

RADICAL BOOKSELLING HISTORY

Newsletter

Issue 2, April 2021

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Editorial

Welcome to this second issue of the Radical Bookselling History Newsletter, with further articles on radical bookshops, this time accompanied by some wonderfully evocative graphics – not just photographs but drawings and prints as well. We're also bringing you a few of the usual shorter items, a poem from Sarah Pritchard celebrating Grass Roots and a piece about how you can best support today's radical booksellers when you buy new books online.

We have continued to be active in collecting bookshop histories and archives and encouraging others to do the same. This newsletter gives a flavour. In addition, we have done some oral history interviews to start recording the history of shops and radical bookselling initiatives, including October Books (Southampton) and The Independent Bookshop (Sheffield), Agitprop and Rising Free (London) and some people involved in community librarianship. Members of the former collectives at Wedge in Coventry and Grass Roots from Manchester are following the example of the Publications Distribution Co-op (PDC) and Sisterwrite in working on putting together their own histories. We look forward to publishing their articles in future editions of the newsletter.

Please do let us know if you are interested in being interviewed for the project or in collecting your own shop's history and archive material. Although so much has been lost, we have been very pleased to receive a duplicated newsletter produced by Grass Roots for its customers in 1981 and an article from York Free Press in 1984 in which the collective from York Community Books describe their ambitions and financial struggles and invite supporters to an open meeting. If you find other memorabilia, historical records or photographs we'd be very pleased to hear of them, and if you archive any material locally do let us know so that we can use this newsletter to direct future researchers to it.

We hope you enjoy reading RBH Newsletter 2 and please get in touch with us if you have suggestions for what to include in future issues or any other comments.

Dave Cope

Progressive Books 1975-85;
Central Books 1986-2004;
LOTS 1992 to date

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Buying new books online

With bookshops closed for much for the last year most of us have turned to online book-buying. New platforms such as hive.co.uk and bookshop.org have sprung up as rivals to big brother Amazon and some booksellers have set up their own online sales web pages. We thought it would be useful to look into how we can best support radical booksellers in this novel world. So, having consulted with the Alliance of Radical Booksellers, here goes.

The best thing you can do is to buy direct from an ARB member (www.radicalbooksellers.co.uk). Most of them have websites and many of those have a 'shop' tab or similar for online buying. The shop will send you your books in the post and some have a click & collect option for customers who can come to the shop. Where the shop doesn't have a website, ring them up to order (and pay) over the phone.

Where that's not possible, the next best option is the independent <https://uk.bookshop.org/>, (a 'B Corp'). What's crucial, however, is to choose a shop first from the 'choose a bookshop' tab. You will find many of the ARB members there. Once you've done that the shop will receive 30% of what you pay for the book (ie excluding postage & packaging). If you don't choose a shop first and instead go straight to browse, find the book and order it, 'your order will contribute to an earnings pool that will be evenly distributed among independent bookshops' - but only 10% of what you pay for the book less p&p. The order will be processed and fulfilled by Gardners, the UK's dominant wholesaler of books and related products.

Hive, another alternative to Amazon, is part of [Gardners](https://www.gardners.co.uk) and is less generous to booksellers than bookshop.org is. As an incentive to customers wanting to support independent booksellers, after you've bought something from them, you choose a bookshop and they give the shop a percentage of your money. They're rather coy about the percentage – it's up to 8%, well short of bookshop.org's 30%.

We'd be pleased to hear from our readers if you know of other ways to buy remotely from radical booksellers during lockdown – and once it's over too, because we hope that the habit will persist for those of you who for whatever reason can't visit a radical bookseller in person.

News items, old items, obits and odd bits

There's an active Association of Radical Booksellers Facebook group, with frequent mentions of shops from the past:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/radicalbooksellers>

Black History Walks, in conjunction with the Sarah Parker Remond Centre at University College London, is running a series of talks on Black Bookshops as scenes of resistance, under the title 'Books, Violence and Resistance'.

'In the first two sessions (16th and 23rd April) we will cover the incredible Walter Rodney bookshop founded by the legendary 90 year old Eric Huntley and his late wife Jessica Huntley. In session three on the 30th April ,we visit Michael La Rose of New Beacon Books, the oldest black bookshop in Britain. We end with the famous Centerprise and Emmanuel Amevor on Wednesday 5th May.'

Here's a link to the video of the first talk, by Eric Huntley: [YouTube](#). It starts 11mins 30secs into the recording.

The other three events are listed here: [Eventbrite](#)

Obituaries

People associated with radical bookselling who have died in the last few months.

Lawrence Ferlinghetti, poet, artist, activist and founder of San Francisco's famous City Lights Bookstore, www.theguardian.com

Peter Dorsey, a founder of Gay's the Word in 1979, died in February. The BBC website carried this story www.bbc.co.uk. We have been unable to find any obituaries. Please let us know if you track one down.

We have also come across this obituary of Buzz Johnson, founder of Karia Press, who died in 2014: www.theguardian.com

Please alert us to any other similar losses to the world of radical bookselling.

Collets

Very little has been written about Collets. The best source is John Saville's entry on Eva Collet Reckitt in the Dictionary of Labour Biography Vol. 9. If anyone can add to this short bibliography, we would be grateful.

We are also keen to trace anybody who worked in any of the Collets' shops or offices.



Collets: Golden Jubilee, 50 Years 1934-1984, 36pp. Mostly famous names choosing favourite titles, and supporting adverts

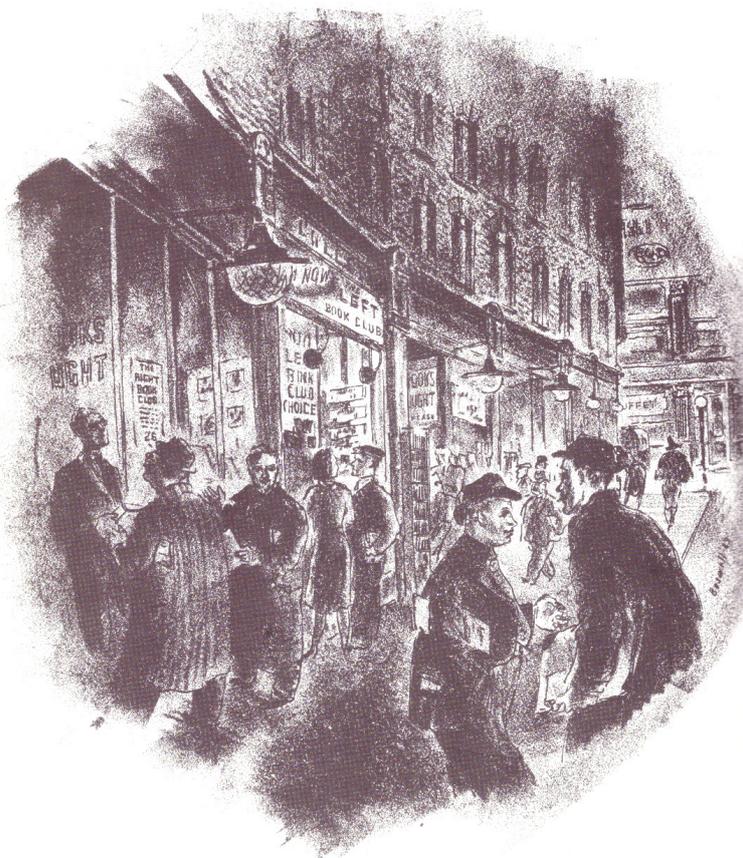
Eva Reckitt – Obituary in *Labour Research*, November 1976

Dave Cope, *Central Books: A Brief History 1939-1999* (Central Books, 1999)

Peter Lennon, *Guardian* 27 August 1993 (G2). Two pages on closure of 66 Charing Cross Road.

R. E. S. [Raphael Elkan Samuel], *Eva Reckitt* – Obituary in *History Workshop* 2, Autumn 1976 (plus letters in No.3, Spring 1977)

John Saville, *Reckitt, Eva Collet* in *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, vol 9 (Macmillan, 1993)



James Boswell (1906-1971)

The Street, 1939

Lithograph

James Boswell (1906-1971)

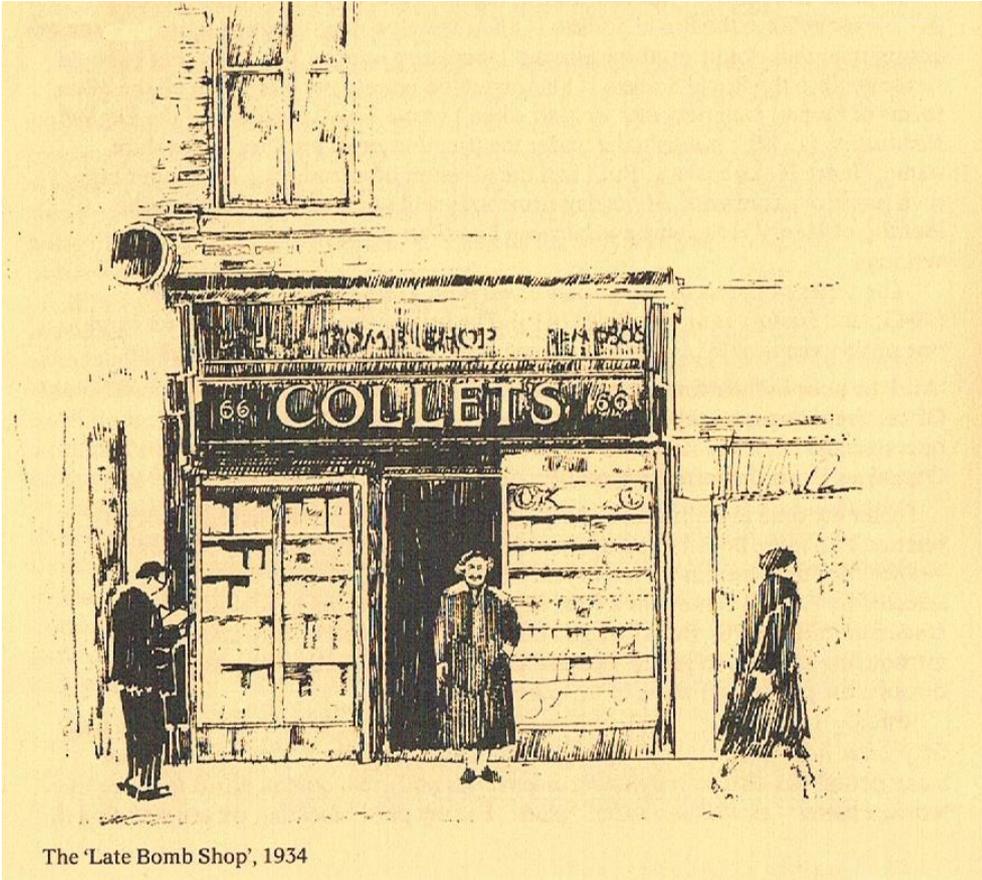
Untitled, 1938-9

Pen sketch on paper

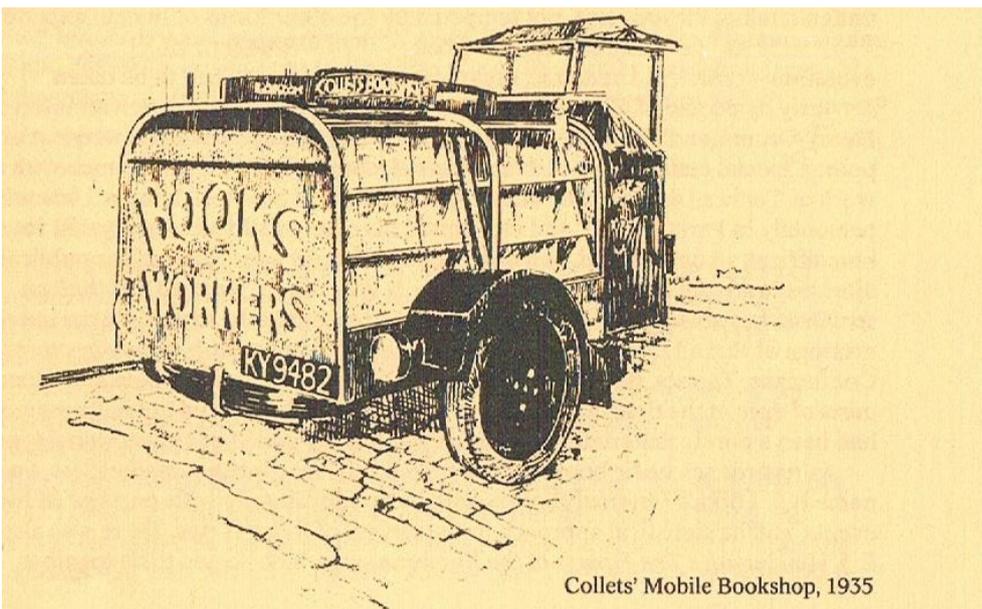
Reproduced by kind
permission of the James
Boswell estate



*From Collets: Golden Jubilee,
50 Years 1934-1984*



The 'Late Bomb Shop', 1934



Collets' Mobile Bookshop, 1935

Days of Hope

Martin Spence

Days of Hope bookshop in Newcastle upon Tyne was part of an upsurge in 'radical' publishing and bookselling in the 1970s and 1980s. This upsurge had several distinct currents: alternative, environmental, socialist feminist, radical feminist, anarchist, Marxist. Within this mix, *Days of Hope* was always clear about its own identity: it was a *socialist* bookshop, and it emerged from a socialist project.

That project was Tyneside Socialist Centre. The Socialist Centre was established around 1975 partly as a network and forum for the left on Tyneside; but also with an ambition to acquire and run a city-centre building, a 'People's Palace', to act as a meeting place, organising focus, and social centre for the left and labour movement. Leading Socialist Centre members included Bob Clay, trade union convenor on Sunderland's buses; Andy McSmith, journalist on the *Newcastle Journal*; Jim Murray, trade union convenor at Vickers Elswick engineering works; and Hilary Wainwright, an academic at Durham University.

Inevitably some held themselves aloof from this project, notably the Communist Party of Great Britain which had its own bookshop and premises in Newcastle. But participants included many on the Labour Left; trade union activists; socialist feminists; and some Trotskyists including members of the International Marxist Group (IMG) and Socialist Workers Party (SWP). At any time this would have been a sufficiently broad constituency to generate fierce debate and disagreement. But this was the period of minority Labour Government, with Healey's infamous resort to the IMF, campaigns against the first welfare spending cuts, and a rising tide of industrial disputes culminating in the so-called 'Winter of Discontent'. So there was perhaps an added edge to the left's debates in the late 1970s.

The Socialist Centre took out a lease on a shop in an area called Cradlewell, in the prosperous suburb of Jesmond, about a mile outside Newcastle city centre. In addition to the shop space this building had a large back-room suitable for meetings, and for a while this became the de facto Socialist Centre, although it was never envisaged as realising the full ambition. In the shop space a socialist bookshop was established, Cradlewell Books. Despite this suburban location, the Cradlewell building became sufficiently well-known as a left-wing haunt to attract the attention of the local fascists, and it suffered a firebomb attack. Some stock was damaged but no-one was hurt.

In 1978 a small shop became available at a more central site in Westgate Road, just outside Newcastle's main shopping area. It had been the

booking-office of the former Tyne Theatre, later a Stoll Picture House, now being refurbished as the New Tyne Theatre. There was room for a small bookshop, but no meeting space.

This provoked a new round of furious discussions. Some argued that a city-centre bookshop could fly the flag for the Socialist Centre and serve as a step towards the ultimate goal. Others argued that on the contrary, the bookshop itself would soon absorb everyone's energy, and wider ambitions would be forgotten. And once the decision was taken to move to the new site, an argument erupted about its staffing, and the titles it should stock. In the end it was agreed that the shop's workers should be properly employed and paid the rate for the job, as laid down by the Wages Council and endorsed by the shopworkers' union - the fact that there was a debate about this is in itself an interesting reflection on the times. Regarding stock, it was agreed that all the various factions and currents of opinion in the Socialist Centre should submit a list of 'essential titles'.

Given that the new bookshop was no longer at Cradlewell, it needed a new name, and the choice was inspired by a recent Ken Loach TV series: *Days of Hope*. Perhaps inevitably, some played word-games with the new name and referred to the shop as 'Haze of Dope'. But the joke palled – not least because the atmosphere of the place, far from being druggy and alternative, was rather puritanical and driven. Legally, it was still a limited company whose directors were leading members of the Socialist Centre.

The first two workers employed to run *Days of Hope* – one a member of the IMG, the other a member of the SWP - had a difficult working relationship with each other, and with the Socialist Centre directors. In early 1979 there was a change of personnel, to one full-time worker – Martin Spence, a local anti-nuclear activist – and two part-timers. Neither of the part-timers lasted long, and from the autumn of 1979 the shop had two full-time workers, Andy McSmith and Martin Spence. Socialist Centre members Bob Clay and Ted Mason were also closely involved in financial management, and these four made up the committee which ran the shop day-to-day.

Both sides in the earlier debate, about the wisdom of moving the bookshop to Westgate Road, could claim to have been proved right. *Days of Hope* was seen as a Socialist Centre initiative, and represented its practical presence in the city centre. But it was also true that simply keeping the bookshop going came to absorb much of the energy of Socialist Centre members. A Bookshop Support Group was established, and members made regular donations to subsidise the workers' wages, and organised fund-raisers.

Uta Clay, Bob Clay's partner, did a formidable job cajoling and persuading members to take turns on a volunteer rota, sitting on the till to free up the paid workers to focus on other tasks. But despite all this energy going into the bookshop, as late as the autumn of 1981 the Socialist Centre was still capable of organising major political interventions; in October several hundred attended a public meeting with speakers from the Polish independent union *Solidarnosc*, jointly organised by the Socialist Centre and the Vickers Elswick Shop Stewards Committee.

Meanwhile back in the bookshop, it was clear from the start that passing trade and purchases by loyal customers would never be enough to keep the place open. So supportive academics, especially at Newcastle University and Newcastle Polytechnic (as was), were persuaded to keep the bookshop informed of their key texts, and to point their students to the bookshop as the best place to buy them – even, in some cases, taking books to the students and selling them in the classroom on the bookshop's behalf. Efforts were made to break into library supply, with some success. Local Labour Parties and trade union branches were encouraged to order bookstalls for their meetings. And from 1980, *Days of Hope* acted as a key resource for the peace movement on Tyneside, providing literature, badges and campaign materials; serving as an information exchange; and becoming a ticket office for buses and trains to rallies and meetings.

These were also the most brutal years of the war in Ireland, and the bookshop acted as an outlet in North-east England – perhaps the only such outlet - selling Irish republican literature, including the Provisional Sinn Fein weekly paper *An Phoblacht*. This provoked occasional nuisance visits from the local National Front, and on one occasion a death-threat against one of the workers. But *Days of Hope* never suffered the violent attacks experienced by some other radical bookshops.

At various times there were serious discussions about moving *Days of Hope* to other premises, in search of more space and/or a more central location. But on each occasion, once the numbers were crunched, it became evident that the shop was stuck in a vicious circle. The only way it could improve trade was by moving, but its current trading situation was so precarious that it couldn't afford to move. Throughout its history, *Days of Hope* lived from hand to mouth, unable to generate a sufficient surplus to move on to bigger or better things.

It did however change its legal status. A debate began in 1981 about converting the bookshop into a co-op, but there were different views about

the most appropriate form. Some felt that the bookshop was in practice run by a small committed group, and that this reality would be best reflected by a straightforward workers' co-op. Others felt this would exclude the wider network of volunteers and supporters, and favoured a 'multi-stakeholder' or 'regional' model which would give them a formal stake in the project. The discussion was at times bitter, and continued through 1982, until eventually the second option was adopted. *Days of Hope* was established as a regional co-op early in 1983. A fair number of Socialist Centre supporters became members, plus others who had never been in the Socialist Centre but felt a connection with the bookshop.

By this time some key participants had changed. In 1982 Bob Clay was selected as the Labour candidate for Sunderland North. He resigned from the bookshop management committee to concentrate on Party work, and was elected to Parliament in 1983. Andy McSmith had also moved on by this time to work in the Labour Party press office in London. He was replaced by Alan Milburn, a local Labour Party and peace movement activist, who now worked alongside Martin Spence.

1984 brought more changes. The year started well with good sales in the early months; the beginning of the Miners' Strike, with its new mood of political urgency, perhaps contributed to this. Yet again, discussion turned to the possibility of moving to better premises, but yet again, once a detailed analysis was done, it was clear that a move wasn't affordable. Then, during the summer of 1984 both the shop's workers left to take up other jobs, Spence to Trade Films in Gateshead, and Milburn to the Trade Union Studies Information Unit in Newcastle.

Two new workers were recruited, Steve Peel and Jan Ligema, and for a while sales held up. But from early 1985 they declined, and in April the New Tyne Theatre warned that in the not-too-distant future it would be giving notice to terminate the shop's lease. It offered alternative accommodation in Thornton Street, just around the corner, but in premises which were entirely unsuitable. The shop limped on, but as ever its precarious financial situation meant that it didn't have the resources to fund an independent rescue plan.

In early 1986 *Days of Hope* had to vacate the premises in Westgate Road. For lack of any alternative, stock was moved to Thornton Street, but by now the shop's accountant was insisting that the only responsible thing to do was to cease trading. Faced with little choice, the co-op's members voted for closure. *Days of Hope* formally ceased trading on 28th June 1986.

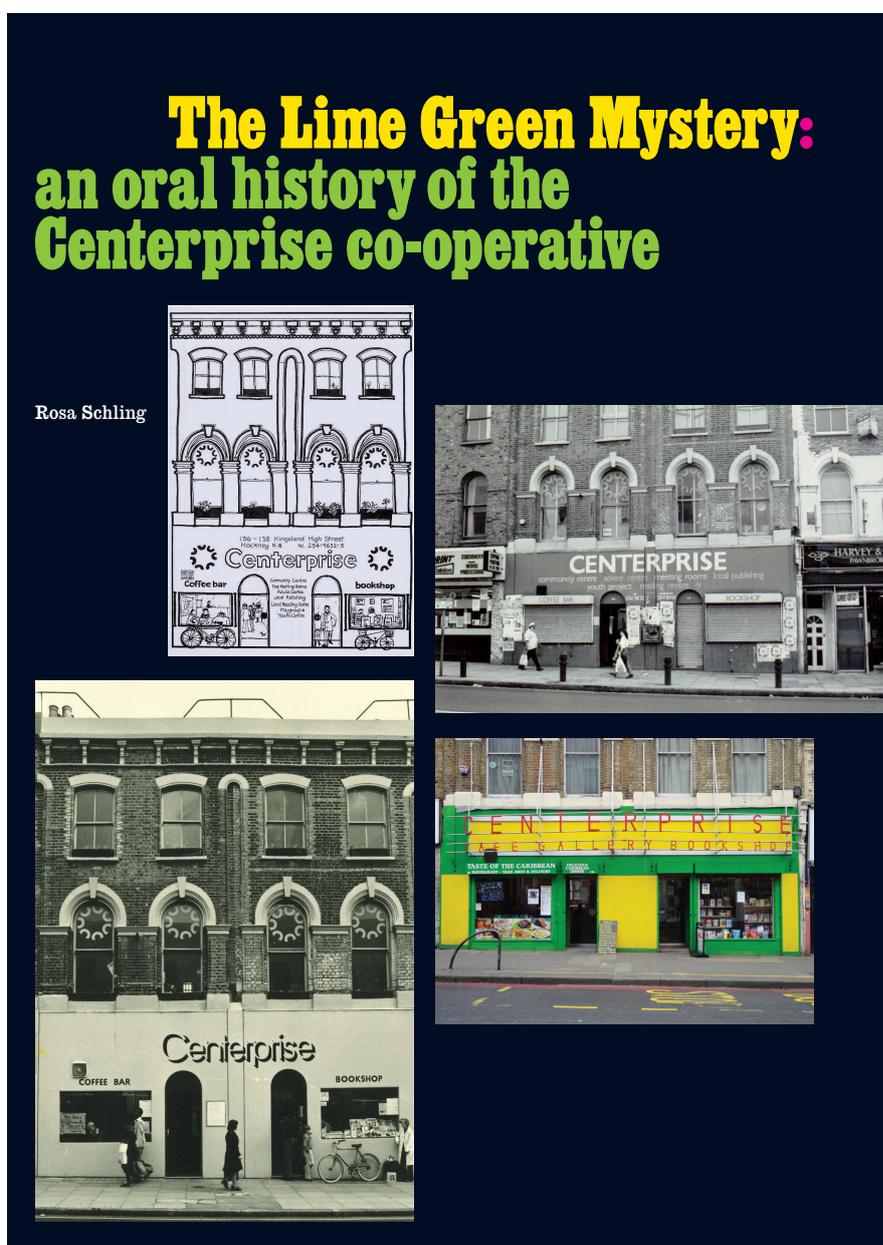
Books about radical bookshops

We're keen to expand our knowledge of books about radical bookshops, to add to the bibliography compiled by Dave Cope:

www.leftontheshelfbooks.co.uk/pdf/2020-12_Radical-Bookshops-Bibliography.pdf

Here's one, to whet the appetite. Do let us know if you're aware of others:

As part of its project on the history of Centreprise, On the Record published a book in 2017: Rosa Schling, *The Lime Green Mystery* (On the Record, 2017), ISBN 9780992739317



Housmans: 60 years of books and activism

Rosa Schling

When Peace News received a surprise donation of £5,000 in 1958 from Tom Willis, a young, idealistic curate who had come into some money, they were able to buy 5 Caledonian Road, a tall, thin building in Kings Cross, London. The purchase of the building provided a secure base for Housmans bookshop, Peace News and more than 50 other organisations that have at one time or another used the building for office and meeting space.

Over the decades that followed the bookshop, and wider building, has been an important centre for the pacifist and peace movement, providing space to groups that might otherwise have struggled to find a sympathetic home. The Gay Liberation Front, for instance, had a small office in the basement of the building from 1970-74. That small room was later the first home for Gay Switchboard (now Switchboard), who stayed in the building for almost twenty years until they moved into their own premises in 1993.



The opening of Housmans, 5 Caledonian Road, London, on 20 November 1959

Photographer unknown.

Front row (from left) Hugh Brock, Myrtle Solomon, Sue Mister, unknown, Val Mister, Vera Brittain, Dora Dawtry, unknown, George Plume, Reverend Willis, Stuart Morris

Second row: Roy Fry (Pacifist Youth Action Group), Ian Dixon (third from left), Ivy Mister (second from right)

Back: Sybil Morrison (left) Harry Mister (centre)



The bookshop has changed greatly over the years: from providing stationery to local businesses alongside peace movement literature to running distro stalls at Crass gigs, it now hosts vibrant events and stocks a great range of carefully curated political and historical literature.

At the end of 2019 a quiet celebration was held in Housmans bookshop to mark 60 years since 'Peace House' was opened. Within a few months of this gathering [On the Record](#) (an oral history co-operative) began an oral history project to document memories of the building, including the bookshop.

So far, the history project has recruited a team of more than 30 young volunteers (aged between 18 and 25), recorded almost 30 interviews remotely and started to collect an archive of material which will be based at Bishopsgate Institute. The young people involved have worked with a theatre director, Lucy Allan, to write and perform radio plays based on the interviews, a series of Queer Monologues, poetry and some original songs. Their work will be hosted on a website that will allow visitors to explore the sights and sounds of the history of the building. Still to come in 2021 is a sound installation to be based in the bookshop and a book charting the history of the building.

If you have memories or archive material to contribute please contact Rosa Schling on rosa@on-the-record.org.uk / 07853 228023

was viable but not making enough of a profit to pay wages! Eventually the DHSS got bored and stopped requesting them. After 4 years, the bookshop moved down the road to Mutley Plain (No. 72), Plymouth's secondary shopping centre, which was already showing signs of fatigue. The move entailed customers and friends moving the entire stock, fixtures and fittings, down the road in wheelbarrows, in their arms or occasionally in a car.

The new premises had originally been a bank, on two levels, with an office down some steps into the basement, reached by ducking under a cupboard door. The reps were very patient with the requirement to bend double and head into the basement. It was shelved – very hard work drilling endlessly into brick walls - by a good friend, later a Mayor of Plymouth.



Prudence and Gay in first shop, 58 Mannamoad Road, c. 1985

© Jane Wainwright

Another friend, a builder, brought some serious kit to knock down a dividing wall and enlarge the premises (worryingly before we'd actually signed the lease!). A small kitchen and loo out the back provided endless problems with leaking from above and flooding from below, which led to equally endless standoffs with the landlords. We opened there in December 1986, just in time for Christmas, and were finally able to start paying (minimal) wages both to Prudence and Gay, and to another member of staff. Volunteers continued to be crucial, especially when taking stalls to fairs took staff away for long weekends in the summer.

However, within a year, shop finances were again proving very difficult, and Prudence took up her previous profession and became a freelance publishers' rep for the following 9 years. This proved very successful, and whilst it took her away from the shop during the week much of the time, her income gave the shop necessary stability and enabled it to (relatively) flourish during those years, as well as increasing the complement of full- and part-time staff.

11 years on, in 1996, the lease ran out, and we had to consider whether or not to close down the business. The lease proved difficult to extricate ourselves from and the landlord held us responsible for some of the structural problems which had plagued us for so long; but we decided to take the lease on a four-storey building four doors down, at No. 64 Mutley Plain, and moved in there to open in June 1997. It was in poor condition, and the landlord gave us a year's grace before we started to pay rent. We spent a large amount of money (too much in retrospect) doing it up – Prudence had recently inherited from her parents – but we opened up a beautiful original ceiling in the main retail space, opened up the basement below for more retail space, as well as a little back yard, and did up the rooms on the two floors above as office space. We managed to fill all the rooms; one with the stock from PG Europe, our small company wholesaling rainbow and Pride-themed accessories and items for the LGBT community. We imported the stock mainly from the company Prerogative Graphics in San Francisco, with whom we'd made contact with in 1994 on a visit there. Another room



frontage of No. 64 Mutley Plain (third shop)

© Gay Jones

was given over to a member of staff who focused on children's books, and supplied large numbers of bookstalls to local schools.

As well as the children's bookseller, who worked mostly during term-time, we had two other full-time members of staff and a part-timer for the first few years at No. 64. We computerised in 2000, courtesy of Bertrams Books in Norwich, which made a huge difference to stock control and general efficiency. But since 1997 we had been feeling the effects of the abolition of the Net Book Agreement, which had meant that publishers set book prices and ensured a level playing field. Independents started going out of business in large numbers as supermarkets and the bookselling chains started discounting bestselling titles (publishers were very short-sighted and gave the larger players larger discounts), and Amazon began its inexorable march. From c.2004 onwards, we found it almost impossible to break even. Prudence received a diagnosis of cancer in 2004 as well, which was a turning point, although she recovered very well from treatment. In 2007, when the lease ran out and the landlord demanded a 50% increase in rent, and despite efforts to sell the business on, we finally closed our doors in May that year.

We moved the remaining stock over the road into an office block, and continued trading in a very small way over there – PG Europe continued to thrive, and we started to list books online with Abebooks, and later Alibris. After Prudence's death in 2011, PG Europe was run down and closed down completely in 2013. But online bookselling under the name of In Other Words Books continues to this day (2019).

What were the things that drove us and enabled us to survive? Well, apart from loving books, and loving being booksellers, we believed implicitly in the power of books and information to change lives and communities. Also, unusually, we never became a co-operative; Prudence was opposed to the idea, but we did try to create as democratic and non-hierarchical atmosphere as possible. Initially, Prudence and Gay were partners, later (acting on the advice of our accountant, Janet Slade, one-time colleague of Gay's at Grass Roots Books) becoming a Limited Liability Company. The Company closed down in 2007 when we shut the doors of the shop, and IOW became a partnership again. Currently it's a sole trader.

Crucially, being embedded in political activities in Plymouth was probably the other main factor in our survival. We were members of Plymouth United Peace Action, later Plymouth CND for many years. We were involved in local feminist actions, and helped set up a Lesbian phonenumber in 1984.



An event in the basement of No. 64

© Gay Jones

After 1997, Prudence became very involved with a new, local LGBT organisation, Plymouth Pride Forum, and later helping to organise the first Plymouth Pride Events in the city. In some ways Plymouth wasn't an easy city to live in, particular in the early days. It was still very dominated by the military and dockyard, it was almost completely monocultural, and distinctly hostile to LGBT people, pacifists or leftwingers generally. Over the years, the military presence has shrunk, many more BAME people have moved here, mostly as students or working in the hospitals or University. Many people from other European countries have also arrived to work here. Labour MPs started to be elected, and the current MP for Plymouth Sutton and Devonport is Labour and gay. The Council has also been largely Labour-run for the past 15 years or so now.

So for a long time, we attracted a beleaguered but very loyal and appreciative customer base, and as mentioned, in the early days, friends made through political activities became volunteers and long-term friends.

We became an information hub, with a very well-used noticeboard, and sold tickets for demonstrations and more local events.

We made the bookshop as cheerful and friendly (and clean!) as possible. Inspired by US bookshops we provided a small area for hot drinks in the first and third premises; we always wanted a proper coffee shop area but space never really allowed. From the start, we sold political accessories and memorabilia – badges, postcards, posters, feminist jewellery – as well as greetings cards, and numerous frivolous items in the run-up to Christmas.

We took numerous bookstalls out to events of all kinds – poetry festivals, local fairs (Hood Fair, Elephant Fayre at St Germans, and the Glastonbury Festival), huge numbers of schools, psychic fairs, trade union conferences (in Bristol, Cardiff and Glasgow amongst others), and organised Feminist Book Fortnight events for several years through the 80s. Like other radical bookshops and now any indie worth its salt, we held numerous author book launches or readings. Our children's bookseller was particularly active with this, and we hosted most of the big names of children's writing. We also supported local libraries' hosting of author events for many years.

We took stalls to Prides all over England, Wales and Scotland, as well as Haarlem and Antwerp.

When we moved to our final premises in 1997, we turned our attention to the idea of publishing, mostly because we'd been approached to publish a pamphlet on Christianity and homosexuality. The author, Michael Halls, was a local academic who went on to found 'Intercom', an Exeter-based organisation supporting LGBT groups and individuals in the south-west of England. 'Homophobia and the Bible: A Self-Defence Manual' was a detailed and searching look at those Biblical passages that are used routinely to condemn LGBT people to, at best, second-class status in the eyes of the Church, and, at worst, hellfire and damnation. Michael analysed the historical and linguistic biases in a rigorously informed fashion, demolishing the traditional anti-gay interpretations and arguments, elegantly and mischievously. The pamphlet became a second edition, now plus spine, in 2000. (ISBN 1-902706-00-5), and both print-runs of 1,000 copies sold out.

Sadly, this book turned out to be our only foray into publishing, although we did some work on marketing and distribution for some other local publications.

And we hosted, for several years, an annual night to coincide with the shop's anniversary in October, with a three-course vegetarian feast and three hours of cabaret to follow. This became an unmissable event for many of our customers, and our last one, in 2002, hosted over 120 guests. Until the last one, staff and friends made the food, and the cabaret was largely provided by talented friends, although we booked some from outside Plymouth – Ova, well-known feminist duo from Totnes, was one. The evenings usually finished with dancing and we normally didn't get home until about 4am. The idea started thanks to the first Feminist Book Fortnight, in 1984. We had several feminist writers visiting (notably Selma James that year) but found that being so far from London, and not having

trains that would get people back to London after an evening event, we were a bit sparse on the visiting author front, so decided to make up for it with a big party at the end of the week. Pearlie MacNeill, Australian writer and creative writing teacher, was involved in the London end of the event, but was Devon-based, and brought much entertaining news from up-country, as well as dancing for us. The party was so successful that we decided to do it again that October to celebrate our second anniversary, and continued it for several years after, finally reviving it for our tenth and then our twentieth anniversaries.

We gained a certain notoriety in the early days – which helped us – for the political slant of the shop. Some of the leaflets in the information section were from CND and publicised nonviolent direct actions around the country. This attracted the attention of the local chair of the Young Tories, a political extremist and attention-seeker who was already well known to the local media, and who decided the leaflets indicated that we were advocating breaking the law of the land (true) and were definitely in receipt of roubles from Moscow (false), since how else could such an eccentric shop survive without an influx of funds? So one Saturday he led a small march of his young Tories up the hill to the shop to demand that we were shut down – and was met by three times as many protestors, led by the aforementioned future mayor of Plymouth, with guitar, and singing *We Shall Overcome* (which struck us as a bit over the top and embarrassing, but we were grateful for the support). Prudence invited them into the shop – inevitably, most of the young Tories didn't know what it was all about – for cups of tea and biscuits, and a general chat, and some of them bought cards and badges before leaving all very amicably. The local paper, which was then of a reasonably liberal bias, thoroughly enjoyed covering the event.

Local journalists also let us know when a pamphlet we sold on self-insemination for lesbians fell into the hands of an Exeter-based right-wing doctor, Adrian Rogers, who denounced us to the *Sun* newspaper, for encouraging the 'breeding of orphans', amongst other things. (He later stood against Ben Bradshaw in the 1997 election on an overtly homophobic platform, and was soundly beaten.)

Because of our demographic, we never really managed to sell much traditional political theory, either left-wing or even feminist, with a few exceptions. There simply didn't seem to be the market (by contrast *Mind, Body, Spirit* books helped keep us afloat for many years). In 1983 we

successfully applied for an Arts Council grant to stock a range of feminist and BAME authors. Back then, the latter meant mostly the Heinemann African and Caribbean Writers series (there was very little Black British or African writing published in the mainstream – Buchi Emecheta was a stand-out figure) plus some African-American writers, particularly the women writers that UK feminist presses were introducing here. Our accounts with the US wholesalers Bookpeople and Baker & Taylor were crucial in this respect too. Sadly, the Heinemann series failed to make much headway and eventually we were only stocking a small number of the best-selling authors. Plymouth now is a very different place with a much more diverse population, although still very ‘white’ compared with other cities of a comparable size – mostly down to geography and being so far from the centre.

We stuck our neck out occasionally over the years, stocking ‘Satanic Verses’, and later ‘Spycatcher’. As a number of other bookshops found, it was not difficult to import copies of this ‘banned’ and rather boring book from Ireland or the USA, and we sold a large number. We also held a public reading of some of the more interesting and (unintentionally) funny passages, and didn’t suffer from the ensuing publicity.

However, people’s reaction to the shop varied according to whatever buttons we pressed – we were called variously communist, queer/gay, occult, peaceniks, man-hating feminists, anti-Christian, usually in an unfriendly fashion.

We originally did very well selling tickets for the Glastonbury Festival, as well as taking a stall there for a number of years – until the year when a new consignment of 100 tickets arrived one day, and most of them were stolen within a few hours (we weren’t incredibly hot on security). We spent a nail-biting fortnight wondering if Michael Eavis would effectively close us down by demanding that we pay for the stolen tickets – to us, a huge amount of money. Fortunately, we had mutual friends in the Glastonbury bookshop who interceded successfully on our behalf. But it was a sobering moment and the end of our career as ticket agents – until a few years later, we were ripped off again, this time remotely, with a large number of tickets for London Pride. Despite the fact that they had been signed for on arrival, both Royal Mail and the police refused to follow it up.

More happily, we hosted many authors to the shop or signing sessions at the (very supportive) local libraries – Susie Orbach was possibly our ‘starriest’ visitor during Feminist Book Fortnight events, and Patrick Gale

was a regular visitor, being almost local. Our closest brush with celebrity culture came when Prudence was still repping; one of her publishers was representing Robin Ellis, the original Ross Poldark, who republished his book about the making of the first TV series when it was re-run in the mid-80s. Prudence had the pleasure of escorting him (high recognition factor) around the towns of the south-west, including Plymouth, where he visited all three bookshops, finishing with *In Other Words*. We found the adulation hysterically funny to watch, but he stayed overnight with us and we took him out to Dartmoor for a pub supper, and he couldn't have been more charming and interesting to spend time with. (Another famous actor, Sir Ian McKellen, once dropped in (he'd been invited!) whilst in town performing *Richard III* at the Theatre Royal.)

Thanks to our children's bookseller, Libby Allman, we also hosted or supported almost all the brilliant authors writing for children, including Michael Morpurgo, Malorie Blackman, Helen Dunmore, Patrick Stewart and Chris Riddell, Michael Rosen and many more. We also made a small name for our three spectacular Harry Potter book launches, with the necessary midnight opening. One year we hired a vintage blue Ford Anglia, and drove it around town with three Harry, Hermione and Ron lookalikes. Supporting children's love of reading was a vital part of our role in the last ten years

We were very fortunate in our early days to hold a launch event for Andrew Hodges' book *'Alan Turing: The Enigma'*. At that point we had no idea of how influential the book would turn out to be; later it would become the basis for the film *'The Imitation Game'*, starring Benedict Cumberbatch. Andrew was a gay Oxford mathematician who was a friend of a mathematician friend of ours from the Plymouth peace group (who taught at the University here); Stephen suggested we might hold an event here for the book's publication. Sadly, it was sparsely attended, but many years later, in 2002, we held a number of events for our 20th anniversary, and invited Andrew back again, this time to a rather better attended event at the University, by which time Alan Turing was more of a household name. We followed it up with one of our most successful events, two lectures by Sir Paul Nurse, one about cancer (he was then head of Cancer Research UK and had just received his Nobel Prize for biology), and the other a public lecture on the evolving understanding of biology. (We invited him because we happened to know him, thanks to university friendships dating back rather a long time).

Lastly, on a more frivolous note, we struggled, as did many radical/alternative bookshops, to stir up local interest and publicity for author visits and literary events, but on one notable occasion we had no trouble at all. In the autumn of 1997, we were forewarned by a member of staff who was very active with the Plymouth rugby scene, that the rugby team of the New Zealand navy (very small) was going to be in town and playing the local marines. As a proud Kiwi, Prudence somehow contacted them and asked if they would visit the shop, and rather astonishingly they did. We draped the shop in Kiwi flags, and they obliged us by performing a Haka twice, on the pavement outside the shop, and in front of all the local traffic. Local media were massively excited about the visit, and turned up in force, as did all the local office workers (largely female), and the ITV journalist phoned us in panic because she had been held up and didn't want to miss it. Hence the two performances. We gave them hot drinks and biscuits afterwards and they seemed quite bemused by the response. I'm happy to relate that they won their match (just); our group were alone in the stadium in cheering them on so it was a considerable relief when they won.....

Writing this now, in 2020, it seems to me that there can be no better way of spending one's working life than in the book trade, most especially the radical wing of it during the late 20th and early 21st century – for the camaraderie, stimulation and a sense of reflecting and participation in living history.

The Plymouth Herald published a long article about IOW in February this year, with more great photos, and a link to an interview about what IOW meant to the local LGBT community: www.plymouthherald.co.uk

GRASS ROOTS

Sarah Pritchard

Off Piccadilly Gardens down
campaign postered stair well
eventings, marches
into the cellar down
walls freshly
screen printed slogan tee-shirts
into the labyrinth of
books on grass roots politics that
fed me for years of my
toddler feminist adventures in Manchester pre-
internet and smart phones here
was the hub of what was happening left wingly
politicizing in Revolution City ...

Manchester Women's Liberation Newsletter,
Amazon Press across the road for small press
leaflets and novels and rooms to rent
in right-on shared houses
and where-to-get tickets to Greenham, the
anti-Apartheid,
Anti-violence against Women, anti-nuclear,
Reclaim the Night, Anti-clause 28 demo-march,
sit-in, civil
disobedience camp from Piccadilly Gardens to
Burton
Woods. Readings by backstreet poets and
lesbian nuns

breaking their silence
or red climbers, gardeners, cooks, plumbers
or pee in the unisex loo with the squidgy loo
seat
listen to marginalised musicians or even
buy a book on My Body, My Self, socio-
feminist
separatist manifestoes and the Peace Union
song book.
Catch the eye of a like-minded alternative, ask
for
everything from
the wise being bookkeepers.
Come into the shadows together below
the shopping frenzies once
a week in sanctuary from
counselling in red
light pre-Village Bloom Street to
Earth myself.

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Published in *When Women Fly (The Seven Ages of a
Mad Woman)*

Hidden Voice Publishing, 2019
(www.hiddenvoicepublishing.co.uk)