

THE PICTURESQUE ATLAS OF AUSTRALASIA

In only one case is a favourable decision recorded for the purchaser. He had signed the contract in 1886, and as no copies of the book were delivered till 1891, the court held that the contract had been abandoned when payment and acceptance were refused.

What must constitute almost a unique procedure as a cautionary measure on the part of the Picturesque Atlas Publishing Company was the issue, in 1891, of a twelve-page folio brochure citing in some detail a number of prosecutions in Australia and New Zealand against delinquent subscribers. It is surely a coincidence that this publication, till now apparently unknown to New Zealand bibliography, should have come into the library just as this article was being completed. Though I have handled very many copies of the Picturesque Atlas, this minatory addendum I had not met before.

But these cases that came to the courts were few compared with those that found it preferable to swallow a bitter pill. They paid up, but endeavouring to convert such an expensive asset to specie again, found the book market glutted with the commodity. It has not yet recovered: the reason has been forgotten, and it is only remembered that it is an item that the market does not want. Today, an age when smaller houses do not have space for tall heavy volumes, the market is still unkindly, so that any time in these last thirty years a lucky purchaser could buy the three often splendidly bound volumes for anything from half-a-crown to half-a-guinea.

But in July, 1891, George Fisher, member of Parliament for Wellington City, asked a question in the House as 'to whether Government would take charge of the Book Purchasers' Protection Bill'.³

'Large numbers of people', he said, 'throughout the Otago and Canterbury Provincial Districts had been victimized by these book vampires. When these poor people came into court, they found themselves committed to a contract, innocent enough on the face of it, but so craftily drawn as to commit them to financial obligations which

³ Hansard vol. 72 p. 252, 488-90.