Books and the Nation:
Aspects of Publishing and National Identity

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For many centuries publishers have responded to notions of empire. This response has been at several levels. First, the *empire*—the British Empire in particular, though not exclusively—represented both a market for publishers' goods and a subject about which it was possible to publish endlessly. The Empire provided publishers and their authors with a ready-made audience: school books for the Empire were the foundation of success for a generation of educational publishers in England—and in Scotland, where many of the great names in publishing had begun to make their fortunes. At the time of Queen Victoria's Jubilee, memorably and imaginatively depicted by Jan Morris,[1] the outpourings of a generation of publishers filled the school cupboards of the Empire.

These cupboards groaned with learning and moral rectitude in equal measure. The custodians of Empire believed that the teaching of moral precepts, presented semi-subliminally as exercises in copperplate handwriting, would serve a dual purpose.

First, such teaching would provide the Empire with a labouring class skilled in penmanship—an essential functioning part of, for example, the smooth operation of the Indian railway system. Second, these hand-writing books (Vere Foster's *Handwriting* series, published by Blackie and Son, is a good example, and was still selling into the 1970s) taught the children of Empire what was right and what was wrong: there was no room for doubt or questioning. Quiet and calm deliberation would unravel every knot—and for those rebels harbouring doubts about the inculcation of such eternal verities, there was the assurance that every cloud had a silver lining.

Publishers thrived on the Empire. Branch offices sprang up in the last years of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth: British publishing blossomed in Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, Cape Town, Lagos, Singapore, Hong Kong, Melbourne and Auckland. Indigenous publishing came later. It was left to the children and grandchildren of the copperplate handwriting practitioners to set themselves up as publishers in their own right. The ties of Empire took until the 1970s to unravel, a process memorably described by (amongst others) Alan Hill of Heinemann in his autobiography.[2]

Empire, of course, has also provided the content for novels and works of popular history in a tradition that stretches back at least as far as Gibbon and contin-

Bulletin of the Bibliographical Society of Australia & New Zealand
28: 1,2 (2004): 142-147

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ues through Churchill (whose books on the English-speaking peoples still sell) to Paul Scott (the *Raj Quartet* being arguably the greatest twentieth-century portrayal of the dying of Empire).

So it was to the Empire that British publishers—and French ones too—looked for overseas markets throughout the twentieth century. In the case of the United Kingdom, and British publishers, that preoccupation easily transferred itself to the Commonwealth. Enter the familiar names: Oxford University Press, Longman, Macmillan, Heinemann and others. Nowadays they are often described as transnationals. Transnational publishers have had a mixed press. They did dominate publishing in the colonies, sometimes at the expense of local enterprises. They did perhaps enjoy an influence in the dissemination of reading and writing habits that drew from Anglo-Saxon, and specifically English, cultural contexts rather than Kenyan or Malaysian or Jamaican ones. But they also brought books to schools and libraries and bookshops where, without their intervention, there would have been none, and they did help to create the climate where indigenous publishing could be born and survive.

Do truly independent countries need a publishing industry to call their own? Is a publishing industry a condition of nationhood? In the straightforward political sense, probably not; there are plenty of examples of countries in Africa and elsewhere in the world where books are bought and used but sourced from elsewhere—often from the capital city of the former colonial ruler. This is true of Rwanda, where the dependence on books brought into the country is absolute, and of most of the countries of what used to be called French West Africa, including Mauritania, where school books still come from Paris to Dakar or by plane to Naukchott. The "new" states of the former Soviet Union vary in the degree to which they can be said to be "book-independent." Some, like Armenia, now have a reasonably thriving publishing industry. Others, such as Tajikistan, do not—and will not for some time to come.

Certainly, the possession of a publishing industry is not a condition of *political* sovereignty—but neither is a parliament. Scotland has a parliament, but it is not a sovereign state. What it does have is a thriving, buoyant, and ambitious publishing industry. Scotland is a perfect example of a small country, sharing its language with others, nurturing its own authors, and propelling its own titles into the weekly bestseller lists of *The Bookseller*. It has in Canongate and Edinburgh University Press two of the most inventive lists in the United Kingdom. There is a strong case for arguing that Scotland's sense of itself, and its identity as a nation, depends in part on the health and well-being of those publishers in Edinburgh and in small towns across Scotland who are as innovative as any house currently active in the United Kingdom. There are, however, two caveats. One, it is quite common for first-time Scottish novelists to be published by a Scottish house

initially, and subsequently to migrate to a London publisher for their later works. Then there is the need to beware of the insidious dangers of parochialism and the perennial attractions of sentimentality, both of which have from time to time afflicted writers in Scotland when dealing with the subject of their own country and its place in the world.

The striving for national identity, and its manifestation in a popular, indigenous book culture, has been particularly evident over the last ten years in the states of the former Soviet Union. To date, only the Russian Federation itself has a book industry that can justifiably claim to reflect at least part of the spirit of Mother Russia, if such a potent essence can ever be distilled in one bottle. Other neighbouring states have a book industry of sorts, but most of the old Soviet Union exists on a diet of school textbooks and worthy if predictable hardbacks, published by the local *oblasts,* devoted to the doubtful beauties of their principal towns. But, along with an often-assertive national identity, a publishing industry is emerging in Uzbekistan, for example, and certainly in Armenia, even if it is sometimes not a publishing industry as we know it. The old state monopolies are being privatised, or turned into joint-stock companies. Some publishers have found new partners with European transnationals. So publishing and a new sense of self have developed contemporaneously. How one affects the other, and whether one depends on the other, is, in the case of the former Soviet Union at least, less easy to be sure about.

One consequence of the renewed sense of national identity in the states of the former Soviet Union has been a rejection of the Russian language in favour of the local language, and, incidentally, an associated crisis of employment for teachers of Russian who are having to undergo retraining in other subjects because of a lack of demand for their services. But herein lies one of the dilemmas of language and nationalism—and of publishing and nationhood. The smaller the catchment area, the less demand there will be for published work in the local language. Small publishers in Uzbekistan want to find markets for their books in the West, but cannot afford to undertake the necessary research. There is no demand for written Uzbek outside of Uzbekistan. And yet the pressure to stress the unique virtues of Uzbek culture is understandable and ought to be encouraged.

The issue of authors seeking a publisher in London rather than in their native country is not confined to Scotland. Similar dilemmas have been played out down the decades of the last century. When Chinua Achebe wanted to publish his first novel, *Things Fall Apart,* there was certainly not a publisher available in his native Nigeria who could have undertaken the task. So it was that the greatest novel to come out of Africa in the twentieth century found its way to Heinemann in London, then later to a printer probably at that time in Suffolk or Somerset, and then again months later, some copies at least would have found their way back by ship to Lagos. Nowadays Africa is better served. South Africa in particular has a

fully developed publishing industry producing works of fiction, reference books and school textbooks that reflect local concerns, written by local authors and edited by South Africans. Yet, if we look at the imprints on the spines of Andre Brink's novels, or J.M. Coetzee's, or indeed other South African writers, we often see familiar names—imprints such as Secker and Warburg or Jonathan Cape or other similar ones. What do these logos offer that others in Cape Town do not? In a word, marketing—the power of the large conglomerates to sell their books across the world and to distribute them to places where other, perhaps smaller companies cannot reach. Perhaps the dominance of the transnationals still does exist after all, in a different guise.

In their search to articulate their aspirations for the dissemination of the printed word, some states have turned to the formulation of a National Book Policy. Kenya is one such example. Its foundations are *sustainability* and *equity*. It is concerned primarily with educational books, since Kenya's publishing output is very heavily weighted towards school books, and always has been. This is something it has in common with most countries in Africa. It stresses sustainability, a key phrase in development regardless of product or service, because indigenous publishers and the Kenyan Government must be ready to continue to publish books of quality after the donors have departed. And it stresses equity because all children should be treated equally in the process of distribution, regardless of where they live, how many siblings they have, their standard of living, and especially whether they are male or female. It is idealistic but also tries to be practical. And it has, in effect, liberalised the book trade in Kenya, and paved the way for similar moves in neighbouring Uganda. The publishing role has been transferred from the state to the private-sector publishing industry, where it belongs. Governments ought to avoid involvement in the publishing process. Publishers know how to publish books and should be left to get on with it.

Private-sector publishers, transnationals amongst them, have carried through the transformation of the book trade in Kenya. Local publishers have also played their part. The sense of a local identity is evident in the bookshops, not least because the books on sale have been written specifically to suit the local school curriculum. There are some general ("coffee table") books in these same shops, and while they are not always published by Kenyans (though some are), at least they are published in Africa, mostly in South Africa. So in Nairobi bookshops, and also, importantly, outside the capital in the small towns of Western Kenya, people can buy books about their own country published by their fellow Kenyans. That can only help to enhance a sense of self, and of nationhood. These books are also chosen not by the central education authority in Nairobi, but by the teachers in individual schools who make their choices based on local needs. In economic terms, the system has become demand, rather than supply, driven.

The publishing industry in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries encouraged the development of publishing companies across the Empire. One of the most interesting accounts of the rise of the book trade in Australia is contained in a small volume published privately in 1963 to celebrate the seventy-fifth birthday of the house of Thomas C. Lothian of Melbourne.[3] The company still trades today as Lothian Books. This elegant family history explains a great deal about the practicalities of publishing in Australia at the beginning of the last century, and in particular about the relationships that were built up between Thomas Lothian and his principals in London and Edinburgh. Great demands were made on publishers and their agents in terms of marketing and distribution—although at that time the word "marketing" had not been coined. In 1912, for example, Lothian issued a card showing that important English and American publishing houses represented by the company numbered twenty-three in London, eleven in Edinburgh, three in Glasgow, one in Hull, three in New York, one in Boston and one in Chicago. There was also the Paris house of Pierre Lafitte, and the Dublin house of Eason and Son.

Through his membership of the Australian Literature Society, Thomas Lothian met a rising young poet called Bernard O'Dowd, and was so taken by O'Dowd's reading of his poetry that he offered to publish a volume of O'Dowd's verse. *The Silent Land* was published at Christmas 1905. Other Australian titles followed. What had begun as a hobby of Thomas Lothian's became, in effect, a truly indigenous Australian list—although interestingly enough, Lothian's father originally opposed the idea. Throughout the twentieth century, however, the mainstay of Lothian's publishing was on behalf of British principals. But the wheel has now arguably come full circle with the decision of Peter Lothian to concentrate on his own list and turn away from agency work. The development of the Lothian list is a fascinating reflection of the way in which local publishing houses have responded to notions of national identity and how their publishing has reflected that interest, sometimes reinforcing it while at other times pursuing a more strictly commercial imperative.

What then are the most significant elements in any country's book culture that will help it to articulate its sense of nationhood? First, and perhaps self-evidently, it must have a pool of *authors* at its disposal. Without authors there can be no publishing. Some aspects of authorship can be taught, but only so much: the rest has to be intuitive. Second, it must have at least the beginnings of its own *publishing industry*—perhaps only a few individuals with a vision, which is precisely how British publishing began—with the vision of a few individuals, albeit in a different, non-global and altogether more simple and innocent time. It helps to have a *local printing capacity*, but this is not essential. A separate paper would be needed to detail the difficulties many governments have in separating the functions of

printing and publishing. *Bookshops* are important, but not crucial; the reading habit in Russia, a spectacular victory for individualism, survived and even blossomed through the twentieth century without the help of an effective retail book chain. Other factors are also relevant: buying power, an effective media, the absence of censorship—these are all important. And of course a *readership*—customers, consumers, people who love books and who might occasionally even buy one. In a digital age, where paradoxically a huge proportion of the world's population has never even used a telephone, the power of the written word to persuade and to articulate aspirations should never be underestimated. Books *do* help to define a nation.

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Endnotes

[1] Jan Morris, *Pax Britannica* (London: Penguin, 1968).
[2] Alan Hill, *In Pursuit of Publishing* (London: Heinemann, 1988).
[3] *The House of Lothian is Seventy Five* (Melbourne: Lothian Publishing Company, 1963).