In December 1995 The Flannel Flower Press will celebrate fifteen years in publishing books on the restoration and conservation of old Australian houses and buildings. In this article its founder and principal author, Ian Evans, gives a personal account of the establishment and success of this independent Australian company.

The establishment of The Flannel Flower Press followed the publication by Macmillan in 1979 of my first book, Restoring Old Houses. The book was based on the practical and historical information which I had gleaned in the process of restoring an old house at Glebe, in Sydney's inner-western suburbs.

Suspecting that writing and publishing might provide the means to enable me to break away from journalism and public relations I resigned from my secure but boring position, handed in the keys to the office car and took the train home. At the age of 40, I was 'unemployed' for the first time in my working life. It was December 1980 and The Flannel Flower Press' first book The Lithgow Pottery was in the final stages of production. My business partner in this new enterprise was my wife, Annette. Between us we shared a lot of hope and enthusiasm but virtually no knowledge of publishing or marketing books.


Each of these books has been carefully written and compiled so that the information provided can be used by home owners or conservation professionals. Believing that the vast majority of heritage buildings is privately owned we have always sought to enthuse and inform their owners because there is no doubt that without their understanding and active involvement comparatively few old buildings would be conserved. The content of the books is thus a blend of conservation philosophy and practice, historic information and practical advice. Illustrations are a blend of new photographs and sketches combined with carefully selected old photographs. Old catalogues provide many of the illustrations.

The conservation architects, Clive Lucas and Ian Stapleton, have both published with us in an association which spans more than ten years. Ian and Maisy Stapleton's Australian House Styles will be published in 1996.

Because our output is small we rely on producing books which are going to be solid backlist titles. Each receives a great deal of care and thought and the emphasis is always on the quality of illustration, design and content. The use of free-lance designers ensures that the company's books are well designed but in a classical rather than fashionable manner. We print on good stock but always aim at a price which will be competitive. As a result, we have established a niche in the marketplace.

The Flannel Flower Press has successfully competed in a tough marketplace with books produced by major international and Australian publishing companies. The enterprise is perhaps unique among Australian publishers in that it is owned and operated by a writer. In this respect, The Flannel Flower Press has returned book publishing to its cottage industry origins.

There are no outside staff and as a result almost every aspect of the business, from production to warehousing, is carried out by ourselves. The imminent arrival from our printer of a truckload of books, however, usually results in a call to the local CES office for some additional help.

Our books are distributed throughout Australia by a network of freelance sales representatives, working on a commission basis. They deliver direct to book stores, write out an invoice and send a copy to us. In this way we supply some 500 book stores throughout Australia.

As well as supplying book stores, we have also been successful in establishing a market in outlets which have not been previously exploited to any significant degree. Flannel Flower Press titles can be found in selected soft furnishing stores, hardware and paint stores as well as the specialist retailers who supply the old house restoration market. In many cases, our titles are the only books in the store.
Although The Flannel Flower Press is now well established, the early years were far from easy. In common with other small businesses which have grown over the years, we now find ourselves suffering from a lack of capital. The Press was started with an initial injection of a mere $8,000. But the old finger-powered typewriter with which we began has long since been replaced by computers which are used in both writing and designing books published by the firm. Complete paged layouts are produced on computer and the resulting disks are simply handed to the printer who then strips in the associated illustrations. The traditional role of the typesetter is dispensed with in this process. The result, I believe, is books which are better written and better designed. Better writing is simply the result of the greater ease and flexibility associated with the use of a computer. Revisions and corrections are easy at every stage of the production process, right up to the point at which the disks are handed to the printer.

Although the link can never be positively established, the growth of The Flannel Flower Press and its numerous books on building conservation has been paralleled by a steady increase in the restoration of old Australian houses. I am certain that Colour Schemes for Old Australian Houses, which with more than 35,000 copies in print is one of Australia’s most popular ‘heritage’ books, has helped to change the face of suburban Australia. Traditional colour schemes from the book can be found on many old houses throughout the suburbs, towns and countryside of this nation.

The Flannel Flower Press has developed steadily over the past fifteen years. Through innovative marketing strategies, quality texts and carefully designed graphics, it has been able to create its own niche within the highly competitive popular publishing market. The work of running an independent press has been constant and hard, but certainly highly rewarding.

Ian Evans is the co-founder and director of the successful Flannel Flower Press. He has authored many books on the historic housing stock of Australia, amongst them the popular Colour Schemes for Old Australian Houses.