them and very strict ideas on how fussy an operator should be in looking after them to both get the best results and to prolong the life of the machine and especially the very expensive rollers.

Jak shared these concerns and attempted to instil them in all the operators he introduced to the machinery - with varying degrees of success.

Even in these early times, Walker* Press had a very clear and distinctive philosophy of operation. The idea was to serve the radical movement by providing very cheap and high quality printing services and, at the same time, encouraging the people to learn and participate in the processes involved. In order to achieve these things a high degree of dedication was involved; in retrospect, the commitment to voluntary poverty was probably necessary to enable it to both operate and expand as it did - as well as attract the levels of use and (not surprisingly) the awe with which it was regarded. Nevertheless, the self-sacrifice involved approached martyrdom; throughout 1974 and for some time after, Jak never took more than $20/week from the business for his own purposes.

A similar outlook permeated the proposal in early '74 to set up the Education Subscription Service. This was an information clearing house on radical education which aimed to produce a monthly magazine of short articles supplemented by abstracts of a substantial amount of more detailed information which subscribers could order, if they chose, to be sent to them. The amount of work was phenomenal. The project was funded by the Schools Commission Innovations Program; significantly, the grant had a wage component of $40/week for what routinely exceeded 100 people hours work. Thus the Walker* poverty syndrome transferred itself to its first regular in-house publication.

Caroline and I took over major responsibility for ESS, with others coming in to help out at peak times - the tasks involved: researching material, collecting and commissioning articles; abstracting articles; typing and laying out the magazine; printing, collating, stapling, folding, addressing and mailing out the magazine; copying the listed articles; collecting other publications; distributing the magazine to selected outlets; individually accounting for and filling subscriber orders - consistent with the philosophy of sharing the work, we did everything ourselves. To run an equivalent service today, you would need to triple the staff and add a couple of noughts on the end of the budget.

While ESS was the major Walker* Press project in 1974, that year also saw the formation of the Campaign Against Racial Exploitation (CARE) and the continued expansion of the business serving outside groups. The

VCOSS annual report was one of the first big out-house publications we took on - doing a job of that size (a couple of thousand copies of around 100 pages) on, the fairly small scale equipment we had was labour intensive in its boring extremity - something that didn't seem to matter so much when it was your own material.

The next big move was to shift to Smith St., Collingwood in early 1975. This placed the Press in the centre of community/political activity taking place in Melbourne at that time - the place became an organising centre for a range of activities, including campaigns around the Timorese and Aboriginal Land Rights issues.

The Press itself was also expanding. Something should be said about the nature of the business - it was run along lines which were (in contrast to its political roles) extremely conservative in a business sense. At no stage had it used credit of any kind; every piece of equipment was purchased second hand and for cash. When, necessary, Mangion would take away a "new" old machine and bring it back gleaming with chrome and operating beautifully. The other presses, the 2066, the guillotine, all the equipment was paid for with cash generated by the workers of that time - the principal 'stock' printer was Steve Soso, Jak was managing, developing Innovations News Exchange and printing, while Bev and I printed our own publications and helped out with other stuff when the load got too much.

By the end of 1975 we had expanded into premises across the road, and the general level of paranoia generated both by the coup and by the "spook hunters" for whom we did copious amounts of printing, led to the view that we needed to find a secure place to house the press. Not only this, we were sick of paying rent - ever increasing rents for substandard accommodation.

These were the motivations behind the proposal to buy 21-23 Smith St. At the time it seemed impossible that a bunch of overworked, rather ragged and exceptionally poor hippies could pull off such a deal. Our bank manager at the Commonwealth agreed and refused to lend us a cent on the grounds that we had no credit rating (remember those cash purchases?), were not a "proper" business, nor a family in the accepted sense. For a while the idea was dropped, then the agent (Langridge) stepped in, obviously keen to get a sale, and offered his bank manager, but warned that we'd need some sort of corporate structure to get a loan. Numerous meetings were held in the British Crown and a combination of Deirdre Mason's dynamism and organisational ability, Tony Brown's substantial contribution to a deposit, legal advice from Robert Wright and dobbings in and suggestions all round resulted in a formidable legal structure - all of which was reproduced on Walker* Press equipment and conveyed to the CBC bank manager, who responded with "how much money do you want?" Thus, the whole operation moved across the road into 21-23 Smith St., and we had a whacking great mortgage to repay in a fairly fierce regime over a period of eight years.

It should be said that the Trust and the company which acted as trustee, San Juliano, had no formal, legal links with Walker* Press, which remained as a simple partnership trading in its own right. The people who contributed sums to the purchasing of the building did not do so because it was to house a printing business, but because of their commitment to the groups whom it serviced, principally ESS, CARE, the Aboriginal Land Rights movement and the progressive movement generally. This is significant because, at a later stage there was to develop a distance, even on occasions a hostility, between the people who worked for Walker* Press (read: The Tenants) and those who ran San Juliano (read: The Landlord) - this in spite of the fact that an ingenious scheme was devised where all the tenants received equity in the building and were always able to participate over how it was to be managed.

After the move across the road to Fitzroy, ESS managed to struggle on for a while, but had lost its grant because we published a cartoon which was considered offensive by a certain Catholic member of the Schools Commission. The subscription charges were ridiculously low considering most beneficiaries were teachers or academics, but a financial reorganisation did not occur, principally because Caroline and I were too exhausted.

Also, at that time, more pressing issues attracted our attention. Eventually, Caroline went off to the hills to have babies, ESS folded and I became completely involved in the Land Rights and anti-uranium movement.

Fiona Kyle came in to organise the Campaign Against Mining Aboriginal Land [CAMAL], I became national coordinator of CARE, working principally on the same issues and Walker* Press played a key role as the principal national generator of printed material on both the anti-uranium and Land Rights struggles. Meanwhile Bev, Thomas Kanjere and Wendy Probert continued to organise and print for the anti-apartheid

movement and support the liberation movement in Zimbabwe. Jak was, among other things, organising to set up a press in Vanuatu - already we'd had a member of the Vanuaku party (New Hebrides Independence Movement) working at Walker* to learn some of the necessary skills. Walker* Press acted as host to numerous groups at the same time - one of which was "Friends of the Thai people", a group dedicated to exposing the murderous policies of the military junta there.

The period of intense activity of a political kind emanating from Walker* Press or happening around it, was at a peak from '75 to '78 inclusive. In '79, things continued, but by the end of that year had declined, and in I980 in-house activity faded out completely.

Caroline was still having babies, Fiona had left to find work, Jak was setting things up in Vanuatu, Deirdre was dividing her time between Alice Springs and Vanuatu, Bev was on her way to Somalia, Thomas and most of the Zimbabweans were heading home and Wendy had already gone to teach there, and after six years of poverty, I was desperate to find a job that paid a proper wage.

The only "old hands" left at Walker* Press were Steve Soso and Peter Wykes, both of whom left soon after - Steve to the hills and Peter to join Jeannie in Alice Springs.

Walker* Press then consisted of Donna Rawlins, Jane Elliott, Hartley Briggs, Brownie and Dave Lane for a while and, when he was around, Jak.

This period coincided with not only the collapse of in-house activity but a number of outside factors which made life a great deal more difficult for what was now much more a pure printing house than it had ever been before. A decline in general political activity, the consolidation of some groups so they now had their own printing facilities, the formation of a number of other "alternative" printing houses (many of which had in some ways spun off from Walker*), the dramatic increases in costs in paper and printing materials, and a drying up of funds to progressive and community groups - all these were contributors.

Nevertheless, Walker* Press should have been in a very good position to trade through these hard times - all its assets were wholly owned, it had a good reputation with clients for reliability and quality work, a special relationship with those groups that were less well off (they always got concessional rates - the problem sometimes was getting anything at all), and an extremely good reputation (Al classification) with suppliers, especially the crucial paper suppliers, built up over years of paying monthly bills on time.

In fairness to the people who presided over its demise, Walker* Press was always run on an unreal, and for those not totally committed, an exploitative basis. Cheap printing for the movement meant lousy conditions for the workers - miniscule wages and an unsafe and grotty environment.

The new regime attempted to put some of these things in order; unfortunately, their efficiency in running the business did not match their aspirations (legitimate) for better conditions.

Part of the problem was that no-one was prepared to work there full time - the "management" role rotated as did the printing, but things quickly began to fall apart and once that happened, there was no sticking them back. First of all, communication between the workers, essential in this wholly part-time structure, was not good, thus jobs got lost and clients didn't come back.

The understanding of cash flow, presuming it existed, was such that no one had the time nor the inclination to find out. This was fundamental, since Walker* Press was actually broke before the workers knew about it - there's not much point in worker control of the ship if the wheel isn't connected to the rudder.

Another basic flaw was a deterioration in the quality of work being produced - accompanied by steep price increases. It was noone’s responsibility to clean the machines, and as they got filthier the printing got steadily worse. People were late, deadlines were missed, promises broken and the carefully built up "special relationship" with a whole range of groups broke down. There seemed to be an attitude that customers were being "done a favour" by coming to Walker* Press. People from organisations not judged "ideologically sound" were gratuitously insulted. They didn't come back - and they told their friends.

The final, and unforgivable, indicator that things were out of control came when there was no money to pay a paper bill, so the workers simply switched suppliers and carried on business. They had also borrowed money to buy more equipment (nothing wrong with that) except that the equipment wasn't used sufficiently to even attempt paying back the loan.

As a partner in Walker* Press who was actually resident in the building for most of the period of its demise, I should accept some responsibility for it. However, the reality was, as instigated by Jak, myself and others - workers control - I had other things to do, and though I was around for some of the time, I was not consulted.

Hence, when Jak returned from Vanuatu, examined the books and found an accumulated trading debt in the region of $18,000, I demanded to be taken off the partnership, as I stood to be personally liable for debts I had not incurred. Not only that, I was extremely angry and bitter that the assets which had been accumulated as a communal resource by former workers, had to be sold to pay creditors.

It is a measure of Jak's integrity that he didn't copy my Pontius Pilate act, but came in and traded out the worst of the debt and organised the sale of the assets to cover the rest.

In eight years of trading, however, Walker* Press could boast some considerable achievements: the quality of publications emanating from the progressive movement changed from the smudged, heavy type, roneo-ed leaflet to some very smartly presented and effectively designed material; many groups which had no previous public airing for their views, were able to gain access to cheap printing and learn a great deal about the process; a number of individuals learnt skills they have been able to apply elsewhere; some radically different methods of organising work were tried; it proved that people with few resources but a lot of ingenuity can achieve a great deal - even if they don't talk to each other afterwards.

Finally, it managed to demonstrate in practice its only politically serious slogan: "FREEDOM OF THE PRESS IS OWNING ONE".