

Tramping Typographers and Transnational Labour Mobility in the Scottish Printing Trade, 1850-1900

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In March 1848 a compositor set off from London for a long walk...a grand tour that lasted over a year, covered 1800 miles, and included stops at Brighton and round the south coast to Bristol, then up to Birmingham, Liverpool, Carlisle, to Edinburgh, Glasgow, Stranraer, and then to Ireland, where he visited the major printing centres of Belfast and Dublin, as well as nineteen Irish towns. Crossing back to mainland UK, our indefatigable typographer passed through Liverpool, Yorkshire and Cambridge before completing his tramp at his old haunts in London.

Such peregrinations were common amongst trained printers and compositors of the nineteenth century. Indeed, this typographer was participating in a tradition amongst skilled artisanal workers that dated back several centuries. It was part of the so-called ‘tramping system’, which organised trade guilds and unions in Britain utilised throughout the nineteenth century as a means of organising and controlling

labour activity in local and regional areas. The system acted as a method of unemployment relief, providing members with a fixed travel sum (usually between one and sixpence a mile) to travel between union towns in search of work. On arrival in town, they would present their union card to the secretary (whose hours and place of availability were circulated in local typographical journals and membership notes), who would sign off the card, give them the required stipend, offer them a meal, some drink, a chit for lodgings, and where possible some temporary work in a local union shop. If no work was forthcoming, such tramping typographers were required to move on to the next town in the circuit, continuing the process until they found full employment or ceased tramping. The main typographical unions in Britain (England, Scotland, Wales) encouraged such mobility amongst union members throughout the nineteenth century as a means of monitoring and controlling supply and demand for labour. As well as providing a form of unemployment relief for its members, it also strategically removed excess labour from key sites of strike action, and cemented union organisation and membership cohesion. Some tramping typographers acted as union missionaries, starting up unions in unserved towns along these regional networks, playing key roles as informants, cultural transmitters and social networkers. And they were not the only ones. As E.J. Hobsbawm noted in his 1952 groundbreaking piece on the artisanal tramping system, “By the mid-nineteenth century the system was very widespread. In 1860 it was in use among compositors, lithographers, tailors, coachmakers, bookbinders, smiths, engineers, steam-engine makers, stonemasons, carpenters, iron-founders, coopers, shoemakers, boilermakers, plumbers, bricklayers and various other crafts.”ⁱ

But tramping was only a part of the picture of worker mobility in the nineteenth-century British printing trade. As data drawn from the union records of the

Scottish Typographical Association reveal, such union members participated in a communication and trade network that encompassed and supported skills transfer and personal mobility between printing centres locally, regionally and internationally. Members were welcomed and encouraged to circulate between union branches, acting as key transmitters of union values and trade skills, and in some cases becoming central to the expansion of labour interests in new territories. When they travelled or settled into work, details of circumstances would be broadcast through typographical circulars and notes.

Supported by union sponsored emigration and removal grants, union members also migrated overseas as key players in social and trade union networks, setting up businesses, engaging in union politics, and creating the print culture infrastructures that enabled social, communal and national communication and identification.

Scottish Typographical Association

Scottish printers were at the forefront of union activity in the early 19th century; one of the first labour unions for printers and typographers was started in Glasgow in 1817. It did not last long, nor did successive organised attempts in the 1840s. A more enduring organisation rose from such faltering beginnings in 1853 with the founding of the Scottish Typographical Association, an organisation that grew into a regional bastion of union activity, expanding from a general annual membership in 1857 of around 2100 in six key centres to almost 4,000 members in 1902 based in 25 Scottish towns and cities. Union records exist for several key union centres, covering membership details, minute books of union meetings and general union business records. Of particular value are the union subscription lists, of which there are fairly comprehensive records covering the period 1850-1914 for the three main printing

centres in Scotland –Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow. A preliminary examination of over 100,000 entries in these membership lists for the period 1850-1900 provides fine grained details about the levels of mobility and skills transfer amongst union registered compositors, pressmen and journeyman printers during this period. My analysis of this material is by no means complete, so what I offer here are some snapshot examples of the type of material and cases one encounters in these records.

These lists included details of area of specialisation [compositor, pressman, journeyman], place of employment, dates of subscriptions and comments on status and other matters. The comments section is particularly interesting for what it reveals about methods of managing and overseeing membership –there are details of where individuals have come from, dates of when they ‘lift their card’ for another branch, dates of re-entry into the union, and personal commentary on the standing of these individuals. We find members cast out of the union (usually for non-payment of dues), or blackballed and branded as RATS for crossing the union line and taking employment at a ‘closed’ or non-union shop. This information was then circulated through publication in the union journal (the Scottish Typographical Circular, founded in 1857), or through quarterly lists sent to all branches.

An initial sampling of material suggests there were four particular types of trade workers involved in the union. There was the solid, long lasting anchor, whose presence in the union was constant over decades and whose place as motivator and conserver of traditions was often extolled in obituaries and retirement notices. A typical example was David Lockhart, a staunch union member in the Blackwood publishing firm, whose death in July 1888 was marked by the Scottish Typographical Circular with the following encomium: “...a first-class compositor -indeed, in the opinion of many, he stood unrivalled in every kind of work which was put into his

hands. At his death he was one of the oldest hands in the office, having been about thirty-four years there. Mr Lockhart was a staunch unionist, and was one of the oldest members of the Edinburgh Branch of the Scottish Typographical Association. Eminently straightforward, upright, and conscientious in all his actions, he was emphatically a 'man' in the highest sense of the word...”ⁱⁱ

Equally, the *Typographical Circular* of March 1918 recorded in commendatory prose the retiral of R.G. Fobister, Scottish trained compositor who proved a stalwart member of the Liverpool Typographical Association for almost 40 years, acting as secretary and member of the Executive Council, involving himself in the society's superannuation and benevolent funds, and who 'persistently identified himself with everything that made for the progress of the craft of which he was a proud member'.

A second type of member was the regionally mobile artisan, whose movements within the Scottish printing network were frequent and wide-ranging. A typical example was John Farquarhson, who between 1887 and 1903 shuttled between Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Glasgow and the northern town of Newcastle, sometimes working for a few months, at other times undertaking multi-year labour stints.

Likewise there was the union member who ranged across national printing networks, such as William Bradbury, who secured short and long-term work in England, Scotland and Ireland between 1886 and 1892. In Bradbury's case, short-term contracts suggested a peripatetic approach to work, akin to the tramping typographer of earlier years. Unlike the tramping typographer, however, the migration and mobility patterns of later members like Bradbury often saw transfers between recognised centres and secured jobs gained through word of mouth and personal contacts.

Andrew Ferguson

The fourth category was the international migrant, the wandering typographer who sought work overseas. During key periods of union history, and particularly from the 1880s onwards, STA members proved extraordinarily mobile across international networks of union shops, with many playing key roles in the nineteenth-century transnational transfer of printing knowledge and union practices across the English-speaking world. One New Zealand example of skills migration and return integration was Andrew Ferguson. Ferguson, born in Dunfermline, had trained in the offices of the Edinburgh printer Thomas Constable before joining Smith, Elder and Co. in London. In 1867 he migrated to Dunedin to join his cousins in running the daily *Bruce Herald*, an example of ‘chain migration’, in which family and/or trade contacts smoothed the entrance of skilled artisans into overseas workplaces. He would go on to start various newspapers throughout the South Island, as well as working as a printer and journalist. In 1882, he sold his business interests and returned to Edinburgh, where he promptly joined the firm of Scott and Ferguson, Burness and Co., which in 1896 was amalgamated into Morrison and Gibb (a well-known local printing firm), of which he remained as Secretary until his retirement. Thus here we see completed a circle of migration and flow of skills and expertise from Scotland to New Zealand and back.

Alex (Sandy Hossack)

Skills transfer were not the only aspects of such migratory experiences. Equally important was the manner in which trade and labour practices and values were exported overseas and integrated into indigenous settings. Scottish Typographical Association members were particularly prominent in various overseas labour movements. A prime example was Alexander (Sandy) Hossack. A STA member

between 1891-1903, Hossack migrated to Johannesburg in May 1903, becoming heavily involved in trade union politics. He was a founding member of the Transvaal Labour Party in November 1904 (a socialist leaning political organisation aimed at representing white artisanal labour union and trade interests), and served as its first secretary. He also rose to prominence in the national South African Typographical Union, acting as union Vice-President between 1911-1914. Not content with exercises in union management, Hossack also threw himself into local activism, for example strategically supporting strikes in 1914 in Pretoria against the de-unionising of particular shop floors, and overseeing and singlehandedly typesetting propaganda material and strike proclamations during these union confrontations.

Cultural Transmission

One final comment on cultural transmission within typographical contexts. Printing unions underpinned attempts to inculcate trade cohesion and cultural identity through shared publications and journals. The Scottish Typographical Circular and other such examples maintained networks of information across space and time, as Sydney Shep highlights in her continuing work on international typographical journals.ⁱⁱⁱ Cultural transmission enabled union networks to inform members of continued activity, to keep tabs of movements across regional, national and international borders, and to enshrine trade traditions and identities in printed form.

Such publications also offered reconceptions of trade beliefs and rituals in fiction –as these examples demonstrate. Union sources encouraged such reflexive performances, publicising the composition and writing successes of its members (such as prize winners in local essay competitions), and providing space in journals for printers and compositors to engage in a much-vaunted tradition of self-reflective and creative practice.

Furthermore, local and regional newspapers played significant roles in broadcasting union events, carrying obituaries and news of retirements, meetings and annual fetes, and often casting these in particular rhetorical tropes favourable to union members. Examples of such material culled from Aberdeen, Glasgow and Edinburgh sources demonstrate the standard form in which such information was disseminated.

Conclusion

What I have offered here is an initial foray into using primary union data and secondary material as starting points for examining issues of printing and book trade ‘skills transfer’ in a transnational context. The Scottish Typographical Association was just one union amongst many seeking to use its organisational structure to sustain a cohesive sense of social identity and elite trade status amongst its members across space and time. The various forms in which such identities were effectively supported and monitored shaped regional, national and transnational flows of skills and labour traditions throughout the English-speaking world in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Endnotes

ⁱ E.J. Hobsbawm, ‘The Tramping Artisan’, *The Economic History Review*, 3.3 (1951), (299-320) p. 305.

ⁱⁱ *Scottish Typographical Circular*, August 1, 1888, vol. XI, no. 324, p. 676.

ⁱⁱⁱ See her work-in-progress piece, ‘The Printological Worlds of “Australian Jack”: the Typographical Press System in the Indian Ocean’, at www.ruc.dk/isg_en/indianocean/activities/Sydney_Shep