

Chapter 4.

Matters of Artistic Merit.

Barnet believed that public buildings should be not only 'suitable for their purpose and built with the most durable materials in the best manner available' but also 'an example to the public'.¹ The monumental public buildings for which he was responsible met those objectives being fine examples of richly-decorated classical architecture such as might be found in any advanced western nineteenth century city. The Sydney General Post Office was the finest of those buildings but, in the opinion of Barnet's critics, it was a building which he had spoilt because of the realistic carvings on the Pitt Street facade. The campaign waged to have those carvings removed will be now examined as an example of colonial opinion in relation to matters of artistic merit and external pressure upon the Colonial Architect. An examination is also made of public reaction to government buildings erected in provincial towns or villages; buildings which, in their classical design, stood in marked contrast to most of the neighbouring buildings and which Barnet would have regarded as being 'an example to the public'.

1. Abolition of the Office of Colonial Architect (Letter from Mr. James Barnet, late Colonial Architect, Respecting), NSW LA V&P 1891/92 (2).

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The designs prepared by Barnet for the General Post Office had been widely acclaimed and the rich carvings and decorations, prominently featured on the northern and western facades, were regarded as being fine examples of the craftsman's work;² some of the carvings on the eastern facade were condemned as being in poor taste. These represented scenes of contemporary colonial life in which people were portrayed in modern dress going about their professions or trades. The carvings upset many people and gave rise to serious doubts about Barnet's aesthetic taste and professional integrity. His spirited defence won him few friends and gave his critics new grounds for renewed attacks upon him.

The furore whipped up about the artistic merit of the carvings was an example of the cultural cringe so often found in colonial society. Rather than rely upon their own judgment, Barnet's detractors sought the approval of English art authorities. This was not surprising; New South Wales was 'a transplanted society, a new province ... of the United Kingdom, a rapidly expanding component of the British Empire' in which community leaders 'strove to recreate British society'.³

Russel Ward believed that until almost the close of the nineteenth century, 'culture (in the narrower and more formal sense of that word)', had 'tended naturally to be almost a monopoly of the more cultivated and well-to-do minority' so that 'literature, painting, and art were little more than a rather anaemic and artificial provincial reflection of their English exemplars'.⁴ Ward's opinion was shared

2. See, for example, *ISN*, 28 November 1868; *SMH*, 29 January, 2 April 1869.

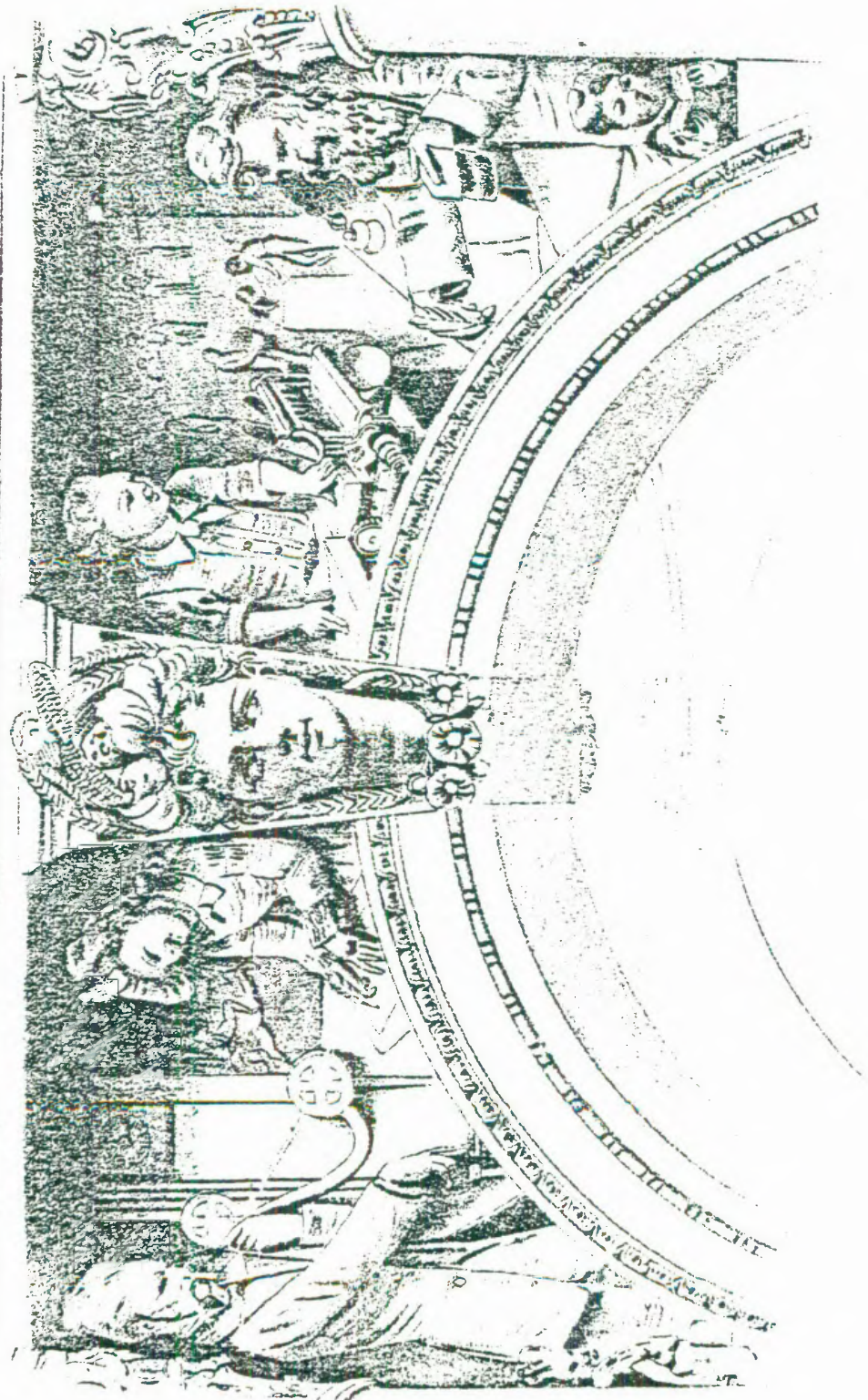
3. G. Serle, *From Deserts the Prophets Come*, Melbourne, 1973, p.19.

4. R. Ward, 'The Social Fabric' in A.L. McLeod (ed.), *The Pattern of Australian Culture*, New York, 1963, p.25.

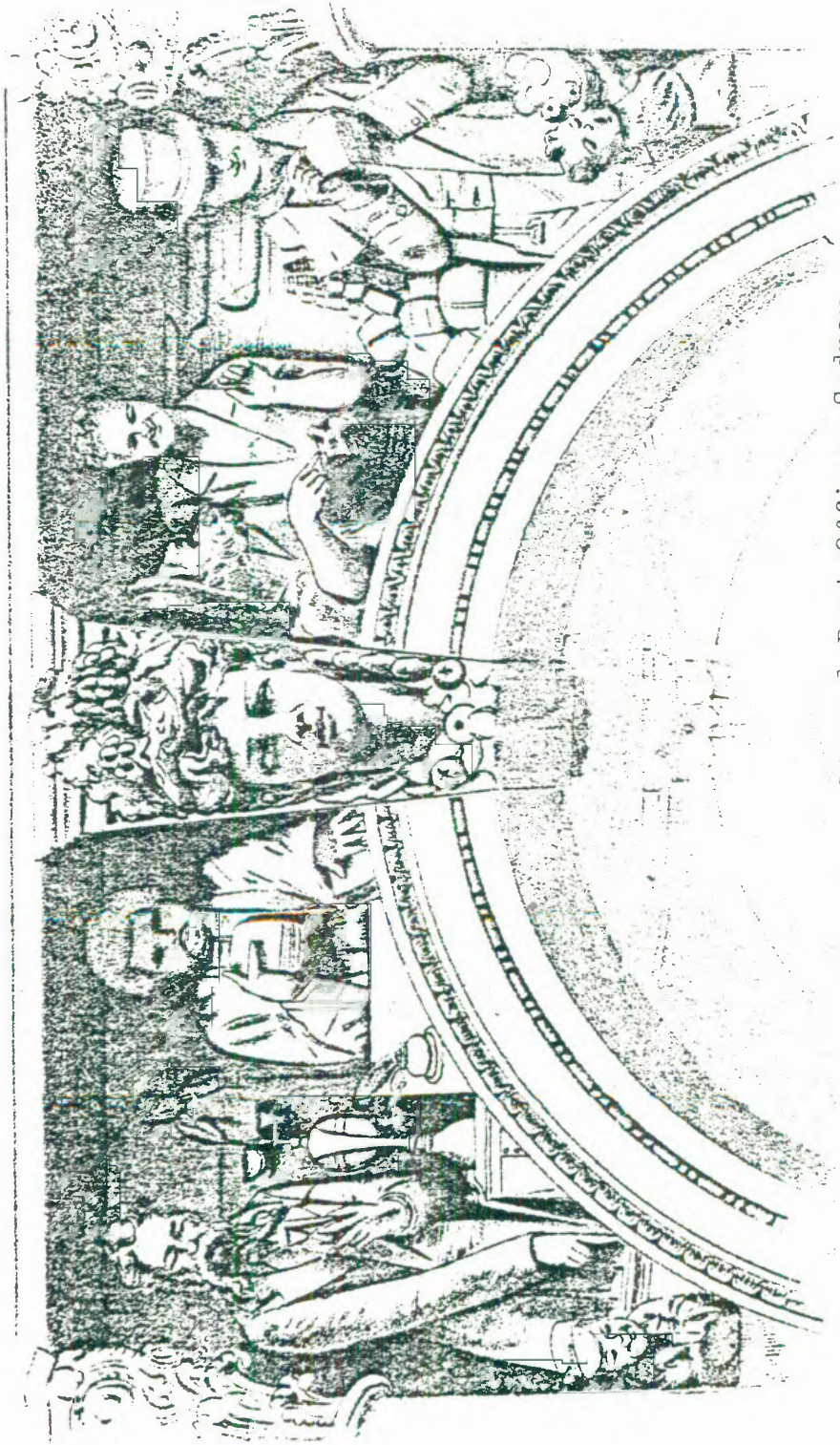
by the art critic, Robert Hughes who found that before 1855 'colonial water-colourists were merely applying English painting techniques ... to an environment which they did not "see" clearly'.⁵ These observations were applicable to that most visible of art forms, architecture; for example the migrant architects of Sydney readily accepted the convention that government buildings should be classical in style whereas Early Gothic was appropriate for churches, schools and universities.⁶ The idea that a public building might be decorated other than in classical forms was neither seriously considered nor generally accepted as being appropriate. In breaking with that tradition, Barnet divided members of the Sydney community who claimed to understand art and architecture. At the same time, he became the centre of a bitter and protracted controversy such had been experienced by few civil servants either before or since.

In February 1882 Barnet wrote to McCredie Brothers, contractors for the Pitt Street section of the General Post Office seeking an estimate of the cost of substituting *basso relievo* representations for the ornamental panels originally planned for the spandrels of the arches of the facade; carvings which would feature contemporary trades and professions.⁷ McCredie's quote of £800 was thought to be

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5. R. Hughes, *The Art of Australia*, Ringwood, revised edition, reprinted 1980, pp.36-37. See also B. Smith, *The Antipodean Manifesto*, Melbourne, 1976, pp.159-64.
 6. Serle, *op. cit.*, p.46. There were, of course, exceptions - for example, William Wardell's ES and A Bank Building (now ANZ), Collins Street, Melbourne (1882) was a fine example of Gothic Revival. For an examination of the 'battle of the styles' see S. Muthesius, *The High Victorian Movement in Architecture 1850-1870*, London, 1972, pp.160-199.
 7. Barnet to McCredie Brothers, 22 February 1882 - Post Office Carvings (Copies of Minutes, Report &c), p.2, Item 1 - NSW LA V&P 1883/84 (9).



Carvings, General Post Office, Sydney



Carvings, General Post Office, Sydney

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Mining.

reasonable and John Lackey, Secretary for Public Works, acting on Barnet's advice, approved the proposal.⁸ The sculptor, Tomaso Sani⁹ was commissioned to prepare models based on sketches drawn by Barnet and approval was given for the work to proceed. It was well under way but not yet completed by April 1883 when the carvings were criticised for their design and execution.

On 12 April in the Legislative Council, Frederick Darley¹⁰ asked whether the attention of the Government had been drawn to the carvings; what did they mean and, if unsuitable, would steps be taken to stop the work and remove that part already completed? William B. Dalley,¹¹ Attorney-General had sought Barnet's views which, 'in justice to the Colonial Architect', he placed before the House. Barnet explained that the carvings represented the purpose of the building and 'the leading classes using it'. He listed the subjects featured and stated that the style of sculpture employed was 'bas-relief, realistic in character, representing men and women in the costumes of the day'. In this manner, he hoped to provide a statement of life in colonial Sydney which could not be achieved through the application of 'allegorical or classic sculpture'.

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8. Barnet to McCredie Brothers, 8 May 1882, p.2, Item 3 - *loc. cit.*
 9. The son of an Italian farmer, Sani had arrived in Melbourne in the late 1870's. He had trained as a sculptor's pointing assistant - that is the person who did the rough carving on a work in marble. He seems to have moved to Sydney shortly after 1880 - Noel S. Hutchison, 'Sani, Tomaso', *ADB* 6.
 10. Darley had been nominated by James Martin in 1868 to the Legislative Council. Later he was appointed Chief Justice of New South Wales where his sole concern was the administration of the law - J.M. Bennett, 'Darley, Sir Frederick Matthew', *ADB* 4.
 11. Dalley was Attorney-General in the Stuart Ministry (1883-85) - Bede Nairn and Martha Rutledge, 'Dalley, William Bede', *ADB* 4.

Barnet argued that, in reaching his decision, he had been influenced by the work of the classical architect, Phidias and such notable English architects as Christopher Wren, Charles Barry and Gilbert Scott. He pointed out that in their work 'the figures [were] in the costumes of the period, and fix[ed] the date, [and illustrated] the costumes of the period, to which class of sculpture history [was] greatly indebted'. Barnet also acknowledged the artistry of Sani's work; he was 'a man of talent and cultivation, accustomed to the advanced styles of sculpture adopted at the present time'.¹²

This explanation infuriated Barnet's critics who demanded that the carvings be destroyed. Darley, for example, while seeking an explanation of their meaning was convinced that none would be forthcoming. His point was taken up by the editor of *The Echo* who wrote:

As well ask what is meant to be typified by the Jack and Gill [*sic*] work which adorns the cottage of the industrious but uncultured artisan. The one thing shown is the architect's intense desire of elaboration and profound ignorance of appropriate design and true art principles. Grotesqueness has been mistaken for grandeur. It is as though a pastrycook had been suddenly promoted to design in stone. Work that might be suitable adornment for a cake built for a children's feast has been graven upon a building that is to endure through the ages. It is difficult to understand or believe that the same brain planned

12. Barnet to Dalley, 12 April 1883 - quoted Legislative Council, Proceedings 12 April 1883, - *SMH*, 13 April 1883. These proceedings were not reported in *PD* Session, 1883, First Series, Vol.9.

those noble piles of buildings in Macquarie and Bridge streets and that mad entablature in Pitt street which reminds children of Twelfth Night and bushmen of the wildest of their delirium trances.¹³

"Advance Australia" acknowledged that Greek and Italian sculptors had faithfully reproduced contemporary scenes but he believed that there was a marked difference between the dress of those earlier times and that of nineteenth colonial society. Agreeing that fashions had degenerated, he thought that the inelegant styles of modern society had been poorly served by those 'grotesque and badly-interpreted carvings' which recorded the bad taste in contemporary dress.¹⁴ The editor of *The Echo* argued that should the carvings be allowed to remain 'posterity [would] never be troubled by doubts about the degeneracy of the races'. In the opinion of that newspaper, an appropriate record of the times would have 'idealised in stone some few of the noblest men our century of history has shown; but it [was] monstrous folly to perpetuate its excrescences'.¹⁵ Within a few days doubts about Barnett's professional integrity were being expressed. An admirer of the many buildings in Sydney for which Barnett had been responsible, believed that in those works he had been 'entitled to much praise'; approval of the carvings was interpreted as evidence of his 'utter want of taste and knowledge of art'.¹⁶

Although criticism had been levelled against the execution of the carvings, the question finally revolved around the purpose of

13. *The Echo*, 12 April 1883.

14. "Advance Australia" to editor, *SMH*, 16 April 1883.

15. *The Echo*, 13 April 1883.

16. "A Lover of Art" to editor, *Ibid.*, 16 April 1883.

architectural ornamentation. Some critics believed that there was no room for differences of opinion; ornamentation must be 'artistic and beautiful' whereas Barnett's carvings were neither artistic nor beautiful.¹⁷ Architectural ornamentation was also said to possess 'beauty of form, grace of outline, and harmony with the rest of the structure it [was] intended to adorn' whereas 'the excrescences now in course of completion' did not satisfy those criteria.¹⁸ In the opinion of self-acclaimed arbiters of good taste, the purpose of art was to 'elevate and inspire by reference to mythic figures and heroic deeds'; to suggest that manual workers, held in contempt by persons of respectability, and work, part of man's punishment for original sin, could 'elevate and inspire' was thought to be absurd.¹⁹

When the Legislative Council met on 17 April, Darley moved 'That in the opinion of this House the carvings now in course of execution ... are unsuitable to, and disfigure the building' which, he reminded the Council, was one of the colony's most important public buildings. He argued that the carvings, 'however well ... adapted to a Punch and Judy show, or something of that description, they [were] quite unsuitable to what is intended to be one of our principal buildings'. Although experiencing some difficulty in describing the carvings, he thought that, in so far as he understood Barnett's explanation, the groups of figures were 'supposed' to represent aspects of contemporary life executed in caricatures. Darley believed that the decoration of so important a building was

17. *Ibid.*, 18 April 1883.

18. "Aesthetic" to editor, *SMH*, 26 April 1883.

19. G. Sturgeon, *The Development of Australian Sculpture 1788-1975*, London, 1978, pp.32-33.

a task for which Barnet should have prepared sketches; no architect could rely solely upon his own judgment in such matters and Barnet should have sought the advice of 'a committee of gentlemen of taste and judgment in art' and submitted the designs to public competition.²⁰ Darley ignored the many fine carvings which decorated the building and which had been designed by Barnet without the benefit of the guidance of 'gentlemen of taste'; in that work he had shown that he was well able to 'rely exclusively on his own judgment in these matters'.

Dalley doubted that it was Parliament's role to determine matters of art and good taste. In the first place, he believed that 'to constitute itself a committee of the beautiful and the aesthetic, to concern itself with matters of artistic decoration, of taste, of fitness in adornment of public buildings' Parliament would be distracted from its consideration of public business. Secondly, he questioned the 'collective capacity' of the House to make a critical evaluation and suggested that the opinion of Parliament in matters of taste was of no value. He also made the point that adoption of the motion would be tantamount to an unwarranted censure of Barnet. Finally, he agreed that arrangements would be made for the carvings to be examined 'by persons competent to form an opinion of their fitness' and he assured the Council that 'if found to be wrong in point of treatment or execution' instructions would be given for their removal.

Although the majority of the Council was critical of the carvings, Barnet was not as yet the subject of their personal attack

20. NSW PD Session 1883, First Series, Vol.9, p.1538.

or censure; indeed, his work in general was praised and his professional ability acknowledged. For example, John B. Watt, 'loath to condemn' any task undertaken by Barnet, acknowledged that the carvings showed evidence of originality as 'specimens of modern society and modern costume and modern art'. He agreed that they should be examined by a group of 'competent gentlemen' so long as those gentlemen were not choiced from persons 'educated in the old school of mythology, and that the decision would be left to a plebiscite'. Finally, he made a plea that the carvings be not condemned because they were novel and not mythological.

Watt was the only member taking part in the debate who believed that judgment should be withheld until the work was completed, the scaffolding removed and an uninterrupted view of the carvings became possible. He recognised that only in this manner would it be possible to view the carvings in the perspective intended by Barnet who had designed them 'to be seen not from opposite the figures but from the ground'.²¹

Barnet found an unexpected ally in the editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* who argued that the discussion should revolve about the question of selecting a more appropriate form of decoration. The editor believed that Barnet's plans were sound in theory; they had suffered in execution. The *Herald* hoped that the project would not be abandoned but rather that the work would be executed in a finer form.²²

The art critic, de Libra examined the work in an objective and soundly reasoned letter with particular reference to the

21. NSW PD Session 1883, First Series, Vol.9, p.1539ff.

22. *SMH*, 19 April 1883.

execution of the design and the degree of the relief. At the outset, he stated that it was 'sometimes most difficult for the trained and accustomed eye to judge of unfinished work'; to attempt to so do 'while the stone - [was] still glaring from the chisel, the work encumbered with scaffolding, and the whole superstructure absent, [was] impossible'. He believed that only an experienced person could understand the difficulties to be overcome by an architect who sought the services of a craftsman competent to execute faithfully his designs. Even if a first-class tradesman were engaged, 'a single false stroke of the chisel, one faulty line of the brush and the architect's work, instead of being a thing of beauty, becomes a derision and a scorn'.

De Libra found fault with the manner of their execution rather than the subject matter of the carvings. He believed that carvings depended more for their effect upon the amount and disposition of light and shade than upon the arrangement of outlines. As he saw it, the problem was that Barnett's carvings, upon which the blazing sun beat sideways 'and high in heaven during the greater part of the day', could only be viewed from across the narrow Pitt Street. In de Libra's opinion, the carvings as executed in 'unusually bold relief' were an error of judgment. Furthermore, they overshadowed the adjoining capitals which de Libra believed should be emphasised.

Turning to Barnett's role, de Libra made the point that 'every architect must be the fittest man to carry out his own designs, down to the smallest detail'. To illustrate his point, he referred to attempts made by the Prince Consort to persuade Sir Charles Barry to line the House of Lords with mirrors. Barry's refusal had resulted in 'a loss of court favour, influence, large commission,

almost his appointment'. He reminded Barnet that he would need to stand firm against external pressures and he warned the Government that its interference could be disastrous.²³ Later, de Libra was to regret that the Government had not taken a firm stand in insisting that its decision that the carvings be removed be acted upon.²⁴

In 'Letters to the Editor' numerous correspondents, generally using a pseudonym having classical overtones, expounded their views about what constituted art and argued, not always rationally or objectively, either in support or condemnation of Barnet's carvings. The *Bulletin*, in a satirical review, described them as being 'really high-class specimens of the Chinese Art' while the sculptor was referred to as 'Signor Sani, not Signor Insani'.²⁵ Barnet, confident of his professional judgment and aware of his position as a civil servant, ignored his critics.

Although Dalley had announced in April that a Board would be appointed neither he nor Francis Wright, Secretary for Public Works seemed to be in a hurry to act. On 2 August 1883, for example, W.J. Trickett²⁶ wrote to Wright asking whether a decision had been taken regarding the 'grotesque carvings' - were they to remain or was 'something more presentable' to be substituted; had the matter been referred to the board? In a reply dated 29 August, Barnet

23. J.G. de Libra to editor, *SMH*, 20 April 1883.

24. see, for example, 'The Post Office Carvings', *ABCN*, 20 September 1890.

25. *Bulletin*, 5 May 1883.

26. Trickett, a lawyer by profession, was Postmaster-General (28 May 1883 - 1 May 1884) and Minister for Public Instruction (2 May 1884 - 6 October 1885) in the Stuart Ministry - C. Cunneen, 'Trickett, William Joseph' *ADB* 6.

reported that he was unaware of any decision having been made regarding the carvings nor had he received any instructions on the matter.²⁷

Another two months passed before Cabinet finally decided to appoint a Board 'to report to the Government on the advisability or otherwise of retaining the carvings on the Pitt-street front of the General Post Office',²⁸ and it was not until the end of October that the membership of the Board was finally settled.²⁹ Cabinet had originally decided that the Board should consist of Edward Combes, M.P.,³⁰ Frederick Du Faur,³¹ Henry Dangar,³² William Wardell

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27. Postmaster-General to Secretary for Public Works, 2 August 1883 with annotations and initialled 'JB 29 August 1883' - Post Office Carvings - p.3, Item 5, *loc. cit.*
28. Minute of Secretary for Public Works, 19 October 1883 - Post Office Carvings, p.4, Item 15, *loc. cit.*
29. Minute of Secretary for Public Works, 29 October 1883 - Post Office Carvings - p.4, Item 15, *loc. cit.*
30. Combes, engineer, pastoralist, politician and artist had studied at the Conservatoire des Arts et Metiers, Paris. In 1884, while on a return visit to Paris, he studied free hand and water colour drawing. He directed the art section of the Sydney International Exhibition (1879) and exhibited his work in London and Paris. In 1883 he joined the committee of the New South Wales Academy of Art and became President of the Art Society of New South Wales. He was a foundation trustee of the Art Gallery - Bede Nairn, 'Combes, Edward', *ADB* 3.
31. An original member of the New South Wales Academy of Art, he joined the Council in 1873 and was honorary secretary and treasurer until 1881. When the National Art Gallery was formed (1876) he was appointed a trustee acting as secretary/ treasurer until 1886. - Anon., 'Du Faur, Frederick Eccleston', *ADB* 4.
32. Dangar represented West Sydney (1874-77) and East Sydney (1880-82) in the Legislative Assembly before being appointed to the Legislative Council from 25 September 1883 - Louise T. Daley, 'Dangar, Henry Carey', *ADB* 4, and *NSW LC Journal*, Session 1883-84, Vol.36, Part 1, p.2.

and John Young. Combes and Young declined to serve - the former because of 'the multiplicity of [his] public engagements';³³ the later, having been earlier associated with the General Post Office project, believed that 'good taste' prevented him from accepting an appointment which might require him 'to criticise any portion of the building now in course of erection'.³⁴

The Board, as constituted, would not have satisfied Watt's request that its members not be persons 'educated in the old school of mythology'. Given their backgrounds, social status and professions, by definition they constituted 'a committee of gentlemen of taste and judgment in art' which would be acceptable to Darley and the conservative members of the Legislative Council as well as the many anonymous members of the public who had contributed to the debate. There seemed little likelihood that the Board would reach a conclusion which would be acceptable to Barnet.

In his handling of this matter, John Rae, Under Secretary for Public Works showed little regard for Barnet's feelings. For example, on 15 December he told Barnet that the Board wished to have photographs of the carvings and asked that he 'erect a contrivance to enable the photographer to take the necessary views from the inside of the scaffolding, which at present obstructs the process'; a more conciliatory approach might have been to seek Barnet's views on the best way of making the photographs. Barnet's reply was brusque and unbending; he wrote

33. Combes to Under Secretary for Public Works, 24 October 1883 - Post Office Carvings, p.4, Item 11, *loc. cit.*

34. Young to Under Secretary for Public Works, 24 October 1883 - Post Office Carvings, p.4, Item 10, *loc. cit.*

If I am informed of the position in which the Commission wish to have the structure, and am also furnished with the names of the gentlemen forming the Commission, I shall instruct the contractors to comply with their wishes. I think, however, it would be better to wait until the scaffolding is removed.³⁵

If his assertion that he had not been informed of the names of the members of the Board were correct, Barnet would have been justified in taking umbrage at his treatment. He was a senior civil servant both in years of service and in status, the head of the largest architectural practice in Sydney and a senior and respected member of his profession. His association with Rae had extended throughout his civil service career and he was entitled to have been treated with tact and courtesy. His wounded feelings were unlikely to be assuaged by Wright's rejection of Barnet's objections although conceding that 'he may fit the stage as low as he likes'.³⁶

Nor did the Board treat Barnet with sympathetic understanding. He had been asked to attend a meeting on 10 January 1884 when he was told, although evidence would not be taken by a shorthand writer that a digest of the proceedings would be published. Barnet had offered to supplement his oral evidence with a detailed, written description of the carvings but, because a transcript of his evidence was not sent to him for revision, he was unable to submit that

35. Under Secretary for Public Works to Colonial Architect, 15 December 1883 with minute initialled 'JB 17 Dec, 83' - Post Office Carvings, p.5, Item 18, *loc. cit.* For an example of the type of photograph to which Barnet objected, see M. Herman, *The Architecture of Victorian Sydney*, Sydney, 1956, p.43, fig. 55.

36. Du Faur to Bischoff, 18 December 1883 with minutes initialled 'JR' and 'F.A.W. 20/12/83' - Post Office Carvings, p.5, Item 19, *loc. cit.*

additional information. He was upset that questions had been asked 'in a conversational manner' and he quickly formed the opinion that the Board favoured 'ideal in opposition to realistic or natural art'. He was also critical of the Board's direction that the photographs should be taken 'nearly on a level with the carvings, and close to them, within the scaffolding'. In his opinion, this arrangement was 'manifestly unfair to the work, the sculptor, and [himself], as the carvings were not intended to be seen from such a position, but from the street level, and at varying distances'. Barnett quickly, and as later events were to prove correctly, sensed that the Board had already reached its decision and he believed that any protest by him would be ignored. In his evidence he had stated that he would welcome judgment being passed by 'competent authorities' living in Europe;³⁷ to that extent he was bound by his English training and cultural heritage.

On 6 February 1884 the Board reported its findings. At the outset, it stated that, although 'several meetings' had been held, the Board had not thought it either 'desirable or necessary' to obtain the assistance of oral evidence other than that presented by Barnett. That evidence had been re-inforced by the photographs submitted.³⁸ While commending Barnett's plan, the Board regretted that he had chosen the Post Office building for his purpose; the carvings were 'unsuited in character and design to a building distinguished throughout by much chasteness and excellent execution in other subjects selected for its ornamentation'. The design and

37. Col. Arch. to Under Secretary for Public Works, 13 May 1884 - Post Office Carvings, p.6, Item 23, *loc. cit.*

38. Report, 6 February 1884 - Post Office Carvings, p.5, Item 21, *loc. cit.*

execution of the work was condemned as being inappropriate; the carvings were in high relief consisting 'almost without exception of stiff upright figures'. In the Board's opinion, such an arrangement was contrary to the practice followed in 'all pure and good examples'; when the spandrels of arches were decorated, the subjects were either in low or half relief and the grouping of the figures followed the contours of the arches. Aware that it had been asked to inquire and report upon the carvings as 'fit subjects for the decoration of the Post Office', the Board argued that it was not expected to express an opinion on the merit of the work as an example of realistic carvings. Nevertheless, it recorded the opinion that the carvings failed to record accurately the subjects portrayed and 'approach[ed] far more to the unnatural and burelsque than they do to the real'. Believing that the stability of the building would not be endangered if the carvings were removed, the Board recommended that they 'be cut out, and that blocks of stone be inserted which can be decorated or not as may be thought desirable'.³⁹

Cabinet approved the Board's recommendation and Wright directed Barnet to give immediate effect to its decision submitting his proposals of substituted decorations to him before commencing the new work.⁴⁰ Barnet at first ignored the decision; three months later, on 13 May he submitted his comments. After outlining the manner in which the inquiry had been conducted, he set out to justify his decision to adopt 'the realistic style or natural manner'. He explained that it had not been possible 'to represent all the

39. *Ibid.*, p.6.

40. Minute of Secretary for Public Works, 14 February 1884 - Post Office Carvings, p.6, Item 22, *loc. cit.*

subjects selected by ideal, allegorical, sham classic figures, lying in unnatural attitudes, on the backs of the arches' and he had therefore adopted 'the realistic or natural manner'. In his opinion the result had been 'admirable, both as to decoration and illustrative of the customs and costumes of the present day'. He praised Sani's 'bold and dashing stroke of the chisel' which, when viewed from a distance, showed 'the artist's power of producing a masterly effect of life and reality in a few touches, and [was] evidence of fine handling'.

Barnet acknowledged the argument between persons who favoured realism in art and those who believed that classical designs were the most appropriate form of decoration for the General Post Office and he pointed out that he had employed both forms in the numerous carvings which decorated the building. He argued that in 1884 realistic art was widely applied throughout Europe and was 'especially encouraged at South Kensington', and he claimed that, in contrast to classical sculpture, realistic art was 'easily understood by the people generally'. Barnet believed that, through blind prejudice which favoured classical sculpture, the Board had harshly treated both the architect and the sculptor and it had failed to serve the people with objectivity; its conclusion could not be sustained. He made the point that the Italian Renaissance style of architecture had been adopted for the building; a style which insisted 'on progress' with 'common sense' the only guide to be observed. He rejected the Board's assertion that 'all fine and good examples' of decorations on spandrels were 'invariably in low relief' supporting his argument with evidence to be found on churches and other buildings in Rome and Venice. He asserted that, in approving the ideal heads

on the keystones, the Board had once more demonstrated its 'ineptitude ... for the task it undertook'. It seemed to him that it was more concerned about 'finish and beauty' rather than 'thought and truth so admirably displayed by the artist in the adjoining spandrels'.

Barnet then commented upon Wright's direction that he prepare a substitute plan and design. In the first place, he did not deny that the carvings might be removed but he insisted that this could be achieved only 'by very careful and somewhat costly operations' in order to prevent damage to the 'surrounding architecture'. He admitted that he would be 'unable to recommend or submit any [designs] that would be better than those now provided' and he therefore suggested that the spaces be filled with ashlar. At the same time, he argued that to remove the carvings before the Pitt Street facade was completed and the scaffolding removed would be an injustice to both Sani and himself. For that reason, he asked that implementation of the decision be deferred until photographs of the building as a whole could be taken; such photographs would establish 'the value of the carvings as decorative works, and their general effect in the architectural composition, and in detail for their artistic and representative character'. He hoped that copies of those photographs would be sent to 'the best authorities on modern decorative carving in England, Paris, Milan, and Rome' because he doubted that 'competent and independent opinions' were available in the colonies. Barnet thought that, because of his position and successful civil service career, he had a right to such consideration and made the point that his opinion carried 'more value and weight than that of

the gentlemen forming the Board'.⁴¹

Barnet's request met with a sympathetic hearing from James Norton, Postmaster-General.⁴² He believed that little was to be gained and much lost should a hasty decision be taken which would 'offend a meritorious public officer'. At the same time, he shared the opinion of the Board that the treatment of the subjects was 'little better than a parody on the dress and customs of the present day, carried out in unquestionably bad taste'. Nevertheless, he thought that, after the building was completed and the scaffolding removed, the designs would 'have a different appearance from that which they now present'. Furthermore, there was a lot of support including that from 'gentlemen of unquestionable good taste' for delay in giving effect to the Board's recommendation and in that he succeeded in winning Cabinet approval.⁴³

With that decision the matter was postponed for the time being but it did not assuage critics who continued to demand that the carvings be removed. Much of that debate, which took place both in Parliament and through the columns of the daily press, traversed the earlier arguments although the Board's report and Barnet's spirited defence were fresh grounds for attack upon him. The editor of *The Echo* believed that the Board's report generally reflected public opinion while Barnet's reaction was a natural one which might be overlooked; the carvings were 'children of his genius' which he

41. Col. Arch. to Under Secretary for Public Works, 13 May 1884 - Post Office Carvings, pp.6-7, Item 23, *loc. cit.*

42. Norton was Postmaster-General from 2 May 1884 until 6 October 1885. In the opinion of the *Daily Telegraph* he was a 'respectable incapable' - K.G. Allars, 'Norton, James', *ADB* 5.

43. Minute of Secretary for Public Works - Post Office Carvings, p.10, Item 25, *loc. cit.*

Loved 'with all their faults'.⁴⁴ The Board was thought to have apologised for the unreasonable assignment given to Sani but no such apology was necessary; if he were a competent artist the task was not beyond his ability.⁴⁵

Speaking in the adjournment debate on 15 February 1884, Angus Cameron (West Sydney) argued that adoption of the Board's recommendation would result in 'the greatest piece of vandalism which had ever occurred in this country'. In his opinion, Wardell was the only member of the Board who knew anything about the construction of buildings.⁴⁶ Barnet's critics believed that his assertion that his opinions were of 'more value and weight' than those of the members of the Board was arrogant and evidence of a misplaced self-confidence. His suggestion that European art authorities be consulted was rejected as being more likely to result in Sydney becoming the laughing stock of the world rather than to confirm his opinions.⁴⁷ Dangar was angry that Barnet had ridiculed the members of the Board; in particular, Wardell 'who was certainly his equal if not his superior'. Dangar was upset that the London *Art Journal* had criticised the carvings and that Sir Frederic Leighton, President of the Royal Academy 'had emphatically condemned them'.⁴⁸ Those opinions had

44. *The Echo*, 11 February 1884.

45. *Ibid.*, 12 February 1884.

46. NSW PD Session 1883-84, First Series, Vol.11, p.1832.

47. *Daily Telegraph*, 9 August 1884. Such an appeal had been made by Barnet's critics.

48. NSW PD Session 1885, First Series, Vol.16, pp.277-78. Leighton had studied art in both Europe and London. He settled in London in 1860 and regularly exhibited at the Royal Academy of which he was elected a royal academician in 1869. He became president in 1878 and 'filled the office with extraordinary distinction in the eyes of his fellow-countrymen and of strangers'. A member of many foreign artistic societies, he was president of the International Jury of Painters for the 1878 Paris Exhibition and a member of the Society of Painters in Watercolours (1888) - *DNB*.

been formed on the basis of photographs which because of the angle, could not possibly have been taken from street level and therefore did not show the carvings in true perspective; for that reason the judgment of such authorities was of little value although there would have been few people in Sydney prepared to reject it.⁴⁹

Barnet would have been able to read those comments in the *Sydney Morning Herald* which on 31 December 1884 published a lengthy extract from the *Art Journal*. Nevertheless, while visiting England in 1885 he had unsuccessfully attempted to meet Leighton. He met the editor of *The Builder* on a number of occasions,⁵⁰ the last being a few days before he sailed for Sydney when he collected a copy of that journal featuring a leading article which examined the Board's report and Barnet's spirited reply. It is not clear whether Barnet had provided the editor with a copy of that material; he was not likely to have supplied the photograph used to illustrate the article since it was in a form of which Barnet would have disapproved.

The editor first sought an answer to the question of the manner in which art might develop in a country 'in which the English race and the English language [had] taken root afresh, and where a new English civilization [had] sprung up and flourished mightily'. Contrary to some prophecies there had not been a new flourishing of art; American architectural fashion had imitated that of England and that of the Australian colonies seemed 'to run also mainly on

49. Photographs had been sent to Leighton by E.L. Montefiore, a foundation member of the NSW Gallery of Art and later a trustee of the National Gallery of New South Wales. Correspondence between Montefiore and Leighton is located at PWD - Special Bundles: Post Office Carvings - Demands for Removal 1882-91 (NSW AO 2/891).

50. Barnet called at the office of *The Builder* on 5 June, 22, 24 July 1885 - James Barnet, Diary 1885 - Barnet Papers (ML Mss. 726).

the old lines'. The controversy about the Post Office carvings had 'given to Colonial aesthetics a little jolt out of the orthodox path, which may have further consequences'.

The Builder acknowledged that Barnett was 'a gentleman of no ordinary attainments and ability' and the Post Office was 'a dignified and orthodox structure ... containing nothing calculated to startle any one'. The carvings, however, were thought to be inappropriate 'owing to their juxtaposition with decidedly Classic detail, with which they do not harmonise either in spirit or in line'; the adjoining architectural decoration was based on familiar classic models whereas the figures in the spandrels had been taken from 'another world of art entirely' and were 'vulgar in conception'.

Barnett's comparison with the Parthenon was 'hardly to the point'. While agreeing that the frieze of that building was realistic in form when compared with other decoration, *The Builder* insisted that there had been a blending rather than a clash of differing elements. The next question posed was whether a realistic representation of the arts or professions was the most appropriate and artistic manner in which to portray Barnett's subjects and the answer to that question was 'a higher and more intellectual form of sculptural art ... would convey, not the realistic accidents of dress and circumstance, but the abstract symbolising of the essential and central idea'. In the opinion of the editor the carvings were not a work of artistic merit but merely stone cutting.⁵¹

This assessment would have been received in Sydney with mixed feelings. On the one hand, it would be interpreted as confirmation

51. *The Builder*, 19 September 1885.

of the opinions of persons who had denounced the carvings. On the other hand, the artistic taste of the colony had been exposed and condemned. Barnet would also have had mixed reactions to the article; although his idea had been supported, its execution had been criticised. Nevertheless, he did not admit defeat. After returning from Europe in December 1885, he wrote a long minute in which he described the many overseas buildings which he had inspected and which, he believed, supported his stand. He argued that the Post Office carvings compared favourably with those works; Sani's figures were life-like, mobile and represented 'real, every-day people, living and at work, which ... he [had] accomplished with great success'. Barnet persisted in his attack upon his critics; for example, Leighton was dismissed as being 'a painter of the Ideal School [who] is credited with having tried his hand at sculpture' and whose opinions of the carvings had been formed on the basis of 'one-sided information and distorted photographs'. Barnet also believed that Leighton would support the trustees of the National Art Gallery because they had purchased some of his works. The opinions of the editor of the *Art Journal*, based on evidence similar to that submitted to Leighton, were dismissed as being 'of no value whatever'.⁵²

Angered by a report published in the *Daily Telegraph*⁵³ Norton decided that the matter should be settled once and for all time. He was sympathetic towards Barnet whom he believed had been the

52. Carvings at the General Post Office (Memorandum from the Colonial Architect), NSW LC *Journal*, 1885-86 Part 2.

53. *Daily Telegraph*, 16 April 1885.

subject of 'abuse and dictatorial things' and was tempted to do nothing further until Barnett returned to duty.⁵⁴ He did not succumb to that temptation; on 19 May he recommended to Cabinet that the carvings be removed arguing that, in the light of opinions already published, there was little likelihood that Barnett would be able to obtain 'a favourable opinion from any one, whose opinions would be likely to carry weight'. That recommendation was approved and an order was issued that the carvings be removed.⁵⁵

In spite of all that had gone before, nothing was done to remove the carvings. Once again, Darley took up the matter in the Legislative Council where the same arguments were aired and the Government was again criticised for its failure to act. A number of members who had spoken during the 1883 debate, in 1886 occupied different benches in the Council and expressed views which contradicted their earlier opinions. Dalley, for example, was no longer a member of the Government and he supported Darley's criticism of tardiness on the part of both the Government and Barnett.⁵⁶ For his part, Barnett remained obdurate. For example, on one occasion, in preparing a reply to a question on notice in which reference was made to carvings said to disfigure the General Post Office, he wrote that he was not aware of any such carvings and denied that their removal had been ordered.⁵⁷

54. Minute of James Norton, 18 April 1885 - PWD Special Bundles: Post Office Carvings, *loc. cit.*

55. Minute of James Norton to Cabinet, 19 May 1885 with annotation 'removal approved' - PWD - Special Bundles: Post Office Carvings, *loc. cit.*

56. NSW *PD* Session 1885/86, First Series, Vol.19, pp.1167-92.

57. Question on notice, 10 February 1886 with draft reply initialled 'JB' - PWD - Special Bundles: Post Office Carvings - *loc. cit.*

The matter was next raised in the Legislative Assembly on 7 May 1886. While Parkes' defended Barnet's buildings in general, he believed that the Colonial Architect would have been wiser to have ignored the controversy being unlikely to achieve anything. Parkes next attacked Leighton who, 'by the very idiosyncracies of his genius', was condemned as being unfit to judge a work of sculpture.⁵⁸ The ensuing debate was inconclusive and the campaign seeking removal of the carvings continued. It was supported very strongly by the *Daily Telegraph* and *The Echo* and in articles written by de Libra and published in the *Australasian Builders and Contractors' News*.⁵⁹ Barnet stood firm; the Secretary for Public Works was seemingly unable or unwilling to enforce the Cabinet decision.

The matter was not finally settled until 16 December 1890 when the Legislative Assembly agreed that carvings should remain 'until the authority of Parliament be obtained for the removal of the same'. The general tenor of the debate was that far too much importance had been attached to the opinions of Leighton and the *Art Journal* whereas those of many persons who had inspected the carvings *in situ* had been ignored.⁶⁰ The decision was interpreted as being an expression of colonial nationalism which had mistakenly slighted informed opinion.⁶¹

58. NSW *PD* Session 1885/86, First Series, Vol.19, p.1808.

59. See, for example, *Daily Telegraph*, 14, 15, 21 July 1890; and *ABCN*, 20 September 1890.

60. NSW *PD* Session 1890, First Series, Vol. 50, pp.6413-6422.

61. *SMH*, 17 December 1890.

During the course of that protracted debate the underlying question was one of agreeing on what constituted art and the place of realism in art; an argument which for much of the nineteenth century tormented the world's art circles. In Sydney, the argument was clouded by personal animosities as well as artistic snobbery. There was no reason why an architect should not portray scenes of contemporary society through realistic sculptures but many people believed that such decorations were inappropriate when applied to an important public building. This was a matter of opinion. What was more significant was the inability of colonial artists and critics to break with the past and to modify traditional practices and theories to a new environment. Barnett's critics, lacking confidence in their opinions, sought the backing of recognised art experts. Barnett did not suffer from such doubts; indeed, his opinions had been strengthened by his visit to Europe in 1885. He was satisfied that the carvings were works of art and he challenged his critics to test those opinions by reference to those same art critics whom, he believed, would vindicate his judgment.⁶²

iii.

In his treatment of the Post Office carvings Barnett had imposed his ideas upon some reluctant members of the community but available evidence suggests that this was an isolated instance. While art critics might disagree about the merit of certain of his

62. Carvings at the General Post Office (Memorandum from Colonial Architect), *loc. cit.*

buildings or his use of statuary on the Lands Department, there was no insistence that he prepare designs which would be appropriate to the harsh Australian climate and which might express the nationalistic aspirations of the late nineteenth colonial society. The evidence firmly established that it was Barnet who defined standards of architectural design and in so doing he provided buildings which were acceptable to the community. At the same time there is no doubt that, on occasion, a building located in a particular town, because of the influence of politicians, was more ornate than Barnet would have wished. The Carcoar Post Office was one such building.

When the Goulburn Court House was opened in 1887, the editor of the *Goulburn Evening Penny Post* condemned it as being 'a monument of folly and extravagance' reflecting the common ambition of politicians who saw the erection of 'a stately but practically useless courthouse' as being 'the sublime consummation of a life of Parliamentary mendicancy'.⁶³ Nevertheless, an earlier description of that building was fulsome in its praise of the 'excellent design', the use of costly Carrara white and Belgian black marble tiles and the beautifully decorated vestibule.⁶⁴

The Goulburn Post Office and Telegraph Station, described as a 'noble structure ... of Italian architectural design', was 'a magnificent building' which reflected the professional ability of all who had been associated with it.⁶⁵ The gaol, 'a massive pile of buildings', reflected 'great credit on the office of the designer - Mr. Barnett[*sic*] Colonial Architect, Sydney and the manner in

63. *Goulburn Evening Penny Post*, 15 October 1887.

64. *Ibid.*, 6 August 1887.

65. *Goulburn Evening Penny Post*, 12 July 1881.

which the contractor has carried out his work'.⁶⁶

The editor of the *Bathurst Times* rejected the idea that public buildings were an acknowledgement of electoral support. In his opinion, those opened in Bathurst in July 1880, 'the handsomest block of buildings which Government has yet constructed out of Sydney', were nothing more than the city deserved.⁶⁷ The new Tamworth Post Office was thought to be an 'elegant building' worthy of that thriving centre.⁶⁸ The gaol was regarded as being substantial, sound in construction and appropriate to its purpose.⁶⁹ At Cootamundra, a 'handsome gaol' had been provided⁷⁰ and that at Walgett was a 'fine and expensive building' although far too large to be used as 'a common watch-house'.⁷¹ The Trial Bay Gaol, 'a very large one', had been 'exceedingly well-constructed' with 'every convenience ... thought of'.⁷² In the opinions of all these newspaper editors, who saw themselves as reflecting community attitudes, Barnet's buildings were 'an example to the public'.

There were occasions, however, when Barnet's Office broke with tradition and responded to the demands of the local environment. The Grafton Court House and Police Station, with 'their verandahs

66. *Ibid.*, 12 June 1883.

67. *Bathurst Times*, 21 July 1880.

68. *Tamworth News*, 28 May 1886.

69. *Tamworth Observer*, 17 April 1880.

70. *Cootamundra Herald*, 20 February 1886.

71. *T&CJ.*, 22 May 1886.

72. *Ibid.*, 15 May 1886.

and wide eaves, cross ventilation and double ceilings', were evidence of his 'awareness of the importance of climate control'.⁷³ At Armidale, the verandahs of the Lands Office, supported by 'ornamental iron pillars after the Italian style' and decorated with ironwork painted in 'bronze colour',⁷⁴ shaded the offices from the bright summer sunlight. These buildings, which came towards the close of Barnett's career, were exceptions to his almost slavish adherence to tradition. On one occasion only did he produce a building which looked towards an age of technology in which wood, brick, iron and glass would displace stone as the most common forms of building materials. The design of the International Exhibition Building, which will be now examined, was both imaginative and innovative.

73. *Building Ideas*, September 1972, pp.4-5.

74. *Armidale Express*, 12 July 1887.