

A PRESS FROM PAIHIA IN THE NATIONAL MUSEUM?

The National Museum was recently presented with an example of one of the most remarkable types of hand printing presses, a *Columbian*, made in 1841 by Clymer & Dixon, London, and bearing the makers' number 973. The date of manufacture would, whatever the history of this press, make it interesting as one of the oldest in New Zealand, but there is evidence to suggest that it was sent out initially by the Church Missionary Society to its printing house at Paihia and was later used for some years at St. John's College, Tamaki, and St. Stephen's, Parnell.

Columbian presses in general are surely some of the most bizarre machines ever produced. They were introduced in 1813 by their inventor, George Clymer (1754-1834) of Philadelphia, who exploited the decorative possibilities of cast iron to adorn his machine with a fantastic variety of ornate decoration, the crowning glory of which was a counterweight cast in the aggressively patriotic form of an American eagle. The object of the rather startling ornamentation was simply to ensure that the press, once seen was never forgotten by a potential buyer, and in fact, they became widely known as 'Eagles'.¹

Apart from their remarkable appearance, 'Columbians' are significant in the development of hand printing presses as a link between the *Stanhope*, the first successful all-iron screw press, and later machines of the *Albion* type which received their power from the straightening of a knuckle, chill or toggle joint. The *Columbian* was not the first press to dispense with the screw, but it did represent the most successful use of compound levers to give more power to an impression.

The compound lever action perfected by Clymer gave his press a great advantage over screw presses in power, durability and evenness of impression. Clymer spent some years developing his system, and when manufacture of *Columbian* presses commenced in 1814, the improvements were greeted with enthusiasm by the trade in New York and Philadelphia. Although a number were sold, mostly in these two cities, the new press did not enjoy commercial success in America as a whole. They sold at \$400 to \$500, a prohibitive price when the much more portable wooden *Ramage* press cost about \$130. 'Columbians' were simply far too heavy to be transported long distances overland, despite the wide recognition given to their efficiency.

However, Clymer had sufficient confidence in his invention to migrate to England in 1817, at the age of sixty-three. He arrived armed with testimonials from eighteen New York and Philadelphia printers, and in the knowledge that iron presses in the form of the *Stanhope*, were already in fairly wide use. Once in London, Clymer lost no time in publicising his invention throughout Europe, and in setting up a factory. In his