Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s novels in the Albury Banner

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A recent project, ReCollecting Albury Writing, studied the history of Albury-based and Albury-focused writing. This uncovered a wealth of writing, some of which was collected in an anthology [1]. But the early Albury newspapers, the Border Post and the Albury Banner published more than local authors. Australian, British and American poets and short story writers competed for column space, the outcome determined by the editors’ whims—until the field in the Albury Banner was ‘blitzed’ by a dominant force of popular fiction: Mary Elizabeth Braddon.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon (*4 October 1837 † 4 February 1915) was one of the most prolific and popular female authors of Victorian Britain. Between 1859 and 1915 she wrote over 80 novels, plus a large number of short stories and other articles [2].

Mary Braddon was an unashamedly commercial author, catering for public taste without literary pretensions. Braddon was a writer of sensation novels, who shot to fame and infamy in the 1860s with her novels Lady Audley’s Secret (1862) and Aurora Floyd (1863). Both deal with bigamous relationships, casting the perpetrator as the heroine. In Lady Audley’s Secret, for example, the pretty blonde heroine enters a bigamous relationship, deserts her child, murders her first husband and contemplates poisoning her second. Attacked by contemporaries for corrupting young and impressionable minds by making crime and violence attractive, Braddon continued to write what a ready market was prepared to buy.

Novels of sensation, commonly depicting lurid, implausible and sensational events became a genre at the time. While even Dickens resorted to some of this, the primary authors in addition to Braddon were Wilkie Collins and Mrs. Henry Wood.

By the late 1880s her publishers claimed that she had 43 novels in print, making her the most commercial author, catering for public taste without literary pretensions [3].

Her novels certainly presented challenging subject matter for a conservative Australia—and an even more conservative rural New South Wales—where adventure novels by Gustave Aimard (actually Oliver Gloux) and James Fenimore Cooper on the one hand, and romantic English village tales on the other were the preferred staple [4].

The Albury Banner

The Albury Banner and Wodonga Express had been founded in 1860 as the second newspaper of a town of then about 700 inhabitants. The four-page paper at first appeared bi-weekly. After two changes in ownership the paper was bought by George Adams, who continued to run it as a weekly paper until his death in 1918. By 1880 the paper had expanded to 24 pages, and by 1887 to 40 pages. The paper was often dubbed the ‘Cockey’s Bible’ as it strongly advocated the rights of rural communities and particularly of small-scale land owners (selectors).

Not confined to Albury itself, its readership extended over 200kms from the place of publication. As a weekly paper of substance it did not directly compete with, but augmented other local dailies. Like its main competitor, the Border Post, the Banner ran fiction from its inception. In the beginning it was mainly poetry as well as short, commonly unattributed fiction. Serials were added later.

The Serialised Novels

After a faltering start in 1864, when the serialisation of Charles Dickens’ Our Mutual Friend was terminated without conclusion after 18 weeks, the Albury Banner embraced the serialisation of novels in March 1869. By the end of the century, a total of 38 novels had been reproduced, usually in weekly instalments. Fourteen of these novels were authored by Margaret Elizabeth Braddon—the single most represented author. The authors of the other novels were Wilkie Collins, W. Stephen Hayward, and Jules Verne with two novels each; one novel each was serialised by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, Frederick Walter Robinson, Moy Thomas, Henry Rider Haggard, May Thomas, Frederick Boyle, Henry Broadbent, Charles Dickens, H.A.R. Joy, and Edmund Mitchell. The authors of seven other serials have not yet been identified.

The Banner serialisation of Braddon’s The Captain of the Vulture in July 1872 follows closely the first serialisation of a Braddon novel, To the Bitter End by the Melbourne Age [5]. It is intriguing to note that of the fourteen Braddon novels serialised in the Albury Banner only one, Taken at the Flood had been serialised by another Australian paper (the Melbourne Leader in 1874) [6].

From their subject matter both Lady Audley’s Secret and Aurora Floyd were too challenging to be serialised in Australian newspapers. The Banner commencing with Braddon’s The Captain of the Vulture but advertised it, as well as subsequent serialisations, as “by the author of Lady Audleys Secret, Aurora Floyd, etc.”, clearly playing on the notoriety of these two novels.

All Braddon novels serialised in the Banner have convoluted and implausible plots that, on average weekly instalments of a page and a half, must have kept the audience in suspense. Most of the novels ran for 30 to 40 weeks, but The Captain of the Vulture was dragged out for 66!
That part of the readership not interested in the serials was entertained by pieces of short fiction, which on occasions could run for up to three weeks.

The Braddon novels first appear in the Banner at a time of a new era in journalism on the border: lots of information from a variety of sources and district correspondents, political commentary, advice for home, garden and farm—and a good read. With the Braddon serials the Banner had got onto a good thing as was determined not to let it slip. While Adams paused for a year after the serialisation of The Captain of the Vulture, it ran two Braddon novels in succession, serialised Wilkie Collins’ The Dead Secret and then ran seven Braddon novels back to back.

The works serialised were by no means recent novels. Only Taken at the Flood and Joseph Haggard were serialised soon after the British publication (one and two years respectively). Others, such as The Trail of the Serpent, Eleanor’s Victory, John Marchmont’s Legacy, and Rupert Godwin were serialised thirteen years after they had first appeared in book form in the United Kingdom. In this, the pattern of serialisation differs dramatically from the Braddon serialisation in the metropolitan papers, where her works usually appeared one or two years after initial release in London.

Given the time delay, and the general practices of the Banner at the time, it appears that Adams printed the serials without much concern for copyright and royalties.

The readers had to be content with the strong representation of Braddon novels in the Albury Banner. Until 1885 the Banner had a stranglehold on the local serialisation market as its competitor, the Border Post, remained a four-page paper. Limitations of space only permitted intermittently serialised short novels. In 1885 the Border Post expanded into a 20-page paper (on Saturdays), replete with regular columns on gardening, a Ladies page, juvenile fiction and the like. This extended format allowed for the inclusion of a serial. In the first three years in this new format the Border Post focussed on novels by Wilkie Collins.

**BOOK SALES**

George Adams operated a book and stationary store in conjunction with the Albury Banner. Although Adams serialised the Braddon novels, her work is conspicuously absent from his major book advertisements at that time. He offered Lady Audley’s Secret [7] but in his advertisement for 1873, where Adams lists 78 books and advertises that novels by another 22 authors are in stock, Braddon is not listed [8]. This had changed completely by 1895, when Adams offered 46 Braddon novels [9].

**CONCLUSION**

It may be coincidence that the Banner stopped serialising Braddon novels when the Border Post expanded its format and provided competition. No records of the Banner survive so the question of why the volume of Braddon serialisation occurred cannot be solved.

**NOTES**

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5 The Age 20 April 1872 to 11 January 1873.
7 Advert. in Albury Banner 5 November 1870, p. 3.
8 Advertisment in Albury Banner 21 June 1873, p. 3.
9 Advert. in Albury Banner 22 March 1895, p. 37.