In Search of Frank Keating

For some time now, I have been searching for material on Frank Keating, a partner in Gibbs, Bright & Co., a merchant house based in Melbourne.

I first came across Keating in an article by Bernie Schedvin, whose surname may be familiar because her husband was a Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the University of Melbourne. Schedvin wrote about a remarkable conflict in the early 1920s between a Queensland Labor government and a group of British-registered companies that had invested heavily in the state’s pastoral industry. After winning an election outright for the first time in 1915, Labor wanted to abolish the statutory limit on how far pastoral rents could be raised. The companies regarded the proposals as a breach of contract. Labor finally forced the issue in early 1920 by swamping the Legislative Council with its own nominees. The uproar poisoned Queensland’s credit in London, making it impossible for the Government to borrow more British money to finance the State’s economic development. As chairman of the Australian Pastoral Company, Frank Keating was in the thick of it.

The episode has always fascinated me. I wondered how Keating and the other businessmen – a group Schedvin dubbed the “London pastoral lobby” – managed to organise the boycott in the first place and then persist with it until 1924, when a deal was finally struck with the State Premier, Ted Theodore. There was also the question of the episode’s wider meaning. What could it tell us about the persistence of certain kinds of British influence in Australia well into the twentieth century? Schedvin offered tantalising clues but I always felt there was much more to learn. Even within a short time of her article’s publication in 1970 an enormous variety of new sources had become available to historians, including at UMA. For a long time the Queensland pastoral rents dispute remained a side interest for me. But while pursuing other interests and projects I always kept my eyes open for useful material. Keating continued to make his appearances, asking the Secretary of State to intervene in 1918, meeting the Governor of the Bank of England during the early 1920s, and then participating in the final negotiations. Eventually I decided to write a book about Queensland. There had, in fact, been two earlier occasions in which the colony’s credit was on the verge of collapse. The story of the pastoral rents dispute would, I thought, be a fitting climax. And so my hunt for relevant records intensified. It took me from Brisbane to Edinburgh and then back to Australia, until finally it brought me to the Cultural Collections Reading Room on the third floor of the Baillieu Library. I completed my joint honours degree in History and English Literature at the University in 1981 and was then awarded a University scholarship that allowed me to study for my doctorate overseas. It was curious to find I had travelled full circle to complete the research for what I hoped would be a belated first book.

As I have already implied, Schedvin had had little to work with. In fact, her only manuscript sources were two files of correspondence in the records of an English merchant bank, Antony Gibbs & Sons, which were then kept at the Guildhall Library in London. The letters were written to Frank Keating. They survived because Keating was a partner in Gibbs, Bright & Co., an Australian merchant house in which Antony Gibbs also had a substantial interest. Keating himself was based in the latter’s offices at 22 Bishopsgate, in the heart of the City of London. The correspondence dated mostly from 1920, a critical year in the company’s struggle with Queensland Labor. One large file comprised letters from Keating’s partners in Melbourne and Sydney; the other was a fat dossier of political reports from Percy Deane, the private secretary of Australia’s Prime Minister, Billy Hughes. Both files showed that Keating and his associates were deeply involved in raising funds to support the anti-Labor political campaign in Queensland. Otherwise, they shed little light on what had actually happened in London. They covered all too brief a period and did not include any copies of Keating’s own letters. As sometimes happens, the files were an odd and isolated survival. And so, hoping to find the letters Keating had written over the entire course of the dispute, I turned to the records of Gibbs, Bright & Co. at UMA.

Research often involves more hope than expectation, and it was especially so in this instance. The Gibbs, Bright
& Co. records were taken into UMA in the early 1980s. The largest of the three accessions (1980.0115) spans 130 years, from 1840–1970, and occupies approximately 78 metres of shelf space. The brief description in the UMA database was suggestive, but there was no way of knowing whether what I wanted had survived. The real explorer was Jane Beattie, Reading Room Officer, who responded to my original email. It was she who scanned the metres of shelf-space and made notes from annotations on the sides of 800-odd archive boxes in the repository. Even then, the first selection was disappointing; the second (quite late into my research) was far more than I could have hoped for.

At this point I should say a little more about the man I was searching for. Francis Amboor Keating (1853–1929) combined brains with business acumen, a coincidence according to the writer of his obituary in The Times “which does not always accompany such a brilliant intellect” (April 18, 1929, p. 21). He was a scholarship boy at Eton and St John’s College, Oxford, and then met the merchant banker Henry Hucks Gibbs, who was friendly with his father. The Gibbs family were just starting their partnership with the Bright brothers in Melbourne, and Keating was sent to work with the colonial firm. By the end of the 1880s he was a partner and fast becoming a leading light in the local business community. He married Constance Mary Prell, one of the daughters of a German entrepreneur and property developer who pioneered the erection of large office blocks in Melbourne, including the eponymous buildings – for the most part now demolished – on Queen Street. Gibbs, Bright & Co. owned and part-occupied Number 34. Keating himself acquired a spacious town house, “Alta Vista”, at the corner of Punt Road and Tivoli Place in South Yarra. The theft of jewellery valued at around $160,000 in today’s money during a dinner party in 1893 was a brief press sensation (the butler did it, with the help of an accomplice.) By then, Keating was also dabbling in local politics and representative of that great social body Manning Clark parodied as ‘Yarraside’ in the final volume of his History—Melbourne’s commercial middle class. He was propertied, protestant, conservative and proudly British. His absences overseas on the firm’s business, however, were becoming increasingly frequent. In 1903, he re-settled permanently in England with his family, taking over the direction of Gibbs, Bright and Co.’s interests in London. It required him to stay in constant touch with his partners in Melbourne and Sydney. This was the correspondence Jane Beattie discovered for me.

The private letters of business partners, company directors and senior managers are different from those written for more general circulation. They include the essential confidential information that amplified and supplemented what was contained in more formal or routine reports, as well as much else: assessments of character and occasional gossip; news of family and friends (or children on active service); requests for personal favours; advice about stocks and shares; and exchanges of news and views about politics, politicking and subscriptions to political funds. When they survive in business archives, it is often only as one side of the correspondence or with large lacunae or, as in the case of the London material Schedvin used, as an isolated fragment. This meant the discovery of Keating’s letters was particularly exciting. The files started around 1910 and continued into

Offices of Gibbs, Bright and Co, Corner of Flinders Lane and Bond St, c1883
Sir Wilfred Russell Grimwade, photographer, 1882-1884, Reference 1975.0089, UMA/I/4271
the second half of the 1920s. The most useful runs of letters were those exchanged with the senior partners in Melbourne and Sydney, James E. Hayne (who also married one of the Prell daughters; a third married the pastoralist, politician and company director George Fairbairn) and Sir Alfred Meeks, as well as the letters written by Alfred Bright during periods when Hayne was ill or absent. But files of letters to other partners and businessmen, including C. F. Courtney, the Australian manager of Sulphide Corporation, a Broken Hill mining company for which Gibbs, Bright and Co. was the managing agent, also spilled out from the archive boxes. Many of the attachments Keating enclosed also survived, including other correspondence he had received in London.

This is only a selective summary, one snapshot of the records of a remarkable firm. Gibbs, Bright & Co. originated as a typical British merchant house and was equally typical in the ways in which it diversified. When Antony Gibbs & Sons started their partnership with the Bright brothers in 1881 the core of the business was the consignment and import of merchandise, either as agents or for their own account. But in a rapidly expanding colonial economy the temptations to branch into pastoral finance, mining promotions and, under Keating’s influence, even into a form of local merchant banking were considerable. The legacy in the early twentieth century was a mixed portfolio of shareholdings, a solid list of managing agencies – including for Sulphide Corporation, the Australian Pastoral Company and Cunard’s Commonwealth & Dominion line – and control of the Sydney-based wire goods manufacturer, John Lysaght Brothers & Co., which also spun off considerable business for the Pitt Street office. Reviewing the firm’s position at the beginning of the 1920s, the author of an unsigned report (probably Keating himself) emphasised the importance of the ‘tied’ business arising from Lysaght and the various agencies: “Through it and through the managing agencies in particular, we are brought in perpetual contact with all the main currents of Australian commerce” (1980.0115, box 803). Keating’s letters and the replies sent to him place us within those “main currents”. We enter the business, political and social worlds of a vanished commercial middle class and thus also come into contact from the inside with an Australian conservatism which had deep roots in an older British Australia.

It would be wonderful if resources could be found to thoroughly catalogue and conserve the Gibbs, Bright & Co. archive and make this rich source more accessible to researchers in many fields. In the end, I sampled only a small fraction of the material, but there was more than enough for my purposes. My plans for my book have changed; the London pastoral lobby itself will now be the centre of the story. The discovery of Keating’s correspondence was, of course, one of the most important reasons for this. I hope to discover a photograph of this energetic businessman who preferred to avoid the limelight. Then I really will be able to say that I’ve finally found Frank Keating.

Dr Bernard Attard
Lecturer, University of Leicester

Bernard Attard is a Lecturer in Economic History at the University of Leicester in the United Kingdom and is completing the research for a book about British business, Australian conservatism and informal empire in eastern Australia in the early twentieth century.

He can be contacted at bpa1@le.ac.uk