



Henry Aitken Wise, the foremost directory publisher of his time in New Zealand and Australia, was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, on 28 December 1835. He was the son of George Wise, a grocer, and his wife, Helen Dove. He worked in a newspaper office in Ayr before

entering the civil service in Glasgow. Shortly after this, in 1858, he emigrated to Melbourne, Australia, where he worked for the printing firm Sands and McDougall. In 1863 he moved to Dunedin, New Zealand. There he married Elizabeth Isabella Walker, on 27 February 1864; they were to have six children.

In Dunedin Wise established himself as a commercial stationer and printer, taking into partnership James Caffin in 1875. Following the example of his Melbourne employers, he quickly turned to directory making. His *Dunedin directory*, published annually from 1865 to 1872, outlasted the rival local publications. Once securely based in what was then New Zealand's most prosperous city, Wise acted with a characteristic mixture of boldness and commercial shrewdness to take in the rest of the country. He sold his printing business in 1870, presumably to concentrate on directories. Late in 1872 he published the first issue of what is loosely known as *Wise's New Zealand Post Office directory*. Like *Kelly's London Post Office directory*, on which it was modelled, Wise's was not an official publication. His use of the term 'Post Office', however, was officially sanctioned in 1881. Although at first sales were slow, the directory proved a success. Publication continued biennially or annually under the imprint 'H. Wise & Co.' for 100 years. It continued thereafter under new ownership and in an altered form.

In the 1880s Wise directed his attention across the Tasman. With the support of his four sons he took on the existing Australian competition, with unequal success. In a dozen hectic years he founded the *Victoria Post Office directory* (1884–1916), the *New South Wales Post Office directory* (1886–1950), *Wise's Queensland official directory* (1890–1949), the *Tasmanian Post Office directory* (1890–1948), and the *South Australia Post Office directory* (1895–1906) and *Western Australia Post Office directory* (1895–1949) which were combined for the first issue. As these comprehensive regional directories grew larger, more cumbersome to produce and more expensive to buy, Wise experimented with a variety of smaller, more specialised compilations. He produced many town and local district directories of varying longevity. Other publications focused on the commercial sector, such as *Buyers and sellers and traders of Australasia* (from 1903).

Wise's output was not confined to directories. His abiding interest in places as well as people saw the publication of many specially commissioned maps, issued with the directories and independently. Guidebooks were a logical development, notably the *New Zealand index*, which appeared from 1899 to 1948 and thereafter continued irregularly as the *New Zealand guide*. The full extent of Wise's monograph publications has yet to be assessed. Perhaps the best known is a set of 15 reproductions of watercolours by John Gully: *New Zealand scenery chromo-lithographed after original water-colour drawings* (1877).

Henry Wise died at Dunedin on 16 June 1922; Elizabeth Wise had predeceased him by some 12 years. The business was carried on by his sons and grandsons until 1972. Wise's regional directories were successful as business ventures because they served the immediate needs of scattered, highly mobile and rapidly growing populations on both sides of the Tasman. They continue to provide an immensely valuable resource for genealogical and historical research.

How to cite this page:

K. I. D. Maslen. 'Wise, Henry Aitken', from the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography. Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 9-Apr-2014
URL: <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/1w34/wise-henry-aitken>

