

RADICAL BOOKSELLING HISTORY

Newsletter

Issue 4, May 2022

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Editorial

Issue 4 of the Newsletter is different from its predecessors. It contains a long article on the history of Publications Distribution Co-operative (PDC), which we commissioned from David Berry, an ex-PDC worker who subsequently became a writer and TV and radio producer. We hope you'll agree that it was worth devoting such a lot of space to a single topic, given the importance of PDC in the period that concerns us and the richness of the material that David has unearthed. The extended form has also allowed David to explore aspects of the period's politics, economics and media and to produce an analysis that we think is of wider interest. It's controversial too, and we'd be interested to hear from you, our readers, with comments and critiques of the piece that we can publish in future editions.

Alongside David's article you will find Dave Cope's account of the life and work of William Cobbett, that remarkable radical activist, publisher and – yes – bookseller, plus the usual RBHN features.

Please let us have any comments on this Newsletter, or previous editions, and we'd also welcome suggestions for future articles.

Dave Cope, John Goodman, Rick Seccombe and Maggie Walker

Radical Bookselling History Group

RBH project now has its own email address: rbh@phoncoop.coop. Please use this if you want to contact us.

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This Newsletter, and previous issues, can be downloaded from:
www.leftontheshelfbooks.co.uk (Research Pages tab)

Design and typesetting
Ben Goodman

News items, old items, obits and odd bits

Feminist Book Fortnight runs this year from Sat 14th May to Sat 28th May. Five Leaves Bookshop in Nottingham is holding a launch event on 10 May, 7-8 pm. The evening will take place both in the shop and online. You must register via Eventbrite to attend. More at:

www.fiveleavesbookshop.co.uk/events/feminist-book-fortnight-launch-event-10th-may-2022/

On YouTube you can watch Margaret Busby and Janice Durham talk about the International Book Fairs of Radical Black and Third World Books and the importance of the archive collection at the George Padmore Institute (GPI):

www.youtube.com/watch?v=uGt_TbRrcyk

Obituary

Sarah White, Anti-racism activist and co-founder of New Beacon Books, Britain's first specialist black bookshop and publishing company:

www.theguardian.com/books/2022/feb/16/sarah-white-obituary

Talk - A Short History of Radical Bookselling

A talk by Ross Bradshaw of Nottingham's Five Leaves Bookshop – with illustrations – touching on the history of freethinking, socialist, anarchist, feminist – and Stalinist (!) – radical bookshops. Complete with tales of great successes and terminal disasters.

Sunday May 22, 6.30, Leicester Secular Hall, 75 Humberston Gate, Leicester LE11WB

Free entry, tea and biscuits for a donation.

No need to book

New Beacon Books

The Hornsey Historical Society has published an article by Michael La Rose on the history of New Beacon Books in the latest edition of its Bulletin (no 63).

www.hornseyhistorical.org.uk/resources/bulletin/

Mushroom Book Events Remembered

A little under 40 years ago, two women with their young children came into Mushroom Bookshop in Nottingham, saying they had heard about the 1st Feminist Book Fortnight and would like to be do something about it. I was working at Mushroom at the time and, smiling, I opened a drawer bringing out all the promotional material about the Feminist Book Fortnight the bookshop had received. I was enthusiastic but knew I could not do it on my own. And so Mushroom Book Events came into being. Chris Hall and Ellen Lotinga were the two women and together with Tamsin Morris, the four of us contacted a number of women authors who came to Nottingham to talk about their work. The fortnight was a great success, and we enjoyed it so much that we decided to carry on.

Mushroom Book Events (MBE) flourished for several years, bringing to Nottingham much of the best in contemporary women's writing whether in poetry, fiction or non-fiction. They included Dorothy Rowe, Dale Spender, Jackie Kay, Maureen Duffy, Ellen Kuzwayo, The Raving Beauties and many, many more.

Reflecting on those times, it is amazing the energy we had to write to authors, find funding from the Nottinghamshire County Council via the so helpful John Deere, organise the venues, advertise the events, chair each one and, in the case of Chris and Tamsin, put authors up in their homes. All this when we had our own careers and, in the case of the other three, looking after young children. Throughout the time we were grateful for the help and support we received from Margaret McDermott from the Library Services as well as Huw Champion and Carole Clarke from East Midlands Arts.

Ellen recently found some paperwork relating to those events, including a few leaflets, and we decided to search for anything else relating to MBE. Sadly, all the information kept at Mushroom Bookshop was lost forever when it closed.

Whilst we can list many of the women who came to Nottingham, we would like to ask anyone who remembers those days to offer their memories of any of the visiting authors and, if possible, provide any posters, leaflets or other paraphernalia that may have been stored for all these years.

Please contact Kate Marsden at kate.marsden@ntlworld.com

A Bookshop for All

New oral history collection published to celebrate award-winning community bookshop

A new oral history will chart the impact of Newham Bookshop through snippets from the life stories of its readers and writers. It includes a foreword by Michael Rosen and interviews with Newham authors Irenosen Okojie, Luan Goldie, Vaseem Khan and Andy Lane.

On sale from 30 March 2022

This month (March 2022) marks 44 years since Newham Bookshop opened its doors on Barking Road, E13. It began in 1978 as part of Newham Parents' Centre, aiming to provide local families with access to educational materials and books. In 2019 it won *The Bookseller's* award for London's Independent Bookshop of the Year.

A Bookshop for All, a new collection of oral history, celebrates this remarkable place. It will be published at the end of March in a limited run. Copies will be available from Newham Bookshop for £6, free to libraries, schools and community groups. Can be pre-ordered from Newham Bookshop.

A Bookshop for All tells the story of the bookshop through 21 interviews with workers, customers and authors who live or lived in the area. These include Irenosen Okojie, Luan Goldie, Vaseem Khan and Andy Lane.

As Michael Rosen writes in the foreword: 'Newham Bookshop is much more than a bookshop. It's a philosophy.'

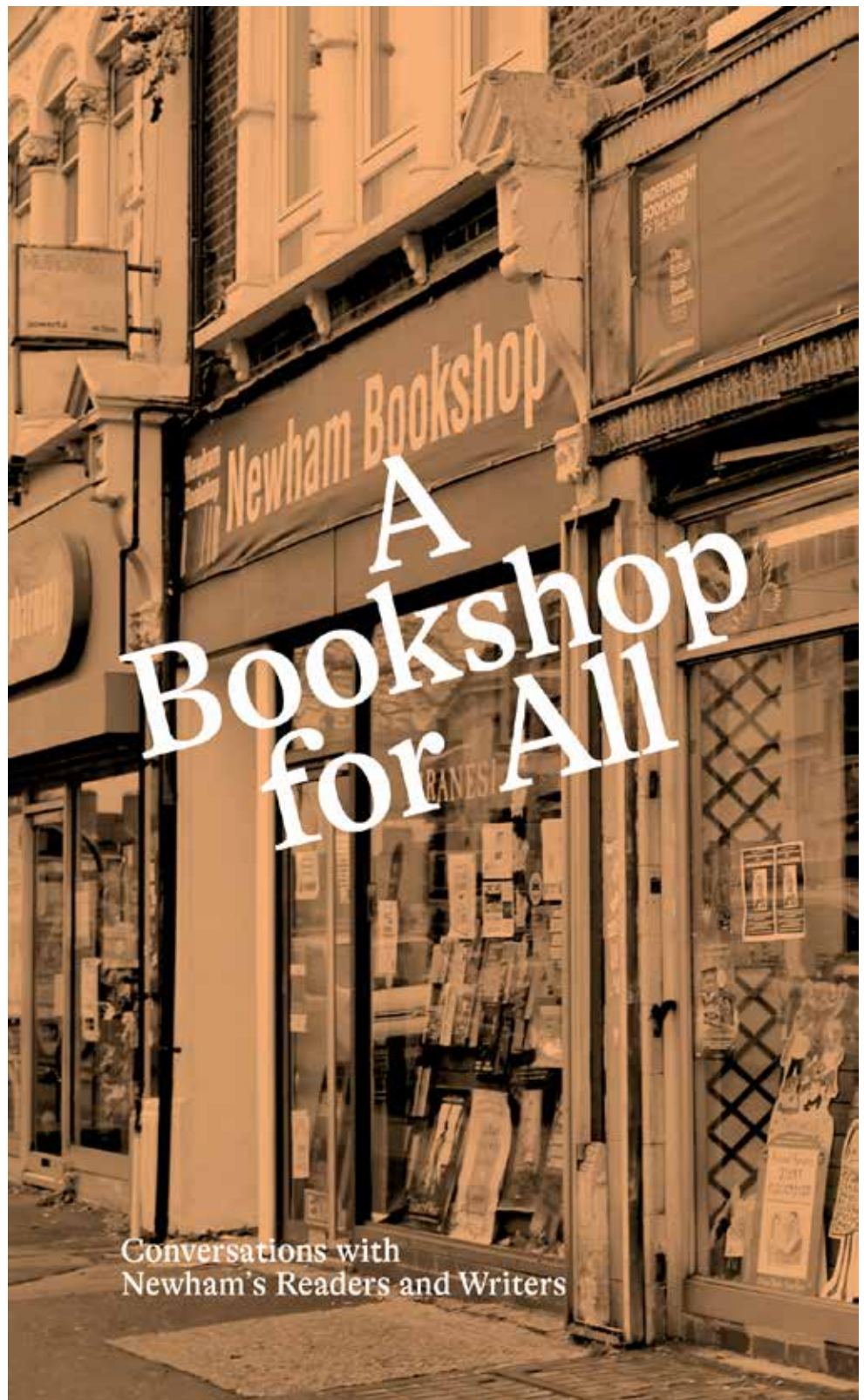
As well as selling books, the shop is deeply involved in the local community. It raises money for a host of good causes, most recently for humanitarian aid for Ukraine. It distributed 1,000 books to disadvantaged children last Christmas and has raised money to support refugees, the homeless and victims of the Grenfell Tower disaster.

It brings local people into contact with authors, through events, book signings and readings in local schools. Customers interviewed remember bumping

into Michael Rosen or Benjamin Zephaniah in the shop, or queuing for hours to get their book signed by Danny Dyer or Nadia Hussain. This has helped generations of Newham residents to see reading and writing as something for them. Some, like bestselling crime writer Vaseem Khan, shopped there as children and have since returned to the shop as published authors.

Vaseem Khan, talking about the importance of the bookshop, said: 'How egalitarian a society do we want to leave behind for future generations? Our vision should be for *everyone* to have easy access to books. Newham Bookshop is a part of that vision, a vision we should all seek to support.'

The book is beautifully illustrated with colour photographs taken by Fatimah Zahmoul, a talented young photographer who lives locally and has visited the bookshop since she was a child.



A Bookshop for All uses interviews recorded by the history project *Writing and Reading Newham*, funded by the Gilda Street Trust, and run by community history organisation On the Record. The project also made learning resources promoting reading and writing for pleasure, which were distributed to every primary school in Newham and are freely available on Newham Bookshop's website. The book is dedicated to the memory of Gilda O'Neill, author and oral historian of the East End, and great friend of Newham Bookshop.

About On the Record:

On the Record is an oral history organisation established in 2012. They turn the memories of people and places into podcasts, artworks, books, websites and audio walks. See more at www.on-the-record.org.uk.

About Gilda Street Trust:

The Gilda Street Trust was set up in 2013 to promote Gilda O'Neill's life's work as well as passion for oral history. In particular to involve individuals and communities in 'owning' their own histories and telling their own stories. Read more at www.gildaoneill.wordpress.com/contact/.

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William Cobbett 1763-1835

Dave Cope

Life and Ideas

Cobbett was the grandson of a labourer and the son of a small farmer and innkeeper. Like most of his contemporaries, he was not brought up in an environment with books - he could not even remember seeing any newspapers in his childhood home. He taught himself grammar by learning a text book off by heart and copying it out two or three times.

He joined the army, served in Canada, and on his return he exposed a case of military corruption, but his witnesses were intimidated and in 1792 he fled to Paris and then America to escape prosecution himself.

He farmed in America, and he opened a bookshop and started a newspaper in Philadelphia. Writing anonymously as 'Peter Porcupine', he named the latter *Porcupine's Gazette*. As a Tory, he supported slavery as beneficial to the British economy and he attacked freedom of the press. In his eyes, Britain stood alone against tyranny and 'groaning nations look to her for deliverance; justice, liberty, and religion are inscribed on her banners'. Both shop and paper were stridently pro-British, royalist and provocative: Philadelphia was a centre of pro-French sentiment, and both were at the receiving end of violent attacks. His independence and combativeness were already very much in evidence.

He had built up a reputation as a writer and propagandist and when he returned to England in 1800, he was briefly courted by Pitt, the Prime Minister, and Canning, the future Prime Minister. He was offered the job as editor of a pro-Tory paper with a printing press and premises, which he refused, determined to retain his independence. The same year he set up a daily paper, the *Porcupine*, based in Southampton Street. The magazine's main aim was to oppose peace with France, and again his premises were attacked. The paper lasted only a month – sabotaged after he refused to pay a bribe to the Secretary of the Post Office.

In 1802 he started his *Political Register*, intending it to appear every fortnight, but after just two issues its success was such that he published it weekly.



The Industrial Revolution, which coincided with Cobbett's life span, was at its height between 1789 and 1815 – the years of the French Revolution and war with France, which dominated British economic and political life – and which were also the formative years of Cobbett's political development.

Cobbett's experience of the Industrial Revolution was not the growth of industry but its impact on the countryside and its increasing impoverishment. Large landowners became larger, with higher profits during the war and through enclosures; peasants lost land, rural labourers desperate for work fled to the towns where some got work but still lived in poverty while those who remained had to turn to poor relief for survival.

Cobbett's writings reflect the change from a rural economy to an industrial one, and his appeal in the towns was due to the fact that his audience there were recent arrivals, not far removed from their rural origins. Cobbett's stated aim was 'to restore that harmony and good will between the rich and poor, which has long been banished from the land'. When he became a farmer himself, he put his beliefs into practice by providing free accommodation and meals and a fair wage for his labourers. He even dressed like a gentleman farmer, even when he was not one.

Throughout his life, his interests lay in agriculture, horticulture, gardening, nature, rural life and rural lives. He was never happier than when farming and gardening and he was a significant 'agricultural improver' – a great tree planter and importer of seeds and vegetables – he introduced swedes and maize ('Cobbett's corn') to Britain, based on his American experience.

He detested the new breed of farmers, a 19th century version of hedge fund tycoons, 'stock-jobbers who do not know a fox from a deer or a hare from a polecat', who had no organic link to the land but saw it as a source of profit or social advancement.

His other passion was politics. Starting as a sort of right-wing libertarian, his first successful campaign was to prevent the banning of bull-baiting.

By 1806 he had broken from the Government and was siding with the Whigs. Experience and reading Paine (after previously denouncing him in the strongest terms) eventually made him a radical, but there was no sudden revelation. It was his personal experience of corruption which led to a broader awareness of corruption in society, and he spent a lifetime exposing it.

He was always independent minded with a strong antipathy to injustice. He continually berated those who profited from sinecures (positions with

'payment' but no work, which could even be passed on to family members) and from 'pensions' – financial payments for supporting the monarchy or government.

Later, writing about the use of spies who provoked uprisings, he argued that the people had the right to rebellion when governments themselves misused the law and acted unjustly, though he argued against the use of violence as often counter-productive.

By 1810, he was selling 6,000 copies of the *Political Register*. The previous year the Government 'filed an information' against Cobbett on a charge of 'seditious libel' for his criticism of the Government's support of vicious flogging in the army. This was a tactic designed to intimidate opponents, offering them an opportunity to recant. Cobbett did not recant and in 1810 the jury of hand-picked Government supporters took minutes to find him guilty. He was sentenced to two years in prison, fined, and ordered on his release to pay sureties of £3,000 himself and he had to find two guarantors of £1,000 each, to keep the peace for seven years.

Cobbett was lucky in having some wealthy backers who paid his fines and financed him in hard times, as he was not good at managing money.

In 1810 when there was a surge of hunger rioting and machine breaking, Cobbett, from his prison cell, condemned the violence and urged the rioters to turn to political reform as a more hopeful route to change, while excoriating the Government's vicious reprisals and their use of provocateurs. He focused on the cause, writing that 'Measures ought to be adopted, not so much for putting an end to the riots, as to prevent the misery out of which they arise'.

He supported the right of workers to join trade unions, but he did not write much about working conditions, and his views of employers were still of men who employed a small number of skilled craftsmen. He was very critical of Robert Owen and his theories but became a bit more open to them at the very end of his life.

Never a republican, he nonetheless criticised the national anthem and George III's jubilee.

In 1820 Cobbett played a leading role in the popular campaign to respect the right of Caroline to be recognized as queen and resist George IV's attempts to divorce her. He wrote, anonymously, her famous long letter to the king which sold over two million copies. Cobbett was not alone among

Radicals in supporting this campaign, a strange episode in the country's erratic relationship with its monarch. It revived radicalism, according to Cobbett, and 'The feeling towards the THING now is much more of a *contempt* than *dread*' (Cobbett's emphasis) – the 'THING' was his term for the Establishment.

He was a member of the Church of England all his life, though he continually attacked the corrupt clergy and the system of tithes, the church tax all individuals were obliged to pay. He argued strongly for the separation of church and state, and he argued against bringing legal cases against booksellers who sold deist or atheist works. He read Daniel Eaton's *Ecce Homo! Or a Critical Inquiry into the History of Jesus of Nazareth* and freely admitted he was disturbed that he could not answer some of the arguments there.

His views on slavery had undergone a complete transformation. He supported its suppression in the colonies and was strongly against compensation for slave owners. He often drew attention to the hypocrisy of MPs who expressed concern for slaves but ignored the slavery of factory workers.

The raft of repressive laws of 1817 included the suspension of Habeas Corpus and magistrates being given powers to arrest any speaker 'calculated to stir up the people to hatred or contempt of the Government' and the power to remove anything 'irreligious, immoral, or seditious' from reading rooms. These measures did not stem the flow of cheap papers. Cobbett claims he was approached by someone on behalf of Lord Sidmouth, the Home Secretary, offering £10,000 if he would retire to his estate and cease publication of the *Register*. At this point he fled to America, fearing imprisonment. He was criticized by Wooler in his *Black Dwarf* as a 'silly old man' for running away.

From there he continued publishing the *Register*, though a bit behind with the news – two months to receive news from Britain and two months to send articles back. He posted articles to his son in England who printed and sold the paper, which continued issuing strong attacks on Government policies of high taxation, poor wages, unemployment, paper money 'Place-men and Place-women and Pensioners', standing armies, wars. One of his first articles from America told how he was earning more than £10,000 a year just from his writings. He was back in England in November 1819, to a rapturous reception.

1820 was a busy year for Cobbett and British radicalism. On 29 January he launched *Cobbett's Evening Post*. This was the same day that George III died, an event which triggered an automatic election – not for his replacement, unfortunately, but for the very corrupt and undemocratic House of Commons. Cobbett was under the illusion he would be even more effective as a reformer if he became an MP. In a raucous election he failed to get elected in Coventry and the costs of contesting this election and of his paper broke his finances and he had to declare himself bankrupt.

In 1832 he was elected MP for Oldham, alongside John Fielden, the factory law reformer. He was re-elected unopposed in 1835, the year of his death. In his last month he was talking of publishing another evening daily paper.

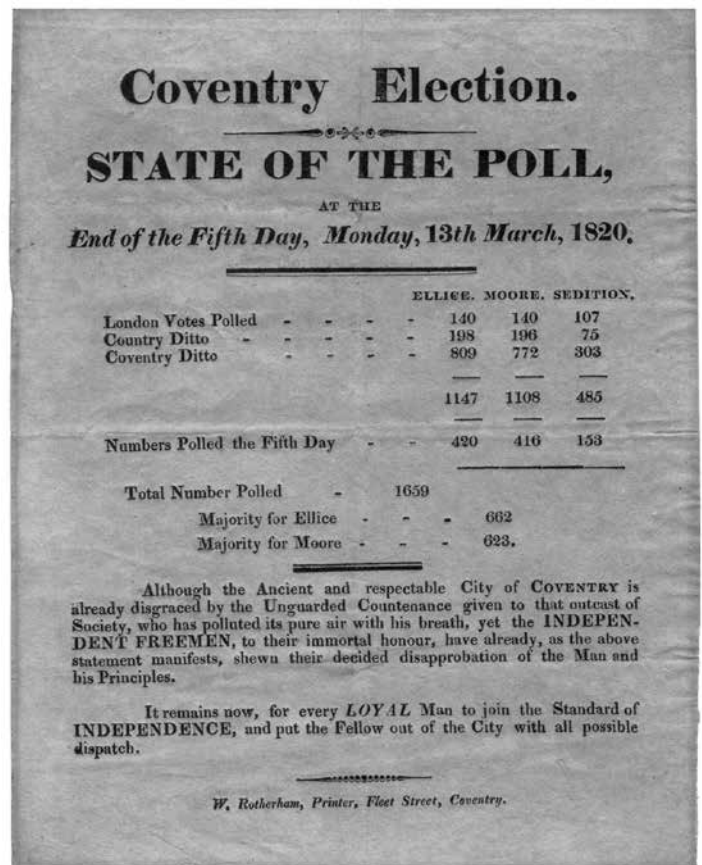
He did have several publishing/bookselling businesses where he sold his works, often reprints and collections from his *Political Register*, which remained his main publishing concern. He cannot really be described as a bookseller by profession. In 1821 he had bought a small-holding in rural Kensington, and from this site he ran his small farm and traded in seeds, trees, meat – and books.

He sings the praises of radical booksellers: 'It is quite useless for you (country gentlemen) to endeavour to discourage and check the progress of political knowledge...It is useless for you, in conjunction with the Pittite Parsons, to shut out the *light* out of the Reading Rooms and great Booksellers' shops. It makes its way through the country in spite of your and their threats...'

After his death his daughter Anne, carried on distributing his works.

Before turning to look in more detail at the *Political Register*, his great contribution to Radicalism, it is worth mentioning some of his other publications in order to give a rounded picture of this enormously energetic man's life and work.

The Grammar of the English Language, which sold over 100,000 copies during his lifetime, was described by Cole as 'in some ways his greatest



work'. It is outrageously provocative and political in the examples of the use of language, and often very funny. The sample of 'a sentence' was: 'The People suffer great misery'; and of 'plural nouns': 'Mob, Parliament, Rabble, House of Commons, Regiment, Court of Kings Bench, Den of Thieves'. There had been an upsurge of new grammars in the second half of the 18th century, but they were mainly attempts to codify and legitimise a 'correct' upper class language, at the expense of popular language which was 'improper'. Cobbett followed Spence's example of turning grammar and language into tools for the lower classes to learn to read and write and help their participation in political debate.

He also produced a *French Grammar*, and a French-English dictionary. *Cottage Economy* was one his most popular books - a 'plain man's guide to self-sufficiency' as Ingrams describes it.

His *History of the Protestant Reformation*, published in parts, was his most popular work during his lifetime and sold in huge quantities, but was a plea for Catholic emancipation and against bigotry rather than an objective history.

His *Paper Against Gold* was a formulation of one of his major themes – the danger of paper money and the National Debt.

For a while, he published *Cobbett's Parliamentary Debates*, which reprinted verbatim all speeches made in Parliament. When short of money in 1811, he sold it to his printer T C Hansard, under whose name it continues today.

Journalism

William Cobbett was the 19th century's first radical journalist and by far the most widely read and influential of his time. He created a very loyal readership. 'He is a kind of fourth estate in the politics of the country' wrote William Hazlitt. He never built up a school of followers, he was a supreme individualist and not good at working collectively. But his political realism meant he was willing to compromise and work with others – although he often fell out with political colleagues, he also renewed contact when circumstances changed.

He was one of the most prolific British writers, writing effortlessly, without much revision. His writing, in the words of Cole, 'had always the vividness of a personal conversation'. His articles were full of sarcasm, invective, alliteration and wit as well as lyrical passages'. He was a passionate writer about injustice and exploitation, not a theoretician or good writer of

sustained logic. He wrote in the language of the people. Henry Brougham, a 'liberal' was a particular object of Cobbett's scorn and he wrote of this Whig politician 'He is the weasel, he is the nightmare, he is the indigestion'.

He addressed everybody in the same straightforward language as their equal – not patronising towards the semi-literate nor subservient to the highest minister. His egalitarianism stands out in his later writings – 'Genius is as likely to come out of the cottage as out of the splendid mansion', he wrote in the *Register* in 1817.

One of the most striking characteristics of Cobbett's writing is his emphasis on himself. He was totally convinced that he was right on nearly everything he wrote about, to the point of frequently quarrelling with erstwhile friends, but his writing is not self-indulgent. He writes about what he sees and what he believes in a way that shows his identification with others, and especially from 1816 with the poor and suffering. He could write with modesty 'I have derived from the people...ten times the light that I have communicated to them'.

He was aware that his impact as a writer, and later a speaker, came from the force of his personality; he knew he was a significant figure and was pleased that he could influence individuals and crowds. His influence did not come from original ideas. His views on politicians were pragmatic: 'It is the chief business of a government to take care that one part of the people do not cause the other part to lead miserable lives'.

His radicalism and his influence posed, from the time when he split from the Tories, a serious threat to the establishment and some of the laws introduced against the freedom of the press (like the Six Acts) were specifically aimed at Cobbett and his *Political Register*. One MP spoke in the debate on the Acts of 'venomous weekly publications'. Sidmouth spoke of the cheap publications which found their way into cottages and hovels'.

People were imprisoned for reading his paper; one man was imprisoned for ten weeks for announcing his return from America. There was a whole industry attacking Cobbett: the Government financed false books by Cobbett, consisting of extracts from his early denunciations of Paine and radicalism.

It was still appearing when Cobbett died in 1835. His sons tried to carry it on after his death, but this was erratic and it finally ended in 1838. At its peak, it reached sales of 40,000-60,000 a week.

I want to explore in more detail the mechanics of the paper's economics and distribution because such details are generally absent from accounts of radical papers until the 20th century.

By 1815 the stamp duty was 4d – a third of the selling price of the *Political Register* which had a circulation of about 1,000 copies at the time. It was read very widely and passed from hand to hand, and also read aloud in coffee houses and inns. Cobbett asserted that 'a single Register served for a hundred or two persons.'

Desiring to reach a larger audience, on 2 November 1816 Cobbett issued his normal edition of the *Political Register*, but also the famous cheap version, No.18. He reduced the price from one shilling to 2d and it sold 44,000 within one month, and 200,000 by the end of 1817. This only contained one item – his main article from the standard edition, titled *Address to the Journeymen and Labourers*. It contained no news, only commentary, so he could claim it was not a newspaper. In it he made a strong case for the reform of parliament, without which nothing else could be achieved – he had just become converted to the demand for universal (male) suffrage, under the influence of the old Radical Major Cartwright. He also emphasises labour as the source of all wealth. He modestly wrote 'The effects of No.18 were prodigious. It occupied the conversations of three-fourths of all the active men in the kingdom'. A third theme was an attack on Malthus and his theories of overpopulation – one of his persistent life-long campaigns. E. P. Thompson called this the most influential radical text since Paine's *Rights of Man* in 1791. From this time, he found himself writing more and more for the working classes, skilled artisans and small farmers.

He soon turned these articles into weekly pamphlets which had a much smaller tax and all sold for 2d; his opponents called his cheap pamphlets 'twopenny trash' and he accepted the term with glee.

Generally, the *Register* had 12 pages. There would be a leading article by Cobbett, sometimes in the form of a letter to a leading political figure, a format that he initiated and was followed by other Radicals. There were also articles reprinted from other papers, a common feature of the time. He did not use cartoons, or publish stories or poems in the *Register* - surprisingly, he came to despise fiction, poetry and drama as distractions.

Topics covered by the *Political Register* included his obsessive theme of paper money; material on America which he in many ways admired as a more democratic country; and Ireland, generally not much on international

issues, though he welcomed the European revolutions of 1830, emphasising the fact that it was working people who were mainly involved.

He does begin some issues with an 'Advertisement' but this is in the original sense of 'notice' – Cobbett would not have known what a paid advertisement was. His notices do 'advertise' his own productions.

The issue of 21 December 1816 opens with a note about bulk sales. All former numbers from 15 to 24 had been reprinted and were available from the office at 192 Strand. 100 copies would be given the wholesale discount, approximately 25%. And if 1,000 were taken regularly outside London the discount was over 33%.

He appeals for wholesalers to come forward, and he describes the measures that had been taken to hinder distribution. In Romsey in Hampshire, for example, landlords of public houses have had their licence threatened by 'busy persons'. A bookseller in the same town was threatened with a boycott.

There were legal and illegal attempts to prevent distribution of the *Register* through the courts. Individual sellers were arrested for possession of a copy of the Register, and some were arrested under vagrancy laws. Cobbett explained that any licensed printed newspaper (i.e. that paid stamp duty) could be sold without a hawker's licence.

The sixth of the Six Acts which became law early in 1820 was aimed at Cobbett and the producers of the other radical papers. Now all papers and pamphlets published more than once a month and that were priced at less than 6d, or were below a certain size, had to pay the newspaper tax, which was 4d.

The stamp included postage, so unstamped papers had to create their own distribution networks. Sending parcels via coach was uneconomical for small parcels.

Cobbett continued with an unstamped edition at 6d and in the enforced large format, (which led to greatly increased costs), and a stamped edition of 1s sent by post which appeared in April 1821. The poor could not afford the first, though they could try to buy it in groups; the second was for his richer supporters and had a much lower circulation than before. Sales of the *Register* fell by 80%. The content was generally the same with accounts of radical meetings and small bits of news. In 1827 it was announced that it was illegal to publish **any** news in any paper that was not stamped. Cobbett

consequently stopped the unstamped edition in January 1828. He simultaneously reduced the quality of paper used in the stamped edition and reduced the price to 7d. This was divided as follows: 4d Stamp Duty and ½d for paper tax to the Government; 1d to the Newsagent and 1½d for the author, printer and publisher (or 2½d on copies posted to subscribers). This reduced income was a very narrow margin indeed. This continued until October 1830 when the size was doubled, and the price went up to 1s again. Cobbett had started a new monthly, *Twopenny Trash*, in July which had no news content and so no stamp duty to pay. But the law of 1820 meant it could only be issued once a month. To replace the loss of the cheap *Register*, Cobbett produced cheap pamphlets, often consisting of reprints of articles from the paper.

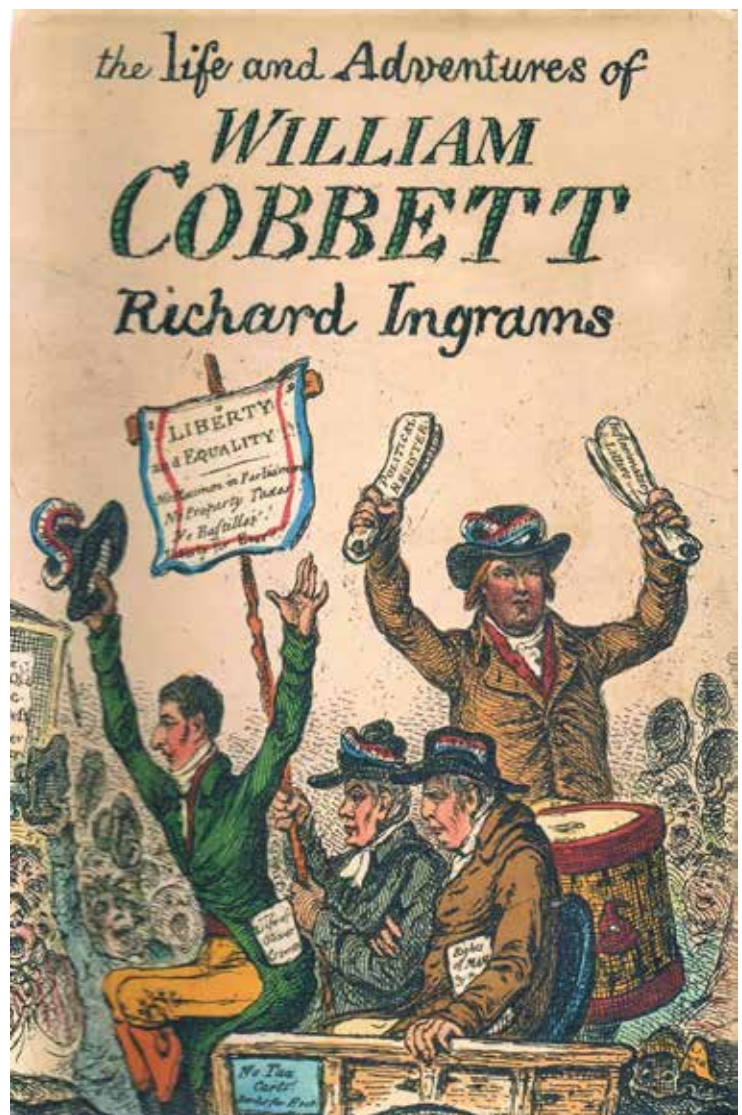
To sum up, Cobbett was not a revolutionary ('We want **great alteration**, but we want nothing new'), but a writer who inspired the poor with the hope of reform and played a significant role in the fight for freedom of the press. One modern historian sees him as a precursor of fascism with his 'nostalgic evocations of popular solidarity', but Marx was surely closer to the real Cobbett and his contradictions when he described him as 'the purest incarnation of the old England and the boldest herald of the young England'.

Sadly, he is little read today, perhaps apart from his *Rural Rides* which appeared between 1822 and 1826 as a feature in his weekly *Political Register*. When collected together in one book, he had little expectation that it would be successful.

Further reading

G D H Cole, *The Life of William Cobbett* (Collins, 1925)

Richard Ingrams, *The Life and Adventures of William Cobbett* (Harper Collins, 2005).



The Radical Internet of its Day

The story of Publications Distribution Co-operative, part 2: 1979-1983

David Berry

With essential input from: Chas Ball, John Goodman, Charles Landry, Alison Read and Rick Seccombe¹

In Autumn 2021 Verso Books published *Daring to Hope*, a memoir of life in the 1970s by the feminist historian Sheila Rowbotham. The book is a powerful if sometimes exhausting account of Sheila's political and personal involvements during a decade which saw a flowering of radical politics, dissident ideas and alternative lifestyles not seen in Britain since the 1930s. One moment she is helping with the night cleaners' campaign to join a union. The next she is attending the first conferences of the new Women's Liberation Movement. Somehow, she also finds time to write two innovative histories which put women at centre stage; live in a communal house in Hackney where all domestic tasks are shared; and conduct significant relationships with two charismatic but quite different men, one from the Socialist Workers Party and another from *Achilles Heel*, a magazine committed to rethinking masculinity.

Towards the end of the decade, Sheila Rowbotham tries to pull together these shards of a committed life in a booklet which she wrote with Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright. *Beyond the Fragments* was published in the spring of 1979 by Tyneside Socialist Centre² and Islington Community Press. The authors were not at all confident it would appeal to anyone else, but to Sheila's surprise it did and the booklet 'soon sold out.' Later that year, an expanded edition was published by Merlin Press, and it has been reprinted several times since. With its synergy of feminist and socialist ideas, *Beyond the Fragments* has turned out to be one of the most important radical publications of its time.

Missing from this story, though, is the crucial role played by Publications

1 Their help and guidance were crucial, but they do not share any responsibility for any errors in this article and the views expressed are my own. Can I also thank Jeremy Crump and Helen Cosis Brown who read an earlier version and provided some particularly useful comments.

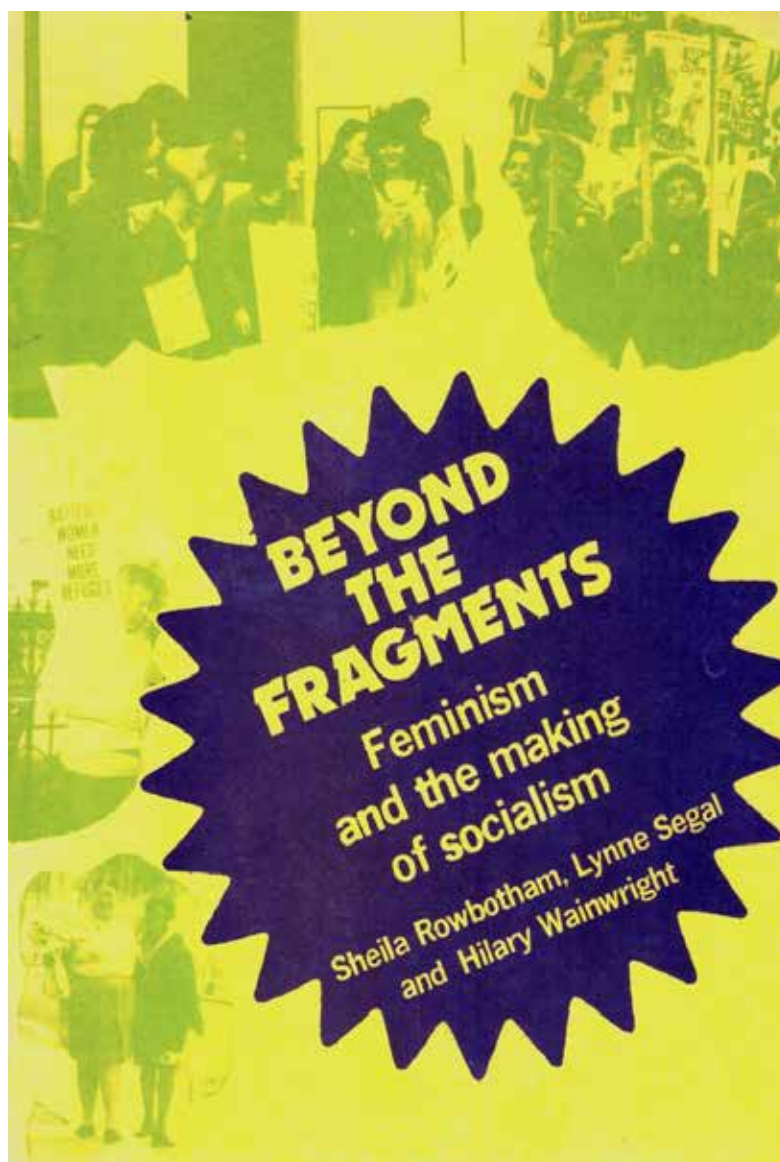
2 Wrongly named in the first edition as Newcastle Socialist Centre.

Distribution Co-operative (PDC). The reason the original edition of *Beyond the Fragments* 'soon sold out' was not because of its striking yellow cover, but because PDC workers traipsed around dozens of radical and commercial bookshops nationwide encouraging them to stock and display what we all felt was an important work. Our efforts showed that there was a market for the booklet much wider than Islington and Tyneside and gave Merlin Press the confidence to invest in a second edition. Yet while Merlin, Tyneside Socialist Centre and Islington Community Press are all credited in *Daring to Hope*, there is no mention of PDC. That's not unusual.

You can search hard these days for any reference to Publications Distribution Co-operative in print or on-line. Yet for seven crucial years from 1976 to 1983, PDC kept alive a vast array of radical, feminist, socialist, and ecological ideas put out by hundreds of small publishing groups from all over the UK. Many of these ideas were written collectively and only half-formed. They were often expressed in ephemeral publications like magazines and pamphlets. But taken together, they allowed the different strands of the British Left to talk, listen and learn from each other. And they provided an easy way in for anybody undecided about their politics or their life to discover alternatives to the status quo. PDC was the radical internet of its day. Yet now it is as if it never existed.

This article is going to try and rescue its memory. It is a companion piece to the story of PDC Part 1 published in the last edition of this Newsletter which dealt with the years 1976 to 1979³ but it ranges more widely (and at much greater length) to deal with the problems PDC faced in the harsher 1980s, problems which led to its premature collapse. It is based on

³ See Chas Ball, David Berry, Charles Landry & Alison Read, 'History of PDC 1976-1979', *Radical Bookselling History Newsletter* 3, October 2021.



documents that have survived from this time⁴ and the testimony of people who were there.⁵ One of those people was me.

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In the spring of 1979, I was 25 years old and facing the first true crossroads of my life. I had lived happily in Birmingham for the last three years and for most of that time I worked for PDC, my first job after university. PDC had changed considerably during this time. Initially a modest venture set up in September 1976 to distribute radical magazines from a dingy basement off North London's Caledonian Road, it morphed in just two years into a national distribution service for a wide variety of Left publications based on two floors in Clerkenwell, Central London, with thriving, devolved outposts in Edinburgh and Hebden Bridge, plus a smaller store in my very own garage in the Birmingham suburb of Moseley.

But now PDC was dividing into two separate co-operatives. Scottish and Northern Book Distribution (S&N) would be based in Edinburgh and Hebden Bridge⁶ and handle the distribution of radical book and pamphlet publishers from the Midlands to the North of Scotland. PDC London would distribute the same publishers in the South but also take full responsibility for radical magazines and journals nationwide.⁷ In this new radical distribution world, my modest operation in Birmingham was no longer required and I was out of a job. Unless, that is, I wanted to move, but none of my fellow PDC workers expected me to, and neither did I.

Then a relationship I was in finished badly when the woman I loved fell for a man in my Men's Group – it was that kind of time. My enjoyment of

4 They are all listed in Appendix 2.

5 As well as the five people mentioned above, the following also kindly shared their memories and thoughts with me either in conversation or by email: Fiona Boddington, Gail Chester, Sue Clarke, Derek Cohen, Kingsley Dawson, Eilis Doherty, Ralph Edney, Bill Godber, Peter Gotham, Pam Isherwood, Hans Klabbers, Alison Macfarlane, Andy Metcalf, David Musson, Ruthie Petrie, Michael Phillips, Aleine Ridge, Kim Smailes, Russell Southwood, Roger Van Zwanenberg, Phil Walden, Jane Watts, Dexter Whitfield, Kent Worcester, Ken Worpole plus several others who didn't want their names recorded. Thanks to them all.

6 It moved its Northern base from Hebden Bridge to Manchester a few months after it was founded in 1979.

7 Throughout this piece I have generally used 'PDC London' to refer to the work done in London from 1979 to 1983; the 'original PDC' to refer to that done from 1976-1979; and 'PDC' to cover all the work done from 1976-1983. I use S&N throughout to refer to Scottish and Northern Book Distribution.

life in Moseley started fading fast and the attraction of a new beginning elsewhere became compelling, especially if it meant holding on to a job I enjoyed. The only question was, should I go North and help set up S&N? Or South and assist the renaissance of the new PDC? I sensed the rest of my life would depend on which direction I chose, and I was right.

The night of my decision, I shared a lentil and chick-pea stew with my friends Frans and Catherine in our flat above a wholefood shop called Redbeans. Over an after-dinner joint, Catherine suggested I consult the *I Ching*, a copy of which I had recently bought in Prometheus, Moseley's alternative bookshop.⁸ The advice from this ancient Chinese book, however, was about as clear as the canal-water in Birmingham Basin. What I had to do was 'cross the great river'. It didn't say which one. Catherine interpreted this, rather speculatively I thought, as meaning I needed a new challenge. If I moved North to S&N I could keep my links with the Midlands and my life would be much the same. A move to the new PDC in the South was starting anew. London it had to be.

In the first week of May 1979, I left my shared flat in alternative Moseley for a shared house in radical Brixton and joined the new PDC collective in Clerkenwell Close. Some people who were there at the time, like Derek Cohen and Paul Westlake, I knew quite well. Others, like Alison Read and Pam Isherwood, I knew a little, while still others, like Hans Klabbers, I hardly knew at all. But one thing I did notice straight away. They all seemed to put in the kind of long working days I rarely did in Birmingham.

My first Thursday in London was particularly gruelling with plenty of packing and lugging up and down stairs and two meetings that seemed to go on for ever. Still, that evening I had something to look forward to. After work, I took the number 19 bus North to Canonbury, then as now one of the smarter parts of Islington. At 87 Canonbury Park South, an immaculate four storey Victorian terraced house shared by five fierce feminists, I was welcomed in by my friend who worked for New Left Books. She ushered me downstairs to a large communal lounge with two televisions in front of which the evening's shenanigans were about to take place. It was May 3rd 1979, the day of the General Election, and I had been invited to their General Election party.

⁸ Prometheus was owned and run by John Dennis, a good Birmingham friend of mine at the time. It sadly went bankrupt a few years later as books like the *I Ching* went out of fashion in the 1980s.

Before the results started trickling through, I faced a difficult inquisition over copious red wine from two women from *Feminist Review* who were not at all confident that PDC was the best distribution option for their journal.⁹ Fortunately, this increasingly heated discussion was curtailed by the closure of the polls and a chilling prediction from the BBC swingometer¹⁰ that the Conservatives were on course for a decisive victory. The next few hours saw a litany of parliamentary seats turn from red to blue. A gloom descended over Canonbury. The political climate was changing in front of our eyes, but in the early hours, as a convincing Tory win became ever more likely, I remember striking an optimistic note. With over a hundred radical bookshops around the country, dozens of thriving radical publishers and, in PDC, a radical sales and distribution network spread all over the British Isles, I suggested the political future may turn out to be not quite as bad as we feared. The radical book trade in Britain was surely too strong to be dismantled by the policies of this new prime minister, Margaret Hilda Thatcher.

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In hindsight, of course, my comment made in the dead hours of the night turned out to be a comical underestimate of how much Mrs Thatcher would in time change everything. But it didn't seem that way in the summer of 1979. What we now call Thatcherism didn't really develop until after the Falklands War in 1982 and the defeat of the miners three years later. So when I staggered into work at 27 Clerkenwell Close the morning after the election night before, the Tory victory received scant attention. What was happening on the ground seemed far more important to us than what was going on in Westminster. Charles Landry, one of PDC's founding members, sums up the mood of these times well. "The 1970s", he points out now, "were a moment where many of us felt there was a possibility of creating a 'new world'. People were exploring new ideas in many fields, such as feminism, personal politics, environmentalism, rethinking the economic system, differing lifestyles, the very basis of truth and knowledge. We felt we were

9 There were competitors to PDC around at the time like Central Books and Pluto, but they were nowhere near as comprehensive and tended to cherry-pick only a few of the most profitable radical books and journals for distribution.

10 This was a mechanical contraption designed to show how shifts in the percentages of votes were translated into parliamentary seats lost or won. May 1979 was of course still a pre-digital time. Apple had introduced its first personal computer only two years before while the internet as we know it now and smart phones were still fourteen and fifteen years away.

helping shape an evolving worldview that had an impact on politics and life. PDC when it started in 1976 was full of energy and hope.”

Three years later, that hope was still there but it was not burning quite as bright. The relentless pressure of running an increasingly complicated business was beginning to tell. Southern Distribution, the book and pamphlet division of PDC London, now dealt with over two hundred publishers. Some, like Zed Press, Onyx, Interaction Imprint, the National Council for Civil Liberties and Friends of the Earth, expected their books to be available in High Street bookshops. Others, like the Labour Coordinating Committee, AFFOR (All Faiths for One Race), the Women’s Research & Resources Centre and the Ecology Party (now the Green Party), were content with reaching the sixty or so radical bookshops that flourished in London and the South in the late 1970s. Full Time Distribution, PDC’s periodicals division, handled eighty magazines from *The Abolitionist* to *Workers Control* and thirty-five journals from *Critique of Anthropology* to *Writing Women*. While its main market was the radical book trade nationwide, a few of Full Time’s more popular magazines like *The Leveler*, *Spare Rib* and *Undercurrents* also had a sale in selected newsagents, while some of their more popular journals like *Feminist Review*, *Radical Philosophy* and *Ideology & Consciousness* did well in academic bookshops.

All these publishers, large or small, pamphlets, magazines, books, or journals, felt that what they were doing was supremely important. They wanted feedback and support as much as accurate accounting and stock control. Dealing with their complicated needs required a continual shuffling around of priorities, although the basic tasks were straightforward enough. “There was a lot of simple grunt work”, one of the London workers, Pam Isherwood, recalls. “Packing and unpacking and counting and photocopying and humping stuff up and down the stairs – there were no computers and no proper lift.” The working day at 27 Clerkenwell Close was punctuated by constant deliveries and when popular magazines like *Spare Rib* were dropped off from their printers, Pam and the rest of us had to immediately drop what we were doing and form a chain down two flights of concrete stairs to the van below, usually parked precariously on a tight corner of the road.

In between all this sheer shifting of stuff, there were sales trips to be planned and bookshops to be sounded out. ‘Distribution’ at PDC did not just mean the physical delivery of stock from warehouse to shop. It also involved ‘repping’: turning up by appointment at an indifferent or occasionally hostile bookshop to persuade them to carry radical publications, “a little

like going to a party where you didn't know anybody", as one PDC worker remembers today. These daunting occasions in the High Streets of Southern England were balanced out by the camaraderie received from workers in radical bookshops who could often be enticed to take a little more than they had ordered "especially if you had extra copies with you on the van".¹¹ Back in the office after a trip, there were invoices to be written out, accounts to be done, strategies to be developed, meetings to be had. People worked late to make sure everything was done.

One night in May 1979, Pam Isherwood was the last person left in the office, a not unusual occurrence because her working hours rarely conformed to the conventional working day, sometimes to the irritation of the rest of us. On this occasion, though, her unorthodox time-keeping was fortunate. She was still there late at night on the 2nd Floor when a fire broke out in the stock-room below. The exact cause was never discovered but the culprit was probably a heater that had been left on. A discarded piece of paper must have caught fire and flames started to spread, but Pam smelt the black smoke percolating upwards and was able to raise the alarm. The sprinkler system kicked in and the blaze was extinguished. No harm was done, or so it seemed until the next day. Then we discovered that while most of the books, pamphlets and magazines piled up on the 1st Floor were untouched by the flames, many had been drenched wet by the very sprinklers designed to minimise fire damage. These ruined publications littering the Clerkenwell Close stock-room seemed an omen for hazardous times ahead.

In 1976/1977, PDC's turnover was £25,000. By 1978/1979, that had increased to £170,000. This was a spectacular achievement, but it came at a price. For the first time, PDC had made a loss and the reason was not difficult to see. The co-operative charged publishers 50% of cover price. Bookshops took 33%, leaving PDC with 17%, a margin much smaller than that charged by commercial distributors. Given PDC's modest overheads, this margin

11 For more about what PDC repping entailed, see my account in of a typical Birmingham repping day in *Radical Bookselling History Newsletter* 3, October 2021.



was manageable for high-priced items but not for low-priced ones. The more we ensured that low-priced pamphlets and magazines reached all the shops that wanted to stock them, the more money we lost. Increasing turnover would only help if it came from selling more higher-priced books and journals. Unfortunately, several publishers of these books, like Zed and Onyx, were unhappy with PDC's service and were thinking of leaving. Their potential departure worried one PDC worker more than most.

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A few weeks after the fire, Derek Cohen was sitting alone in the PDC offices at 27 Clerkenwell Close. It was a miserable Wednesday evening in June, colder and wetter than it normally was at this time of year. On an orange duplicate pad, Derek wrote out another invoice. He wondered if it would ever get paid, climbed over a mountain of *International Times* which were still damp and mouldy from the fire, and wrapped his final parcel of the night tight enough to resist the vicissitudes of Red Star, British Rail's parcel service. It was now well past 9pm. Everyone else, including Pam, had left, although one or two were lingering in the Horseshoe pub next door. Derek decided not to join them. He wasn't in the mood. After checking that all the heaters had been turned off, he locked up, trundled past the empty offices of *Community Action*, and *Undercurrents*, who were also based in the building, and hurried down the stairs to the street below.

It was a black night. Rain started spitting on his copy of the latest *Camerawork* which he was intending to read after supper. Derek unlocked the white Renault Van, one of three PDC had bought with a grant from the Gulbenkian Foundation a couple of years before. He then drove over the river at Blackfriars Bridge and headed down to Brixton and the squat at 145 Railton Road which he shared with another PDC worker, Hans Klabbers. In two years' time Railton Road would be the epicentre of the first (but by no means the last) inner-city riots of the 1980s, provoked by



The Horseshoe today

the racism of the police and the policies of the first Thatcher government. Tonight, though, it was quiet, quiet enough for Derek's mind to race around with insidious imaginings. He realised he wasn't only tired but frustrated and depressed.

In 1977, he had turned up at Clerkenwell in the days when PDC still received practical help from publishers before it officially became a workers' co-operative. Derek was a volunteer from *Gay Left*.¹² When it became clear he knew far more about wrapping parcels and tying knots than anyone else, he was asked to join the PDC collective. The timing was good. He had just finished a qualification as a social worker but had decided to give up the profession, as he found it too bureaucratic. Selling publications too was in his blood: his parents owned Percival's, a thriving chain of commercial bookshops in Manchester. Two years on, Derek's practical skills and organised mind were invaluable to the co-operative, but his heart wasn't in it anymore. The optimism he once felt about PDC had long gone.

He arrived home, kissed Hans and sorted out a late supper. Then he retired to his bedroom and started bashing the keys of his Olivetti manual typewriter. Forty years later, we can still read the result. *In the Land of the Zombies*, the single sheet of A4 he wrote that night, has rather miraculously survived. And unlike the other dozen or so documents in the small PDC archive, it is signed and dated: 'Derek, 13-6-79'.

In half a dozen paragraphs, Derek Cohen pleads that he is 'totally exhausted and swamped', as on the journey home he remembers two more tasks he has forgotten to do. 'Important things keep falling through the net. East London doesn't get delivered; central newsagents don't get done; bills are left unpaid, money uncollected. The vicious circle is starting to bite deeper. Maybe people like Onyx and Zed going elsewhere will help, maybe it reduces the financial base on which we can survive.' Derek wants to quit but knows that if he does, all his knowledge about distributing radical

12 There were several other volunteers who also made a significant contribution to PDC at the time, including Bob Young from *Radical Science Journal* (who had been one of the prime movers of the co-operative in 1976 when he was the coordinator of the Radical Publications Group), Russell Southwood (who on behalf of the new Leveller magazine did the preliminary Radical Publications Group research with Chas Ball into the viability of PDC), Norman who worked at Rising Free Bookshop in Islington, and two Americans, Sasha Alyson who would return to Boston and set up Carrier Pigeon, an American version of PDC, and Kent Worcester, now a professor of politics in New York. Kent remembers that each PDC volunteer was offered a free book at the end of their stint. He chose *Beyond a Boundary* by C.L.R. James which so inspired him he later wrote a biography of James.

publications that he has picked up over the last two years will be lost and PDC's precarious financial situation will become even worse. 'How long,' he worries on that dark night in June 1979, will PDC last before the 'abyss of bankruptcy finally engulfs us and we lie here quivering wrecks on the stock room floor, dying of an acute case of unrealised potential?'

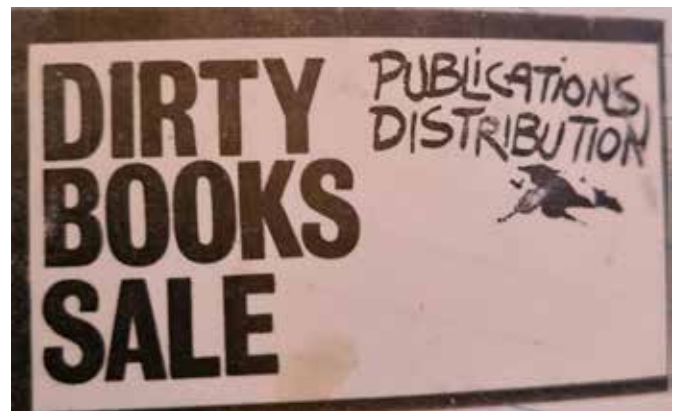
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In the Land of the Zombies was written in the early hours of the morning when things can seem at their bleakest. Derek in fact stayed on at PDC for another nine months, his mood brightening considerably a week or two later when an unexpected windfall from the fire went some way to compensating for last year's financial loss. The soggy stock in the 1st floor stockroom was declared a 'write off' by PDC's insurers. While most of the damaged magazines were clearly destined for the rubbish dump, many of the written-off books remained perfectly saleable even if they were not in pristine condition. They couldn't be sold as 'new', but if they were clearly marked as damaged there was money to be made.

All that was needed was a prominent sticker drawing attention to their soiled condition. Derek had just such a sticker in mind. Each publication would be labelled a 'Dirty Book'.

On Saturday July 7th 1979, PDC opened its doors at 27 Clerkenwell Close for a grand 'Dirty Books Sale'. Any member of the public or bookshop worker could pop down and buy the written-off books, pamphlets and journals at less than a quarter of the cover price – with a further discount for trade. "The only condition of the sale", Derek remembers now, was that they "had to pay cash. There was certainly no sale or return. The last thing we wanted was to have any of them back!" He can't remember how much money was made that day, but as each sale, even at a greatly reduced price, was pure profit, it certainly went some way to making up that £3,500 deficit.

The Dirty Books Sale was an example of the kind of entrepreneurial flexibility that PDC had become known for. Although still in their late 20s, Chas Ball and Charles Landry had considerable experience in setting up deals before they helped found PDC in the Autumn of 1976, Chas at the National Council for Civil Liberties and the National Union of Students, Charles at the European Economic Community. They brought these



skills to the world of radical bookselling as they sought gaps in the market that could keep PDC afloat. Amongst the more lucrative deals PDC made in 1977 and 1978 were wholesaling radical academic books from mainstream publishers like the Motive series from Alison & Busby, and supplying alternative bookshops with the popular *Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*, comics that stretched the notion of 'radical' a long way from the politics of the Left. The most celebrated contract struck in the early years, however, was for PDC to be the British distributor of *Class Struggle*, a board game designed by Professor Bertell Ollman, a New York Marxist who proved to be as good at commerce as any graduate from Harvard Business School. At £6.50 a copy, PDC sold hundreds.¹³

After Charles and Chas left, the co-operative's commercial *nous* was kept alive by Derek Cohen and another PDC worker, Alison Read, who joined in February 1978 after a stint at a wholefood magazine. Alison had been away on holiday in Crete when the fire broke out but was home for the Dirty Books Sale. For her, it summed up all the good things about working for PDC at the turn of the decade. "We had fun selling stuff", she says now, "the work was often stimulating and enjoyable and people worked together with a common sense of political purpose. We took pride in getting publications into places that hadn't sold radical material before and disgruntlement when we failed, but we were making an impact and it was exciting. We were part of a movement and helping to make changes happen." Six months after the Dirty Books Sale the print part of that movement came together for the first and, as it would turn out, last time.

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Caxton House is a community centre built in the late 1960s on the edge of one of those sprawling North Islington housing estates that have been the

¹³ *Class Struggle* turned out to be a good investment: copies of the game today go for £270.



bedrock of Jeremy Corbyn's support since he was first elected constituency MP here in 1983. Charles Landry chose it as the venue for the first national conference organised by his Minority Press Group, the new venture he set up after he left PDC in 1978.

'How Can Radical Publishing Survive the 1980s?' took place on Friday and Saturday 22nd and 23rd February 1980. Food was available. So was child-care 'if you ring first'. Nobody did. One hundred adults and the odd child turned up. There were many small publishers there, as well as representatives from Verso (founded as New Left Books in 1964), Pluto (founded 1969), Spokesman (1971), Virago (1973), Writers' & Readers (1974), Zed (1976), The Women's Press (1977) and Gay Men's Press (1979). Several workers from PDC London and S&N were also present and one or two of them attended a lively session run by Pluto on the Saturday afternoon entitled 'Socialist Business Practice'. The two-day conference was judged a success and Charles was pleased with the vitality present. Despite the new decade threatening to be less sympathetic than the old, the radical book movement appeared to be in a healthy state. It remained relatively easy to open a new radical bookshop in Britain in 1980 or for a new radical publisher to make its mark.

Looking back, though, Charles thinks an opportunity that weekend was missed. "We could and perhaps should have talked about how PDC could become the embryo of a distribution service for *all* radical books, not just the small presses and one-off pamphlets it had dealt with up to then." But the main problem, he admits, was that the larger book publishers like Pluto, Verso and Writers & Readers simply weren't interested. They were too obsessed with their own problems and challenges, and not convinced that PDC could ever match the efficiency of their commercial distributors.

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The day before the conference, on Thursday February 21st 1980, a meeting took place at 27 Clerkenwell Close between PDC London and S&N, one of the first since the split seven months before. Rick Seccombe from S&N remembers it well. He had joined the Northern co-operative after half a dozen years at Manchester's Grass Roots Bookshop, one of the most successful radical bookshops of that or indeed any other time. This was his first meeting with the workers in PDC London, but he was a little confused about who they all were. "It was all very friendly, but a little unsettling", he reflects today in his home in New Mills in Derbyshire. "There was a mini-crisis about staffing, so we went around the room introducing ourselves and saying how long we intended to stay."

Not long, it seemed, at least for several key people. Derek had finally decided to leave. I would be going shortly, as would Hans. Gone already were the four founding members of PDC who started the project in the Autumn of 1976: Chas Ball, Paul Westlake, Charles Landry, and Gail Chester. Gone too was the formidable Liz Cooper who was there from the early days. Such a high turnover of original staff was not altogether surprising. The work at PDC could be relentless. But all this leaving meant that much of the experience picked up so painfully over the first few years had to be learned anew by new recruits like Aleine Ridge and Michael Phillips.

Aleine and Michael's political experience in lesbian and gay politics¹⁴ was impressive, their book trade experience a little less so. Close friends, they replaced those other close friends, Derek and Hans, in Full Time Distribution, the periodicals part of PDC London, and they quickly noticed something only newcomers would grasp. Full Time simply could not carry on distributing the plethora of magazines and journals it now handled from its cramped stock room on the 1st floor of 27 Clerkenwell Close. Alternative premises were desperately needed, hopefully nearby and on street level. Soon they did find somewhere close and spacious, but it had a drawback. It wasn't on the 1st Floor but in a basement that had previously been occupied by a young man in a hurry.

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In the summer of 1980, Warren Evans was still a talented teenager when his bed business started taking off. He advertised his wooden beds and pocket-sprung double-sided mattresses in *Time Out* magazine and soon he was selling more than his basement premises in Clerkenwell could handle. He moved out to Camden Town and made his name and fortune. Full Time Distribution took Warren's place, and his beds were replaced by radical magazines, hundreds of them, thousands of them. The basement was certainly an improvement on the old stockroom but, as there was no natural light, it was more appropriate for making mattresses than packing periodicals. Sue Clarke, who worked at the time for Southern Distribution, PDC's book and pamphlet division, remembers watching them struggle. "We called it 'the Hole' and it was where they worked their socks off, taking thousands of magazines up and down those steps without a rail into that small, cold space."

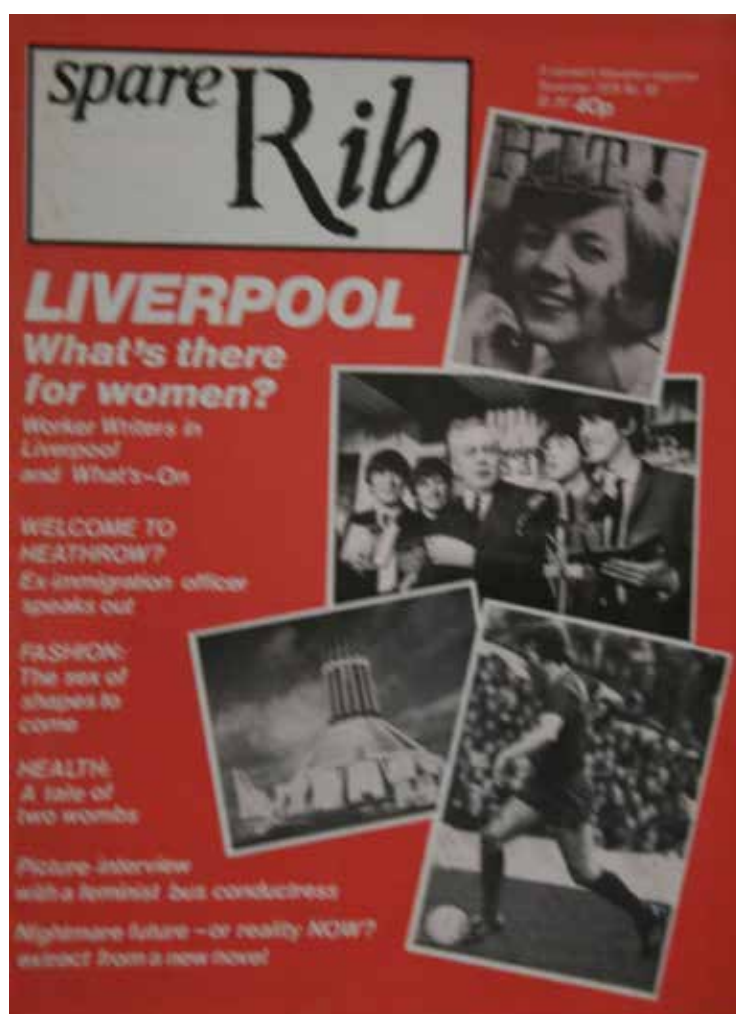
14 Throughout this article, I use 'lesbian and gay' since this was the acceptable term at the time. LGBTQ and its derivatives only started to be used widely in the 1990s.

Today Sue lives in Sheffield, and as I live in North London I spoke to her on Zoom. But Michael Philips lives only a couple of miles away from me, so I arranged to meet him for a walk in Clissold Park in Hackney with his canine companion, Molly, who he assured me was quite friendly: “she only chases rabbits not people.” We sat down on one of the Park’s benches in late 2021, not too close as social distancing was then in force. Michael tried his best to remember his time at PDC four decades before. “The work was quite enjoyable but also tiring and a little boring”, he told me, “we had a VW van for Central London, a Ford Escort van for West London and the Renault for the East. The only perk was you could drive them home afterwards, although you had to record your mileage and pay 3p a mile.”

Well, perhaps not the *only* perk. There was the pleasure of using Full Time’s ‘computer’ which comprised a Big Board, a T Square and different masking pieces of paper. It worked well, until the pieces of paper fell off. There was also the peculiar sense of ‘owning’ London. It was exhilarating, driving around in the almost benign London traffic of the early 1980s, pulling up on Charing Cross Road to run into Collets, then Britain’s largest radical bookshop, to deliver magazines and collect returns. Or popping into Compendium on Camden High Street, then Britain’s largest alternative bookshop, to check up on journals and collect returns. That was fun, and it is worth bearing all this in mind considering what would happen. Much of the time working for PDC, as Michael said, *was* enjoyable as well as “making you feel you were doing something important and worthwhile”.

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“Everything though”, continued Michael, “was dominated by The Run.” This took place every second Wednesday and Thursday, when new editions of magazines or journals were picked, packed, invoiced, and delivered. In London, delivery was by



one of the PDC vans. Outside London, parcels were dropped off at the Post Office's labyrinthine sorting centre in nearby Mount Pleasant, then the largest in Europe, or at King's Cross or Euston stations, where they would be railed up for collection by S&N and delivered by them on their very own Run to the major cities in Scotland and the North.

When PDC started in 1976, the original idea behind the Run was simply to ensure that new copies of magazines were delivered in the right number at the right time to the right radical bookshop. But it soon became clear that this imaginative solution to the problem of distributing dozens of small circulation magazines which came out at different times of the month could be extended to books and pamphlets which could be dropped off at the same time. And when these parcels were being delivered, it also seemed sensible to try and sell any new title that had come in and top-up anything that was going well.

The Run then became an all-encompassing event involving everyone in the office. It was a hectic but often exhilarating few days and has become part of the folklore of PDC. Charles Landry still remembers it vividly over 40 years later. "Colletts was on my run in 1978. I had a great trusting relationship with Phil, the buyer, and he let me do anything I wanted, as he knew everything was on 'sale or return'. It was always an exciting journey, as I could stuff the shelves. I remember I always wanted to deliver £1,000 worth of books and magazines on one trip. This represented a £170 profit!"

At the end of each Run week, there was a real sense of achievement but there was also a downside. Excitement would flip over into exhaustion and people often needed the following week to recover. And so one unintended consequence of work dominated by The Run was that less urgent but more strategic tasks were put off or not done at all.

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"We never really had our own desks", said Michael as we ended our stroll around Clissold Park. "There we were down in the Hole and there they were up on the 2nd floor, feet on the table, drinking tea and talking politics."

'They' were the workers in Southern Distribution, the books and pamphlets half of the PDC London collective. The income from both divisions was about the same, but the perception was that books were more important, even though it was the periodicals that made PDC stand out. Perhaps it was always so. Books have a permanence. Magazines are here today, gone tomorrow. Journals are somewhere in between. PDC encouraged

the journal collectives to give their publication a spine and look more like books. One journal, *Radical Philosophy*, refused but they were philosophers prone to questioning everything.

The 'spine' policy had mixed success even in the university bookshops which were second only to radical bookshops as Southern Distribution's most important customers. Many of these shops were supportive of PDC, as their workers were often ex-students with radical views themselves. A few though were less friendly. Sue Clarke remembers one. "In Southern, you took responsibility for your area, repped, came back with an order, packed it, and sent it off. I had the West of England and that included Exeter University Bookshop." On one visit to this shop, the difference between PDC's approach to selling books and that of more conventional publishers was noticeable. "Most reps wore suits and had briefcases with well organised plastic folders containing book covers and recent reviews. I turned up in jeans with a big red crate of actual books and the buyer looked at me as if I were something the cat had just brought in."

If dealing with the disdain of bookshop buyers could be difficult, so too could venturing into the murky world of the news trade. At that time, many newsagents in Central London were controlled by criminal gangs who stocked them high with pornography. Oddly enough there was also a market in these shops for radical magazines, as PDC discovered in the late 1970s.¹⁵ Supplying these newsagents with the latest issues, however, was not a task looked forward to in Clerkenwell as Aleine Ridge remembers. Several of these shops, were "dangerous and nasty, the kind of place where they put *Spare Rib* on the top shelf."

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Another new worker at PDC at the start of the 1980s was John Goodman, who came down to London from Coventry, where he had helped set up the radical bookshop, Wedge. Like hundreds, perhaps thousands, of young people with socialist, feminist, ecological or alternative views at that time, John could afford to work for a political cause like PDC in London because of the availability of cheap short-life housing. It is hard to over-estimate the contribution this kind of accommodation made to the survival of all kinds of radical and artistic projects during the 1970s and 1980s. Virtually every worker at PDC lived in a squat or self-managed housing coop, which meant

15 See David Berry, Liz Cooper & Charles Landry, *Where is the Other News?* (Minority Press Group, 1981).

they could survive on the PDC wage of just £45 a week. This housing has long vanished, an important reason PDC could not exist today, at least in London.

John found a place to live in a squat in Bethnal Green. “I used to come in by the 55 bus every morning to Clerkenwell”, he remembers, “and no, I didn’t read any PDC publications on the journey. I remember I was reading novels like Paul Scott’s *Raj Quartet*.” Looking back now, John says that he “got on well with everyone. I had a strong affinity with the other people who worked at PDC London during my time there.” But there were problems too. “The state of the place I found appalling. The warehouse was a bit of a mess. It wasn’t kept tidy, and I was shocked by the lack of respect for publications and the people who produced them. Mags fell on the floor and were left there to be stood on.” John feels now that PDC London seemed to be run during this time “for the workers not the cause, and that bothered me. I felt that PDC only existed because of the publications. It had no right to exist apart from this, but I thought I was the only one who felt like this as we went from crisis to crisis. It was one reason I left after a year and went to work for CSE Books.”

Another reason was the seemingly endless succession of meetings. John’s diary in just one month in 1980, for example, records a PDC meeting with publishers (4th June) a PDC meal (6th June), a three-day PDC Partnership Meeting (16th-18th June), a *Radical Bookseller* Meeting (23rd June) and another PDC meeting with someone called Steve (27th June). These meetings were in addition to other, more regular meetings with Alison Read and Pam Isherwood, his fellow workers in Southern Distribution, not to mention meetings called just to plan more meetings. Meetings often took up most of the day, especially the “endless ones about strategy,” says John today, “I wish I could remember now what they were about.”

Most co-operatives have too many meetings, but those at PDC seem to have been more taxing than most. In his stint in the late 1970s, Charles Landry found the time given over to discussion excessive. “There were always meetings, endless fucking meetings. After one six-hour meeting my head was spinning so much I had to get acupuncture.” A year or two later, in one of my first meetings after I moved to London, my head was spinning too and not in a good way. With the arrogance of a 25-year-old, I launched into a critique of my fellow collective members, most of them, apart from Hans, a few years older than me. One of them became so angry that they threw a cup of hot tea straight at me. I managed to duck and the cup hit the

wall, splattering tea everywhere. After a few seconds of shocked silence, I carried on. The meeting always came first.

These continual meetings, though, were inevitable, because PDC was not content with fulfilling the challenging task of distributing hundreds of different radical publications, most of which lost money. It also chose an equally difficult way of organising the work. Tasks were shared out equally. There were no managers or secretaries. It was a true collective. Everyone did a bit of everything from sorting out financial projections to making the coffee.

This didn't mean that individual expertise was not recognised and encouraged. But it did mean the development of crucial skills, such as managing cash-flow and maintaining accurate accounts, was never made a priority, although this was by no means unusual at that time. Aleine Ridge recalls PDC's lack of business acumen as not exceptional: "All organisations then were hand to mouth and there wasn't any anxiety about it. That's just how it was. We weren't commercially minded, but this had advantages as well as disadvantages. We worked much longer hours than we were paid for because there was all this goodwill."

There was too a shared delight in working differently from conventional companies, a profound belief that there was little point in distributing radical publications which advocated a fairer, more equal society if the way you worked was unfair and unequal. The late Liz Cooper was the most forceful advocate of this 'prefigurative' approach. She drew inspiration from Redstockings, the radical feminist group set up in New York in 1969. Redstockings argued that specialisation in a sexist society inevitably leads to the jobs men do becoming more important than the jobs women do. This effect is magnified in powerful areas like finance, to which men traditionally gravitated and from which women tended to stay away. Such a concentration of male power had to be avoided in any collective that prided itself on its commitment to feminism. Process was as crucial as result, perhaps more crucial.

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Working collectively with no one ostensibly in charge didn't mean that power in PDC London was evenly spread. "The idea that there was ever a flat hierarchy at PDC was a load of bollocks", says Derek Cohen today. Some people at the co-operative had more power than others due to their experience or their character or because they were in an intimate relationship

with another worker, relationships which, at PDC in the early 1980s, were by no means uncommon. Other workers could sabotage decisions by not following up anything they disagreed with. At PDC too there was often, in American feminist Jo Freeman's words, a 'tyranny of structurelessness' with bullying as common as in any conventional company, but often more difficult to challenge because there were no employment guidelines and certainly no department handling HR.

When there were conflicts, there was little alternative but to spend hours going through things to try and find some kind of consensus. There was no PDC publishers' advisory group or trust which could intervene¹⁶. When there was any kind of trouble, or when disagreements turned personal and nasty as they sometimes did, the workers were on their own. There was nobody they could turn to for help. Potentially sympathetic outsiders like trade union officials did not understand the dynamics of co-operative or collective work, nor did they appreciate that there could be problems without any obvious person to blame.

Nevertheless, the workers at PDC London were determined to join a union, even though it was not clear what benefits they would receive, apart from a sense of solidarity with other workers fighting for their rights. One summer afternoon in 1980 a group from PDC joined a 'social' on a river boat down the Thames organised by SOGAT (a print union, now part of UNITE). As the boat meandered past Tower Bridge and the Pool of London, the PDC workers realised that while they were at one with the union in their opposition to Mrs Thatcher, their political culture with its roots in feminism, libertarian socialism and what we would now call the politics of identity, diverged fundamentally from the more traditional and often patriarchal values of SOGAT, rooted in the British Labour movement. "It felt as if we were unwelcome relatives trapped at a family wedding", remembers Alison Read. "And as we chugged down to the Isle of Dogs eating anaemic chicken and chips, a track came on the disco which crossed all boundaries of acceptance and a row ensued." "The track was *Brown Sugar* by the Rolling Stones", confirms Pam Isherwood, "it was a useful bonding exercise for us but not with them." "We really were out to engage," concludes Alison, "but no one from the union made any effort to engage with us. We didn't join. We felt we were on another planet."

16 Some co-operatives, like Centerprise Bookshop in East London, did have such an advisory group. This option had been rejected in 1977, when the PDC workers opted for a 'pure' workers co-op without any kind of formal publisher involvement.

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Trade Unions were not the only people confused by PDC's radical approach to work and its lack of managers, spokespeople and specialisation. The conventional business world was perplexed too, especially because initially the office phones were answered by whoever was nearest the phone. To make it easier for callers, Derek invented a rotating receptionist, Mildred Luscious, whose only job was to deal with the mail and answer the phone. All the London workers did a day every fortnight being Mildred, and this turned out to be one example of rotating tasks that worked extremely well.

The new publications meetings worked well too, although sometimes they would stretch long into the evening, as consideration of new titles could easily lead to discussions about the co-operative's future direction. Decisions were meant to be made on economic as well as political grounds, but in practice this was difficult to implement because figures weren't available to show which publications were profitable and which were not. But even if they had been, deciding to exclude something that was not going to make money clashed with the political values at the very heart of PDC. The co-operative saw itself not simply as a radical business, but as a political service committed to all publications on the Left, large or small, profitable or unprofitable. This pledge went back to PDC's origins in the Radical Publications Group in the mid-1970s, a venture which was open to all. In the 1980s, as the Left started to retreat and Thatcherism started to bite, PDC's inclusive approach would prove fatal, but there was something admirable about it too. Every radical publisher had the right to distribution.

Of course, it depended a little on what was meant by 'radical', but in practice it was usually clear. The only disagreements were at the margins. "One of those new publication meetings stands out very starkly in my mind", says Sue Clarke today. "It was concerning a pamphlet put out by P.I.E. – the Paedophile Information Exchange. I remember Pam getting completely outraged at the idea we were even discussing distributing it. It was rejected outright but I vividly remember Pam's face turning red with anger that we weren't all in instant agreement with her." Pam recalls the meeting too, but a little differently: "There was a long discussion about whether to take on the P.I.E. pamphlet with much exercising of liberal ideas until Liz Cooper exploded and said, are you seriously saying we would take this on? We all said No."

Liz and Pam were ahead of their time. In the early 1980s, there were still arguments on the Left that relationships between adults and children

could be empowering to the child. An issue of one of PDC's best-selling international magazines, *Body Politic*, a radical gay monthly from Toronto, included a sympathetic article about NAMBLA, the North America Man-Boy Love Association, which denied that paedophilia was inherently abusive. This issue was impounded by US Customs and does not seem to have ever arrived at Clerkenwell Close. "I can't recall if we had copies", Pam says now, "maybe we cancelled in time. We would not have distributed it, if only because we would have got busted too."

In the spring of 1981 Pam herself got 'busted' with the result that PDC came under surveillance. Much of Pam's time in those days was taken up with what would become a lifetime passion, street photography. The 1981 riots in Brixton, near where she lived, gave her an opportunity to get up close to the young discontents, and it was there that she was spotted by a security guard from the Clerkenwell Workshops. "He went to the cops telling them he had seen me filling bottles with petrol from an overturned car and handing them to young people." This was malicious nonsense, but it gave Pam the "valuable life experience of thirty hours in a police cell. It also gave me a lot of street cred and I was fast-tracked into the NUJ for protection. I am still a member forty years on." Pam was never charged with any offence, while the security guard ended up doing five years in jail for theft.

One consequence of this police scrutiny was that PDC were advised to hold any crucial meetings outside, just in case bugs had been planted in their premises. Being forced to talk in the cold and rain in the late Spring of 1981 seemed a sign that Clerkenwell was not the right place to be anymore. The offices were overflowing. The Hole had long outlived its usefulness. It was time to move. Michael Phillips and Alison Read took on the task of touring around Islington and Camden looking for a new PDC home. Eventually they came across Albion Yard.

Today, Albion Yard is part of the new King's Cross, home to Google, the *Guardian*, Kings Place and Central Saint Martins, as well as numerous restaurants and cocktail bars. The Yard's dozen buildings, originally



Albion Yard today

Victorian workshops, have been turned into luxury flats, some of which are on the market for over £1million. Just before Christmas, 2021, I strolled around to see if I could find where PDC had been based forty years before, but I was soon stopped by a security firm who insisted I was not allowed to take photos (although I did manage to grab one when they weren't looking).

In 1981, there were no security guards stopping anybody doing anything. King's Cross was not chic but run-down and, in parts, dangerous. Albion Yard in Balfe Street, N1, was then an odd assortment of light industrial buildings, a little dilapidated, trying to find a new use but hampered by dampness when the rain came in. Still, it was central and relatively cheap and just around the corner from Housman's, one of Britain's oldest radical bookshops. In the early summer of 1981, it became the final headquarters for PDC, who snuggled into the ground floor of Building K. Albion Yard did not have any of Clerkenwell's radical heritage, but it did have space, much more space. "You could drive straight up to the doors with deliveries or to load up", remembers Alison fondly, "plus it had a nice light upstairs room for the office." Even the mannequin workshop across the yard, which cast out suspicious shadows at night, could be coped with. They were only dummies after all. Things could only get better.

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For some workers they did, but not for Alison. In May 1981, shortly before PDC moved into Albion Yard, she had taken a three-month sabbatical, feeling burnt out. "It was unpaid of course. I went to the USA to spend time with friends, although I ended up talking with feminist and left publishers on the West Coast about setting up their own version of PDC! It did give me time to think, and I knew we needed to change." When Alison returned to London and PDC's new home in Albion Yard in August 1981, she proposed that they "seriously reduce" the number of publications to cut costs and workload. "Everyone was very receptive", she remembers, "we all knew we were in trouble. But of course, enforcing change when we were overworked and overstretched was beyond us." At the end of 1981, Alison left to focus on her work at Sheba Feminist Publishers. Pam had quit earlier that year. There was now no one left who had been with PDC for more than a couple of years, nobody left who could remember the co-operative before the division in 1979. And with this severing of any connection with the original PDC, something else was lost too, some of that entrepreneurial spirit which had been so alive in the first few years of the co-operative and had enabled it to survive.

It is difficult to know why PDC kept losing people. The average length of stay seems to have been only 18 months. One worker who didn't want their name used told me the reason was that PDC "just wasn't functioning very well. A lot of the original people like Hans had left, and like him I wasn't that happy, it wasn't working. So I left too." Hans Klabbers confirmed this when I traced him to an old convent on the Belgian-Netherlands border where he now lives after a lifetime working as an artist in Australia. "It was a fun job of which I have fond memories," he told me by e mail. "Working in the centre of London, looking after Cienfuegos Press with phone calls with Stuart Christie on a scratchy telephone line to the Orkneys, what's not to like!¹⁷ But, towards the end of my time, almost everyone was unhappy and bickering. I left in frustration."

This unhappiness at work seems to have been shared by most people at PDC in its last few years. Back in 1980, I too had left in a mood of despondency although for reasons which at the time seemed more about me than the co-operative. Now I am not so sure. In the four months I spent researching and drafting this article, I spoke to most of the sixteen people who worked for PDC London between 1979 and 1983 and frustration at work was a common thread, although by no means universal: Pam Isherwood, for example, although suffering like Alison from "burn out" when she left, has "no regrets" about her time at PDC at all.¹⁸ Perhaps that is true too of the workers I didn't manage to connect with: Sal Jenkinson, Carol Biggs and Amanda Baird. I did have some correspondence with Jean Smith but in the end Jean did not share her memories with me. Perhaps her experience and that of Sal, Carol and Amanda when they worked for PDC was happier.

17 A diverting postscript to this story of Stuart Christie is provided by Rick Seccombe. "We did have some interesting dealings with him. Stuart would invoice S&N for the stock he sent us, but we had an agreement only to pay for what we sold to shops. That arrangement worked fine until he sold all his invoices to a factoring finance company who then pursued S&N for payment, including for all the books that we had not sold. Kingsley (Dawson) had a lot of tedious conversations with Stuart about all this, the punchline being that he promised to refund us as soon as he could raise the finance. Kingsley and myself were keen on cycle touring and so in the summer of 1982 we decided to go for a cycling holiday that took in Orkney. We took a two hour ferry from Orkney Mainland to the island of Sanday and cycled up to Stuart's house, 'Over the Water.' A baffled Stuart opened the door to be met by Kingsley's opening line 'Hi Stuart, we've come to collect the money.' He offered us a cup of tea and we had a cordial discussion and I think he repaid at least some of it." Stuart Christie died in 2020.

18 "I learned a massive amount of politics", says Pam today, "both from the contents of the books and mags, and from the comrades who were mostly way ahead of me, especially on hardcore Left stuff. I was a whole lot younger then."

Or perhaps not. In the PDC archive, there is a twelve-page document written by one of the workers who remained till the end. *The Crisis at PDC* is undated but it is probably early summer 1983. It is unsigned too but likely, it seems to me, to have been written by Jean, an articulate Canadian who bravely tried to hold PDC together in its last difficult few months. Working at PDC, the document notes, was sometimes 'fun but other times made my head spin and stomach churn'. Many of the arguments and conflicts were 'necessary and fruitful' but there were 'too many and they were allowed to go too far. There was too much time spent on resolving internal problems and a lack of answerability to the outside world. The individual egos and the collective ego were not kept sufficiently in check.' The implications of this lack of harmony would soon become clear.

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After the split in 1979, S&N in Manchester and Edinburgh faced similar pressures to PDC in London. They distributed the same unprofitable book and pamphlet publishers. They chose to work collectively without managers or excessive specialisation. And they lost most of their experienced people early on. But over the next few years S&N were more successful than PDC. Their turnover was higher, publishers and bookshops were more content with their service, and the workers seemed to have had a happier time, partly because they paid themselves £3,000 a year, £650 more than PDC, a radical reversal of 'London weighting'. S&N lasted only two and a half years longer than PDC London, but its ending was considered and harmonious and not full of rancour. So why did S&N work while PDC in London did not?

One compelling reason was that they did not have to deal with periodicals but could concentrate on books and pamphlets. Magazines are perishable and need to be distributed fast. Books you can take your time with. While PDC London had to juggle resources and energy between the different demands of book and magazine distribution, S&N was able to focus on books, and this gave them the space and opportunity to think hard about the harsh economics of distributing small radical publications. They grasped one essential fact early on which seemed to elude PDC in London. 'We quickly realised', Kingsley Dawson explained in *The Radical Bookseller* in December 1980, 'that the existing PDC publishers would not on their own support a viable operation.'

Kingsley had joined the original PDC in 1977, and with Moira Turnbull set up PDC Scotland in Niddry Street in Edinburgh's Old Town, above

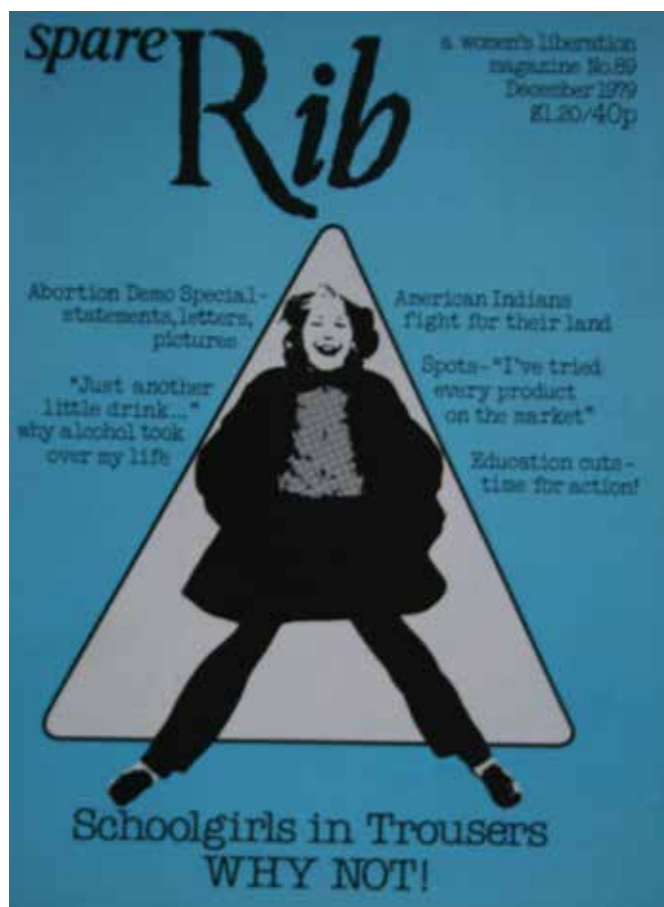
the First of May radical bookshop. Before training as a primary teacher in the mid-1970s, Kingsley had been involved with setting up First of May, and this had given him a taste for the business of selling books, a taste that lasted all his working life. Of the forty-five people who worked for PDC and S&N between 1976 and 1986, Kingsley is one of only a handful who made a subsequent career in the book trade.

When PDC split in 1979 into PDC London and S&N, Kingsley and his fellow workers in S&N searched for gaps in the radical book market which they could exploit to survive. Soon they found one that had been first developed a couple of years before by Chas Ball, Liz Cooper and Stella Dawson when they worked for PDC North, which had been based in Hebden Bridge. S&N took it to a new level. The large radical publishers in Britain employed conventional companies to distribute their books, but they were not well served in Scotland and the North of England. 'Publishers such as Writers and Readers, Pluto, The Women's Press and Virago', Kingsley noted in *The Radical Bookseller*; 'had problems which, with our four vans visiting most large towns in the Midlands, Northern England and Scotland every fortnight and Manchester, Glasgow, Edinburgh and Birmingham weekly, we were in an ideal position to solve.'

Indeed they were. S&N made wholesale deals with these companies, whose profitable books they could deliver at the same time as they repped and distributed the less profitable books and pamphlets they shared with PDC in London. This successful wholesaling kept S&N solvent, but it was only possible because their territory was well away from London, and thus difficult and expensive for larger radical publishers like Pluto and Virago to visit and supply. This option was not available to PDC in the South apart from a few crumbs around the edges, smaller towns the larger publishers simply did not bother with, like Basildon and Bracknell New Town¹⁹.

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19 And there was not much of a market for radical books in Bracknell New Town, as I know well. I was born there.



Profitable wholesaling is one explanation for the success of S&N, but it only goes so far. Lucrative deals from the larger radical publishers may not have been available in the South, but there were other ways to make a profit, as PDC's successor, Turnaround, would demonstrate. The main reason S&N was more successful than PDC London was because they had a different attitude to business. Unlike PDC, S&N encouraged one worker to specialise in finance. She was sent on courses and became the person responsible for keeping the accounts up to date and alerting the rest of the co-operative's workers about any possible problems ahead. S&N also felt little embarrassment about doing the kind of deals with commercial publishers that raised eyebrows in the South. These deals were done, says Kingsley Dawson on a Zoom with me from Edinburgh at the end of 2021, simply to survive. "There *was* some hostility in London", he remembers now. "I was regarded as opportunistic. PDC London was a little holier than thou, the result of living in a radical bubble." Derek Cohen also witnessed this when he was part of the PDC London collective. "A political righteousness crept in and just would not shift", Derek recalls today, "people at PDC always felt that staying in business was never as important as politics. It was better to be 100% right-on and go bust." "They just weren't able to prioritise selling", adds Kingsley. "I love selling, but in London they seemed rarely able to leave the office."

This last comment by Kingsley is not entirely accurate. Every fortnight, the PDC London Run made sure that new titles *were* sold to the main shops in the capital. And repping trips *were* made regularly to Oxford, Brighton, Bristol and more occasionally to Wales, East Anglia, and the West Country. It is true that other important university towns like Southampton, Guildford and Colchester received less attention, while the London suburbs and satellite counties like Buckinghamshire, Essex, Surrey and Hertfordshire were hardly visited at all: not for nothing was this area labelled by PDC as 'Outer Mongolia'.

But leaving the offices in Albion Yard to go out repping was difficult. There were always deliveries to be queued up for, parcels to pack, invoices to write, publishers to talk to, discussions and debates to be had. It was not simply that the London workers did not prioritise selling. They did not prioritise anything as they rushed from task to task, never finding the space or the time to deal with difficult stuff like book-keeping and elementary accounting. "We didn't have the financial skills and didn't make a point of taking them on", says Alison Read, "accounts were seen as dreary". "There was far too little emphasis on finance and management", agrees Derek.

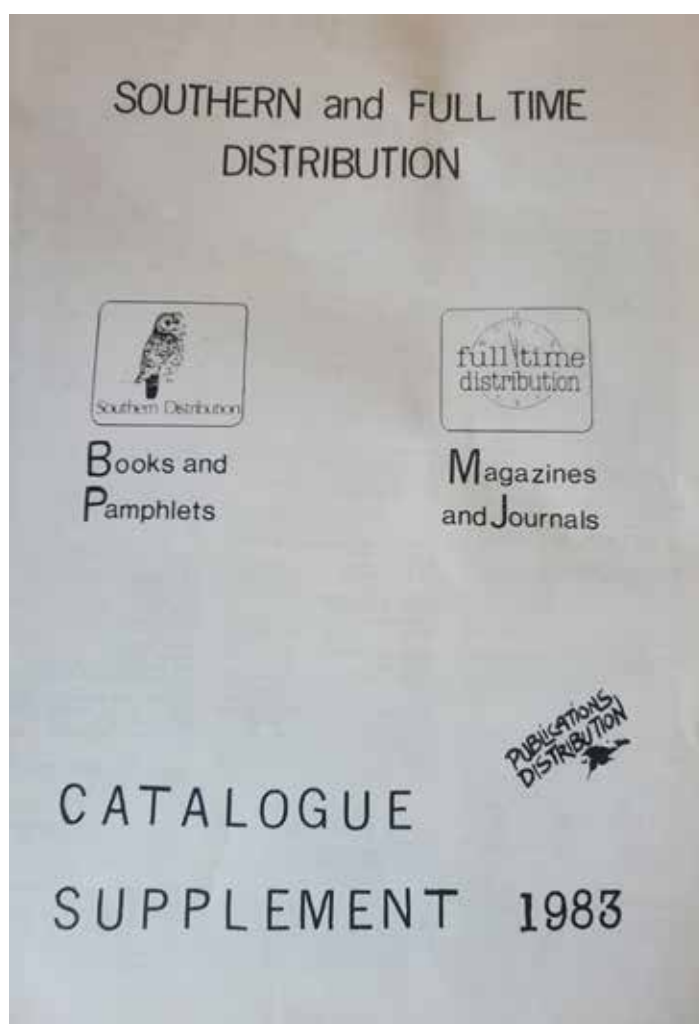
“Bookshops owed us zillions and wouldn’t pay. I said why don’t we stop supplying them and the answer was they would go out of business.”

This reluctance to put pressure on struggling bookshops was another example of how PDC London saw itself as part of a political movement rather than just another business. Radical bookshops, it was felt, needed support not cost control. But what this support meant was that PDC did not collect enough of the money it was owed by bookshops to be able to pay its publishers at the agreed time. Money due in three months was often not paid in six. “It was always difficult to get sales information or money out of PDC”, remembers Russell Southwood from *The Leveller*. ‘PDC London was less organised in terms of doing stock checks and paying up than S&N’, wrote Alison Macfarlane in a memo from that time for the Radical Statistics Group. ‘PDC was a self-contained alternative world, parallel to and insulated from the actual world of commerce’, Roger Van Zwanenberg from Zed Press recorded in his diary at the time, ‘the concept of business did not exist in their minds. The need for profit was hardly worthy of consideration.’

Zed left PDC in late 1979 followed, in the next few years, by Onyx, Comedia, Gay Men’s Press, *Feminist Review* and, in the summer of 1983, Sheba, who wrote in *The Radical Bookseller* about their ‘frustration and disappointment at the level of service’ they had received. All these publishers were committed to the idea of PDC. They simply could not afford to stay. And as their publications were the higher-priced, more profitable books and journals, each departure was a financial blow, blows from which PDC London would eventually not recover.

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Looking back now, admittedly from the easy position of decades of hindsight, I wonder whether one major mistake PDC London made was to keep the PDC name. The split in 1979 gave S&N the chance to reinvent itself, choose a new name, adapt to new times. PDC London chose to keep



the initials 'PDC' and this meant that it was more difficult to break with the original PDC heritage. This heritage was rich politically, but it also brought with it a lackadaisical attitude to finance that was present right from the co-operative's origins in 1976.

In its first couple of years, PDC had been kept going by grants from the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust and the Gulbenkian Foundation. Then the late Paul Westlake spotted a not widely known commitment in the Manpower Services Commission's job creation scheme to spend 1% of its budget on co-operatives, a commitment made by Michael Foot in the mid-1970s, when he was Secretary of State for Employment in the then Labour government. PDC's application to join the scheme was successful and the result was that the wages of all workers apart from the founder members were paid for a year. All this 'free' money, however, was used to expand and keep the business going rather than to think strategically about what was needed to plan for a future without subsidies. Any surplus cash was squandered on speculative projects like re-publishing *The Politics of Sexuality* by Red Collective in 1978, an important book which sadly did not set the book trade alight.

Earlier this year, I talked about all this to Chas Ball, the person responsible for forming PDC in September 1976. He agreed that there was a "business naivety" in the early days. "We didn't have a proper business plan and we didn't appreciate the importance of working capital. We simply didn't look at finances enough at the launch or as we grew." This was by no means unusual amongst radical projects in the 1970s. It was that kind of time. Get the politics right and the money would follow. There was a belief, it seems to me now, deep in PDC's collective unconscious, that a financial saviour would turn up because PDC's work was too important to fail. In 1981, just as it seemed harsher times were here for good, and that there would be no more Rowntree or Gulbenkian money, and certainly no more job creation schemes for radical co-operatives, PDC believed that such a saviour had indeed appeared.

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Ken Livingstone was at that time a charismatic firebrand known for his commitment to radical causes and co-operative ventures. In May 1981, when Labour won back the Greater London Council (GLC), 'Red Ken', as the popular press called him, was just 35 years old but had already put in a decade as a left-wing councillor in the London boroughs of Lambeth and Camden. After the election, he became GLC Leader and turned it into the

most radical local authority in Britain, taking on many ideas that had been aired first in publications distributed by PDC.

Livingstone's new GLC encouraged radical and community projects to apply for financial help and so, in August 1981, PDC London put in for a grant of £6,200 to buy computer equipment and transform their work. Given Red Ken's reputation, they were confident their application would be successful, but they were turned down because PDC's yearly accounts had not been done properly. The new GLC may have been sympathetic to the radical politics of the early 1980s, but it was still part of an older Labour tradition of being careful with public money.

A few months later, in February 1982, with the help of Community Accounting Services, PDC London's accounts were properly completed. They showed that while turnover had increased in 1980/1981 to £192,000, there was a loss now of £11,500. Most worryingly, some of this loss was due to what the accountants called 'constant slippage': stock had gone missing and invoices were filled out incorrectly. Something clearly needed to be done.

Unfortunately, nothing was. In 1982 and early 1983, there was no shake-up in PDC London of invoice procedures or any new stock-room control, no culling of unprofitable publications nor any dispensing with bookshops that did not pay. The focus instead was on selling more books, magazines, journals and pamphlets. It was hoped that this would generate enough extra money to pay off the debt. Turnover did increase in the following year to £235,000, its highest ever, but since much of this increase was from unprofitable items, losses simply grew and a final chance to save PDC was missed. By the middle of June, 1983, PDC London had run out of money. £140,000 was owed to publishers, while bookshops only owed £100,000, and much of this was 'bad debt' from shops which could not or would not pay. The co-operative was clearly insolvent. The four or five workers left at PDC London at this time knew they needed outside help and so they called a meeting.

It might have been sensible to restrict this meeting to half a dozen major creditors but that wasn't PDC's way. The co-operative had always prided itself on its openness, even if transparency in this situation could well hasten its downfall. So all PDC's three hundred publishers were invited, small and not so small, those who were owed money and those who weren't. The packed meeting took place in London on Friday June 24th 1983, a rainy day colder than expected for that time of year. The temperature did

not become any warmer when the PDC workers outlined their plan for survival. If all publishers were willing to write 25-30% of their debt off, the loss would disappear and the co-operative would be solvent once more. An application could then be made to the GLC's new business initiative, the Greater London Enterprise Board (GLEB), for a grant to finance expansion, purchase computers and ensure nothing like this happened again.

As the only real alternative to this plan was PDC going into liquidation with no guarantee of any money back at all, the publishers had little choice. The plan did have a certain logic. Over the years PDC had probably charged its publishers too little for distribution so this could be seen simply as a long overdue clawback of money that should have been deducted already. A grant from GLEB, the GLC's new business initiative committed to funding co-operatives, also looked entirely possible. Even with the reservations noted by Community Accounting Services, PDC London's accounts were now up to date and GLEB's response was expected to be positive.

Somewhat reluctantly, most publishers at the meeting accepted the workers' plan although a few decided to cut their losses and leave. Those remaining formed a publishers' Emergency Committee and approved a PDC grant application to GLEB which was submitted at the end of July 1983. When GLEB appointed Charles Landry and Russell Southwood from Comedia to assess it, the signs looked good. Russell had done the original research with Chas Ball into the idea for PDC back in the summer of 1976 and Charles was one of PDC's founding members. Two more knowledgeable and sympathetic assessors it would have been hard to find. As both were still connected with publishers who used PDC, GLEB's choice would not have been countenanced today. But at the time it was acceptable, and Charles and Russell's personal stake in the survival of the co-operative seemed another factor in PDC's favour. After its most difficult year, the future of PDC suddenly seemed bright.

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9 Poland Street was a warren of offices run by Comedia on behalf of the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, and occupied by charities and pressure groups. In August 1983, during one of the hottest summers on record, Russell Southwood and Charles Landry met there to ponder PDC's grant application to GLEB and so decide its future. They waded through realms of figures. It was long, tiring work, but the thoroughness of their assessment was impressive. Unfortunately for the PDC workers, it was not good news.

In fifty closely typed pages, along with several appendices, Charles and Russell identified numerous financial errors and mistakes that PDC had made over the last eight years. There were no month to month cost or sales breakdowns, for example, and never any indication of what was profitable and what was not. The way the co-operative was organised meant there was no regular check on what was owed and no proper record of liabilities. Payments meetings were about responding to demands and not done to any recognisable schedule, the co-operative had only introduced credit control on bookshops two months before.... and so the list of errors, mistakes and omissions continued. It was a devastating critique of past business performance but worse was to follow.

None of the four future options open to PDC, increase turnover, increase profit margin, increase productivity, or decrease costs could be achieved, at least according to Russell and Charles. In their Report to GLEB, they argued that PDC London's dire financial situation was irreversible and liquidation unavoidable without substantial and on-going grants. But because of the co-operative's history of poor book-keeping and lack of business skills, these grants were never likely to materialise, nor would they be deserved if they did. PDC London with its present structure, culture and workforce would never be commercially viable.

With conclusions this damning, it was hardly surprising that GLEB turned PDC's application down. Hardly surprising, too, that this had a calamitous effect in Albion Yard. In those last months of 1983, as they desperately tried to keep the co-operative alive, the morale of the workers left at PDC hit new depths, with feelings not just of despair but of humiliation and betrayal. Russell had developed the original template for PDC and worked there as a volunteer in the early days. Charles worked full time for PDC for two years and was one of the co-operative's most influential early voices. They both knew what it was like to run a radical distribution service on a shoestring. How could they be so critical and cruel?

Today, Russell Southwood stands by their conclusions. "You can't change a business's culture while keeping the same people in place", he said when we talked on Zoom from his home in South London just before Christmas 2021. "PDC London had developed a culture which was inimical to running a radical business in a market economy. It had to go to allow something else to move into its place."

That was not, of course, how PDC London saw it, although they realised that things could not go on as they were. In the final few months of 1983,

while the workers continued to work longer and longer hours to try and keep trading, the publishers' Emergency Committee had a series of meetings with GLEB and other parts of the GLC to see if any kind of funding might be available. Even when they pointed out the likely consequence of PDC's collapse on London's radical bookshops, printers and small publishers, no promises of help were forthcoming.

An omen of things to come was when, on Friday November 4th 1983, the Seventh Socialist Bookfair, the highlight of the radical book year, opened for business. This year for the first time it was held in Jubilee Hall in Covent Garden. Today the Hall is a well-equipped gym, but four decades ago it welcomed that weekend not dozens of vigorous people in leotards but 1,700 committed radical book buyers and book trade workers who were all celebrating, according to the Bookfair organisers, 'the continuing strength of left publishing.' The world was a little different then.

At the fair that year, PDC London proudly proclaimed it was, 'open for business' as usual. But in previous years, when it had been held in Camden Town Hall, PDC London and S&N exhibited together in a premier position on the stage as 'branches of the old Publications Distribution Co-operative (PDC) and still growing'. This year PDC London was alone on a small stall on one side of the room. Across Jubilee Hall, S&N took a larger stand which made no reference to PDC at all. They were businesses that seemed to have no connection with each other, and soon this would be the case. Four weeks later, in the December 1983 edition of *The Radical Bookseller*, it was announced with little fanfare that PDC was 'closing at the end of the year. Would bookshops please pay up.' It is not known how many did.

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A week after Christmas, which in 1983 must have been depressing for the PDC London workers facing up to losing their jobs and the PDC publishers facing up to a large hole in their finances, Peter Gotham began his work as PDC's liquidator. He was based at 25 Roman Road in Bethnal Green, four miles away from Albion Yard, close enough to pop around occasionally if he needed to, but with enough distance to deter any but the most disgruntled ex-worker or publisher from paying him an impromptu visit. With the initial help of a new PDC Dissolution Committee ("poorly attended", says one member, "because everyone was so upset"), Peter quickly discovered that PDC had debts of more than £100,000 but was owed only £30,000, most of which was likely to be difficult to recover, although he was going to try his best. He would also attempt to raise money from the disposal of PDC's

assets, which consisted of three vans which had seen better times and a mountain of unsold radical publications. It was his first liquidation. Peter Gotham would do hundreds more as he became one of Britain's leading insolvency practitioners before retiring in 2017 to Cambridge where he is now Treasurer of the local cycling campaign.

"I was seen by my profession as rather soft and by my clients as hard-nosed", he says today. "My memory of PDC was that it was a radical feminist organisation and there was a feeling there that business was bad." That feeling was accurate, but Peter's perception of PDC as 'radical feminist' was not strictly true. Some PDC workers were indeed radical feminists, but others saw themselves as libertarian socialists, or socialist feminists, or looked to lesbian and gay activism as their political home. Amongst PDC's publishers too there was a wide diversity of radical views, from anarchists like Black Flag, who argued for immediate revolution, to eco-activists who argued for immediate wood-burning stoves.

"PDC was a small business", continues Peter Gotham. "And like most small businesses its main problem was over-trading – growing faster than its systems can support. To do what PDC tried to do with so many variables, to manage all these suppliers and accounts, you need a very tight system, and my memory is that they did not have a tight system. You need someone with the kind of brain that notes small differences, and it didn't have someone like that."

Peter thought it would take at least a year to sort everything out. In the end, it took three. PDC London was not finally deregistered until July 1st 1987. "It was all before the 1986 Insolvency Act", he recalls, "so I had to 'wing it'. There was little knowledge of how to liquidate a co-operative – even the forms were for companies." His first task was to meet with PDC publishers who, as creditors, had to appoint him formally to take charge of what was left of PDC. But his most pressing problem was what to do with the unsold books, pamphlets and magazines which were piled up in Albion Yard. Some their publishers would have back, but most had to be disposed of to the highest bidder. One came forward straight away.

Charles Landry had a brother Harald who ran a thriving second-hand book business and they both thought there might be a market for complete sets of some of the more popular PDC magazines and journals. Charles put forward a proposal to Peter Gotham that was gratefully accepted, and he turned up in Albion Yard one day in early 1984 with a van that he filled up with radical publications. It was a good deal for everyone concerned. "I

thought there might be collectors who in the future might want complete sets of, say, *Capital & Class* or *The Leveller* and it turned out there were”, Charles remembers today, “I made quite a bit of money out of it in the end.”

Unfortunately, few other people did. Nobody was that interested in dozens of copies of *The Ancient Religion of the Great Cosmic Mother of All* (£4.25) or *A History of Race and Racism in Liverpool* (60p) or *The Public Face of Militant* (35p) or indeed most of the other several hundred titles cluttering up the now deserted PDC offices and warehouse. In the end, many were thrown away. Much of the money owed to PDC was never recovered or was swallowed up by the costs of liquidation. The publishers ended up with little. *Spare Rib* alone lost £10,000, the Child Poverty Action Group, the National Council for Civil Liberties, *Race & Class*, and Sheba not a great deal less. This was money they could not afford but, contrary to the dire predictions made a few months before, no radical publisher seems to have gone out of business and no radical bookshop forced to close, at least in the short term. Although *Spare Rib* lasted another ten years, the knock-on effect for many organisations was serious and probably hastened their demise.

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It was undoubtedly tough at the time and accusations of blame abounded, some of it aimed at the London workers but most of it directed at Charles Landry and Russell Southwood, the authors of the damning GLEB Report. These accusations surfaced a couple of months later in an article published in the *New Statesman* on March 9th 1984. It was written by freelance journalist Christian Wolmar who had worked in the 1970s for Shelter and Release, two pressure groups whose publications were distributed by PDC. Christian was also a housemate of mine at the time, but I had little to do with his article as I had other pre-occupations. Instead, he talked to Jean Smith, one of the workers who was still with PDC when it collapsed. She confirmed that PDC at the end had been



dealing with '500 bookshop accounts and 300 publishers' accounts which involved something like 1,000 monthly invoices'. She doesn't appear to have said much else, or at least anything Christian thought worth quoting. Gail Chester was more forthcoming.

Gail had been a founding member of PDC in the Autumn of 1976. Eighteen months later, as she told me at the start of 2022, she was "summarily sacked" in a manner which she still thinks today "was wrong and for which nobody has ever apologised".²⁰ After PDC, Gail went to work for Pluto Press and then set up Ultra Violet Enterprises in an old bookbinding factory in Horsell Road in Islington, which had been turned into small units much like Clerkenwell Workshops. Gail was on the top floor with Third World Publications and the Troops Out Movement, from where she gave promotional and publishing advice to small radical publishers. When she first heard talk of PDC's imminent collapse towards the end of 1983, she offered her help to see what could be salvaged, the only one of the original PDC founding members to come forward. "I had heard things were going down the tube", she said when we talked, "PDC was on the slide and the workers were all very distressed. They were very pissed off about the GLEB report."

Christian Wolmar quoted Gail in his *New Statesman* article in March 1984 as extremely critical of the GLEB Report because it created 'an atmosphere of panic' and a 'run on the bank' which had forced PDC into liquidation. GLEB money, she had suggested to Christian then, may well have been available and PDC survived if the report had considered other courses of action such as better training for the workforce. But instead, Russell and Charles had consigned PDC 'to the dustbin'. When I talked to her on Zoom Gail confirmed that she hasn't changed her mind forty years later.

But then neither has Charles Landry when I caught up with him at the end of last year. 'Many radical publications', he had told Christian in 1984, 'have failed to adapt and more thought has to go into selling. If you've been selling two hundred copies of a bimonthly for the past five years and your circulation hasn't grown, perhaps you should be thinking of what you're doing. The left must get out of its ghetto and not be ashamed to sell itself.'

²⁰ Gail seems to be the only PDC worker to have been dealt with in such a hurtful fashion. Three years later, another worker was 'asked to leave' too but in a kinder, more considered way. It remains one of the great problems of working in a small co-operative: how to deal with a worker who has lost the confidence of others without indulging in scapegoating.

Charles still thinks the same today, yet it occurred to me after I talked to him that sometimes a ghetto can be the safest place to be. In 2022, many of us look back on the early 1980s ghetto of more than one hundred radical bookshops and a dozen larger radical book publishers with envy. There is no such ghetto now. What we have though is something else, as a direct consequence of PDC's demise.

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At Foxholes Business Park in the outskirts of Hertford, there is a 'state of the art' warehouse that was opened in February 2018. It is the new headquarters of Turnaround Publishing Services, 'Britain's leading independent book distributor', at least according to its website. Metal shelves which reach thirty feet up to the ceiling are piled high with 2,000 titles from 200 publishers, 'small independent literary presses to large mainstream houses'. Fork-lift trucks help the thirty or so workers pack and despatch parcels to bookshops all over Britain and abroad. The stock is computer controlled and, although the workers aren't in a trade union, there has never been any industrial dispute in the 38 years it has been in business. Turnaround Publishing Services is what PDC could have become. Without PDC, it would never have existed.

In the middle of January 1984, as the PDC liquidator, Peter Gotham, started coming to terms with the co-operative's assets and debts, so PDC publishers started coming to terms with its passing. For over seven years they had relied on PDC, not simply to distribute their books, magazines, journals, and pamphlets, but also to provide an essential link with their readership. It was this connection that was the most difficult to relinquish.

A replacement for PDC was desperately needed, but what kind? The political times had changed considerably between 1976 and 1984, as John Goodman, who worked both for PDC and for one of its publishers, CSE Books, remembers. "The 1970s had a kind of emancipatory feel to it", John recalls, "anything was possible. But the 1980s was a defensive era, sapping the morale of the Left." As Thatcherism started to bite hard, however, defensiveness could be a useful trait. Any new distributor that rose from PDC's ashes would need to have solid, defensive foundations grounded in the kind of harsh economic reality that PDC never thought it needed. It would not be able to rely, as PDC had once done, on the optimism, faith, and subsidies of a time when conventional left politics and radical businesses were more in harmony. To survive in the mid-1980s and beyond, a distributor of radical publications would have to make the kind

of pragmatic deals and cut-throat decisions the PDC collective in London would never have countenanced.

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Bill Godber had been recently made redundant from running the UK office of an American publisher where he was seen as “dangerously red”. At the start of 1984, he heard about the liquidation meeting Peter Gotham had called for PDC publishers at Interaction in Kentish Town. Bill decided to go along. He was looking for something else to do where his politics might be an asset not a hindrance. After the meeting, he joined a small group who had decided to investigate whether anything might take PDC’s place. They included Gail Chester, David Musson, who had been working at Merlin Press for several years, and Kingsley Dawson, down from S&N in Edinburgh.

The collapse of PDC had created problems for S&N but also opportunities. One was to expand Southwards and take over PDC London’s territory. This was considered by the S&N workers but rejected, Kingsley says now, because of concerns about “over-reach”. Still S&N had an obvious interest in ensuring a viable replacement for PDC, and Kingsley himself liked the idea of leaving Edinburgh after seven years, first at PDC Scotland and then S&N, and moving to London.

Kingsley, David, and Bill hit it off and soon they were the embryo of ‘XYZ Distribution’. Unlike the founders of PDC, they had extensive publishing experience. They also had the lessons of PDC’s demise to guide them and they knew they needed the larger priced PDC publishers to survive. But several of those publishers like Interaction Imprint, NCCL and the Child Poverty Action Group had gone to Central Books for distribution, which also snapped up some of the more popular PDC magazines and journals, including *Spare Rib*, *Radical Philosophy* and *Undercurrents*. Other publishers went to two other distributors who also had an eye on the PDC spoils, Airlift and Third World Publications. “We were scrambling around trying to get anything to distribute at all”, says Bill Godber today. Still XYZ did have one or two things going for them.

One was Bill himself. His commercial publishing contacts and marketing bravado turned out to be invaluable and complemented Kingsley Dawson’s and David Musson’s extensive radical book trade experience. Together, they made up an attractive trio, not simply to the many small book and pamphlet publishers still left without distribution by PDC’s collapse, but

more importantly to grant-making bodies. In March 1984, XYZ approached GLEB for financial support and this time, perhaps embarrassed by turning down PDC, GLEB was welcoming. It already had a blueprint for how such a radical distributor could be economically viable, which had been sketched out helpfully in Comedia's damning report on PDC six months before. This involved ditching uneconomic periodicals and pamphlets and taking on higher-priced and more professionally produced publications from the voluntary sector as well as the Left. If a new distributor was also flexible enough to include the kind of profitable wholesale deals that Kingsley had specialised in at S&N, there might well be a grant or loan available.

Even so, GLEB was no pushover. "We came up with a Business Plan and tried it out on them, but they were very tough", reflects David Musson today. "We had to work quite hard to persuade them." But persuade them they eventually did. Gail helped the trio find offices near her, at 27 Horsell Road in Islington, and a month later, a man from GLEB turned up with a cheque for £10,000 in his pocket. The only problem was those initials. 'XYZ' didn't exactly roll off the tongue. They needed a name which showed how they were going to do things differently, how they were going, in fact, to turn things around.

The money from GLEB came with free business support and training to ensure the new distributor was set up on a firm commercial footing. The three men were also required to put up some of their own money and ensure the new business was a co-operative with women involved just as much as men. Bill put an ad in *The Radical Bookseller* for a couple of workers paying £7,700 a year, three times the pay at PDC London, with applications 'particularly welcome from women'. Turnaround opened for business on April 1st 1984, just three months after PDC closed. It offered many of the same publications as PDC plus a wide range of wholesale and remaindered books, as David Musson remembered when I spoke to him on Zoom. "We decided not to do periodicals and moved into the charity and NGO world, with publishers like Directory of Social Change, CHAR and Shelter as well as more radical publishers like Falling Wall Press and Free Association Books. We also did a lot of gay publishers and took on quite conventional Black publishers like Hansib, which produced books for the black mainstream and I notice is still on the list today."

Indeed it is. Bill Godber is still there too and claims that Turnaround today is as radical as ever, although their website prefers to call their publishers 'interesting, innovative and important' but not 'radical'. "Much

has changed in politics and publishing since the early 80s”, Bill told me on Zoom. “Turnaround’s interests today are centred around movements such as Occupy, Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ+ and climate change. Several of these titles have sold many thousands of copies, but we carry many more books which have sold just a few hundred and these are enabled by more commercial titles we distribute in a wide range of other fields. Our viability has been in the mix.”

If this mix can sometimes make Turnaround appear like any other commercial book distributor, it is nonetheless an extraordinary achievement to be still distributing dissenting publications after four decades which have seen the rise of Amazon and the decimation of the radical book trade, especially as two of the original trio didn’t stay that long. Kingsley left in the summer of 1985 and David Musson soon followed, spending most of his career since working for Oxford University Press. But Bill Godber stayed on, perhaps the most important reason Turnaround has not just survived but prospered. In the 1990s, Bill “somewhat reluctantly” abandoned co-operative working. “Yes, I am very much in charge today”, he says, “I realised along the way that most of my sixty odd workforce want to be treated and paid well but then go home and forget about work. And that’s what I have tried to do.”

In 1986, Kingsley Dawson moved back to Edinburgh with his partner Annie Rhodes, who worked for S&N before joining the Women’s Press. Together, they opened Bookspeed, a similar operation to Turnaround but this time a “family business” owned by the two of them. Thirty-six years on, it is still in rude health, with their son Lewis at the helm and sharing his parents’ commitment, Kingsley says, to “transparency, responsibility and inclusivity” along, of course, with sound financial planning and control. Just as Turnaround owes its existence to PDC’s demise, Bookspeed would never have happened if S&N had kept going.

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In the autumn of 1984, everything had looked so promising for S&N. Even though Kingsley, Rick Seccombe and the other people who set it up in 1979 had all left by then, and PDC in London had collapsed earlier that year, S&N confidently celebrated five years of existence on Tuesday September 4th with a party and disco at Manchester’s Strawberry Duck Pub. The 1970s hits, *Five Years* by David Bowie and *I will Survive* by Gloria Gaynor no doubt produced a smile or two on the dancefloor. The co-operative’s future seemed assured.

It was not to be. In 1981/2 with a turnover of £192,000, not dissimilar to that of PDC London, S&N made a loss of £5,000. This was less than half PDC's loss of £11,200 but, unlike their sister co-operative in London, they took immediate action. They reduced staff to seven, put up the discount they charged to publishers and bookshops, and set up more profitable wholesale deals. Three years later, they were solvent, but in truth they were struggling despite the disco bravado. There was a real need for new technology to replace the manual systems which they still used for invoicing and accounting, and more employees were required to operate the business than their sales could support. In December 1985, two years after PDC's collapse, S&N announced they intended to wind up their business in six months' time, at the end of May 1986. They could see where the radical book market was going, and it did not look hopeful.

The success of the radical book trade in the late 1970s and early 1980s had brought in commercial rivals. Waterstones, set up in 1982, was slowly but inexorably taking over much of the sale of feminist, ecological, and lesbian and gay books. Mainstream companies were offering best-selling radical writers more money to publish their work with them. The wholesale deals that had kept S&N solvent looked likely to dry up soon. S&N jumped before they were pushed. Unlike PDC London, however, they tried to ensure that their closure was a soft landing with no money owed to anyone. Although this was not quite achieved in the end, there was none of the bitterness, regret or blame seen in the South two and a half years before.

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I intended to include more about S&N in this piece, but the editors felt this was a task best done by someone who worked in Manchester or Edinburgh, which I never did: the *I Ching*, in the spring of 1979, had pointed me to a future in London, not Scotland or the North. Hopefully, S&N's full story will be written by someone else soon, as it would be good to see how the politics of that time affected the radical book trade differently there from here in the South. As the North of England and Scotland had to deal with the effects of Thatcherism earlier, and the strongest opposition to the Tory government came initially from there, it must have been easier to believe that S&N was part of a united political movement that combined traditional battles against job closures, such as the miners' strike in 1984-85, with a new (and much more radical) commitment to devolution. In London, the Left at the time felt a lot more splintered, a return once more to disharmonious fragments.

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In March 1984, three months after PDC London collapsed, the *Radical Bookseller* published an angry article by Charles Foster, publications officer at the National Council for Civil Liberties and one of the co-operative's most loyal supporters. He agreed that PDC's working methods could have been improved, but he claimed there was nothing 'fundamentally wrong with PDC that a healthy amount of capitalisation would not have been able to provide. If more imagination had been shown, an operation which distributed to several hundred outlets, many in places where other distributors simply will not go, could have been saved. The people who brought about the downfall of PDC are those who stayed away from a co-operative that needed their support.'

'Those who stayed away' were the large radical publishers like Pluto, Writers and Readers and Verso, who never seriously entertained how they might work together to develop PDC into a distributor for all radical publications, not just the small, uneconomic publishers who had nowhere else to go. John Goodman remembers feeling the same way as Charles Foster at that time. "I can still feel my frustration", he told me, "at how those publishers cuddled up to the mainstream distributors and did not co-operate with each other, let alone with us." Someone else is scathing too, someone who did manage to turn a small radical distributor into a substantial commercial outfit but with no help from Pluto et al. "Both PDC and Turnaround might well have become very different beasts if their natural allies had chosen to work with them", says Bill Godber today. "Without the support of the better funded, larger left publishers it's not so surprising that the smaller left leaning publishers and distributors struggled. That was the main challenge we all faced."

Turnaround managed this challenge and turned it to their advantage. PDC did not. Turnaround was founded by three people with extensive knowledge of selling radical books. At PDC, virtually all the founding members and subsequent workers were book trade beginners. "None of us had direct business experience", Alison Read reminds me, "we all had to learn on the job."

What we did have, though, was plenty of enthusiasm and ability at a time when the British Left was strong. "Lots of people who worked at PDC at the start had a lot to offer", said Charles Landry when we talked once more about the reasons PDC, a venture that meant a great deal personally to both of us, died a premature death. "They went on to do great things but it all

imploded. The chemistry meant it was always doomed to fail.” An example, Charles feels, of this tense chemistry, came from two of the founding members, Liz Cooper who was “always strong-willed and difficult to argue against”, and Paul Westlake, who took responsibility for the finances early on but “never seemed to tell anyone what was going on”.

This is, of course, a little unfair, as neither Paul nor Liz is with us anymore and so are not able to defend themselves. I do not personally agree with Charles about Paul but I do about Liz, one of the most charismatic and insightful people I have ever worked with, but someone whose dogged commitment to principle, I feel, pushed PDC down paths it would have been better not to go and which in the end would prove fatal.

Other PDC workers from the early days will have others they feel are to blame, not least Charles himself, given his involvement in the GLEB Report that condemned PDC to an inevitable demise. And the people who were left on deck in December 1983 as PDC crashed beneath the waves will also have their own candidates, perhaps people they were working with during the dark months before the end when the chemistry must have been not just tense but toxic. No wonder that some people do not want to talk about it on the record now. It brings up disturbing memories that are best forgotten, even four decades later. As Emmylou Harris once sang, ‘The truth bites and stings. I remember just who we were’.²¹

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Perhaps though it is not really about the individuals involved, but about what people believed, their ideology and their politics. In the spring of 1985, Comedia published *What a Way to Run a Railroad – an Analysis of Radical Failure*. In this book, Charles Landry and Russell Southwood were joined by Patrick Wright and David Morley, radical writers and academics, to widen out many of the arguments in the report about PDC for GLEB that Charles and Russell had compiled in the summer of 1983. One key target of the new book was the ‘prefigurative libertarianism’ of 1970s Britain, which many radical projects like PDC came out of, and which Sheila Rowbotham celebrates in *Daring to Hope*. The four authors of *Railroad* claim that there was a disdain in this culture for profit, investment, specialisation, and management, because they were seen as part of the apparatus of capitalism and not essential tools for running any business in a market economy. Truly radical initiatives like PDC were too concerned with becoming ‘islands of

21 In her 1995 song ‘Blackhawk’ which was written by producer Daniel Lanois.

socialist/feminist good practice' which could somehow remain magically immune from the capitalist marketplace in which they operated. As a result, they became inward-looking with too much time spent on internal processes and developing new ways of working rather than ensuring a business survived, too much 'prefiguring' and not enough concentration on figures, too many fucking meetings. It is hardly surprising that the book led to Charles Landry being labelled a 'left-wing Thatcherite', a label of which today he is still curiously proud.

Earlier this year, I re-read *Railroad* and marvelled at its arrogance, short-sightedness, and bravery. It is full of insightful brilliance although it lacks the wisdom, perspective and kindness that comes with age. It is a book that could only have been written by clever young men. The contrast with *Beyond the Fragments* is startling, and it is not simply because *Fragments* came out in the late 1970s when most things seemed possible, whereas *Railroad* is very much a child of Thatcherism six years later. It is also because *Fragments* was written by Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal, and Hilary Wainwright, three equally clever young women, who were immersed in feminism and not in management theory.

Perhaps because I once saw myself as a 'clever young man' too – an aspiration of someone who grew up on a working class housing estate in the 1960s, whose only way of escape was because his Mum told him he was smart - I still think that *Railroad* was on to something and provides the best theoretical framework for understanding why an initially successful radical business like PDC collapsed in acrimony a few years later.

It seems to me now that what PDC needed to survive was much greater specialisation amongst the workers with at least a couple of them developing the kind of expertise in finance that would take many months if not years to learn and perfect. But the co-operative's political commitment in 1977 to a collective structure with nobody allowed to concentrate on money stopped this happening. And the political choice we made that same year, for a workers co-operative with no formal role for publishers to intervene when things went wrong, meant there was no-one to turn to when shit

happens as it always does and always will.²² Bookspeed and Turnaround have survived because their moving spirits, Kingsley Dawson and Annie Rhodes, and Bill Godber are still there forty years later. When things were not working they had the experience and confidence to try something else. PDC could not keep key workers for any sustained length of time, so it never learned from its inevitable mistakes but kept repeating them.

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In the summer of 1976, representatives from most of the British Left gathered in Centerprise Bookshop in Hackney, East London to try and sort out the problems of selling and distributing radical pamphlets, newspapers, and magazines. One group that turned up had been formed only a year before. The Radical Statistics Group was set up in 1975 to show how ‘using statistics can support progressive change’. A year later, its first pamphlet about the health service, *Whose Priorities*, became one of the first publications taken on by the organisation that emerged out of that Centerprise meeting, the new Publications Distribution Co-operative (PDC). ‘Without PDC getting our publications round the bookshops’, the group would later admit, ‘we would not have been able to publish them.’

Three years on, in 1978, a group of men in North London who had been strongly influenced by feminism started publishing the magazine *Achilles Heel*. With its provocative critiques of traditional masculinities, they thought they might well have an audience amongst the nascent men’s groups which were blossoming around the country, like the one I joined in Moseley in Birmingham around that time. So they wanted their magazine to be sold nationwide not just, as one *Achilles Heel* founding member, Andy Metcalf, told me recently, “on a stall in Brixton market”. The only reason that happened was the existence of PDC.

In the Autumn of 2021, there was an exhibition which featured *Achilles Heel* and the ‘forgotten men’s movement of the 1970s’ in the Baltic Arts Centre in Gateshead. Andy and another member of the original collective

²² Since that time, many co-operatives have adopted what is now called a ‘multi-stakeholder’ structure. Giving its publishers a stake in PDC may well have led to conflict but it would also have allowed PDC to use the considerable talent and experience of people like Charles Foster at NCCL, Keith Smith at Interaction and Ruthie Petrie at *Spare Rib*. Some of the original members of PDC, like Charles, were in favour of this as I initially was, but Liz Cooper argued forcefully against it partly because of her antipathy to Bob Young who often seemed to exemplify the worst aspects of publisher intervention when he turned up at Clerkenwell Close as a ‘volunteer’. Liz’s arguments won most of us over at the time, which looking back now seems to me a pity.

travelled up from London to speak to a group of young working class fathers about their own struggles with traditional male roles. *Achilles Heel* may have long since ceased publication but the ideas it explored are still relevant today. Without PDC, those ideas would not have spread as widely as they did.

In these last couple of Covid years too, the debate about the proper use of statistics has become even more crucial to the politics of health and everyday life. The Radical Statistics Group still provides a different perspective from the mainstream about how numbers are used politically, although their important research these days is published on the internet rather than in pamphlets sold in radical bookshops. Without the wide distribution of their work in the late 1970s, and the support, feedback, and legitimation from across Britain that this distribution produced, in short without PDC, it is likely they would not have survived.

PDC may in the end have collapsed in failure but what it did in its seven years of existence was remarkable. Many great radical publications of the 1970s and 1980s would not have been read so widely without Publications Distribution Co-operative to ensure they were put out there and indeed many small groups would not have felt confident about even publishing them. Without distribution, you are just talking to yourself.

Meanwhile at the Clerkenwell Workshops, 27 Clerkenwell Close, London EC1, the ground floor from where, 40 years ago, we hauled up *Spare Rib* and all those other radical magazines, journals, pamphlets and books is now a restaurant that serves great coffee and a lunch that merits a mention in the *Good Food Guide*. And PDC's old stockroom and offices up on the 1st and 2nd Floor, where we had too many fucking meetings talking about collective process and did not spend anywhere near enough time sorting out the finances and accounts, are occupied today by the Institute of Finance Accountants.



Clerkenwell Workshops today

Appendix 1: Where are they now?

What became of the PDC workers and volunteers featured in this article?

Chas Ball (1976-1979)

Chas left for the Highland and Islands to work in rural co-operative development. Later, he was a pioneer in waste and recycling in Leeds (1990s) and in shared mobility as founder of City Car Club (from 2000). Finally, he became CEO of national transport charity, Carplus (now called CoMoUK).

David Berry (1977-1980)

After a long career as a staff producer/director of features and documentaries for BBC TV in White City, David now spends his time writing, playing tennis and having lunch. He has written five books, his latest being *A People's History of Tennis*, and is now writing a book about friendship.

Sue Clarke (1979-1981)

Soon after leaving PDC Sue trained as a carpenter – not an obvious progression route from radical book distribution but that's a longer story! She worked in a women's carpentry co-operative in London for 5 years and then trained as a furniture maker and worked self-employed in London. She moved to Sheffield in the early 90's and continued working as a furniture maker. She then trained as a teacher and taught furniture making and DIY skills, primarily to women-only groups, in several F.E colleges in South Yorkshire as well as in the community. She also volunteered at a women's construction training project in Nicaragua, rebuilding houses after a hurricane and training young women in carpentry skills. She continues to do a mixture of furniture making and teaching.

Gail Chester (1976-1978)

Gail has worked in the radical book trade and been continuously involved in feminist activism since the 1970s, including as a founder of PDC, as an organiser of the 1984 First International Feminist Book Fair, and on the board of Housmans Peace Bookshop, 2002-2012. She co-authored *Rolling Our Own: Women as Printers, Publishers and Distributors* (Comedia, 1981). Her most recent book history article is 'From Self-Publishing Collective to Multinational Corporation: The Publishing History of *In Other Words* – *Writing as a Feminist*', in *Women: A Cultural Review*, 2021. She helped to set up HOWL: History of Women's Liberation, which is gathering material

from the WLM and encouraging grassroots groups and local campaigns to produce their own writing for the HOWL website. She is very fond of a one-minute 15-second video of her life story, made in 2018: www.vimeo.com/304187336

Derek Cohen (1977-1980)

Since PDC Derek spent over 20 years in publishing, working as a writer, editor and editorial director on mainstream IT and other consumer magazines. Following that he spent another 20 years running an online survey software company. He's now retired and is back at university doing a Masters in Bioethics.

Liz Cooper (1976-1979)

Liz worked in magazine distribution, first for the *New Statesman* and then for *News on Sunday*. She learnt Spanish and relocated to Bilbao where she died in 2019. www.theguardian.com/books/2019/aug/12/liz-cooper-obituary

Kingsley Dawson (1977-1979)

After helping set up Turnaround, Kingsley returned to Scotland in 1986 with Annie Rhodes and together they established Bookspeed as a family business, which is still trading 36 years later and is now run by their son, Lewis Dawson. Kingsley and Annie chose Scotland for their business because it is a wonderful small country committed to fairness and inclusion. It's always good to play the Scottish card, but not with Alex Salmond.

John Goodman (1979-1980)

After leaving PDC, John went to CSE Books (distributed by PDC) for a year, then back to Coventry to set up the Co-operative Development Agency where he worked for 18 years before becoming head of policy at Co-operatives UK. In retirement he's busier than ever, amongst other things with the Radical Bookselling History project. He still lives in the Coventry area and is about to become a grandfather.

Pam Isherwood (1977-1981)

Pam still works as a photojournalist and is still a member of the National Union of Journalists. She has been taking pictures of LGBTQ marches, demonstrations and Pride events from the very beginning to the present day.

Hans Klabbers (1978-1980)

Hans went to live in Australia where he became an artist and taught art at a university in the outback for twenty years. He returned to Europe in 2016, determined to dedicate the rest of his life to doing nothing. He lives in an old convent not far from the Belgian border.

Charles Landry (1976-1978)

After leaving PDC in 1978, Charles set up a publishing and consultancy organisation, Comedia (formerly Minority Press Group), whose aim was to promote the importance of the alternative media. Comedia later on devoted itself to providing advisory services to cities across the world and was associated with the notion of the 'creative city'. Charles' work has connected the triad 'culture, creativity and city making'. He has written 15 books, such as *The Creative City: A toolkit for urban innovators*, *The Art of City Making* and *The Civic City in a Nomadic World*. He still works on similar topics and in 2018 co-founded the 'Creative Bureaucracy Festival', now in its 5th year, whose aim is to promote the work public servants do for the common good.

Michael Phillips (1979-1981)

Michael is now retired and lives in Stoke Newington, North London with his dog Molly after a lifetime of working for radical and voluntary causes, many connected with the gay community.

Alison Read (1978-1981)

Alison continued in the book trades and feminist politics and never did adjust to the idea of a boss.

Aleine Ridge (1979-1980)

After leaving PDC, Aleine worked as a counsellor and, since 1990, as a psychotherapist, supervisor and trainer seeing individuals and also working for a number of different organisations like the NHS, Pregnancy Advisory Service, Lesbian Line, London Rape Crisis, Complementary Health Trust, Women and Health, Stress Project, NSPCC, One in Four, MIND, Advance and Angel Drug Project. She co-founded Spiral Holistic Therapy in 1995 and was a co-director until September 2021.

Kim Smailes (volunteer: 1978)

Kim went to Australia too and settled in New South Wales, where she works as an acupuncturist.

Russell Southwood (volunteer: 1976-1977)

Russell Southwood has for the last 21 years run a consultancy and research company in Sub-Saharan Africa and in July 2022 will publish a book called *Africa 2.0 - Inside a Continent's Communications*.

Paul Westlake (1976-1979)

Paul worked in publishing for Zed Press and Serpent's Tail and was a key contributor to the development of the co-operative sector in Hackney and Islington. He died in 2013. www.theguardian.com/books/2013/nov/24/paul-westlake-obituary

Kent Worcester (volunteer: 1977-1978)

Kent moved back to the United States and became an academic. He is now a professor of politics in New York and his work deals with popular culture, intellectual history, trade unions, and social democracy. In his spare time, he reads comics and writes songs.

Bob Young (volunteer: 1976-1977)

Bob Young set up Free Association Books and then trained as a psychotherapist. He died in 2019. www.theguardian.com/science/2019/aug/01/robert-young-obituary

And the 14 other people who worked for PDC either paid or as volunteers between 1976 and 1983...

Moira Turnbull (1977-1978) and **Paul Brown (1976)** both still live in Scotland.

Stella Dawson (1977-1979) moved to America where it is thought she now works as a media executive.

Sasha Alyson (volunteer 1978) After a successful publishing career in the USA, it is thought Sasha now lives in Thailand where he writes.

Clare Yerbury (1978- 1979) is now an artist and graphic designer.

Stephen Hayward (1979-1980) worked in radical publishing in London for many years before his death in 2015.

Victoria Wood (now Treole) (1978-1979) moved to Australia where it is thought she works in television.

There is no information, unfortunately, about **Nicky Mooney** (1978-1979), **Barbara** (1978-1981), **Norman** (volunteer 1978-1980) **Carol Biggs** (1981-1983), **Jean Smith** (1980-1983), **Amanda Baird** (1981-1983), and **Sal Jenkinson** (1981-1983). Hopefully, they will get in touch!

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5. Sheila Rowbotham, *Daring to Hope* (Verso, 2021)

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