Historical Introduction to Northern Territory Newspapers

By Barbara James

The Northern Territory Library (NTL) has the most complete collection of current and historic Northern Territory newspapers available in the world.

The history of Northern Territory newspapers is a fascinating, and often controversial, one. Until the Second World War period, the only newspapers produced in the Territory were printed in Darwin. The earliest Northern Territory paper was The Moonta Herald which was published on seven occasions on board the ship that brought South Australian Surveyor General, George Goyder, and his team of surveyors and workers to Darwin (then Palmerston) in 1868-69.

The first machine printed newspaper in Darwin was the Northern Territory Times and Government Gazette (commonly referred to as The Northern Territory Times), published in November 1873 in the back room of a government office. A young Adelaide journalist named Richard Wells brought the first printing press to Darwin via the Gothenburg (the ship on which Wells was to lose his life in February 1875, when the ship was wrecked off the Queensland coast on a return journey to Adelaide). Wells, who had worked with the Register in Adelaide, was the first editor and George T. Clarkson the first publisher. The new Government Resident at the time, George Byng Scott, started the machine that printed the very first copy.

The Times survived until June 1932 and during its history had many colourful editors and journalists working for it, including the Territory’s first member of Parliament (in the South Australian Parliament), Vaiben L. Solomon who owned the paper from 1885 to 1890. Other interesting editors included local businessman, Joseph Skelton (1877-1884); George Mayhew (1890-1899); Charles Kirkland (1890-1896 and 1900-1917); Fred Thompson (1917-1919); Edward Foster (1917-1930); and Jessie Litchfield (1930-1932).

Between 1883 and 1890 a rival newspaper, North Australian, was also published in Darwin by George Mayhew and Charles Kirkland who then bought the Times from Solomon and amalgamated the papers, calling it the Northern Territory Times. During the period the two papers were running, they often carried quite different views and versions of the same events, so anyone researching material from this period would be wise to read both papers. The North Australian has a people index for the entire period it existed while the Northern Territory Time is indexed up to 1920. These indexes, contained in books in the Northern Territory Collection, are extremely valuable time savers for researchers who know the names of people relevant to their research.

On 19 February 1921 the North Australian Workers Union began its own newspaper in Darwin called The Northern Standard, edited for most of its pre-war period by a journalist named Don McKinnon. Again, during the time the Northern Territory Times and Gazette and the Northern Standard co-existed (1921-1932) researchers can gain very different perspectives of the same events, The Standard being the propaganda voice of the union movement and, to a great extent the Labor Party, at the time.

In mid 1932, the Northern Territory Times closed its doors and the Standard became the only Territory newspaper until 1941, except for a brief appearance of The Proletarian published by the Communist Party in the NT between June and September 1934. In October 1941, with the advent of World War Two, the Army News began publishing a weekly newspaper in Darwin. When the city was bombed on 19 February 1942, the Northern Standard ceased and the Army News became the only Darwin newspaper until 1945. Interestingly, just before the Army News began The Northern Standard ran a special four page small issue of September 2, 1941 detailing the circumstances of a riot by soldiers in the Darwin city area, particularly the Hotel Victoria. An original edition of this is held
in the Spillett Collection in the library’s Archives Room. The Army News purchased a printing press belonging to the Communist Party to operate in Darwin prior to and throughout the war.

In June 1946 the Standard renewed its publication and continued until its closure in 1954, by which time the Northern Territory News had begun publication (1952). This is currently the only daily newspaper in the Territory.

In 1946 Alice Springs also began publishing a paper, first a publication called Dead Heart and then the Centralian Advocate which continues today. One of the early editors was Jim Bowditch, destined to become one of the Territory’s most well known editors and referred to as Australia’s “last crusading editor.” After a period as editor of the Centralian Advocate, Jim moved to Darwin to become editor of the Northern Territory News for 18 years from 1954 and reported on some of the most sensational news stories in Australia during that time. (see articles in Darwin Star from February 21, 1980 for a four-part series on Bowditch’s time as editor).