

Wood Pulp and Glue

The Uncertain Future of Ideas

Gavin Jones

We must hope that in coming years more people, here and abroad, will realize how dangerous it is to live in a culture with a limited choice of ideas and alternatives, and how essential it is to maintain a wide ranging debate. In short, to remember how important books have always been in our lives.

Andr Schiffrin, 'The Business of Books', Verso 2000

How important are books to us? Hand in hand with Starbucks and Sushi bars, bookshops have been spreading over the UK with irrepressible haste over the last decade. Our free time has never been so erudite. Or so it would seem. However, the growth in bookselling masks a deeper malaise.

Bookselling is a business, and like any other business, the smart money moves where the pickings are richest. This seems obvious; not at all controversial. There is, though, a big difference between bookselling and pretty much any other business; one that is in danger of being forgotten in the rush for immediate returns. The bestsellers of the future are rarely those of the present, and for books the future can be a long time (the Epic of Gilgamesh is nigh on three thousand years old, for example). Book production is inherently entrepreneurial, and yet the returns are not great, if you are unable to focus beyond today's sales' spreadsheet.

This article is not an argument against good business sense. On the contrary, it is an argument for the long and sustainable future books demand of us. This article is, though, an argument against the prevailing business sense—one that is willfully undermining that future in order to pursue the quick returns shareholders demand.

This article is also a reminder of the important role books have played in the development of our democracy; such as it is. In his book of 1942, "English Social History" (Penguin Classic History, 2000), G.M. Trevelyan has the ghost of Chaucer peeping "over the shoulder of Edward IV at the machine which Mister Caxton had brought from Flanders, as it stamped off... copies of the Canterbury Tales..." he "would have smiled at so pleasant a toy. He would hardly have foreseen in it a battering-ram to bring abbeys and castles crashing to the ground, a tool that would ere long re-fashion the religion and commonwealth of England."

Unlike other media, books last. Their future relevance is potentially greater than their present importance. Unlike politicians and businessmen, they do not merely give the impression of revolution. That makes them dangerous, difficult and challenging: a marketing exec's nightmare. It is vital that attempts to shackle book production to any single ideology be fought.

Bookselling is one of the UK's strong points. According to recent tabloid surveys, we are a land of bookish types, more interested in reading than pretty much anything. Britain produces more books per head of population than any other nation (a total of 3 billion pounds worth per year). Bookselling accounts for 0.35% of the country's GDP (some 2.2 billion pounds, way less than the Iraq War, but still considerable). The sector has seen year on year expansion over the past decade. More importantly, some would say, the quality and diversity of publishing in Britain is without parallel.

I qualify that last sentence, because, as we shall see, some do not view the quality of publishing as of paramount importance. More pernicious-

ly, some see the diversity of publishing as a threat. Unfortunately, these people have huge resources and sway. Worse still, they sit on the boards of many of the world's biggest publishing houses. In the next few years, their agenda will effect what we read as never before. Britain's great success story is about to hit the buffers, not for lack of skills, but as part of a wider political agenda.

In his autobiography "The Business of Books" (Verso, 2000) former head of Pantheon Books, André Schiffrin, clearly sets out the backdrop against which developments in the business of bookselling will take place. It is not an edifying prospect.

By the end of 2000, five multinational super-companies gained control of over 80% of the American book market (in Britain, the situation isn't much better, with the top six companies bossing just over 50% of market share—things always lag behind here—the trend towards merger and takeover is gathering pace). This has had a detrimental effect on the breadth of what is considered publishable. On Harper Collins' absorption into Rupert Murdoch's News International fold, books with a critical slant on China were cancelled. China is Murdoch's most important future market, and any rocking of the boat from within his own empire is not tolerated. Though there are many such instances of political interference across the publishing world, individual cases do not make a trend. If there were plenty of other outlets for new or difficult ideas, major label anti-democracy would be easily fought. However with the "big boys" increasingly acting as a cartel (unquestioned by both the Monopolies and Mergers Commission or the Attorney General), the possibilities of writers, whose work does not fit, finding an outlet are diminishing year on year.

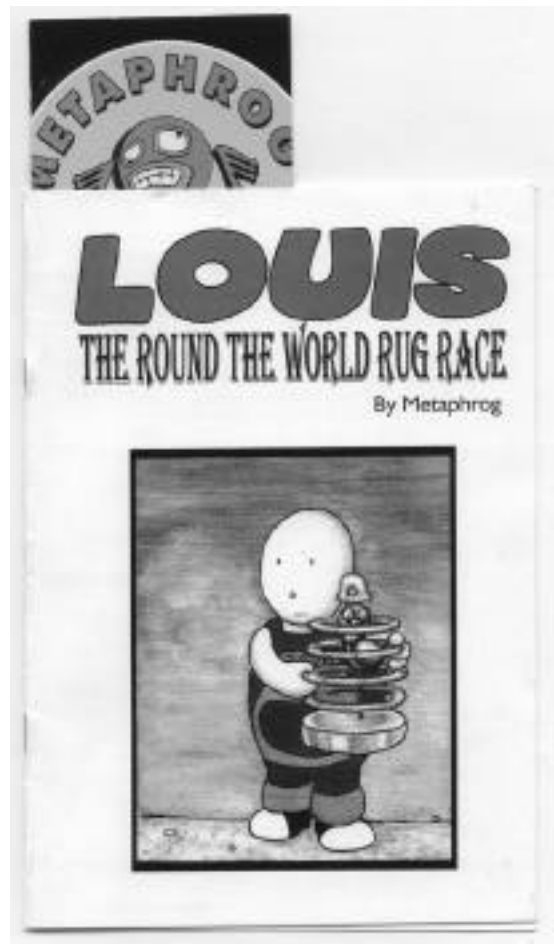
The trend away from plurality towards the middle ground is found in an analysis of UK book sales. It makes for unhappy reading. I apologise in advance—loading an article with figures is against all conventions of decency—but please bear with me on this. All figures are based on those available on the Bookseller's Association web site.

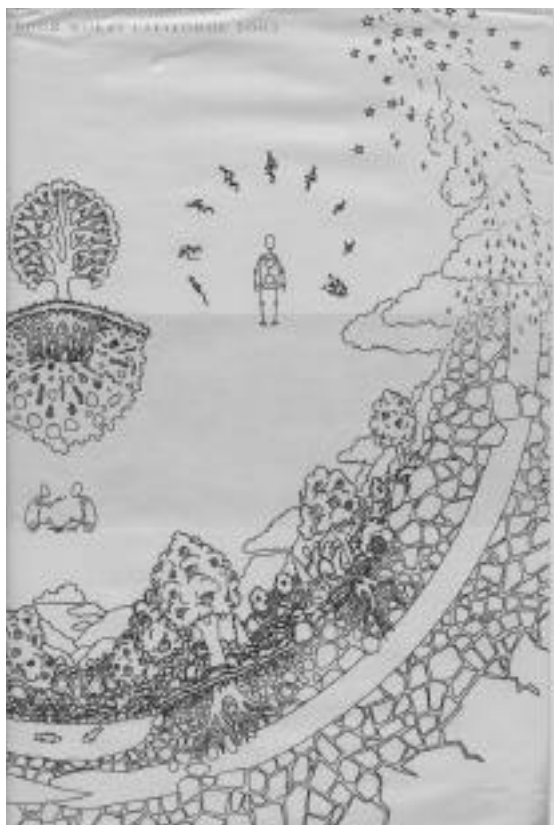
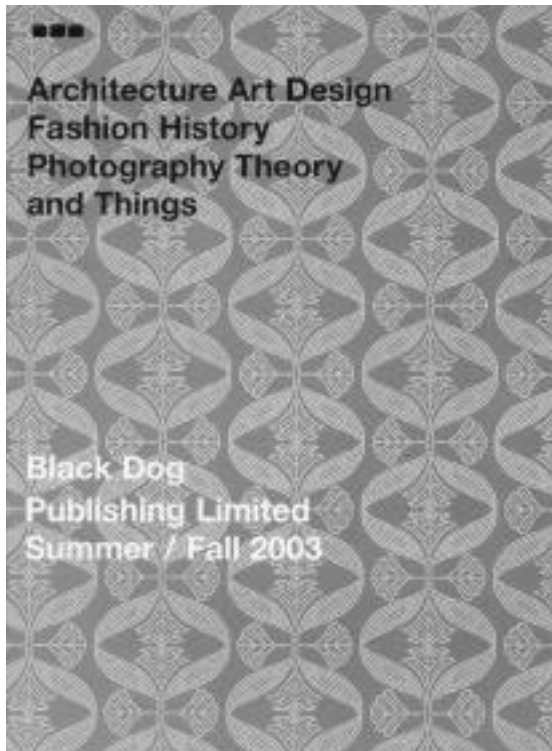
If one looks at trends in the market share of bookshops, a picture of how publishers are being squeezed into less outlets takes shape. In 1998, chain stores (Waterstone's, Borders, Ottakers etc.) accounted for 15.2% of total book sales. By 2001 that figure had risen to 18%. The projected figure for 2004 is 21.2%. That means an increase in market share of 6% in 6 years. There have also been increases in the internet (controlled, incidentally, by Borders and Barnes and Noble) and in the bargain books' sectors.

However, the tale in small book outlets—museums, galleries, independents (excluding second hand, bargain and stationary outlets)—is very different. In 1998 they accounted for 14% of book sales. By 2004 that figure will be around the 8.8% mark. A drop of 5.2%.

If we now look at the types of books being produced, a picture echoing that of bookshops is seen. This illustrates how publishers have reacted to meet the demands of the retailers. In 1990, "mass appeal" books accounted for 66.87% of produced books, and academic books for 26.46%. By 2004 mass books will have increased their share of the market by 2.14%, whilst academic books will have fallen by 3.45%.

This is bad of itself, and with current retail thinking as it is, this situation will deteriorate. Shops increasingly allocate shelf space according





to market share. In a shop the size of the Glasgow branch of *Borders* (around 40,000 square feet) this means a fall in market share of 3.45% from 26.46% would lose academic books 1,380 sq feet, a fall of 13.04% from their 1990 allocated space. A "spine out" hardback book takes up about three inches. Work it out from there—that is a lot of books no longer on the shelves.

Of course space is not the only factor in influencing the sale of books. The placement and merchandising are vital. However, the same logic runs for this as for space allocation. If an area is doing badly, under performing against other areas (or more likely against targets set by the finance "guys"), it will tend to be moved to less visible places in the shop. The signage goes AWOL, junior booksellers end up with the section (not that booksellers do much buying anymore), in short, the subject drifts into neglect. Next time you are in your local chain store, seek out these areas, see for yourself.

The consequences of shrinking and deteriorating space are obvious. Sales in that area will further dwindle, until, like "local interest" books, a bare minimum of shelf space will be allocated, a token gesture, easily dropped.

In the past few years the book market has been working under benign economic circumstances. High street spending has been increasing and overall book sales (even academic) are up. The implications of the underlying trends highlighted above will only be felt when the sector drops into recession. The twin effects of decreasing market share and decreasing overall sales will be catastrophic for many academic lists. Add into this the increasing reluctance (or inability) of museums, galleries and universities to bank role economically uncertain retail ventures and their increasing reliance on "advisors" with high street retail and main stream publishing backgrounds, and the situation is parlous. The recent collapse of *Zwemmer's*, badly run though that company was, should be a wake up call to everyone concerned with museum and gallery bookselling.

For small scale and specialist publishers and retailers alike, the future is bleak. Many will go bust. Many great books will go unpublished. The diversity of ideas will be lost and talent squandered. Some would say the market is only taking care of itself. That may well be the case, but we must remember that without specialist and small scale publishers, "Trainspotting" would probably have never seen the light of day. Not to mention most poetry, most great works of literature, the women's movement, Marxism, free-market liberalism, Matt Groening etc. etc. Trevelyan's assessment of publishing as the medium for social change cannot be overstated. However good Zadie Smith or Robert Ludlum may be, they hardly buck any trends, even within today's publishing.

What exactly will a small scale specialist bookseller face in the coming years? As publishers limit their risks, the proportion of challenging titles will be cut, or the margins will be slashed. Many publishers will be "merged" within larger corporations (reps will be withdrawn, contracts will be re-negotiated). Many companies will go under. The potential for specialization will be limited. "Uniqueness" will be a pitch very difficult to play. Small shops will be forced to compete with the chain stores on unequal terms.

This future is echoed by that facing publishers of more contentious lists. The chain store outlets will limit the space available to their books. It will become increasingly difficult to sell academic lists, and books by unknown or difficult authors. The amount of independent and freer thinking bookshops will begin to shrink. The little publishers will be forced to compete with multinational conglomerates on unequal terms, for space in unsympathetic stores.

It is unlikely the whole sector will disappear overnight: business' worth £700million or so just don't do that (maybe I should go back to the coal fields of South Wales, where I spent my teenage years, and say that!). So, in an optimistic scenario, what will remain of the academic and independent book trade?

Publishers owned by the "super-league" will retain a vestige of more difficult material. The

more popular series (for example books like the "For Beginner's" series) and reading list standards will always be worth keeping. Certain subjects will also retain their hold. Tiny publishers, who manage their costs, and focus on meeting a tight sectorial demand may find the small profits sustainable. Soccer is a good illustration of this. Since the collapse of T.V. deals in football, some of the better run little clubs have even turned in profits this year. It doesn't make for a healthy business sector, but some get by. For a percentage of well structured companies, staying small, avoiding takeover and hoping enough retail outlets hold their product, is a future of sorts, but it is precarious.

Internet publishing is—to a far lesser extent—a way to go, certainly for archival type ventures. However, the publishing of lucrative back list material on the web is something of a contentious issue. I recently found a massively influential philosophy title, in its bi-lingual entirety on the web. No mention given to the book's publisher anywhere. This may be great for some readers, especially students, but someone must be losing out.

Institutions have always supplied the academic sector with the best quality books, both in production and subject terms. This is changing, and not for the better. As the chairman of the *American Association of University Presses* recently said, in-house publishing was beginning to receive "negative support" from parent institutions. In Britain, museums and galleries are finding the economics of free access onerous to say the least. The low returns and high investment of publishing is not a model which fits in the business plans of many. The books that will be produced in the coming will either be sure fire, "cheap as chips" or funded by a shrinking pool of benefactors.

Every now and again an independent in the book world will make it. It is then that the old realities of the book business will take over. These affect publishing generally, big business or small. You can work in bookselling as a hobby for a while, but a couple of kids and a mortgage will soon put paid to any idealism you once had. A friend of mine, an editor in a respected publisher, with 15 years experience, is not even on £20,000 p.a.. Enough to just about afford student digs in London, where rents are £11,000 plus per year. That's not that bad, and everybody has to make choices in life, but as a factor in how publishing and bookselling will develop in the coming years, it is important. Such wages are an indication of how much "fat" publishers can trim before going bust. Clearly, not much.

I began the research for this article with a hang over of belligerent optimism. As someone who has spent 12 years involved in specialist bookselling, in one way, shape or form, I thought there had to be strategies for countering these appalling trends.

The trouble is, the deeper you go, the dirtier it gets. As I have said, there will always be academic publishing of one sort or another. There will always be an independent sector. What is less certain is that such companies will ever be anything more than beautiful butterflies. What is even less certain is that innovative, speculative publishing and bookselling will retain even the marginal place in our culture they currently do. How many untried ideas will go without a voice-piece in this new world? The future does not look good. Editorial decisions made by publishers are increasingly shackled by their finance departments. Stock decisions made by booksellers are increasingly shackled by their finance departments. The Indian summer of British publishing is fast coming to a chilly end. When it does, the final decisions will be made by the finance departments of liquidators and asset strippers, for whom great ideas are nothing more than wood pulp and glue.