



First Signs Publishing Company building.  
Photo courtesy of Adventist Heritage Centre, Australia.

# Signs Publishing Company, Australia

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Since 1906 the Signs Publishing Company in Warburton, VIC, Australia, has been the publishing house for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the South Pacific region. The publishing company came under the umbrella of the Adventist Media Network of the South Pacific Division with its creation in 2007.

## A Successor for the Echo Publishing Company

The parent company of the Signs Publishing Company (SPC) was the Echo Publishing Company (EPC), located in suburban Melbourne. At the 1903 Australasian Union Conference session held at Cooranbong, NSW, it was recommended that the EPC accept the advice of Battle Creek church headquarters and transfer the printing enterprise from the city to a rural locality.<sup>1</sup> Management of EPC consented and began a search for a suitable site,

locating a property in 1905 at Warburton in the upper reaches of the Yarra River. The publisher's leading periodical, *Signs of the Times* (Australasian), carried a front-page article extolling the ideological rationale for the move, explaining that "big towns extinguish genius" and city dwellers are "drowned in vanities."<sup>2</sup>

Wilbur Salisbury, manager of EPC, called for donations from the church members in order to finance the move. Beginning in August 1905, moneys were sent from all over Australasia,<sup>3</sup> and a year later he reported the goal of £3,500 was almost attained.<sup>4</sup> These donations did not entitle shares in the company, as was the case when EPC was formed.

The complex transfer of the business to Warburton took place during the southern spring and summer of 1905/1906. First, the erection of a small workshop was completed on site.<sup>5</sup> By January 1906 the wooden building, located on the flat near the creek, was virtually ready for the installation of the machinery, and staff were constructing their cottages on the slopes.<sup>6</sup> The two-story portion at the front of the plant would house book storage downstairs and editorial offices upstairs. All machinery would be installed in a large single-story building at the back.<sup>7</sup> A major project involved the excavation of a large reservoir upstream and the laying of pipes for a hydroelectric scheme to supply the whole community. From the reservoir a nine-inch outlet directed the water down through a narrowing spiral pipe onto a wheel that drove a generator giving up to fifty horsepower.<sup>8</sup> The heavy machinery was railed from Melbourne during February and March.<sup>9</sup> The first batch of books was sent interstate from the bindery in March.<sup>10</sup> The last issue of the *Signs of the Times* from EPC was dated April 2, 1906.<sup>11</sup> From that time publications carried the new registered name, Signs of the Times Publishing Association, Limited.<sup>12</sup>

## Changes in Management

In his first SPC annual report, 1906, Salisbury noted his staff numbered 42. The five months of operation, February through June, had yielded a loss of £64, a minimal amount in view of the heavy expenses incurred during the move to Warburton.<sup>13</sup> His 1908 report indicated the enterprise was struggling. The fiscal year 1907/1908 showed periodical subscriptions had dropped, wages were rising, and profit margins were narrowing. He warned that steps had to be taken to place the business on "a better financial basis."<sup>14</sup> A net gain of only £113 had been made during the 12 months.<sup>15</sup>

Salisbury excelled as a publishing house manager during his 17 years in Australia, but his return to America went unnoticed in the church media. He was last mentioned as one voted to a committee at the Union Conference Council at Wairoona in September 1909.<sup>16</sup> Johan Johanson replaced him. Johanson's first report, 1910, showed an annual net gain of £369,<sup>17</sup> and by 1914 an annual net gain of £2,183.<sup>18</sup>

Johanson had two terms of office, 1910–1916 and 1919–1926. During the interim Walter Miller served as manager. Miller was an experienced printer from the early EPC days. He was the man behind the pseudonym Uncle Ben, who conducted the children's column in *The Bible Echo*<sup>19</sup> and wrote the series of children's books entitled *Uncle Ben's Cobblestones*, *Uncle Ben's Meadow Bank*, and *Uncle Ben's Clover Field*. He had chosen not to follow the publishing work to Warburton but, rather, to remain in Melbourne and pursue his own printing business.<sup>20</sup> On the strength of his good name and work ethic he was welcomed back to denominational employment.

Isolated in Warburton and without contracts from the Melbourne business sector, SPC struggled during the World War I years. In 1916 Miller inherited a £3,000 overdraft.<sup>21</sup> The loan account had risen to £25,290 by 1919 and only reduced to £18,380 three years later. During the period July 1918 through December 1921 the total profit was only £6,014.<sup>22</sup> The prospects of paying interest on huge loans over many years was daunting. Toward the end of 1921 an extraordinary meeting of management was called to seriously consider voluntary liquidation.<sup>23</sup>

Church management came to the rescue. On January 9, 1922, the enterprise was placed under the umbrella of the Australasian Conference Association, Limited, shifting the legal responsibility to the Church.<sup>24</sup> The business had been listed since 1911 as the Signs Publishing Company, Limited, but after 1921 it was simply referred to as the Signs Publishing Company.<sup>25</sup> The organizational change was accompanied by a positive response from Charles Watson, president of the Australasian Union Conference. He persuaded American church headquarters to make a donation of £5,000, and not to pay down debt but to modernize the plant with the purchase of a Miele press and a Mergenthaler linotype machine.<sup>26</sup>

## Pulling Out of Debt

Johan Johanson's son, Walter, was appointed as manager in 1926. After four years in the role his quadrennial report spoke of mixed success. He noted that sales of subscription books, religious books, and medical books had all slumped. This was not his fault. The reality was that door-to-door book sellers were having a lean time. Johanson's strategy was to trim production so that stock did not accumulate. Subscriptions for periodicals also dropped. When the price was increased, subscriptions nosedived a further 50 percent. Staff numbers were reduced, and Johanson introduced budgetary control. Less turnover meant less profit. During the fiscal years July 1926 through June 1930 the total profit amounted to only £2,611, approximately five times less than the previous quadrennium. The good news was that their loan account had been wiped out. From a frightening high of £32,365 in 1926 "our heavy indebtedness has been lifted," Johanson reported in 1930. He had been lucky to attract appropriations from friendly sources. The Sanitarium Health Food Company gave more than £19,326. Both the Review and Herald Publishing Association and Pacific Press Publishing Association gave generously, and SPC paid out the remaining £1,683.<sup>27</sup>



Johanson became ill and was in the hospital for much of 1934, and temporary management assumed control. He passed away on December 5, 1934, age 43.<sup>28</sup>

## The Flood of November 30, 1934

Heavy rains caused the Yarra River to flood on Friday, November 30, 1934, sweeping trees and lumber from upstream logging mills, carrying everything before it, including all but one of the bridges.<sup>29</sup> A protective wall had been built around the SPC because of earlier floods, but as staff watched the waters rise rapidly they realized disaster was imminent. They frantically labored until sunset to carry stock upstairs. Eventually, with the level up to their shoulders, they had to swim to safety. All the machinery was submerged and covered with silt. Thirty motors had to be sent to Melbourne for repairs. Remarkably, the production line was cleaned and restored in a few days. It was estimated that up to seventy tons of stock was ruined.<sup>30</sup> Only the December 10 issue of the *Signs of the Times* was lost, as it lay on the lower floor awaiting dispatch.<sup>31</sup> The periodical's production continued on with the December 17 issue as if nothing had happened. However, the overall damage bill was £8,736, written off over several periods.<sup>32</sup>

## Recovery

John Potter was appointed as manager to rebuild the enterprise. Twelve months after the flood occurred, some land was purchased on higher ground located on the opposite side of the river, and there the new plant was established.<sup>33</sup> His 1936 report was optimistic, the volume of contracts being stable and mention of 25 percent of the profits being given to "missions."<sup>34</sup> Potter's 1940 report said the balance sheet was "better" than when printing was done in the former building. He did not specify any profit or loss figures. He reported that at the beginning of the war the company was fortunate to obtain paper supplies from Germany, England, Canada, and Tasmania, but book binding calico was becoming unprocurable.<sup>35</sup>

## Wartime

Printing supplies became very scarce as World II war dragged on. Staffing levels, too, became difficult to maintain as the labor force was absorbed by the military. The lack of craftsmen forced Potter to have his blocks and plates produced in Melbourne. The contract to continue printing the packaging for Sanitarium Health Food products proved to be a lifesaver. One of the best-selling books was *Ladies' Handbook of Home Treatments*, by Dr. Eulalia Richards, a hefty tome of more than one thousand pages, sold only by married people to married people. The back cover featured a pocket containing a sealed brown envelope marked "Private. For Married Ladies Only: An Explanation of Contraceptive Methods."<sup>36</sup>

## Slow Progress

Eric Johanson, brother of the late Walter Johanson, replaced Potter as manager early in 1944.<sup>37</sup> The time coincided with the beginning of a government relaxation of restrictions on paper supplies.<sup>38</sup> Thomas Mitchell succeeded Johanson,<sup>39</sup> followed by John Craven in May 1949. The status quo prevailed until Craven arrived. At the time there were approximately eighty staff, both full- and part-time.<sup>40</sup> Craven was an Englishman who had previous experience at the British Publishing House and the Oriental Watchman Publishing House, India. He installed new equipment, and for the first time in years the establishment made a profit.<sup>41</sup> Tragically, he passed away in January 1951, at only 46.<sup>42</sup>

## Longer Tenures

When Craven became ill, a new manager was appointed in the person of Carl Ulrich. He was to serve 12 years, a period that saw the production of Arthur Maxwell's colourful ten-volume set *The Bible Story*. SPC relinquished the contract for printing the Sanitarium Health Food Company packaging, but *The Bible Story* more than compensated their returns. Most of the work was done on a new Roland offset press. Other titles to follow were *Modern Ways to Health*, *Tiny Tots Library*, and *Your Bible and You*. Sales outlets called Book and Bible Houses were established in the local conferences, adding to totals achieved by door-to-door salespersons. An important decision was made to hold £30,000 in reserve from profits as a buffer against disaster or unprofitable years.<sup>43</sup>

Sadly, Ulrich suddenly passed away in his sleep in the early hours of February 27, 1962. He was 59 years of age and the third manager to die in office.<sup>44</sup>

Ronald Pengilly was appointed to replace Ulrich. He built on the good foundation that Craven and Ulrich had established. In his first quadrennium report, 1966, he wrote that 43,662 sets of *The Bible Story* had been sold since they were first printed in Ulrich's time. In his term of office 43,817 three-volume sets of *Tiny Tots Library* were sold. It was an upbeat report, but he gave no profit or loss figures. He noted there were one hundred on his staff and that a number of new machines had been installed, including an Aurelia 46 offset press, an American Miele press, and a Schneider Programmatic guillotine.<sup>45</sup>

Pengilly's era ushered in the advent of cheaper offshore printing and competition for SPC, but the denomination kept channelling their contracts to Warburton, and the enterprise remained buoyant. The last of the letterpress

machines were scrapped by 1970, offset being the preferred method.<sup>46</sup> Management agonized over further expansion, finally deciding to invest \$75,000 in another Roland Ultra offset press. Its first job, in 1971, was to print 1,410,000 *Appeal for Missions* magazines.<sup>47</sup>

David Woolley was the last of the long-term managers. His term witnessed an increasing computerization of the industry. Denominational contracts continued to be fulfilled, and new hardcover books kept appearing, one excellent seller being Dr. James Wright's *Family Medical Care*, first published in 1985. However, book salespersons were decreasing in numbers, and sales spiraled downward. The early 1990s were the worst, with a loss in 1991 and a break-even in 1993. Fortunes rallied by 1995, with a profit of \$263,445.<sup>48</sup>

## Recent Times

Dale Williams was appointed manager when Woolley retired in 1995. His report of 2000 carried news of the 1997 appointment of a manager to develop Adventist Book Centers in the Pacific Islands. He noted that Wright's medical book had been enlarged and updated. Other fast sellers, for children, were placed on the market: *Great Stories for Kids* and the *Sammy* series. Over the five-year fiscal period, July 1995 through June 2000, \$2.6 million was invested in new equipment, all funded by SPC itself. Modernizing enabled Williams to reduce his staff to fifty individuals. In 1997 SPC became the first company in Australia to be granted the status of Quality Affirmed Plus by the Printing Industry Association of Australia. Profits rose to a little more than \$1 million for 1999.<sup>49</sup>

After 2002, when Williams transferred to other employment, managerial responsibility was placed in the hands of Warren Jones, Glen Reed, and Andrew Irvine. With the creation of Adventist Media Network, the SPC was integrated into a media organization whose chief executive officer was located in the Adventist Media Centre building in Wahroonga, NSW. The bulk of editorial, graphic design, and decision-making gradually moved to Wahroonga, and the Warburton plant essentially gravitated to being a printing house with a local manager. The SDA presence in Warburton has been diminishing since the sale of the Warburton Sanitarium and Hospital and the closure of the Sanitarium Health Food Company factory. For this reason SPC has found it increasingly challenging to employ SDA staff. Despite the difficulties, the establishment continues to find sufficient business by printing church periodicals, Sabbath School lesson pamphlets, *Appeal for Missions* leaflets, some hardcover and softcover books, and other contracts.<sup>50</sup>

## Summary of Managers

Wilbur D. Salisbury (1895 [EPC]–1909); Johan M. Johanson (1909–1916, 1919–1926); Walter H. B. Miller (1916–1919); Walter O. Johanson (1926–1934); Rodd E. G. Blair (temp, 1934); John J. Potter (1934–1944); Eric J. Johanson (1944–1946); Thomas A. Mitchell (1946–1948); John C. Craven (1948–1950); Carl F. L. Ulrich (1951–1962); Ronald E. Pengilly (1962–1980); David D. Woolley (1980–1995); Dale R. Williams (1996–2002); Warren R. Jones (2002–2004); Glen A. Reed (2004–2009); Andrew Irvine (2010–2012); Neale D. Schofield (2013–2015); Calvin G. Dever (2016–2018); Bradley J. Kemp (2018–).

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