

PLOD ESSAY
THE POWLETT EXPRESS & A FAMILY
DYNASTY

Malachy Gannon, who had established the *Korumburra Advocate* in 1899, had one daughter (Frances) and three sons (Vincent, Ignatius and Thomas) all of whom were destined to become newspaper proprietors to fulfil their father's ambition of a family dynasty. As the offspring came of age, their father set up family properties and thus newspapers in Warragul and Wonthaggi, which, along with the *Advocate* in Korumburra, would become their destiny. Vincent took over the *Express* in Warragul. Their sister became proprietor of the *Advocate*. Ignatius, the older of the two remaining brothers, was put in charge of the new *Powlett Express* in Wonthaggi and Thomas, who was still learning the printing trade, would become his brother's partner. Thus, in 1909, when many Wonthaggiens were still living in tents, *The Powlett Express & Victorian State Coalfields Advertiser*, established itself as the first newspaper in town with editions coming out like clockwork every Tuesday and Friday morning, due to Thomas's newly acquired expertise. Upon the untimely death of his brother, young Thomas was left to become the owner and publisher of the Wonthaggi paper at a young age.

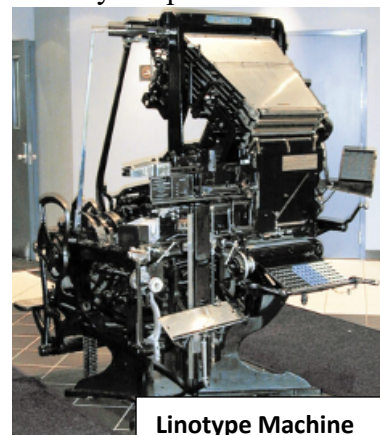


Its newspaper office was on McBride Avenue in Wonthaggi. For years, it stood right next to the Bank of Victoria building, which is still there and is now painted a cream colour and

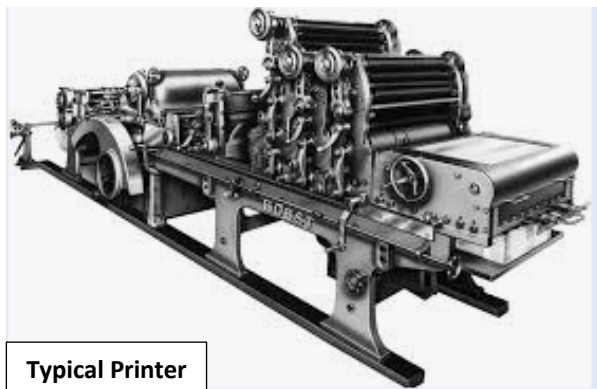
known as Moyle's on Moyle's Corner. In the picture above, the *Powlett Express* office looks inconspicuous, even quaint, and quite a bit older than the building next to it. When it was built, it must have been the building closest to the new train station just across Murray Street until the new bank went up. It looks like it may have been the first building on the street and witnessed Wonthaggi come alive with structure after structure making its way up McBride Avenue past Bonds Corner. We know it was standing there for six years before Taberners Hotel was established on the corner across the street in 1915, long before the whale bones were put in place and made it the most recognizable pub in town.

We also know that the *Powlett Express* had, due to its position, escaped the 1912 fire begun at the Lyceum Theatre which burnt almost all the new structures on Graham Street between McBride Avenue and McKenzie Street corner. The Rifleman's Club, a fancy goods shop, the newly established *Sentinel Times* office, a tailor's shop, Phillip's Boarding house and Abbot's general store were all completely destroyed by fire. The *Sentinel Times* lost everything including its new printing press in that fire, but Mr A.B. Crannage, journalist, at the *Powlett Express* saved the day by offering to print the opposing newspapers' copy for as long as it took them to get re-established. Mr McCrimmon, of the *Sentinel*, said, "Very often opponents in business are the closest friends in the hour of adversity, and this week the *Express* has come to light in a manner which we are not likely to forget for many a day."

The *Powlett Express* office seemed small, but it looked like any shop inside with a long bench, desk, chairs, but, unlike other shops, with a Linotype machine and 'a pot of hot lead' that was essential to the working of the machine. The lead had to be turned on to heat by 6:30 am so that when the Linotype operator, probably in the beginning, Thomas, came in at 8.00 am, he could start producing the lead type needed later for the printing machine. The Linotype was a big, clumsy, yet ingenious machine that was the precursor to the computer and was used throughout the printing world right up until the 1970's. It was essential for getting newspaper stories ready for printing. Unfortunately, the small street-front office was not large enough for a linotype and a printer.



Linotype Machine



Typical Printer

Thus, the printer, which churned out hundreds of newspapers two days a week, every week, found its place in the large dining room of the living quarters connected to the back of the *Express* office. Although the door to the office was on the street, the way into the house was through a door on the side of the building a few steps down the alleyway that ran next to the office. It was here, behind the street-front office, in a small house whose largest room was filled with a noisy printer constantly at work churning out paper after paper, that Ignatius and his brother lived as they were getting the business started. The printer, once in its place was never shifted for the almost fifty years that the paper prospered.

When, in 1912, his brother suddenly died, Thomas had to take the reins on his own and keep the paper going. Because the printing machine, his pride and joy, was in the house behind the office he continued to live there and, in spite of clatter, he was eventually joined by his new wife, Vera, and soon, his beloved son, Thomas Junior. In fact, for almost fifty years, two generations of the Gannon family continued to live in that house with a busy, noisy and odorous printing press in their dining room, and accept as natural that every aspect of the making of a newspaper was part of their lives.



Young Thomas James Gannon Jr at school, aged 14 at school

Young Thomas Junior, always known as Tom rather than Thomas, was properly educated at boarding school in Melbourne and then in Sale. However, he was pulled out of school after Year 10 to work with his father on the paper. He then took over the business at the young age of 22 years when his father died suddenly in the early 1940s leaving him completely responsible for the well-being of his mother and the newspaper business. Much to his surprise, he didn't actually inherit the paper from his father because, in fact, Thomas Senior had never owned it. Malachy Gannon owned it. And so, Tom Junior was obliged to buy the business, or at least finance his mother, Vera's, new life in Melbourne. Apparently, she had a strong personality and felt it would make a man out of her son to burden him with her well-being. In spite of this hardship, Tom Gannon Junior carried on, creating an interesting and readable newspaper, eventually marrying Wilma Shugg in 1948, and fathering six children, all of whom lived in the house behind the office. It must have been a crowded and possibly chaotic household where the newspaper business dominated. Nevertheless, this was where the entire Gannon family lived until 1963. And the *Powlett Express* flourished.

Tom's first-born child, Bernadette, talked about her memories of the days in the house behind the office: "The whole family was involved with the process of getting the paper out each week. We saw all the ins-and-outs of the newspaper process. Dad processed film in our kitchen and washed it in the bathroom then hung the negatives over the kitchen table. The biggest room in the house was taken over by a printing press and that's where it stayed. I love the smell of a printing press to this day."

After Kate, the sixth and last child in the Gannon family, was born, it finally had to be admitted that the family needed more room and so they moved. Kate had lived at the old house for only one year when, in 1962, the family went from 7 McBride Avenue to a larger house one a block away at 38 McKenzie Street. Her father, Tom, rented out the house behind the *Express* office to family friends with the proviso that the printer, essential to the publishing business, stay where it was. Even though Kate was only a toddler when her family moved a block away from the McBride Avenue house, she says, "a particular image of a skylight over a large worktable where Dad would set up the pages for a print and the noise the machine made is still familiar in my memory." She can remember this because the children of the new tenants were her age and so she recalls spending a great deal of time in the old house as a little girl even interrupting her father when he was at work on the massive printer.

Kate's memory of events as she grew older is very sharp. In the McKenzie Street house, for instance, she remembers her father had put in a telephone between "the kitchen and lounge room where vinyl meets carpet, in a corner, just beyond the durable kitchen Laminex table, and behind a lounge chair that our mother generally sat in at the end of a busy consistent day and relaxed with her knitting." There her dad would loudly relay stories to the *Herald*, the *Sun*, the ABC or a Gippsland paper wherever the story was relevant.

“I can certainly recall Dad emphasising punctuation clearly, word for word, comma by comma, full stops, semicolons, new paragraph and story end, full stop. Of course, we all had to be very quiet when he was on the phone.”

In between Bernadette, the oldest Gannon child, and Kate, the youngest, there were four brothers in the following order of oldest to youngest: Tom, Michael, Brian and Kevin.



Bernadette, Tom, Michael, Brian, Kevin & Kate

Kate remembers that on a Monday or a Wednesday night, the nights when the printing of the paper was completed, all hands were on deck to get ready for distribution the next day. Brian, who worked at the *Express* after school, would be the one to sell the

paper hot off the press at *The Express* office, while all the rest of the family [except for Tom and Michael who were away in boarding school] would be counting papers and bundling them up for distribution to outlets in the district. They had to get many papers collated, labelled and bundled, ready for Brian and his brother to take over to the station early the next morning to be loaded on the train for dispersal in the towns along the rail line where they were to be sold in the general stores. A lovely memory for the whole family was buying a loaf of fresh bread from the co-op Bakery, going home, and having that warm bread for supper after all the work was done.

Being in a newspaper family wasn't all fun, however. Kate remembers that being a child of the person who published *The Express* was tough. “It was a matter of harassment,” she says, “or bullying constantly.” If someone didn't agree or like what they read in Tom Gannon's articles, his wife, Wilma, and his children would wear/endure the taunts/slander/bullying/harassment. Often a policeman would come to the back door and ask, “Is your dad home?” or strangers would knock on the door.

Being a journalist or the wife of a journalist led to the dissolving of some friendships. “In one instance both dad and mum were asked to pressure Dad into not reporting a court case involving the son of some lifetime friends, who was facing some serious charges...of course the case was covered, made front page and the friendship ended. It was awful to see Mum visibly upset after answering the phone and being subject to verbal abuse from someone who felt wronged or disagreed with Dad's opinion.

Kates remembers, “Whatever he did, and whatever he printed in his beloved *Express* had to be right. That was what Dad strived for. We all knew he told the truth, but not everyone enjoyed reading about it.”

All the Gannon kids remember that their dad worked a LOT of hours; up at 6.30am to go to the office; out a few times per week reporting on council meetings; gathering facts from the family grieving for a loved one who was recently deceased for the 'Obituary'. Saturday weddings meant a photo in the paper and these photos were taken by Dad or Mrs. Sullivan who had a flare for fashion and would describe in detail what the bride wore. Often Dad, or Mrs. O'Sullivan would be following or getting followed by the *Sentinel's* person doing the same thing.

A fire in town would see Dad rushing as much as the fireman; stop signs and speed limits ignored. Simply picking up the phone and asking the operator, “Where's the fire?” was the method used to know its location. And my brothers would run outside to climb up on the wash house roof to help in directing where the smoke was coming from. Except they never had to look very far the night when the Union Theatre was on fire; the glow will never be forgotten.

Tom took control of the *Express* at the age of twenty-two and kept that paper going, sometimes single-handedly, until 1969, when he sold the masthead to the *Wonthaggi Sentinel*. He then worked for the regional *Sentinel-Times* until his retirement in 1990. He was also in constant touch with the city papers, who respected his style and understood that he reported the news as he saw it. He wrote many articles for *The Sun*, *The Herald* and *The Age*. According to the editors of these papers, he won respect over more than half a century of action-filled, honest journalism.

Tom Gannon died suddenly, when hunting in the Strzelecki hills behind Wonthaggi with friends. He was 74 years old. The obit in the *Sentinel* read, “Tom would have smiled with satisfaction. If he had planned his exit from this world, that was the way he would have organised things...quickly and doing what he liked.”

He was the last of the Gannon journalists although more than one of his grandchildren experimented with the ambition. Kate’s son, the fourth generation of Thomas Jameses in the family, studied journalism and worked for the *Sentinel Times* for two years, but being young he has turned away from that life to seek adventure. Nevertheless, once a writer, always a writer and no doubt we will see his name in print one day.



Tom Gannon, journalist, publisher and editor of the *Powlett Express*, at work

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By C.R.Landon

based on information from *15 Minute Talk* given by Kate McNish January 2024