

Radical Bookselling records and archives

Updated 5 March 2025

1. Introduction

As regular readers will know, an important element of our project is to track down surviving records of radical bookselling. We want to rescue and preserve them by ensuring that their owners deposit them in local or national archives.

We've found this to be the hardest part of our work because few records seem to have survived. As most bookshops from the period closed down many years ago, nothing of their past remains on the premises and we are left with hoping that people who worked in the shops, and especially their founders, hung onto some of their papers and have hoarded them ever since. In a few cases that is indeed the case and we still live in hope that we will find more.

If you know of surviving records – or have some in your attic – please let us know and we will swing into action. We're also, of course, trying to locate records that have already been deposited so if you come across any next time you're ferreting around in your local County Record Office or obscure national collection, do tell us. The same applies to catalogue entries: some of the deposits in County Records that we've been told about don't appear in the online catalogues so please tell us if you find such entries.

Meanwhile, here's a list of what we've found so far. We will update the list occasionally and upload it to the research pages of the Left on the Shelf website alongside the *Newsletters* and other publications from our project.

The RBH team

2. Shop records

Bogle L'Ouverture, London

Material on the shop is included in the Eric and Jessica Huntley papers in the London Archives.

https://search.lma.gov.uk/scripts/mwimain.dll/144/LMA_OPAC/web_detail?SESSIONSEARCH&exp=refd%20LMA/4462

Frontline Books, Manchester

We've been told that there is an archive at Working Class Movement Library, Salford although this is not yet listed in their online catalogue.

Grass Roots Books, Manchester

An archive has been deposited during 2022-25 by former staff. It includes staff and customer memories, oral history, a minute book and promotional material. We expect it to be added to the catalogue during 2025.

In Other Words, Plymouth

Records deposited at The Box, Plymouth.

<https://web.plymouth.gov.uk/archivescatalogue/archivescatalogue?criteria=4492&operator=AND&accno=yes>

Lavender Menace and West & Wilde, Edinburgh

Records deposited at the National Library of Scotland. [Library Search National Library of Scotland - Lavender Menace \(nls.uk\)](#)

<https://lavendermenace.org.uk> Lavender Menace Queer Books Archive.

The collections of Edinburgh Libraries and Museums and Galleries also have an archive of various Lavender Menace and West & Wilde paraphernalia, eg the wooden signs from both shops. The image library is here

<https://www.capitalcollections.org.uk/>, and you can search on Lavender Menace and West & Wilde. This exhibition featured some of the items:

<https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2023/08/digital-project-showcases-edinburghs-lgbtq-heritage/#>

New Beacon, London

Material held in the George Padmore Institute Archives above the old shop.

<https://catalogue.georgepadmoreinstitute.org/> and search on New Beacon

News From Nowhere, Liverpool

There is an unsorted collection in the shop

Oakleaf, Milton Keynes

Records deposited at the Buckinghamshire Archives, Aylesbury

https://archives.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/records/D_335

The Other Branch, Leamington (later renamed The Independent Bookshop)

Records deposited at the Warwickshire County Record Office, Warwick

<https://archivesunlocked.warwickshire.gov.uk/calmview/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=02877>

Includes a very lively day book which drew daily comments from volunteers. Some were extracted and published in 1982 to mark the shop's 10th anniversary.

People's Bookshop, Newcastle

Bookshop Committee Minutes (1975 -1984: incomplete from 1983) and Accounts (1973-1984 with a few gaps) are in the possession of the family of Charlie Woods.

Progressive Books, Liverpool

There are some records in the Liverpool Record Office but we don't yet have a link to the catalogue entry.

3. Trade Associations

Federation of Alternative Bookshops/Federation of Radical Booksellers

11 boxes of records in the Working Class Movement Library, Manchester

<https://online-catalogue.wcml.org.uk/dispatcher.aspx?action=detail&database=ChoiceArchive&preref=110011460&parentpreref=110011460>

John Goodman amendment 15/2/25: the link above doesn't work. Search for 'bookshops' or 'bookselling' in the catalogue: <https://wcml.org.uk/the-collection/catalogue/search-the-catalogue/>

Papers of the Federation of Radical Booksellers in the Personal Papers of John La Rose at the George Padmore Institute, Finsbury Park, London

Reference: LRA/01/0295

Includes leaflet, agendas and booking information from annual conferences held by the Federation of Radical Booksellers; co-ordinators' reports which include news of fire-bombing of the Third World Centre in East London. Material sent to John La Rose from Richard Sylvester, Director of THAP (Tower Hamlets Arts Project) Books Ltd.

Contact: 020 7272 8915

info@georgepadmoreinstitute.org

4. Book Fairs

The International Book Fairs of Radical Black and Third World Books, 1970-2005

Reference: BFC

Extent: 34 boxes

The International Book Fairs of Radical Black and Third World Books took place in London between 1982 and 1995. There were 12 in total. International Book Fairs and events also took place in Manchester (1985-1991; 1995), Bradford (1985-1993), Leeds (1993; 1995) and Glasgow (1993; 1995).

The Caribbean Peoples' International Bookfair and Bookfair Festival (1987-1988; 1992) was a related event organised by the Oilfields Workers' Trade Union (OWTU) in Trinidad.

The founders were New Beacon Books, Race Today Publications and Bogle L'Ouverture Publications. They had worked together since 1975 when the Black

Parents Movement had been formed in North London, active in many campaigns, including the New Cross Massacre Action Campaign [see GB 2904 NCM]. John La Rose (New Beacon Books) and Jessica Huntley (Bogle L'Ouverture Publications) became joint directors.

Collection includes plans and materials for each fair.

<https://catalogue.georgepadmoreinstitute.org/records/BFC>

Contact: 020 7272 8915

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The 1984 International Feminist Book Fair Collection

British Library, Sound Archive

Reference: C154/1 and 2

Begun in 1984, the International Feminist Book Fairs ran biannually until 1996, taking place in London, Oslo, Montreal, Barcelona, Amsterdam and Melbourne. Recordings include organiser Carole Spedding and writers Audre Lorde and Grace Nichols.

See also *Feminist Book Fortnight: A Short History* by Eleanor Careless at <https://blogs.sussex.ac.uk/businessofwomenswords/feminist-book-fortnight/>

Contact: sound-archive@bl.uk

5. Distributors

Archive of pamphlets distributed by Scottish and Northern Book Distribution

In the *Radical Bookselling History Newsletter* issues 3 and 4¹ we published a history of the Publications Distribution Co-operative, which in 1982 split into 2 entities: PDC continued in the south and Scottish and Northern was established to serve the north of the UK with offices in Manchester and Edinburgh. In 1983 PDC closed and in 1986 Scottish and Northern also closed down. As part of that process a set of the pamphlets distributed by the co-operative was deposited with the Glasgow Polytechnic, now the Glasgow Caledonian University. The collection was initially known as the Margaret Roff collection in memory of a Scottish and Northern staff member who died in a fire while on a solidarity visit to Nicaragua in 1987.

The pamphlets are now held by the Library at Glasgow Caledonian University as the Scottish and Northern collection. The University's description of their archive is:

"The subject strengths of our archives and collections are Scottish left-wing politics, trades unions, campaign and pressure groups; Scottish social work, social policy and child welfare; Scottish public health; Scottish social enterprise; Scottish creative industries, and our contribution to the development of Scottish higher education from the late 19th century onwards (dating back to 1875 and the formation of the Glasgow

¹ <https://www.leftontheshelfbooks.co.uk/pdf/Radical-Bookselling-History-Newsletter-Issue-3-October-2021.pdf> and <https://www.leftontheshelfbooks.co.uk/pdf/Radical-Bookselling-History-Newsletter-Issue-4-May-2022.pdf>

School of Cookery). There is an overriding theme of Scottish social history and social justice present in our archives and special collections."

We hope that the Scottish and Northern Collection will continue to be used by researchers of the radical publications of the 1970s and 80s and will be interested to hear from any readers about their experience using this archive.

You can search the library catalogue [here](#).

6. Oral histories

Book Trade Lives

British Library, Sound Archive, Reference: C872

Begun in 1998 as a National Life Stories project to record the experiences of people who had worked in UK publishing and bookselling from the early 1920s to 2006. Featuring 118 in-depth interviews, the collection has been digitised as part of the British Library's Unlocking Our Sound Heritage project. It contains some interviews with booksellers, eg Sue Butterworth, co-founder of Silver Moon.

Note: as a result of the cyber-attack on the British Library in October 2023 many of its online services, including much of the sound collection, is currently unavailable. Latest information here: <https://www.bl.uk/cyber-incident/>.

Oral Histories of the Black Women's Movement: The Heart of the Race collection at Black Cultural Archives

Reference: ORAL/1/3

Gerlin Bean speaks of setting up Sabarr Bookshop, in Brixton, London, one of the UK's first Black community bookshops. Sabarr focused on Black writers, children's books and posters, sourcing books mostly from the USA but also from local publishers. The shop was based in a building that had initially been squatted by community leader and activist Olive Morris, with her friend Liz Obi in 1973. The squat became a hub of political activism and local community groups.

Gerlin Bean was a member of the Black Unity and Freedom Party (BUFP), founded in 1970, She launched the organisation's Black Women's Action Committee after attending the 1970 National Women's Liberation Conference at Oxford University: one of only two Black women present.

Contact: 020 3757 8500

info@bcaheritage.org.uk

The Co-operative Heritage Trust

Jane Watts, founder member of the York Community Bookshop: recollections

Reference: GB 1499 WTOH/4

Based at Walmgate, York, the bookshop operated as a workers' co-operative of five women and three men from the mid 1970s - mid 1980s. Watts speaks about the structure of co-op, how it was run, connections to other co-op businesses, and involvement with the Federation of Alternative Bookshops.

Contact: 01706 524920

museum@heritagetrust.coop

archive@heritagetrust.coop

www.co-operativeheritage.coop/

The Lesbian History Group

Lynn Alderson, co-founder of Sisterwrite Bookshop, Islington, London: recollections

Founded in 1984 at the height of second wave feminism after a lesbian studies conference, the Lesbian History Group continued till 1995, and was re-established in 2015 by some of its original members.

Lynn Alderson worked with Mary Coghill and Kay Stirling to set up Sisterwrite and helped run the bookshop during its first three years. Sisterwrite opened in 1978 and traded until 1993. Run as a workers' co-operative, it also had a café – Sisterbite – where women could meet, and hosted activist organizations. Sisterwrite sold a range of UK and imported lesbian books and magazines that were difficult to obtain elsewhere.

Audio recording and PDF transcript accessible via Lesbian History group website.

<https://lesbianhistorygroup.wordpress.com/talks/>

The Feminist Library

Members of Sisterwrite Collective: in conversation

<https://feministlibrary.co.uk/in-conversation-with-members-of-sisterwrite-collective/>

Members of the collective in discussion. Features Ferha Farooqui, Yvette Ellis, Sheila Auguste, Rachael Cox, Sakthi Suriyaprakasam, and Sylvia Parker.

7. Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the [Business of Women's Words](#) project at the Universities of Sussex and Cambridge for permission to use material from their publication [Feminist & Women's Publishing & Cultural Industries, A guide to archives and resources](#).

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