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**THE AUSTRALIAN BOOK
AUCTION RECORDS**

by

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The Australian Book Auction Records *

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This paper describes the *Australian Book Auction Records*, a dataset of prices and other information collected from auctions of rare books. The dataset contains a large number of prices from Australian rare book auctions, and a much smaller number from London rare book auctions. All the books in the records are connected in some way to Australasia. The sources and inclusion criteria of the records are set out, and the process of converting the records into a digital database is described. The paper presents a statistical profile of the data which includes the distribution of prices, the sizes of the auction events documented and details about repeat sales. The usefulness of the data is discussed, and suggestions for supplementing the data are provided, along with directions for future research.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, the economic study of auctions has experienced extraordinary growth. The empirical literature features studies of auctions of coins, cattle, spectrum licences, forestry leases, fishing entitlements, fine art, business equipment, real estate and many other assets. Researchers have also undertaken experimental studies, and a large theoretical literature has emerged. One explanation for this interest is the suitability of auctions to studying the formation of prices. Auctions are also an important sale mechanism in their own right, and one whose empirical properties are not yet fully understood. Specific lines of inquiry in the study of auctions have included the efficiency and revenue properties of different types of auction, the effects of different characteristics of bidders (particularly how they arrive at their valuations), the accuracy of information disclosed by auctioneers, sequential auctions and collusion among buyers. For surveys of the auctions literature, see Klemperer (1999) (theoretical); Laffont (1997) and Hendricks and Paarsch (1995) (empirical); and Kagel (1995) (experimental).

Rare book auctions have been largely neglected in the empirical literature. This is despite the fact that they have a number of features that make them promising targets for analysis. These features include a wide spread of asset values, from very low value books (a few dollars) to high value ones (up to a million dollars), sequential auctions of similar and identical books, some institutional variety, and simple sale environments that have many similarities with those of many other assets. Books are almost always sold by way of ascending or 'English' auctions, a type of auction that has wide empirical relevance and that has been the subject of a great deal of theoretical work. Another attraction of book auctions is their longevity. Book auctions have been around for a long time, making it possible to trace patterns in prices and the evolution of market institutions.

This paper describes the *Australian Book Auction Records* (ABAR), a dataset of prices and other information collected from auctions of rare books. Most of the books in ABAR were sold in Australia. A small number were sold in London. All the books in ABAR are connected in some way to Australasia. Section 2 introduces ABAR and defines some relevant terms. Section 3 sets out the method of data collection and the inclusion criteria, and sketches the institutional environment of book auctions in Australia. In Section 4, the data in ABAR are described, along with the approach adopted by the present author to convert the records into a digital database. A statistical profile of the data is presented in section 5. In section 6, the limitations of the dataset are discussed, along with possibilities for extending and

supplementing it. Section 7 gives some concluding comments about the value of the data for economists, and directions for future research.

2. THE AUSTRALIAN BOOK AUCTION RECORDS

Sale by auction has for centuries been a favoured way of disposing of valuable books. As early as the seventeenth century, there were auctioneers in England who dealt exclusively in books and paintings (Learmount, 1985).¹ Today, there are vibrant book auction markets in Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, the United States and many other countries.

In Australia, the results from auctions of old, fine and rare books of 'Australasian interest' are published in ABAR. ABAR is published every two years.² The early issues of ABAR, covering the period 1969 to 1978, were compiled by Mrs Margaret Woodhouse. The current series, so far covering the period 1983 to 1999, is compiled by Mrs Jill Burdon. ABAR was not published from 1979 to 1982. The ABAR volumes are offered for sale by the publishers (Australian Book Auction Records) and copies are kept in the National and State libraries, the University of Melbourne library and other major reference collections in Australia. The latest volume, 1998-99, was published in May 2000. The next volume is due for release in May/June 2002. More than 40,000 individual transactions have now been recorded in ABAR.

Buyers and sellers of old and rare books are ABAR's principal audience. At any point in time, the value of a particular book is uncertain. For buyers, historical price information is useful for valuing potential acquisitions. For sellers, it helps in setting reserve prices and choosing when to sell. The scarcity of particular books, a major factor in their value, can in part be inferred from how often (if at all) they come up for sale. As well as prices, ABAR includes information about the books' condition. This can be used to develop a picture of the typical state of the books in circulation, and can guide decisions about whether or not to acquire imperfect examples. It is useful to know that all copies of a title share the same fault (for example, browning of the leaves), or that a book offered for sale is inferior to most other copies that appeared on the market over a given time period.

¹ Book auctions were held in Continental Europe before they reached the British Isles. According to Carter (1977), the first book auctions in England were introduced from Holland before 1680.

² One volume of ABAR covered three years: 1983 to 1985.

Buyers and sellers are not the only potential users of the data. For librarians and historians, the frequency with which books are offered and the prices they realise give insights into tastes, and are an indicator of developing cultural interests. In Australia, recent trends in buying have centred on books about Antarctica, books connected with Norman Lindsay and his family, and children's books. Economists are another set of potential users of the data. The usefulness of the data for economists is addressed in the following sections.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to define some terms. Unless the meaning is clear from the context, 'sale event' will be used to refer to a session held by an auction firm over one or a few days, in which a set of objects were offered for sale in a series of individual (ascending) auctions. In each individual auction, a single 'lot' will have been offered for sale. The lot might have been a single object, or a group of objects offered together. Where one of the individual auctions resulted in a lot being sold, that will be referred to as a 'transaction'. In each transaction, a lot will have transferred from a seller to a buyer for money. Lots that were not sold, because they failed to reach the reserve price, are said to have been 'passed in'.

The word 'book' can mean a number of things. In this paper, 'copy' is used to refer to a book as a physical object; for example, a particular instance of the first edition of Orwell's *1984*. 'Title' is used to refer to the abstract part of the book; for example, that which is common to all copies of the first edition of *1984* and that distinguishes them collectively from all the other books in the world.

3. DATA COLLECTION

For a transaction to be included in ABAR, a catalogue of lots must have been issued before the sale event, and all the lots must have been made available for inspection before bidding started. The compilers of ABAR use the auction catalogues as the basis for the entries in each ABAR volume. The catalogue information is summarised and reorganised into a standard format. The prices are obtained from price lists that are prepared by the auction firms and released after the sales. In the auction catalogues, every lot is assigned a number. The compilers use the lot numbers to collate the prices with the catalogue entries. The compilers of ABAR acquire the catalogues and price lists directly from the auction firms, and by attending sale events. The compilers and their representatives attended many but not all of the sale events documented. Results from London sales are provided to ABAR's compilers primarily by the local subsidiary of Christie's London, Christie's Australia. (It is in the

interests of Christie's Australia to do so, as the London prices are frequently much higher than the Australian prices for the same books.) The main Australian auction houses that deal in books contribute data to ABAR. Christie's, Sotheby's, Leonard Joel, Lawsons, Kenneth Hince, Theodore Bruce, William Ellenden, Pioneer Books and Australian Book Auctions are among the most significant contributors.

All the books in ABAR were sold at ascending auctions. At auctions of this kind, there is an auctioneer who calls out higher and higher asking prices until no bidder will accept the price called. The penultimately called price is referred to as the hammer or gavel price. Most auctions in ABAR were held by commercial auction houses and closely resembled the standard fine art auction in the way they were organised and publicised. At a typical book auction, bidders register with the auction house before the sale, and are assigned a bidder number, which they display on a card or a paddle when bidding. The auctions are normally held in salerooms, galleries, hotels and public venues like town halls. They are advertised in the press and through direct mail. There are no attendance fees.

There are some exceptions to this set-up. The most notable are the 'slow auctions' held every two years at the University of New South Wales book fair. At these events, bids are posted on a board, and bidding extends over several days. To date, twelve of these slow auctions have been recorded in ABAR, and together they account for 716 transactions or 1.68 per cent of the total number of transactions. Another book fair auction in ABAR was held at the 1999 University of Queensland Alumni Book Fair (sixty-five transactions were recorded). ABAR also documents a series of twelve charity auctions at Canberra Life-line (1975-77, 1983-91). These account for 176 transactions (0.4 per cent of the total). Two other charity auctions are in ABAR: one that was held at Monash University in 1972, and one held by the MS Society in Camberwell, Victoria, in 1976. Many books are now auctioned on the internet, a sale environment very different to the standard saleroom. ABAR does not presently include results from internet auctions.

All the books in ABAR are of 'Australasian interest'. For the purposes of ABAR, this is defined as books and periodicals written by Australians, or published in Australia, or written about Australia or Australians, or about Antarctica, New Zealand or the South Pacific. The definition captures fiction books as well as non-fiction books on many different subjects, including history, biography, geology, horse breeding, anthropology and militaria. Rare books auctioned in Australia that do not satisfy the Australasian interest criterion are not included. The range of books that fall into this latter group is equally broad.

In addition to the Australasian interest requirement, the compilers of ABAR have applied a minimum price cut-off. The minimum price has risen in nominal terms over the life of the series. Currently, books must have realised at least forty-five Australian dollars in the two years covered by the particular ABAR volume to be eligible for inclusion. In the first year of ABAR, the cut-off was five dollars. The cut-off is a loose one. For example, if two different copies of a book are sold in a given year, and only one satisfies the price cut-off, the other will be included for comparative purposes.

ABAR includes some sale events in which book lots were offered along with other items, such as paintings, prints and furniture, as well as sales entirely of books. Some of the books were offered by auction firms that mostly sell livestock and farm supplies.

Since 1986, ABAR has included information from some London sale events. The London entries are not comprehensive of Australiana sold in London. They are included to provide comparative prices for key books of Australasian interest sold there. The British publication *Book Auction Records* provides a fuller compilation of price results from sales in London, elsewhere in the United Kingdom and in Continental Europe. The London entries in ABAR are not representative of the dataset as a whole. This point is taken up in section 5.

4. DATASET CONTENT

The compilers have aimed to make ABAR comprehensive of sales that fall within the inclusion criteria described in section 3. In each ABAR volume, the records are organised alphabetically, principally by author's surname. Periodicals and anonymous works are referenced by title. Some books are entered more than once—for example, under the author's name and under the name of special publishers like the Hakluyt Society, the Libraries Board of South Australia and the Golden Cockerel Press. To derive the summary statistics that follow in section 5, such repeat entries were removed.

Table 1 sets out the information provided in ABAR for each title that is listed.

Table 1: Information given for each title in ABAR

Type	Information	Description and comments
Price details	Price in Australian dollars	For London sales, the price in British pounds is given, along with an Australian dollar equivalent, calculated using the \$A/pound exchange rate applying at the sale. Prices are inclusive of buyers' premia. (Buyers' premia are discussed in section 4.)
	Book details	
	Author or authors	Periodicals are entered under title, and no author name is given
	Title	Long titles are abridged
	Date of publication	Year
	Place of publication	City; the majority of the books were published in Melbourne, Sydney or London
	Edition	eg. 'second revised and enlarged edition'
	Number of copies or sets	For small limited editions only
	Number of volumes	If more than one volume
	Condition	Any defects are recorded. This information is drawn from the description of the book in the auction catalogue.
	Other salient details of the book	eg. whether the copy has a special association with the author
	Bibliographical reference number	Only if the book is listed in one of the principal bibliographies of Australiana, eg. J. A. Ferguson's <i>Bibliography of Australia</i> , or M. K. Beddie's bibliography of books concerning James Cook.
Auction details	When the auction was held	Month, year
	The name of the auction firm that held the auction	For book fair auctions, details of the fair are given instead
	Where the auction was held	City, town or suburb
	Whether a buyer's premium was applicable, and the level of the premium applying for the particular sale	
	Type of sale	eg. estate auction; sale of books along with art, prints, furniture etc.
	Other details of the auction	eg. name of celebrity auctioneer or catalogue compiler

The following is an example of an ABAR entry:

Plunkett, John Hubert. The Australian Magistrate. Syd 1835. F2002. 91 Ap C* \$880 (minor foxing)

The reference 'F2002' (the 'Ferguson number') is to J. A. Ferguson's *Bibliography of Australia*. (The bibliography covers books published before 1901, so many of the books sold

in ABAR fall outside its scope.) The reference '91 Ap C' refers to one of the sale events listed at the start of the ABAR volume. This particular sale took place on 8 April 1991 at the premises of Christie's Australia at 1 Darling Street, South Yarra (Melbourne). The asterisk means that the sale featured a buyer's premium, which in this case was 10 per cent, implying the hammer price was \$800. The condition information, shown in parentheses, was taken from the auction catalogue and indicates that the leaves of the book were foxed. (Foxing is spotty discolouration caused by damp and chemical reactions in inferior paper.)

ABAR does not identify sellers or winning bidders, nor any details of losing bids. Sometimes, the seller or sellers are identified in the source catalogues. Other times, no details of sellers are given. (Often, book auction lots are catalogued under the uninformative heading 'The property of a gentleman'.) The identity of buyers and losing bidders can sometimes be discovered directly at the sale events themselves. But buyers can bid over the telephone, leave 'order' bids with the auctioneer, and bid through agents—booksellers often represent their clients at sale events. Accordingly, direct observation is a poor way to gather information about ultimate buyers. Some auction houses publish lists of buyers along with the sale prices. Again, the option of agency bidding makes these buyer lists unreliable.

ABAR does not give lot numbers, nor the total number of lots sold at a particular sale event. Using ABAR, it is not possible to work out how many lots were offered, as multi-book lots and non-Australiana lots are not included. Also, some items that are offered and that fit the inclusion criteria will be passed in, or withdrawn from sale after the printing of the catalogue. It is only possible to work out the total number of single book lots sold, which can be done by collating all the entries in an ABAR volume that were drawn from a particular sale event. To ascertain which items were passed in or withdrawn from sale, it is necessary to cross reference ABAR with the source catalogues.

In Australia, it is common for book auction firms to engage experts to develop price estimates. Estimates are also a feature of auctions of art and many other assets. The estimates are published before sale events in the auction catalogues, and are intended to give buyers guidance about likely sale prices. (The potential for strategic behaviour in setting the estimates is significant.) For each lot, high and low estimates are usually given. These estimates are not included in ABAR.³ Likewise, sellers' fees are sometimes documented in the source catalogues but are not given in ABAR.

³ Estimates were obtained by the present author from a selection of catalogues and matched with the prices in ABAR, for a comparative analysis that is being prepared for publication.

Some other useful pieces of information are not included because they are secret. Books sold at auction in Australia nearly always have secret reserve prices. Sellers instruct auctioneers to pass in lots that fail to reach the reserve. Other information useful to researchers, such as bidders' valuations, how many books they want when multiple copies are offered, and their attitudes to risk, is also secret in real world auctions. It is possible to make some weak inferences from ABAR about the types of buyers present at particular sale events. For example, an auction held by a firm that largely specialises in the sale of livestock is likely to attract a different (but overlapping) set of buyers compared with a high-end auction of paintings and books. Book fair auctions might attract a larger proportion of 'amateurs' than would be encountered at major auction house sales.

ABAR is not presently published in an electronic form. In order to examine the price data, the present author coded the records and combined them in a digital database.⁴ Every title in every volume was assigned a unique number. For example, record 772901 is the 2901st title in the 1977-78 volume of ABAR (*A Month in the Bush of Australia* by T. Walker, 1838, sold for \$1100 on 22 March 1978 by Christie's at the Age Gallery, Melbourne). Every sale event was also given a numeric identifier (the March 1978 Christie's sale is number 7804, as it was the fourth sale in 1978). Two copies of the same title sold in the same year by two different auction firms have the same title identifier but different auction identifiers. Where multiple editions of the same title appeared in a single ABAR volume, each edition was given a different title identifier.⁵

For each copy sold, the title identifier, the auction identifier, the name of the auction firm, the year and month of the auction and the price were entered in the database. For a subset of the sales, Ferguson numbers and buyers' premia were also entered.

Where multiple copies of a title were sold at a particular sale event, the sale order was recorded, as was the number of copies sold. For example, the second of three copies sold has '2' in the order field, and '3' in the number of copies field. Where only one copy of a book was sold at a particular sale event (this accounts for the majority of cases), '1' was recorded in the order and number of copies fields.

Some condition information was also coded. For those instances where two copies of a book were sold in a particular sale event, the database indicates whether the two copies were

⁴ Researchers wishing to use the electronic database should contact the present author via quarle@ozemail.com.au. The author is grateful to Mrs Jill Burdon for permission to make the data available to researchers.

equivalent in condition, whether they differed in condition and the better book was sold first, or whether they differed in condition and the better book was sold second.

5. DATA PROFILE

This section sets out the dimensions of ABAR that were derived using the database described in section 4. Table 2 shows the number of auction events captured by ABAR in every year of its existence. On average, there are fifteen auction events in ABAR each year. The lowest coverage was achieved in each of the inception years of the two ABAR series: 1969 and 1983. In total, 413 auction events have been documented in ABAR.

The great majority of the auctions documented in ABAR were held in Sydney or Melbourne. Auctions held in Canberra, Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth, Hobart, Queanbeyan and Launceston were also documented. Table 2 shows the number of auction firms who contributed data to ABAR in each year of the series. The number of auctioneers contributing data to ABAR has changed over time, as firms have been wound up or merged with other firms, and new firms have entered. In 1999, Pioneer Books suspended its book auctions, and a major new entrant, Australian Book Auctions, joined the firms contributing data to ABAR. Some auctioneers have chosen to stop auctioning books, in favour of fine art, furniture and other items. The table shows that between the late 1970s and the late 1990s, the segment of the book auction circuit captured by ABAR became more concentrated.

Sale events of many different sizes are documented in ABAR. The average number of lots for sale events in ABAR is one hundred lots. The largest auction documented is the 1969 sale by Theodore Bruce & Co. of the Charles Glover Library. This sale, at the Melbourne showgrounds, saw 1,856 lots of Australasian interest sold. The total number of books transacted at this sale event was somewhat larger (recall that ABAR excludes non-Australiana and multi-book lots). At the second largest sale event in ABAR, a Leonard Joel sale on 15-17 November 1994, 1,621 items of Australasian interest were sold. Figure 1 shows the distribution (in logarithms) of the number of single book lots of Australiana that were sold at each of the 413 auction events in ABAR. The figure shows that there was a large number of relatively small sale events, and a small number of large events.

⁵ The words 'edition' and 'impression' have technical meanings. A new edition of a book is created when the type is reset. A new impression is created when an additional run of books is printed using type that was already set for the previous impression.

Figure 1: Number of lots per sale event

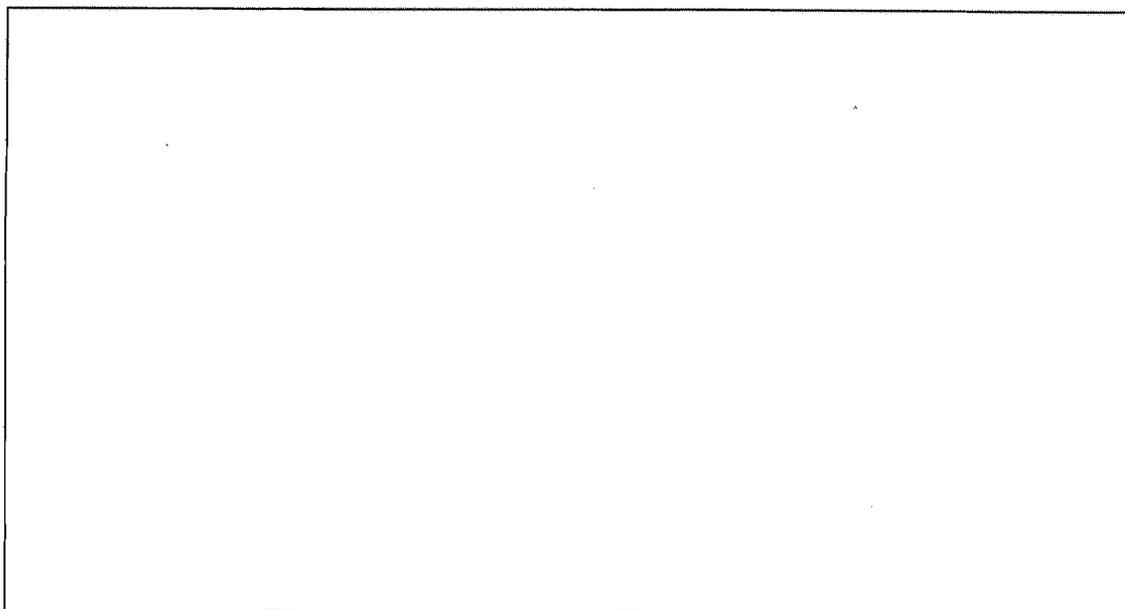


Table 2 shows the number of transactions recorded in each year of ABAR. The number of sale events and the number of transactions have fluctuated considerably from year to year. The total number of items included to date is 42,511 items. In terms of the number of books sold, the boom years for Australiana at auction were 1970 and 1994. (The Leonard Joel sale of 15-17 November 1994 accounted for more than half the 1994 transactions.) Table 2 also shows the value of each year's sales in 1999 dollars.⁶ The gross value of the transactions recorded in ABAR is \$37.2 million. The table hints that the 1980s asset price boom affected the book market. The value of 1988 transactions was more than twice the value in any other year, and the average price was highest in 1988. This indicates not only that the boom arrived, but that it arrived late.⁷

⁶ The figures were adjusted using the consumer price index figures in Australian Bureau of Statistics catalogue no. 6401.0.

⁷ Dedman (1996) documented a similar phenomenon in Australian art auctions. His 'art market index' peaked almost a year after the sharemarket crash. He also presented evidence that the art market crashed in Australia before it did overseas.

Table 2: Number of sale events, number of auction firms, number of lots, value of sales and average price for each year of ABAR

Year	Number of sale events	Number of auction firms	Number of lots sold	Total value (1999 dollars)	Average price (1999 dollars)
1969	5	4	839	225,562	268.85
1970	12	8	2,939	1,359,854	462.69
1971	11	7	1,729	627,708	363.05
1972	14	8	593	564,042	951.17
1973	18	8	1,131	678,737	600.12
1974	12	9	1,783	600,157	336.60
1975	12	8	1,639	970,441	592.09
1976	20	13	1,446	465,066	321.62
1977	15	9	2,207	771,748	349.68
1978	17	11	2,075	845,471	407.46
1983	7	4	974	354,583	364.05
1984	12	7	1,564	1,159,049	741.08
1985	10	5	1,538	1,510,659	982.22
1986	18	8	2,387	2,389,536	1001.06
1987	16	7	1,324	984,583	743.64
1988	20	8	2,245	6,694,749	2982.07
1989	19	6	2,079	2,716,782	1306.77
1990	18	8	1,376	996,912	724.50
1991	20	6	1,725	1,715,907	994.73
1992	17	7	1,404	2,780,834	1980.65
1993	13	4	1,152	789,484	685.32
1994	18	6	2,785	2,161,648	776.18
1995	15	3	941	672,240	714.39
1996	20	4	1,127	1,840,601	1633.19
1997	16	4	1,165	1,853,773	1591.22
1998	19	6	1,265	638,035	504.38
1999	19	5	1,079	839,490	778.03
1969–99	413	nm	42,511	37,207,651	875.25

nm: Not meaningful

Table 3 gives the number of transactions accounted for by each of the auction firms in ABAR. The auction firm Lawsons accounted for the largest number of transactions (9772, or 23 per cent of the total number). Most of the firms accounted for a small share of the transactions. A small number of firms accounted for a large share: more than 70 per cent of the transactions in ABAR took place at sale events held by just four auction firms—Lawsons, Christie’s Australia, Leonard Joel and Kenneth Hince. The next four largest contributors accounted for 15 per cent of the total number of transactions. The smallest fifteen firms together accounted for less than 2 per cent of the transactions. The auction firms differed somewhat in the segments of the auction market that they serviced during the sample period. Some targeted buyers of expensive books in metropolitan Melbourne and Sydney. Others primarily serviced the other end of the market.

Table 3: Number of transactions recorded for each auction firm in ABAR

Firm	Number of transactions recorded in ABAR
Lawsons	9772
Christie's Australia	8597
Leonard Joel	7660
Kenneth Hince	4338
Theodore Bruce	1970
Sotheby's Australia	1791
Geoff K. Gray	1429
Pioneer Books/Academy Enterprises	981
Pickles	942
University of NSW slow auctions	716
Hamilton	645
Christie's London	433
Australian Book Auctions	336
Angus and McNicol	297
Paul France	285
Webster F&G	283
William Ellenden	269
Steer	226
Reads	207
Rees	203
Strange	191
Sotheby's London	142
Wright	123
OTHER	675
TOTAL	42511

Note: 'Other' comprises sales by fifteen auction firms; none of these fifteen firms accounted for more than one hundred transactions in ABAR.

Distribution of prices

Table 2 showed the average prices realised over the life of ABAR, and how they have varied under the influence of occasional sales at very high prices. Table 4 shows the highest prices recorded in each year of the series. Books sold in London figure heavily in the list of highest prices, as do natural history books. Seventeen of the top prices were achieved by books about birds.

On their own, average prices and highest prices are not very informative about the overall profile of prices. They conceal the fact that the distribution of prices in ABAR is highly skewed. In each year, there are a large number of prices at or near the minimum cut-off, and a small number of high-value transactions which account for a large share of the aggregate sale value. An example of these high-value sales is the sale of John Gould's

complete works in 1997. This single lot accounted for 53 per cent of the value of 1997 sales in the database.⁸

Figure 2 shows the distribution of the logs of all the (real) prices in the dataset. The top decile of prices (4251 books) accounts for 78 per cent of the total real value of sales. The top percentile (425 books) accounts for 49 per cent of the total real value. Thirty-four items realised more than \$100,000; 475 items realised more than \$10,000 (figures in 1999 prices). A similar skewed profile is evident in every year of the dataset.

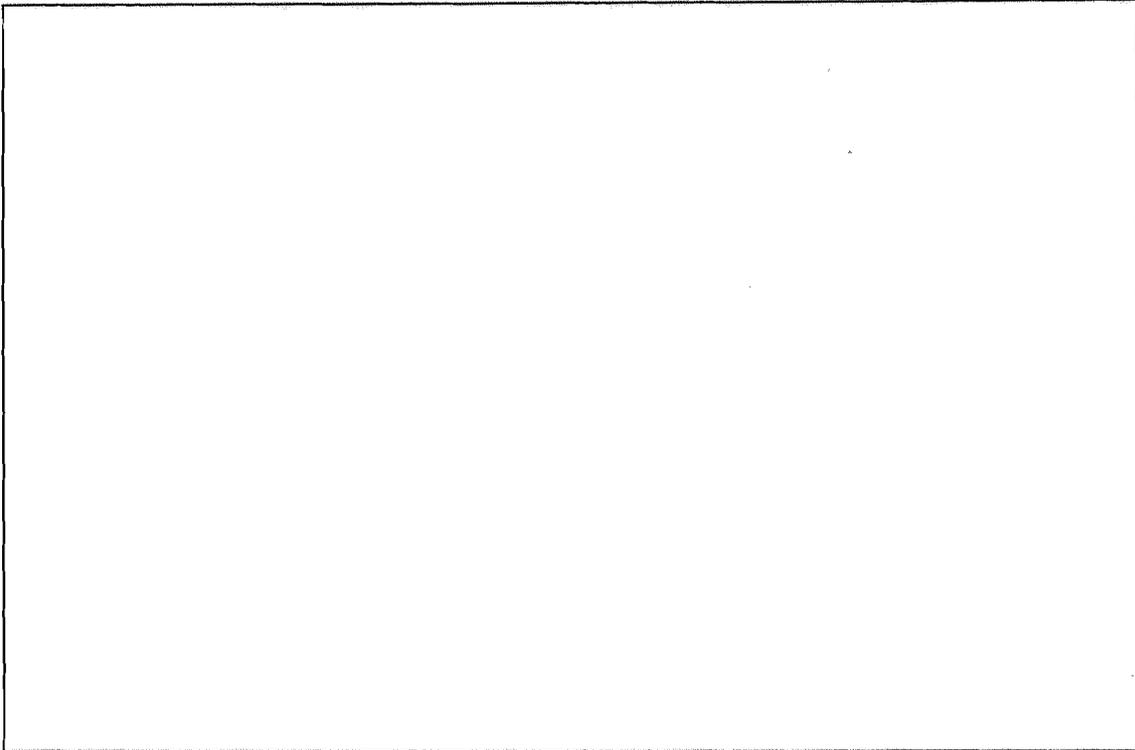
⁸ The nominal value of 1997 sales was \$1.82 million.

Table 4: Nominal highest prices realised in each year of ABAR

Year	Nominal sale price (\$)	Description	Auction house, place of sale
1969	2,000	Joseph Lycett, Views in Australia	Geoff K. Gray, Sydney
1970	16,500	John Gould, Birds of Australia	Christie's, Melbourne
1971	2,300 2,300	John Gould, Mammals of Australia Martens, Sketches in Environs of Sydney	Christie's, Sydney Leonard Joel, Melbourne
1972	13,000	John Gould & Richard Sharpe, Birds of New Guinea	Christie's, Sydney
1973	12,000	John Gould, Birds of Australia	Christie's, Sydney
1974	25,000	John Gould, Birds of Australia	Christie's, Melbourne
1975	7,500	Matthew Flinders, Coasts of Van Diemen's Land	Christie's, Launceston
1976	5,500	John Gould, Birds of Australia	Christie's, Sydney
1977	6,200	Gregory Mathews, Birds of Australia	Christie's, Melbourne
1978	30,000	John Gould, Birds of Australia	Christie's, Melbourne
1983	9,000	Art in Australia (1916-42)	William Ellenden, Sydney
1984	15,000 15,000	Joseph Lycett, Views in Australia Joseph Lycett, Views in Australia	Christie's, Sydney Sotheby's, Sydney
1985	215,000	John Gould, Birds of Australia	Kenneth Hince, Melbourne
1986	282,871* (£126,500*)	John Gould, Birds of Australia	Christie's, London
1987	80,069* (£31,900*)	John Gould, Birds of Australia	Christie's, London
1988	280,000	Joseph Banks, Florilegium	Leonard Joel, Melbourne
1989	495,000*	John Gould, Birds of Australia	Sotheby's, Melbourne
1990	110,000*	Francisco Pelsaert, Ongeluckige voyage van't schip Batavia	Sotheby's, Melbourne
1991	419,189* (£187,000*)	John Gould, Birds of Australia	Christie's, London
1992	416,772* (£165,000*)	John Lewin, Birds of New South Wales	Sotheby's, London
1993	125,249* (£56,500*)	Edward Lear, Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae, or Parrots	Christie's, London
1994	163,945* (£76,300)	Francois Levillant, Histoire naturelle des perroquets	Christie's, London
1995	149,138* (£67,500)	Francois Levillant, Histoire naturelle des perroquets	Christie's, London
1996	354,500*	John Gould, Birds of Australia	Christie's, Melbourne
1997	957,535* (£460,000)	John Gould, Complete works (43 volumes, bound by Zaehnsdorf)	Christie's, London
1998	43,700*	Richard Sharpe, Monograph of the Paradiseidae, or birds of paradise (bound by Zaehnsdorf)	Christie's, Sydney
1999	211,500*	John Gould, Birds of Australia	Christie's, Melbourne

* includes buyer's premium.

Figure 2: Logarithms of prices in 1999 values



London prices

From 1986 to 1997, results from selected London sales were included in ABAR. The following table (Table 5) gives the dates of the London sales in ABAR, and the number of lots whose prices were documented.

The London sale events were held by Christie's London and Sotheby's London. Christie's accounted for nearly all the London sale events in ABAR, and the majority of the London lots transacted. However, while only one Sotheby's sale event was included, it saw many more lots of Australasian interest sold than were transacted at any of the Christie's London events in ABAR.

The cohort of books sold in London was atypical of the books in ABAR. The London sales accounted for 1.4 per cent of the number of transactions (399 items), but 20.9 per cent of the real value of transactions. The average price realised by items sold in London was \$19,484, compared with \$699 for the books sold in Australia (figures in 1999 prices).

Table 5: Number of transactions recorded for London sale events in ABAR

Firm	Date of sale event	Number of lots in ABAR
Christie's London	April 1986	15
Christie's London	October 1986	35
Christie's London	April 1987	4
Christie's London	October 1987	20
Christie's London	April 1988	6
Christie's London	October 1988	51
Christie's London	April 1989	13
Christie's London	May 1991	23
Christie's London	October 1991	9
Christie's London	May 1992	6
Sotheby's London	June 1992	142
Christie's London	October 1992	15
Christie's London	November 1992	1
Christie's London	May 1993	9
Christie's London	November 1993	9
Christie's London	March 1994	3
Christie's London	April 1994	8
Christie's London	May 1995	6
Christie's London	October 1995	4
Christie's London	May 1996	3
Christie's London	September 1996	5
Christie's London	October 1996	1
Christie's London	April 1997	6
Christie's London	April 1997	5

Repeat sales

Many titles appear more than once in ABAR. Table 3 gives some examples. Joseph Lycett's *Views in Australia* brought the top price in two years, while John Gould's *Birds of Australia* was the most valuable title twelve times. (*Birds of Australia* also figured in the sale of Gould's complete works in 1997, which with buyer's premium realised nearly one million Australian dollars.) The majority of titles referenced in any one volume of ABAR appear in at least one other volume. One of the most frequently seen is Andrew Garran's *Picturesque Atlas of Australasia*. It appears in ABAR 237 times. Other frequently appearing titles are Norman Lindsay's *The Magic Pudding*, Arthur Phillip's *The Voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay* and *The Art of J. J. Hilder*, edited by Sydney Ure Smith and Bertram Stevens. While it is likely that a significant number of these repeat sales arose from a single copy being

sold more than once, only in a small number of cases is there sufficient information in ABAR to identify with certainty multiple sales of a particular copy. This information includes author inscriptions, condition information and details of books known to be extremely rare.

The average number of times books appear in volumes of ABAR can be calculated by dividing the number of transactions by the number of referenced titles (excluding duplicate entries). Titles in the 1969–70 volume appear in that volume on average 1.38 times. The corresponding figure for 1998–99 is very similar: titles in that volume appear on average 1.36 times.

The recurrence of titles within and across ABAR volumes means creating a panel of book prices is possible. However, large variations in condition across different copies mean users must be careful they are comparing like with like. For example, the *Picturesque Atlas* copies range from very good to very poor condition, and appear in a variety of bindings and formats, with and without the required maps. Differences of this kind will significantly influence valuations.

It often happens that multiple copies of a particular title are offered at the same sale event. There are 1744 instances in ABAR where two copies of a book were sold sequentially.⁹ In some of these pairs, the second copy was sold immediately after the first, while in others the books were separated by other lots. Not all the 1744 pairs contain copies of equivalent condition; only 1032 of the pairs are matched in this way. In addition to these ‘doubles’, there are 188 triples in ABAR, 39 quadruples, and a small number of instances in which more than four copies of a title were offered at a single sale event. Using the ABAR data, Kells (2001) examined the pattern of prices in 1028 sequential auctions of pairs of identical books and found that there was little evidence in Australian book auctions of the ‘declining price anomaly’ or ‘afternoon effect’—the tendency for prices to be lower in later rounds of sequential auctions of identical assets.

Buyers' premia

It is typical for auction firms to charge sellers a fee related to the sale price. This fee covers the cost of publicising and staging the auction, and is how most auction firms turn a profit. A relatively recent feature of Australian book auctions is an additional fee levied on the buyer and calculated as a percentage of the hammer price. Such buyers' premia first appeared in

⁹ It is likely there were other sequences in which the first or second item or both items were passed in for failing to reach the reserve price. It is not possible to say how often this happened without going through all the source catalogues, as passed in items are not documented in ABAR.

ABAR in 1985, at the Sotheby's sale of 16 April in Melbourne. The Christie's sale of 14 April 1986 is the next sale event in ABAR to feature a buyer's premium; both sales had premia of ten per cent. These fees had gained a foothold in European and American book auctions some years before this, and according to Learmount (1985) they featured in auctions in ancient times.

Buyer's premia were prohibited in New South Wales auctions until 1993, and from 1985 to 1992 all the sales in ABAR with buyers' premia took place in Melbourne or London (all the London sales in ABAR had buyers' premia). But within a decade of their first appearance in Australia, buyers' premia had become commonplace in Sydney and Melbourne, and had spread to Hobart and elsewhere. In the latest edition of ABAR (1998–99), half the sale events and 84 per cent of the transactions involved buyers' premia. A usual premium rate at the sale events in ABAR is 10 per cent. Premia of 15 per cent and higher are sometimes seen, and stepped premia (eg. 15 per cent up to \$30,000; 10 per cent thereafter) have been applied here and in Britain. The total value of buyers' premia applied in the 1998–99 sales was approximately \$164,000, or 11.1 per cent of the total real value (\$1.48 million).

Books sold at Australian auctions after 1 July 2000 attract a 10 per cent goods and services tax. The tax applies to the hammer price and the buyer's premium.

6. LIMITATIONS, AND SUPPLEMENTING THE DATA

The data in ABAR have some limitations. For a sale event to be included in ABAR, a catalogue of lots must have been issued before the sale, and a price-list circulated afterward. Sales without these documents escape the data-set. ABAR also does not document auctions where several unrelated or loosely related books were sold as a single lot. Nor does it document sales of books that are not of 'Australasian interest'. Because these books and multi-book lots are excluded, and because some types of sale are not represented in the dataset, it is possible to infer that the total value of books auctioned in Australia in 1999 was substantially more than \$840,000, and to conclude that the ABAR data are not very suitable for drawing conclusions about the aggregate level of activity in the book auction circuit.

The compilers of ABAR have taken pains to ensure that the entries are bibliographically accurate. Yet the publishers acknowledge that some bibliographic gaps and shortcomings exist in the dataset. Presently, these errors are not published and go uncorrected. It would be useful if the publishers issued lists of errors that had been identified. These lists

might be provided as an appendix to later volumes, or in the form of a supplement to the series.

A research question with practical consequences for book buyers is whether auction firms systematically understate or overstate price estimates in pre-sale materials. Auction firms' estimates are widely published in catalogues, and would be a valuable addition to the data in ABAR, so much so that the publishers are encouraged to include estimates in future editions.¹⁰ Information about passed-in items would be another worthwhile addition to the dataset. The fact that an item was passed in can be as useful as the information that it was sold at a particular price.

The ABAR data could also be supplemented with information from other types of book sale. Many booksellers distribute printed catalogues in the post. From the point of view of studying the features of different sale mechanisms, it would be worthwhile to examine how the asking prices in these catalogues differ from auction prices. (Booksellers' offers would also be useful information for buyers and sellers of books.) Bookshops and book fairs are other sources of asking prices, as are book catalogues published on the internet. The limitation of such data is that, unlike auction records, it is not possible to tell if the asking price has been accepted by a buyer.

Books are well-represented in on-line auctions, and these are another source of supplementary data. Internet auctioneers like eBay and SOLD.com.au will increasingly reduce the significance of where a particular auction is held—the location of a sale event matters less if there is no actual saleroom and anyone anywhere can join in on an equal footing. In some ways, the profusion of on-line auctions will make the job of collecting book auction data easier. For these reasons, the publishers of ABAR will face a growing case for including on-line auction results in future volumes of the series.

In Section 2, it was noted that there is a gap in ABAR from 1979 to 1982. The introduction to the first volume of the new series of ABAR (1983-85) foreshadowed filling this gap by publishing 1979-82 prices in a later issue of ABAR. This is yet to be done, but remains feasible and worthwhile.

To date, ABAR has focused overwhelmingly on book auctions in Australia. The latest volume included no overseas results. Many foreign auctions of Australiana, including important sale events in North America and Europe, have evaded the dataset. This is at odds

¹⁰ As is usually the case in auctions of paintings, book auction estimates are typically given as a price range. While the precise range is useful for researchers, publishing the mid-point of the range would be a reasonable second-best given the constraint of space in the printed ABAR volumes.

with ABAR's intention to record sales of books of 'Australasian interest' rather than just Australian book auctions. It was mentioned in section 2 that the data are useful as an indicator of the availability of different titles. However, to the extent that the database is not comprehensive of all Australiana auctioned, it is that much less reliable as a guide to availability. As a minimum, the publishers are encouraged to widen the scope to include major sale events in the United States and Continental Europe.

Finally, the publishers of ABAR are encouraged to consider electronic publication of the dataset, perhaps on the internet or via CD-ROM, to enable users to analyse the data more readily.

7. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Economists are not included in the intended audience of *Australian Book Auction Records*. Yet despite a number of limitations, the records are a useful resource for economists. The data permit the analysis of auction results across time and space, across different types of auction events, across different auction firms, and across numerous other dimensions. As the records are drawn from many different auction houses and are organised bibliographically, ABAR has considerable advantages over a large collection of auction catalogues and price lists.

The ABAR data, and other compilations of book auction results, promise to shed light on a number of auction topics, including sequential auctions, the reliability of auctioneers' price estimates, differences between auctions and other sale mechanisms, the effect on prices of buyers' premia and other institutional features, and strategic interaction between auction firms in the form of when, where and how auctions are held.

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