

RADICAL BOOKSELLING HISTORY

Newsletter

Issue 7, December 2023

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Editorial

Welcome to *Radical Bookselling History Newsletter 7* and another collection of articles telling stories about, yes, radical bookselling history.

It's becoming something of a tradition to include republications of articles that have appeared elsewhere, and they are well represented this time:

- A long piece on Oakleaf Bookshop in Milton Keynes (1979-1985), written by one of the founder members and originally published by the Open University in booklet form in 1988. As it's not generally available anymore we thought it deserved a new airing, unchanged but with a few notes.
- Shorter pieces on the news that Mudlark will publish Jane Cholmeley's memoir about Silver Moon (from *The Bookseller*, with their permission) and on Housmans, by our regular correspondent Ross Bradshaw, which will also appear in Housmans blog and in The Spokesman.
- A link to 'Jottings of an Anarchist Book-freak' (Dennis Gould) in *Peace News*.

Plenty of original material too of course, notably Dave Cope's study of the Federation of Alternative Bookshops, later renamed the Federation of Radical Booksellers, based on an extensive collection of the organisation's records that we are bringing together to create an archive. Plus articles on Just Books (Belfast) and Sisterwrite (London) and a report welcoming the return of the London Radical Book Fair after a five year absence (we were there).

A feature of our recent activity is that we've made contact with two other groups working in the field, the Bookselling Research Network - international but co-ordinated from the UK - and the Periodicals and Print Culture Research Group at Nottingham Trent University. We're looking forward to working with them and meanwhile you will find short articles about them in this issue.

We can also report steady growth in subscriber numbers. Please help to keep that going - tell your friends and colleagues about us.

Dave Cope, John Goodman, Rick Seccombe and Maggie Walker
Radical Bookselling History Group

Please use this if you want to contact us: rbh@phonecoop.coop

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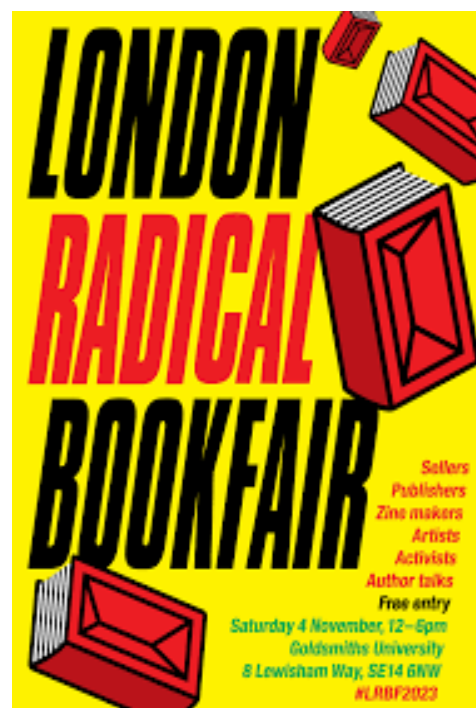
This Newsletter, and
previous issues, can be
downloaded from:
www.leftontheshelfbooks.co.uk
(Research Pages tab)

Design and typesetting

Ben Goodman

News items, old items, and odd bits

After a five-year gap the London Radical Book Fair is back again. It took place on 4 November, in its accustomed venue of the Great Hall at Goldsmith's University of London, and brought in good crowds throughout the day. As well as a healthy range of stands there were a number of talks and break-out sessions. Two of our team (Dave and John) were there, with rare printed copies of the Newsletter and On The Record's bookshop map (you can see it in the top left of this photo). We signed up several new subscribers and unearthed some new leads for bookshop histories.



Book Fairs

While we're on the subject, book fairs seem to be making a comeback:

- the Derry Radical Book Fair is on 27 January 2024 at the Pilots Row Community Centre in Derry <https://derryradicalbookfair.wordpress.com/>.
- the 1st Totnes Alternative Book Fair is on 17 February 2024 at the Barrel House Ballroom in Totnes.

Nottingham Summer School

John Goodman attended one day of the four-day Periodicals and Print Culture Research Group's annual summer school at Nottingham Trent University.

Tony Simpson, the Spokesman Books veteran, gave an illustrated talk on 'Che's Nottingham Impression' – an account of how Spokesman published the first edition of Che Guevarra's diaries in 1968, shortly after Che's death in 1967.

Philipp Koellen, who runs the Sparrows' Nest Archive, introduced us to the collection, which holds tens of thousands of books, journals, pamphlets, zines, leaflets, posters and unpublished archival materials, focused on the history of anarchism and local radical history. <https://thesparrowsnest.org.uk/> and <https://peopleshistreh.wordpress.com/>.

In the afternoon Philipp guided us on a city centre walk that he entitled 'Agitating the Lawless Rabble'.



On our city centre walk

We hope to carry more information about the Periodicals and Print Culture Research Group's work in future editions of the *Newsletter*.

<https://www.ntu.ac.uk/research/groups-and-centres/groups/periodicals-and-print-culture-research-group>

Dennis Gould's retirement

Indefatigable printer, campaigner and anarchist book-freak Dennis Gould claims to be retiring. *Peace News* has reprinted this article of his to mark the occasion <https://peacenews.info/node/10750/jottings-anarchist-book-freak>

Red Shoes Poster Archive

We've established a connection with Shaun Featherstone, who runs the Red Shoes Poster Archive in Cardiff, holding well over 1,000 posters covering the whole range of radical social change. Shaun is planning to write about the archive in a future *Newsletter*: <https://www.facebook.com/p/RED-SHOES-Poster-Archive-100063609391083/>

Listing of Radical Bookshops

Dave Cope's list of radical bookshops has been updated. We'd love it if you could find the time to look over this updated list and send us your comments – for example missing names (especially surnames) and dates of opening and closing. 'Radical Bookshops Listing' at <https://www.leftontheshelfbooks.co.uk/research.php>.

Housmans Book Launch 16 September 2023

Dave Cope

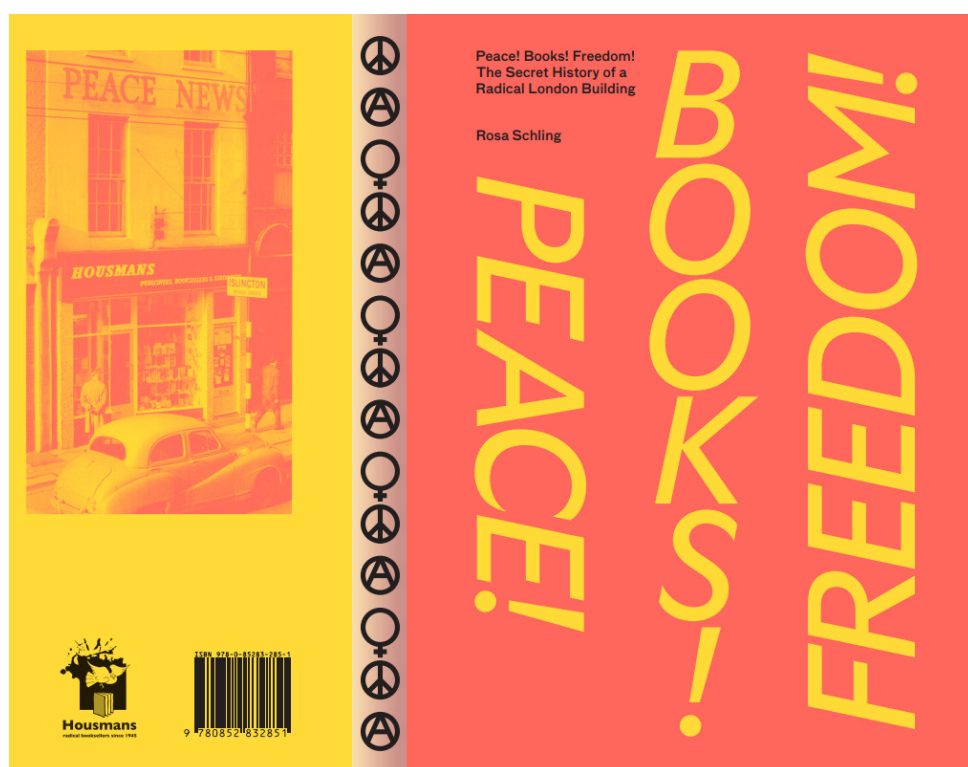
Housmans Bookshop was crowded for the launch of *Peace! Books! Freedom! The Secret History of a Radical London Building*, written by Rosa Schling from On the Record. With her colleagues and volunteers (some thirty people in all) from this radical oral history project she had organised over thirty interviews with individuals who had worked, as volunteers or paid workers, in organisations based in the building at 5 Caledonian Road.

This is not just the history of a radical bookshop, now one of the country's longest surviving ones, but of a building that housed a fascinating mix of organisations and businesses. Some of those who were based there have links to the radical book trade. The premises were bought in 1959 to house the magazine *Peace News* as well as Housmans; Porcupine Books, a major radical second-hand book business, was housed in the basement as were Radical Research Publications. The Committee of 100 and the Direct Action Campaign were offshoots of CND that met in 5 Cally Road (as the site is popularly called) and produced pamphlets and badges that sold well in radical bookshops; as did Campaign Against the Arms Trade, the ABC Defence Campaign, The Gay Liberation Front and the British Withdrawal from Northern Ireland Campaign.

Diana Shelley spoke of her memories of the Committee of 100 and *Peace News*, both of which she was involved in. Paul Gravett spoke of London Greenpeace and the McDonald's Libel Campaign also based at No.5. Apart from the longstanding link with *Peace News*, which did decamp to Nottingham for a time, the organisation with the longest tenancy there was London Gay Switchboard. Julian Hows spoke of this and the GLF. All speakers talked movingly of the support from the shop and the Trustees, and the influence this had had on their lives. Housmans has had a long tradition of employing LGBTQ+ staff, who obviously found it a welcoming working environment.



One other area of activity that the shop and trustees were involved in was local community campaigning over the planning issues that created the blighted area around King's Cross. Few radical bookshops have such a record. Probably the small anarchist bookshops were the most involved in traditional community action, and in London this was even rarer, and Diana Shelley was a key person in this.



One aspect of the project that is unique is that it led to the gathering of a wide range of documents from many of the organisations mentioned that have been presented to the Bishopsgate Library as a permanent collection, together with the audio recordings of interviews. Bookshops take note!

As with Rosa's other books on radical bookshops (*The Lime Green Mystery: An Oral History of the Centerprise Co-operative* and *A Bookshop for All* on the Newham Bookshop) she is concerned with celebrating their role in their particular communities and the people, some known, some unknown, who make use of them. The interviews extend far beyond managers or owners, though these are not ignored. This book, published by Housmans, is a stimulating and ambitious artefact in itself, with archive sections combining photos, reproductions of leaflets and magazine covers and collages; original endpapers, and a cover that is a work of art in itself with its dynamic use of colour, text and a genuinely radical spine without text – just symbols. The book is a great read, and the different individuals and organisations, often overlapping, are very well linked up. It is full of surprises and I can guarantee that every reader will be delighted or moved by some new discovery of this country's radical history.

Peace! Books! Freedom! The Secret History of a Radical London Building is available from Housmans (<https://housmans.com/>), £10. ISBN 9780 85283 285 1

Photos: Daniel Gayne, John Goodman

In praise of Housmans

Ross Bradshaw

Housmans Bookshop in London and I go back a long way. I would visit it on my occasional trips to London in the 70s, but also subscribed to “Housmans Peace Packets” - a monthly parcel of leaflets for events I could not get to (I was living in rural Aberdeenshire) and conferences I could only dream about organised by groups like the Peace Pledge Union, the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the attractively named Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. The packages also included pamphlets from these and all sorts of other peace organisations.

I learned a lot and yearned more. So I joined the PPU and - thanks to a table of literature at Aberdeen People’s Press, a local radical magazine and print set up – I came across *Peace News* (PN) and the anarchist magazine *Freedom*.

PN - based in the Housmans building - became my favourite magazine, which I would start contributing to... and Aberdeen developed a *Peace News* support group.

I became a customer at Housmans initially when Harry Mister was in charge. Compared to my scruffy, youthful hippy appearance, Harry was definitely an old man in a suit but more importantly, he was an activist entrepreneur. In his *Guardian* obituary, the now also late Howard Clark sketched out Harry Mister’s importance to Housmans, *Peace News* and the wider peace movement.* Harry also has the idea that if Housmans also stocked large amounts of stationery, local Kings Cross businesses would put their money into the peace movement. People were selling that stationery for many years afterwards... Howard Clark’s obituary drew attention to the large number of groups which were based at 5 Cally Road. Was it really true that a group called Peace Action London met there at the same time as London Action for Peace or was this an urban myth? I hope it was true.

Among the groups who did meet there was London Greenpeace, no relation to Greenpeace. London Greenpeace was a small direct action group which achieved fame for its campaign against McDonald’s, subsequent fame when Helen Steel and Dave Morris won the “McLibel” case, and more recent fame when it was revealed that a high percentage of the group were police infiltrators, one of whom was involved in writing the McDonald’s leaflet. **

Despite, or perhaps because of, Aberdeen’s remoteness, there was a plethora of left organisations and alternative businesses. As well as Aberdeen Peoples Press, there was an environmental magazine, *Aether*, whose team also ran

a wholefood stall in the market. There was a wholefood shop, a city farm, Jaws wholefood cafe, a youth advice centre, Boomtown Books... with a very active Aberdeen Libertarian Socialist Group (in those days, libertarian was a left-wing word). The ALSG, amongst other things, organised what might well have been the first gay rights demonstration in Scotland, years before partial decriminalisation of gay relationships. An older type of politics was represented by the Aberdeen Peace Council, under the leadership of Ray Newton. Whereas the rebuilt CND and the nonviolent revolutionaries had the YCL as members and colleagues, the older communists were closer to the Peace Council. You can work out why.

One odd occasion in our world was the appearance of the Aberdeen Chief Constable - and his wife! - who came to Aberdeen nonviolence study group to talk about conflict reduction in police training. He knew he was talking to people who believed in breaking unjust laws. In passing, he promised us that if police in the UK became generally armed - there was a contemporary discussion about that - he would immediately resign. He never asked for "Chatham House rules" but we all talked freely and I respect him for that.

But we knew that other parts of the police *were* interested in what we were up to... This was the age of political trials - the ABC case (Aubrey, Berry, Campbell), the Persons Unknown Trial... and that of the BWNIC 14. The British Withdrawal from Northern Ireland Campaign was a pacifist campaign, which on the left stood separately from the Troops Out Movement. Among BWNIC's projects was giving the leaflet "Some Information for Discontented Soldiers" with advice on how they could avoid the war in Ireland. A trickle headed to Sweden seeking political asylum and a few were aided to go underground or find false identities. The trial of the fourteen for Incitement to Disaffection went on for months, but the jury accepted the defence that they - and we in Aberdeen (four of us had also been charged but our case depended on the main trial) - were only aiding discontented soldiers, not inciting disaffection. Naturally, several of the fourteen were associated with Housmans/*Peace News*. ****

But Housmans went through some hard times. The area around Kings Cross was pretty grim for a long period. Drug dealing was pretty open, it was a red-light area with a lot of derelict buildings and directly opposite Housmans was a strip joint. The irony is that Housmans was one of the few businesses to stand against the developers who were quite happy to winkle people out by leaving them in the middle of a planning blight area. In fact it was *PN* staffer Diana Shelley and her partner Phil Jeffries who were

key in ensuring that the area was able to resist the worst of inappropriate development. *** Housmans refused a shed load of money to move.

It was perhaps around then that staffing also became an issue at Housmans, and it sometimes felt that one or two of the people on the counter... well, let's leave it at that. There were stand out workers though, like Malcolm Hopkins who was very knowledgeable about writing about London and his London section and London meetings kept the interest going.

It was all a bit male though. All male in fact for many years. So much so that I was astonished when a woman joined the team (these days the majority of the staff are either female or non-binary).

Dipping back... before the advent of the internet, radical bookshops like Compendium (London), Mushroom Bookshop (Nottingham) and Housmans were among the few places you could buy American imports or Indian, in Housmans case. It was through Housmans that I discovered Thomas Merton, Barbara Deming, Gene Sharp, the *Catholic Worker* writer Dorothy Day, and many others. I bought the lovely spiral bound diaries of the American War Resisters League and bought a shelf of books on or by Gandhi... Indeed, for a period Housmans had its own distribution service carrying imports and small peace movement publishers.

Though I personally abandoned anarchism in the mid-eighties, then pacifism towards the end of the decade, the call has never gone away. I still get Housmans Peace Diary every year! Housmans broadened its range of books and - thanks to the Peace News Trustees owning the building - it survived the political downturn of the late 80s and 90s which saw off most radical bookshops.

For a period I was a member of the board. This was before I set up Five Leaves Bookshop, and my time there was helpful to me at least as Housmans' finances began to turn round, a new customer base developed, and radical bookselling became an option once again in more towns than London. A good job nobody paid attention to an earlier report of mine on Housmans, which advocated closure! Or, indeed, my attempts to close down the Peace Diary.

Nik Gorecki from Housmans was instrumental in reviving the Alliance of Radical Booksellers and starting up the London Radical Bookfair, which returned this year for the first time since COVID (November 4th, at Goldsmiths in South London - see page 3). Nik's been there a long time now, is a friend as well as a colleague. He'd seen the shop pull out of the doldrums

and become the much more attractive place it is now. The current staff also includes the young adult fiction writer Catherine Barter, one of those who took the ARB's Bread and Roses Award for Radical Publishing forward to spin off the Little Rebels Award for Radical Children's Publishing. Like a lot of children, the Little Rebels Award is now bigger than its parent.

Housmans did struggle under and following the worst COVID years, being in central London - thanks to home working, and the collapse in the numbers of people visiting. COVID did not overlook the staff who worked there either.

But it survives, certainly the best radical bookshop in central London and it is still a port of call when I am down there.

*www.theguardian.com/news/2006/feb/06/guardianobituaries.politics

**www.theguardian.com/uk/2013/jun/21/mclibel-leaflet-police-bob-lambert-mcdonalds

***kxdf.wordpress.com/2008/12/20/diana-on-phil-a-truely-irreplacable-campaigner-for-our-community/

****www.historyworkshop.org.uk/war-military/radical-object-peace-newsbnic-poster/

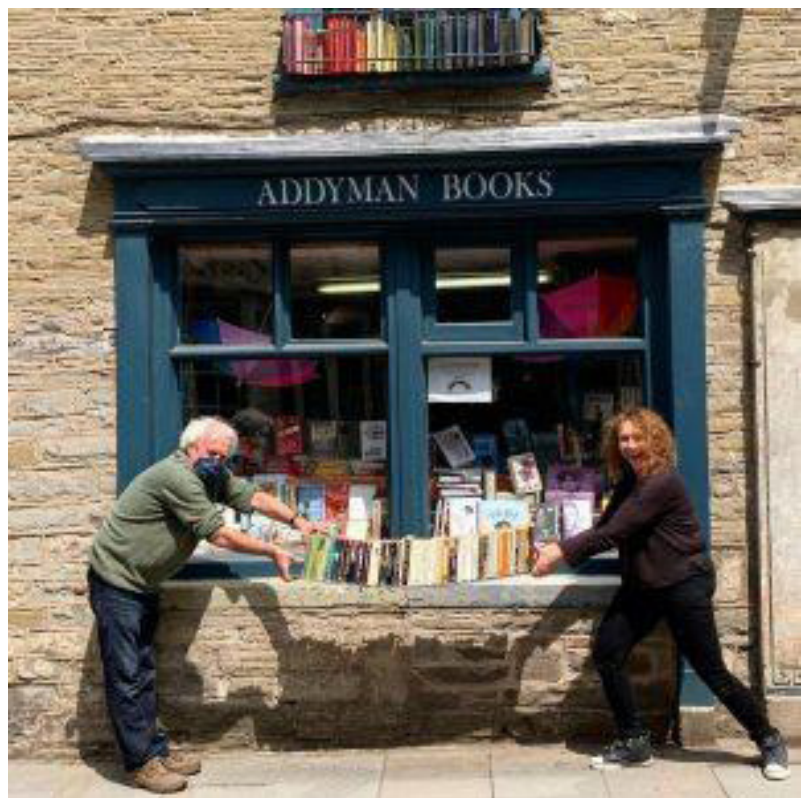
Ross Bradshaw runs Five Leaves Bookshop, and its associated publishing house, in Nottingham

The Bookselling Research Network

The Bookselling Research Network was started in March 2020 to provide a space where researchers, booksellers, publishers, and bookselling organisations around the world could debate the history, practice, and culture of bookselling. Our first launch event, a panel at the 2020 London Book Fair, was cancelled due to Covid, but our visibility and spread of activity has improved since then. Each year we now hold a series of on-line symposia and an annual academic conference.

The Network was founded by Dr Eben Muse (Bangor University's Stephen Colclough Centre for the History and Culture of the Book) and Professor Samantha Rayner (University College London's Centre for Publishing). The goal was to connect people who work in bookselling with others who are researching the field. We were aware that a broad range of work was being done on bookselling in various fields. Individual researchers were now writing on the subject, and the booksellers associations in various countries were promoting research into the business cases for bookselling. Work on bookshops as cultural interaction spaces and spaces of radical activity was appearing in print and in academia. What was lacking was a common space where these threads of activity could be woven together to promote the field's importance and impact.

The BRN was imagined as a network that would encourage research into bookshop-related histories, economic environments, professional practices and cultural impacts, providing an evidence base to support the strategic decision-making of the bookselling councils and associations. By making bookselling research available via public events (conferences, symposia, lectures and workshops) and publications (journal articles, trade articles, books, reports) it is hoped that we can develop the field of bookselling so that knowledge gaps are filled with research that demonstrates the impact



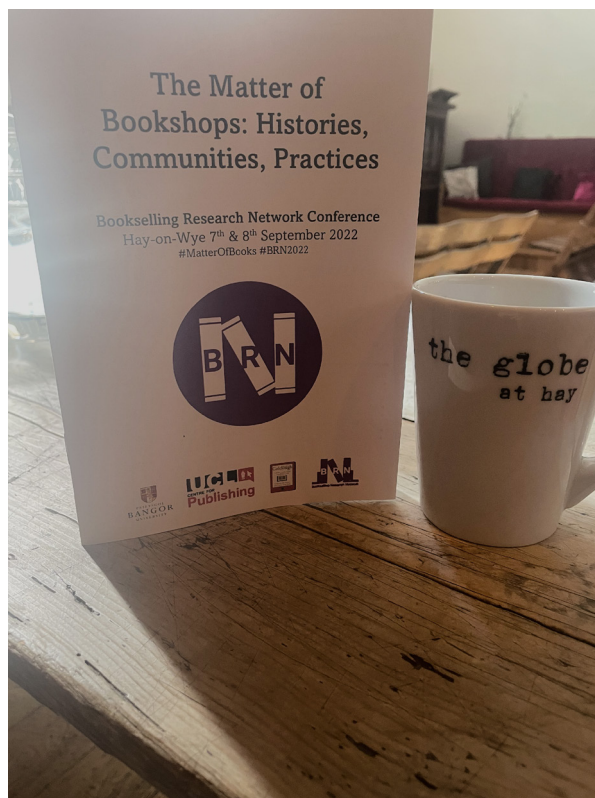
BRN bookseller members Derek Addyman and Anne Brichto measuring 2-metre distance before re-opening their shop after lockdown

bookshops and booksellers have (and have had) on our cultural, economic, and social worlds.

To this end, the BRN established its first symposia series in 2022. Our first online session, in January 2022, was **introduced by Meryl Halls**, Chief Executive of the Booksellers Association of the UK and Ireland. In a warm welcome to the new network, she spoke of the purpose and passion of bookselling. She congratulated the British book trade for their robust business plans, pointing out that the UK gained booksellers during the pandemic. Booksellers, she said, are place-makers—they make a difference to their communities. “Bookselling”, she said, “has a positive cultural impact on the community and wider society – books matter and so bookshops matter”.

The following symposia focused on **bookselling history**. Bookseller Dr Will Smith explored the rich history of Sam Read Booksellers, a bookshop that opened between The Fells in 1887 and is still a thriving shop today. He was followed by Simon Eliot, Professor of the History of the Book at the Institute of English Studies. In his talk, he emphasised the value of archives as providing a source of evidence for a history of bookselling that avoids the “ideologies of the present”.

The third symposium in May, “**Developing Collaterals: Book Retail Networks in the Creation of Social Prosperity**”, brought together Dr Simon Frost, Bournemouth University, Prof. Corinna Norrick-Rühl, University of Münster, and Dr Ryan Raffaelli, Harvard Business School. In this fascinating trio of talks, books and bookselling were seen as fundamentally



First BRN Conference at The Globe in Hay-on-Wye

social. Simon Frost's research into the bookselling ecosystem that existed in Southampton in 1900 was echoed in Corinna Norrick-Rühl's model of the bookstore as a node in a cultural, economic and educational networks. Ryan Raffaelli tied these together in his study of the factors that have allowed bookstores to re-invent themselves and survive today: community, curation and convening.

In September 2022 the BRN held its first conference, **The Matter of Bookshops**, at Hay-on-Wye. Booksellers and academics from Europe, Asia, Australia and North America considered issues that included the history of bookselling, international bookselling, cultures of bookselling, and radical bookselling. The conference was followed by our second series of symposia, beginning with **Feminist & Queer Bookshops – Community and Censure**, in which Drs Kathy Liddle and Sarah Pyke presented their work on feminist and queer bookstores as places of contested cultural interactions. **The Spaces of Bookselling with Kristen Highland** provided an opportunity to hear Dr Highland talk about her work on the cultural and physical spaces of bookstores. In May the topic moved to China, with Dr Simon Mahony of Beijing Normal University talking on **Booksellers and Bookstores in Mainland China: the Age of Common Prosperity**.

Dr Matthew Chambers of the University of Warsaw and BRN Publications Director organised our second conference, **Bookshops: Online and On the High Street** which was hosted by the Centre for Book Cultures and Publishing at the University of Reading. According to Philip Jones, writing in *The Bookseller*, “the connecting thread” of the speakers “was not difficult to discern”. As each speaker talked about the impact bookshops had on their own lives or communities, it became clear that “it is not just the bookshop customers whose lives are changed by bookshops”. The keynote address, “Bücher & Books: Cross-Lingual Bookselling in German Bricks-and-Mortar Bookstores” was presented by Corinna Norrick-Rühl from the University of Münster. Other presenters included booksellers and researchers speaking on topics that included Gay's the Word bookshop, City Lights Bookstore, Women-Owned Bookstores in America, Digital Bookselling, and Independent Bookstore Activism in India.

The Bookselling Research Network has another exciting line-up of symposia scheduled for the coming year, starting with Josh Cook, bookseller and co-owner at Porter Square Books in Cambridge, Mass, speaking about his new book *The Art of Libromancy: On Selling Books and Reading Books in the Twenty-first Century*, followed by sessions on Re-Imagining Bookstores,

Bookselling in India, and Women Booksellers. Our next conferences are planned for Nottingham, England in 2024 and Munich, Germany in 2025.

In addition to our symposia and conferences, the BRN also publishes interviews with booksellers, and blog posts with stories about the culture and commerce of bookselling. Through its web site, mailing list, and online bibliography of writing on bookselling, the BRN provides access to a community of people who are connected to work around bookshops and bookselling. By encouraging membership that crosses borders between academia and the commercial world of bookselling, we provide the opportunity for knowledge exchange between different communities connected to bookshops (booksellers, researchers, publishers, associations, readers).

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Website: <https://booksellingresearchnet.uk/>

Mudlark secures Cholmeley's Silver Moon bookshop memoir

By Heloise Wood

Reprinted from *The Bookseller* with their kind permission. The original article is here: <https://www.thebookseller.com/rights/mudlark-secures-cholmeleys-silver-moon-bookshop-memoir>

Mudlark has signed a book from feminist bookshop Silver Moon's co-founder Jane Cholmeley, *A Bookshop of One's Own: How a Group of Women Set Out to Change the World*.

Anna Mrowiec, senior commissioning editor at the HarperCollins imprint, negotiated the deal for UK and Commonwealth rights with James Spackman at The bks Agency. *A Bookshop of One's Own* will be published in hardback, e-book and audiobook on 29th February 2024, ahead of International Women's Day on 8th March.



*Jane Cholmeley
co-founder of Silver
Moon bookshop*

HarperCollins said: "The Silver Moon bookshop on London's Charing Cross Road was nothing short of iconic. Co-founded by Jane Cholmeley in 1980s London, it went on to become Europe's biggest women's bookshop, hosting a constellation of literary stars from Maya Angelou to Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter. Silver Moon opened in Thatcher's Britain against a backdrop of homophobia and misogyny. Yet in an industry dominated by men and at a time when the government was attacking the gay community with Clause 28, it went on to provide sanctuary and inspiration to thousands of women.

"*A Bookshop of One's Own* is the story of a little feminist bookshop that thrived, against all odds, from a woman at the heart of the women's liberation movement – a true feminist and lesbian icon. A fascinating slice of social history, it reveals the struggle and joy that comes with starting an underdog business, and it's a celebration of the power women have to change the narrative when they are the ones holding the pen."

Cholmeley said: "This is a story of books, politics, love and laughter. It

is from a time when there were culture wars, but the Gay and Women's Liberation Movements were running strong. There was so much energy and we felt we could change the world for the better.

"We must know our history. Not just for the record, but for vigilance in the future. It is particularly timely, today, when the battles we fought on issues of women's safety, abortion, LGBTQ rights, the banning of books and suppression of diverse voices have reared up again around the world."

She added: "HarperCollins sponsored the Young Bookseller of the Year Award in Memory of Silver Moon's [co-founder] Sue Butterworth, and I could not be more happy that they are publishing this book and will bring it to the widest possible audience; those who knew Silver Moon and the next generations."

Mrowiec commented: "Jane truly is an inspiration. What she, Sue Butterworth and Jane Anger did is extraordinary, creating not only a successful business but a unique space for female writers to thrive – it's unsurprising that the likes of Jacqueline Wilson and Sandi Toksvig have named her an icon.

"Reading her memoir transports the reader to a very different time and into the heart of a vibrant movement, with a story that's told with great insight, humour and attitude – and with some great tidbits about the literary stars of the age. Jane has always shone a light on the work of other people, so we are glad the world is finally going to hear her own story."

Silver Moon was founded 1984 in Charing Cross Road, London, by Cholmeley and business partner Butterworth. It closed in 2001 following substantial rent increases but re-opened the following year as a specialist department within Foyle's bookshop.

Just Books, Belfast: A Tentative History

Cahal McLaughlin, with additional material by Elaine Thomas and Louise O'Meara.

Introduction

Based mainly on my memory, this essay will attempt to provide information on the creation and existence of the co-operatively run bookshop in Belfast, Just Books, which was founded in 1978 and ran with different personnel until the mid-1990s. I was involved until 1984. I have used first names throughout, partly for reasons of memory and because not everyone may be content to have their identity publicised after such a long period without consent. I hope those whose names I have forgotten will forgive my occasional memory losses. I provide a very personal framework, in the hope that I can offer motivation and background to the setting up of this unique bookshop.

Political and Social Context

In the late 60s and early 70s the violent repression of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights movement by the state led to the re-establishment of the IRA, followed by the introduction of the British Army and a war lasting 30 years, commonly known as the Troubles. The unionist majority, formed at the creation of the state in 1921, allowed discrimination in housing, employment and the gerrymandering of elections, e.g. Derry had a majority nationalist population but a perpetual unionist city council until the fall of the Stormont Government in 1972. The outbreak of violence enforced the division of communities, with many areas remaining, or returning to, communities of a similar political outlook. Belfast city was divided, particularly in working class areas, into separate communities. Although the city centre was an area open to all, it was generally deserted after the shops and pubs closed at 6pm, due to the violence that included bomb attacks and the killings of citizens. The legacy of division continues to this day in working class communities,



with neighbourhoods identified by particular sets of flags, murals and kerb painting.

Origins

I had dropped out of university in Belfast, mainly due to dissatisfaction with my chosen subject of architecture (too much study of sewers!) and the parochial nature of higher education in the north (the majority of students came from the area). I went to study at a teacher training college in Leeds, where I was introduced to the concept of anarchism by Tony; this radicalisation led to my dropping out of my second college (I loved the subject of sociology, but not the institutional setup). The main themes of political debate at home had, inevitably, focused on discrimination, civil rights, and colonialism, whereas in Leeds my views opened up to a much broader scope of politics, including union strikes, feminism, and LGBT rights.

After a brief stint at a printshop and Leeds Free School, I took up bus conducting, mainly between Leeds and Bradford. Political activity included distributing *Leeds Free Paper* and resisting the presence of fascist groups. I also attended pickets outside Irish-themed businesses in Leeds when the anarchists Marie and Noel Murray were sentenced to death by hanging for the killing of a policeman in the south of Ireland. The campaign worked, to the extent that the sentence was commuted to a life jail term.

When I decided to return to live in Belfast, I met with some anarchists who had been involved in the Murray campaign. Ronnie was running a bookstall at Queen's University and we both thought that a bookshop in Belfast might work. Dave, who ran a printshop with his partner Marilyn, became interested and when the printshop had to relocate we agreed to share a new building.

JUST BOOKS

7 Winetavern St.
SMITHFIELD Ph 225426
BELFAST BT1 1JQ

JUST BOOKS is run as a co-operative and has been in existence for eight years now.

OPENING HOURS: 10 00 a.m.-5.00 p.m.
Mon, Tue, Thurs, Fri, Sat. (Closed all day Wed.)

LOCATION: The old Smithfield area of Belfast opposite the new market building, below the Shankill and the Falls.

SERVICES: Mail order, bookstalls, library supply, Prisoners' Book Service (1/3 off publisher's price)

SPECIALITIES: Anarchism, Ireland, feminism, lesbian & gay literature, socialism, international politics, media.

OTHER GOODS: Posters, badges, earrings, postcards, magazines pamphlets, papers, Irish Language cassettes, small stock of feminist & alternative records.

PUBLICATIONS: Postcards, cards, catalogue of books on Ireland (other catalogues to follow).



We chose a derelict building, 7 Winetavern Street, for several reasons: being derelict, we could afford the lower rent by repairing it ourselves; it was in the city centre and therefore relatively neutral territory; and it was next to Smithfield market, which was situated at the bottom of the Shankill and Falls Roads – two areas associated with differing political identities, unionist and nationalist respectively. Unfortunately, the pigeons who had made nests in the top floor lost their homes. We had enough amateur practical skills between us to build the infrastructure, repaint everything and construct bookshelves. The bookcases were painted geranium red and there was magnolia painted chipboard paper on the walls. Smells of coffee and cigarette smoke mingled with fumes from the SuperSer gas heater. More often than not there would be music being played. The bookshop was on the ground floor, the printshop on the top floor, and the middle floor eventually became a café. The café served freshly made simple fare such as pizza and salad, baked potatoes and curry with flapjacks to follow.

We had visited several community/radical bookshops in England in order to learn from their experiences; these included News from Nowhere in Liverpool, Grass Roots Books in Manchester and York Community Books. They introduced us to practices, policies and networks of publishers that proved invaluable. We were able to achieve an extended credit from distributors and publishers in starting off. We tapped into our connections to radical networks in Belfast, which helped us attract long term loans and we secured a bank loan to allow us to open with a modest but impressive stock.

Principles and Politics

The shop was an extension of our identity as the Belfast Anarchist Collective, although not everyone who worked in the shop necessarily regarded themselves as anarchists. We operated on co-operative principles, having weekly meetings to discuss the issues that ensued from establishing a radical bookshop in the centre of a city that was experiencing



"Under The Health Surface"

VIDEO REVIEW

The most significant aspects of this programme on women's health are that it is for the most part, told by the women who suffer from bad health themselves; and unlike most other programmes on this issue it does not place the cycle of ill-health in a context of a personal problem but rather looks at the class nature of it. Most of the ill health and associated specific illnesses such as heart disease, hepatitis bronchitis, gastroenteritis, spina bifida, etc. are preventable. They are directly related to unemployment, poverty, bad housing and compounded by unionist discrimination.

Bad housing is a major problem in Belfast. By the 1960s 1/3 of the stock in the public sector had been built before 1850, and 87% of all houses were in need of repair. To go some way towards remedying this, huge housing complexes were built using inferior materials and often not complying to general standards. Places such as Moyard and Divis were the results.

Women from Moyard in West Belfast talk about the maisonettes, which were built as a dumping ground for single parents. They talk about the damp and cold in the complex leading to at least one death — a young boy died from an uncommon type of polio caused by extreme damp and cold. 75% of all hepatitis in Belfast came from the Moyard area, as well as in 1982 the first case of polio in Ireland or the U.K. The problems of rats and vermin (besides the Brits and UDR) have led to many pressures apart from the obvious physical ones. Women speak about being afraid to let their children out to play and having to keep them cramped up in the maisonettes all day. As one woman put it, it's 'like a prison'.

They conducted health surveys in the area and widely publicised the results — one of which was the fact that the water lying

about in pools around the area was 90% raw sewage.

Divis suffers many of the same problems. Women here spoke of children constantly getting colds and other 'minor' illnesses. Many people get weekly prescriptions for nerves, and sleeping tablets to help deal with problems such as stress, tension, and depression, in overcrowded areas. Women are especially prone to these as they tend to spend more time cooped up at home with the kids.

Most estates are poorly served by shops and many people are living on state benefits. The north has the highest rate of spina bifida in the world and though this disease has been shown to be related to poor diet many people cannot afford to eat the food that is necessary for good health. This point was made by some of the Moyard women who talked about fruit being a luxury — especially with children, who would gobble it up in minutes!

Watching this programme and listening to women speak of their experiences rekindles the anger that we all feel from time to time. That anger has become an energy for the women in the programme. They have formed self-help groups dealing with drug dependence and depression. They have got the Moyard maisonettes demolished and some of the Divis blocks are being pulled down. Their sense of strength is powerful.

This is a well made and beautifully shot programme, produced by a woman who lives in Belfast. It is available for hire from Just Books, 7 Winetavern St., Belfast, or to purchase from Northern Visions, 9, Winetavern St., Belfast. We hope it will be shown by community groups and women's health groups, as it deserves a wide audience. ■

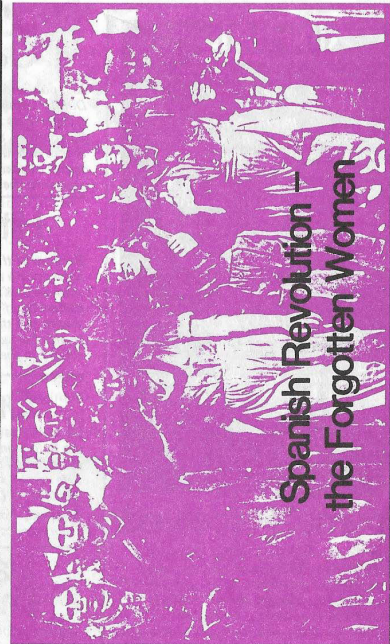
CHANNEL 4, 22nd June '86.

55p Channels 20p
Elegant 2.99p

Aug/Sep '86 No. 5

A Belfast Anarchist Bi-Monthly

ANIRIAL



Spanish Revolution —
the Forgotten Women

★ CONTENTS ★

Sectarianism
Strike at the RVH
'Supergrasses'
Women's Health

extended political violence. Decision-making was primarily based on consensus, which meant prolonged debates with decisions often postponed for weeks in order to facilitate agreement. Obviously, we wanted to be as inclusive as possible, but this brought many issues about stocking material that could be seen as divisive or discriminatory or favouring 'sides' in the conflict. It was many months before we agreed to stock *Republican News*, the publication of the republican movement, and which could be interpreted as including justification for their armed struggle. We also stocked *Combat*, a loyalist publication, primarily because it contained a quote by the anarchist Emma Goldman on its front cover at one point.

Less difficult decisions were made about feminist, lesbian and gay, environmental, educational, and socialist publications. Books, pamphlets, magazines, periodicals, posters, and postcards filled the small shop. Reflecting now on the range of publications, there are a few that jump out as inappropriate, e.g. Chinese communist posters of work and play; I even had one in our house because I loved the colours and design, not because I was a Maoist! Just Books also published some material, including a range of postcards and badges, and a well-researched catalogue of radical books on Ireland, which were printed by Dave and Marilyn upstairs.

Another aspect of our work as anarchists related to communications. We published periodicals, sometimes consistently, sometimes sporadically, ranging from *Outta Control* to *Ainrail*, which we sold in the shop and also at other shops in Belfast. We were involved in many campaigns, including opposition to the building of a nuclear power station at Carnsore Point in Wexford, against uranium mining in Donegal, advocating abortion liberalisation, and protesting British government prison policies that led to the hunger strike when ten prisoners died in 1981.

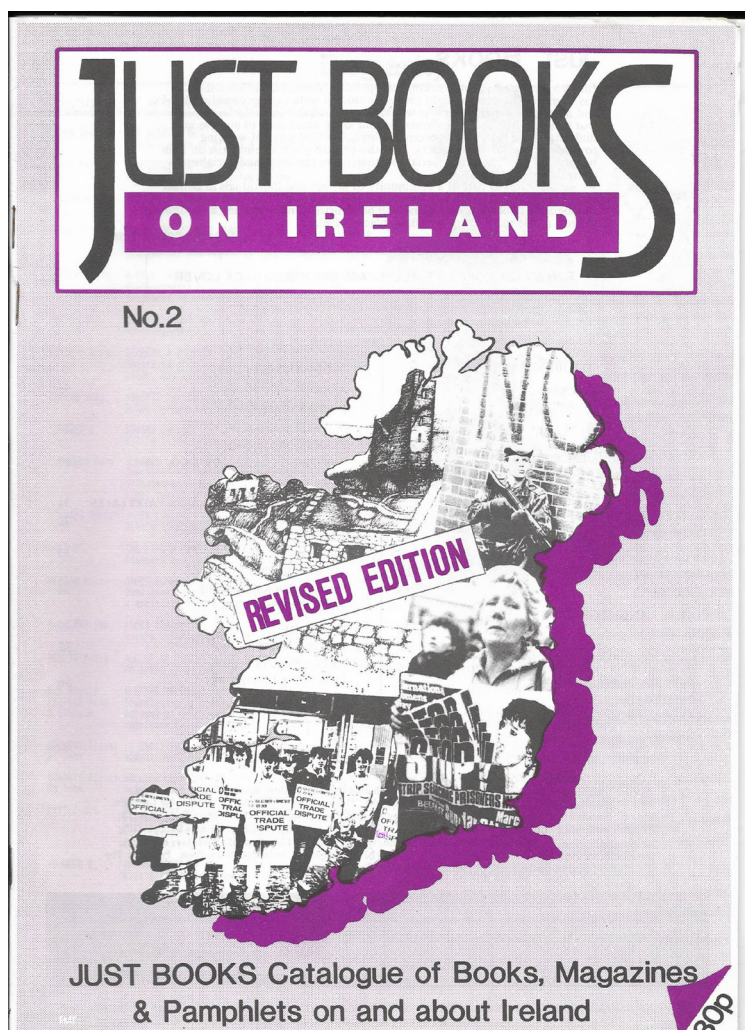
The bookshop ran a Prisoners Book Scheme which gave a 30% discount on our books if they were bought for prisoners. Given the huge numbers of people in prison at this point in time, this was helpful for their families. We also provided a service of re-covering books for prisoners. Because the prison system forbade any books on Irish history or politics, we replaced covers with other themed covers to help them get into the prisons. This was a service we provided for all prisoners.

The shop and the café above became a meeting point for many debates and events, small as it was. For example, there was a street theatre protest against the visit of President Ronald Reagan in 1984.

We were also the focal point for some people who claimed no political identity, but who sought out a more neutral space in Belfast city centre to meet, browse and chat.

Personnel

While Ronnie and I started the shop, with the crucial support of Dave, the number of people who joined the collective over the years increased, to include Maggie, Sean, Dessie, Elaine, Evie, Ann, Louise, Helen, Karen,



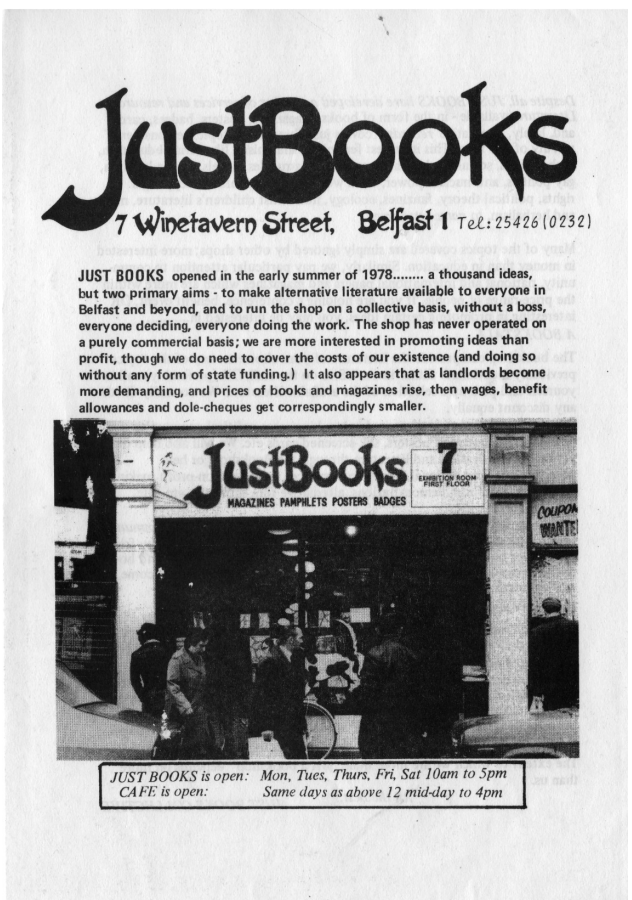
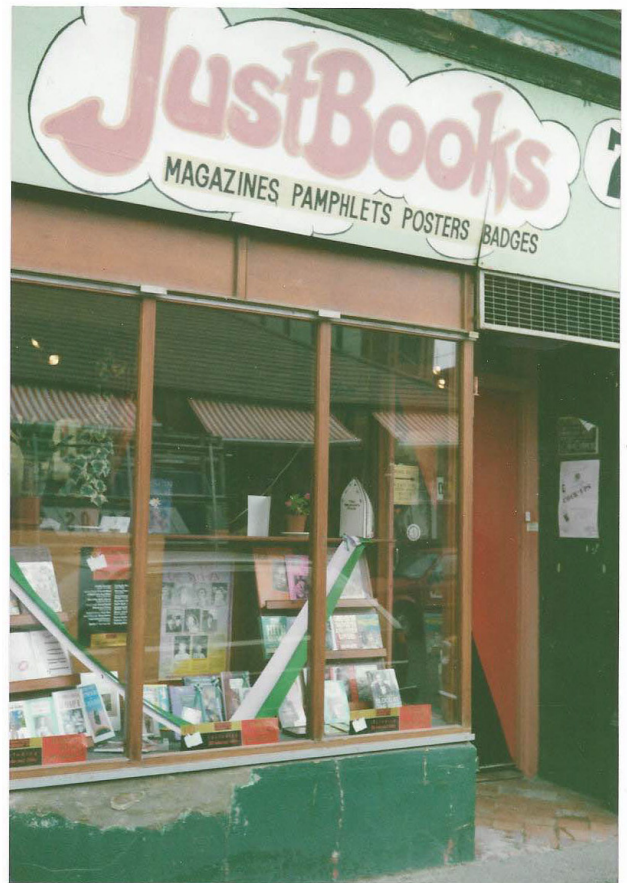
Theresa, and later Jason (Jason will provide a Part 2 history of Just Books in due course). The upstairs café had periodic openings, with Catherine and Gerard having the longest tenancy, with many others contributing. We also had great support in the early days from people who helped out, including Margaret, Marie-Therese, Bill, Paul, and Marie. The shop was run by volunteers, in that we never had enough turnover to allow for wages. However, modest expenses were paid to top up the meagre social security payments that most of us depended on.

From the mid-1980s until the early 1990s, the bookshop was run by a group of women who expanded the feminist/women's section and furthered our links with other bookshops and feminist publishing houses in Ireland. The Irish language section was enhanced given the increasing interest at the time. In 1988 we ran a Feminist Book Week which was very well-attended. Also in 1988 we celebrated Just Books' 10th anniversary.

Incidents

We remained relatively unscathed during the Troubles, despite the regular occurrence of violence in and around the city centre. We believe this to be primarily because of our inclusive nature, in both personnel and publications available; we were always conscious of ensuring the window display reflected this inclusiveness.

Three incidents come to mind. In one, we arrived at the shop one morning to discover a small perfect hole had been made in the window. It was probably from a bullet, but we never found the bullet and guessed it was from a low calibre weapon. We took it as a threat, although not sure from who. We asked contacts to suss out if any of the communities' or organisations' representatives had heard of threats against us, but none were discovered. We opened

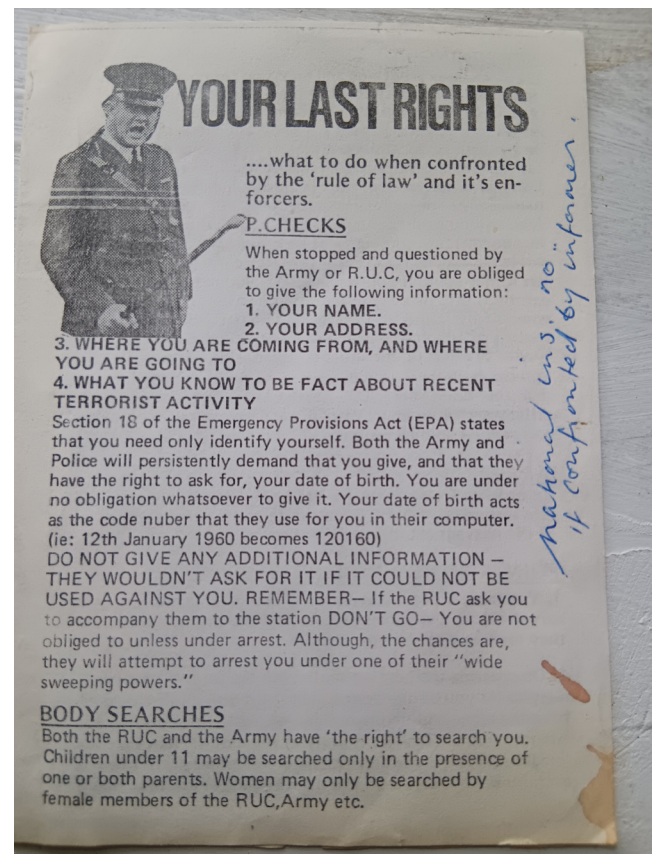


up again and were extra careful in our window display and what was easily identifiable as you entered the shop.

The second incident occurred when a patrol of the police force, the Royal Ulster Constabulary, passed the shop. The British Army and RUC, both always heavily armed, regularly passed by on patrols. We had a notice on the shop door explaining that all weapons were to be left outside the shop when entering and this had been respected on previous occasions – some young British soldiers had bought mementos from the shop to bring home after their tour. However, on this occasion, one of the police officers entered the shop with his weapon. I leaned across the counter and asked him to leave the shop until he had removed his weapon. He did leave, but returned shortly after with a fellow officer and arrested me. I was taken to the BA base at the requisitioned Royal Avenue Hotel and questioned by a BA officer. It took little time for him to realise that the situation was not serious and I was shortly released.

The shop suffered damage in nearby explosions including one where the windows and the front door had to be replaced. Another explosion, the bombing of the new Smithfield Market building days before it was due to open, caused more damage to the front of the shop.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s there was an intensive campaign of violence where individuals who were deemed to be supporting republicanism were targeted and in separate incidents in 1991 two shopkeepers who sold *Republican News/An Phoblacht* were assassinated at their place of work. This caused distress and alarm to Just Books workers, but we continued to include our usual republican newspapers in the bookshop's range of material.



Conclusion

While this reflection focuses on my own memory and experiences, this should not cloud one of the most important aspects of Just Books. It was run as a co-operative and all those who worked there had an equal say in policies and practices. Each and all contributed to the imagination, the commitment and the solidarity that made the shop not just a shop, but a unique, inspiring, and enjoyable site of political and social engagement during a period of challenging political violence.

Despite all, JUST BOOKS have developed a number of services and resources. Literature available - in the form of books, magazines, posters, badges, cards, and, lately, alternative records - covers just about every topic we consider worthy of our time. This includes: feminism, anarchism, libertarian education, Irish politics, socialism, housing, community struggles, novels, drug education, gay politics, anti-nuclear power, third world politics, adult literacy, legal rights, political theory, fanzines, ecology, non-sexist children's literature, media and herbalism, to name but some !

Many of the topics covered are simply ignored by other shops; more interested in money than in education. Similarly, we pay particular attention to community, national and international papers and magazines which are more within the price-range of people. If you are holding a conference, benefit event, OR interesting in promoting certain ideas, you may be interested in.....

A BOOKSTALL.....

The bookshop can provide the literature of your choice on any of the topics previously mentioned. Either invite US to do the stall, OR (preferably) call in yourself and pick up a selection of the available literature. We normally divide any discount equally.

The Bookshop is always interested in stocking more political-community newspapers, magazines, posters, silk-screened cards etc. We will also help distribute your campaign leaflets and literature through the Bookshop, or help advertise local and national events - conferences, benefits, non-profit making music gigs, meetings, demonstrations, alternative film showings, etc., etc.

JUST call in

We also supply literature to prisoners - *any prisoner who is able to communicate with us*. Books are either sent free, or given half-price, being paid for by friends or relatives on the outside. We also intend sending in regular parcels and books to the remand prison on the Crumlin Road. Donations are always welcome, as are new contacts with prisoners.

There are many ways we can help you, and likewise you can help us.

Call in and look around we are more interested in people reading their interests than merely spending money. And there's always..... *THE CAFE* above the shop, so you don't have to rush in, rush out.

You can order books through us and if you run some Course or other, we can supply bulk titles, and always at a discount to a "worthwhile" cause (though we'd appreciate 4 weeks notice).

Let us know about books, magazines, alternative records YOU feel WE ought to have available we particularly welcome lists of book suggestions.

The extent to which we are more than "just a bookshop" depends on more than us.

All the best,

JUST BOOKS COLLECTIVE

Photos in this article by Elaine Thomas

Sisterwrite Womens Co-Operative Bookshop

Lynn Alderson

I was working at Compendium in Camden, managing the sexual politics (as we termed it then) section there when I was approached by Kay Stirling and Mary Coghill with the proposition that we start a women's bookshop. It was early in 1978 and the Women's Liberation Movement had been flourishing since the early 70's – it seemed a good moment. When the movement got under way women were seriously under-represented in publishing, writing, the media, most occupations, and in the political arena – but the way that feminism quickly and publicly spread, and the energy and sheer bloody noise we made, meant that there were growing demands articulated that could not be ignored. Many newsletters and pamphlets had begun to be published and the feminist publishing houses were well under way. From *Spare Rib* to Onlywomen Press, to Women's Press and Virago – it became clear there was a market, a constituency that wanted to know much, much more about our history and literature, women's experiences of the world, and who were committed to activism and creativity of all kinds – women demanded that our voices be heard, wrote more from polemics to poetry and, where it didn't exist, created for ourselves the mechanisms to produce and distribute our own material.

From the beginning we saw it as the WLM bookshop – a centre for information and connection, and we were committed to making as much material as we could available to as many women as possible. We knew that we would have to make it as a successful business in order to survive, but we also made many decisions on the basis, not of profit, but of what we could make possible for women and to spread the word. We later took bookstalls to conferences and meetings, did sale or return, and developed a thriving mail order service.

We set up as a workers' co-operative, with I think around £16,000 in total,



Caroline Forbes who created Sisterbite

found a run-down shop on Upper Street that we could afford to rent – not central as we'd have liked but not far from Highbury and Islington tube. It really wasn't a posh area then, and many women helped to set it up, building shelves, decorating, getting materials cheaply for us. And, although we knew that co-ops were famous for being 'self-managed exploitation' we were determined to give ourselves decent conditions as workers. Our lack of capital funding meant that we had to work with no pay for some months until the shop got properly under way. That was made possible by the fact that two of us were squatting and therefore not paying rent and we lived on the dole, but we gave ourselves a four day week, and the right to take a year out if we wanted to, on the basis that if we gave maternity leave women should also be able to get leave to pursue other paths and projects too. We were a collective, sharing duties, making all decisions together and on an equal basis.

Many of the publications we wanted to stock were from the USA. We spent some of our capital sending me to the US to set up accounts with publishers and with a distributor, and an American bank account so that we could pay directly in dollars. Womanbooks of New York were generous and sisterly and allowed me to spend three days standing on stools, going through their shelves and writing index cards with information about all their books. It was a great data base and complemented the knowledge I had from working in *Compendium* and previously *Housmans*, and from Kay who had worked in *Collets*. But importantly, we all three had political involvement in various forms of activism and a pretty comprehensive grasp on the discussions and events of the movement. We were familiar with the small press and journal publications, the discussion pamphlets and newsletters, the posters and the records, the events and debates that were getting most attention and discussion. We kept movement newsletters under the



Sisterwrite noticeboard



Postcard advertising sisterbite cafe

counter and only sold them to women. We kept some lesbian material there too. Two of the founder members were lesbians and in spite of the hostility then to both feminism and the lesbian and gay communities, the shop (and later, the café Sisterbite above) were always lesbian-friendly and functioned as a meeting place and information centre. Our noticeboards had everything from marches and big events to women wanting to start a women's centre or consciousness-raising group, or to find somewhere to live.

We occasionally held meetings – one was a discussion of whether women should join the Labour Party. Far too many women turned up and we had to close the doors - a measure of the intense interest in feminist politics and strategy at the time - and the debate for and against was fierce and heated. Arguments were made to preserve the autonomy of the WLM (an argument that also took place around the funding of women's projects and co-option) and also for the need to find a voice in mainstream politics. In hindsight, it's easy to see that both could produce useful gains for women, that an autonomous movement strengthened the power of women struggling within the political system for reform and change, and also meant that the radical source of feminist thinking and activism wasn't lost to compromise with the institutions and appropriation. Various different approaches and emphases were taken by different strands within the movement, radical feminists, socialist feminists, anarcha-feminists, lesbian feminists, liberal and reformist feminists – we reflected those debates across the material we stocked, the conferences and meetings we attended and the information we shared.

Sisterwrite supplied libraries and events and painstakingly (before the days of computers it was very labour-intensive) produced a catalogue of all our publications so that we could have an effective mail-order service that extended our reach way beyond London and even internationally. We were opinionated



Lynn Alderson and early display



Lynn Alderson and Mary Coghill in Sisterwrite office



Sisterwrite (before signwriting)

too and said what we thought of many publications, but we didn't only stock those we agreed with. We built up sections on non-sexist children's books, sexuality, practical self-help, poetry, theory as well as literature and history. The lists of publications in every issue of *The Bookseller* and *Publishers' Weekly* from the US were scrutinised for anything of interest and it was a matter of pride that if we didn't have or know of something, we would find it. Our mission was to be a really good bookshop as well as a political hub and we learned all the necessary skills from stock control and importation to wages.



*Mary, Lynn and Kay at Sisterwrite
(Photo: Jenny Matthews)*

And, of course, we were part of a wider, alternative and socially radical scene, from squatting and protesting to other radical booksellers, publishers, distribution collectives (the Publications Distribution Co-operative, another worker collective, were friends as well as providing services we relied on). And many other bookshops had feminist sections as the whole sector grew and its commercial potential was recognised. Some of the most popular titles we stocked were from the US, essential reading such as Mary Daly's *Gyn/ecology* and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*. *The Women's Room* by Marilyn French was a huge bestseller. When British houses decided to publish them, we stopped selling the US versions, as requested. We had sold hundreds of copies of some of those books. But equally important were the pamphlets such as *Love Your Enemy - the Political lesbianism debate* which was the subject of intense disagreement over many years (and which recently resurfaced in the current women's movement discourse) and the newspapers (such as *Outwrite*, *Off Our Backs*, *Spare Rib*) and journals from women's history to lesbian ethics. None of those would have survived for any length of time without alternative bookshops.

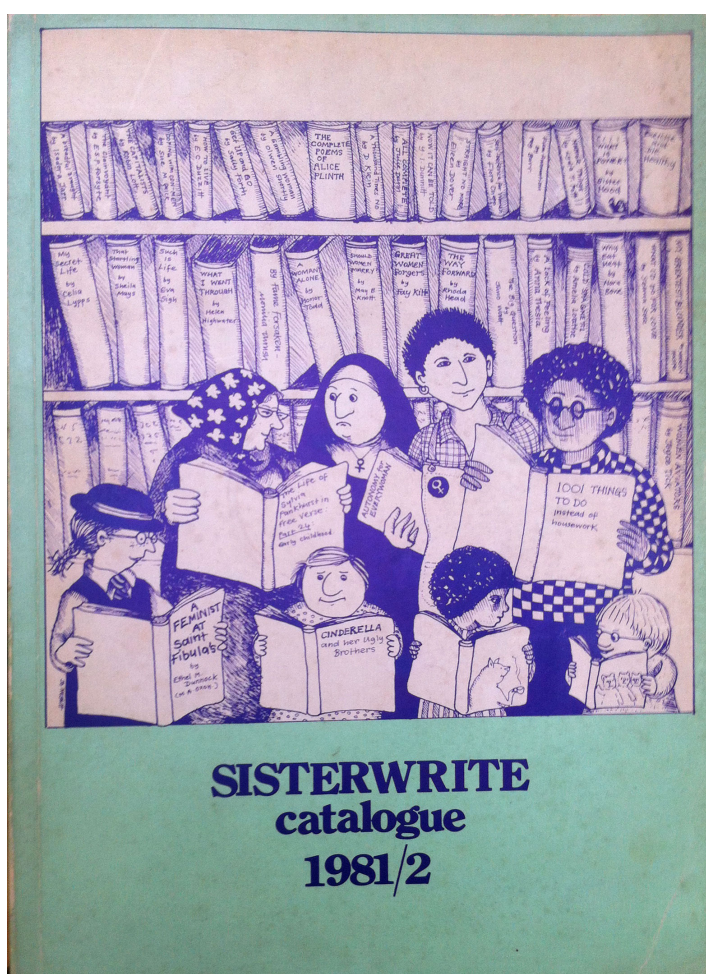
Many women supported us through their work, so, for example, a feminist librarian might send us a sum of money and ask for a selection of books to start their women's section, or teachers ordering books for children. It would not have been possible to make the bookshop financially successful without the support it received. But it did grow quickly and within three years we were an expanding collective of workers with fair if not generous wages, a mortgage to buy our premises, a café, the Women's Research and Resource Centre housed in the upper floor and we were occasionally able to provide some support to other feminist projects.

It was not all harmony and light, of course. We had our disagreements within the collective. Occasionally we'd get hostile and rude customers, lads throwing things into the shop, our locks were glued once and sometimes Customs would hold back some of the imports they disapproved of (*The Joy of Lesbian Sex*, for example, though even *Spare Rib* had trouble getting into Ireland at times). We thought our phone was monitored and were careful about queries since they could be about anything from plans for the next demo to where to get an illegal abortion. And I once answered the phone to find myself connected to the National Abortion Campaign, though neither of us had called the other. Its perhaps hard to remember now that some bookshops had been bombed and the sense of being at war with the establishment was a powerful reality at that time.

I was there for the first three years and saw Sisterwrite go from strength to strength. The shop lasted for 15 years with a changing workers' collective of women always in charge. It stayed at and eventually bought the 190 Upper St premises. Over those years we saw great social change and the circumstances and movements that had supported our communities and projects no longer existed in the same way in the harsh landscape of Thatcher's Britain. But many things had changed for women, and the feminist project as a whole had been successful in profoundly altering the expectations of women and the range of possibilities for our lives. Which is not to say that there isn't still a long way to go.



Sisterwrite meetng with PDC



Sisterwrite Catalogue cover 1981-2 by Jo Nesbitt

Oakleaf: The Story Of A Radical Bookshop

A case study by Ben Plumpton (Ms)

This article was originally published in May 1988 as Co-operatives Research Unit Occasional Paper No. 11, ISBN 0 7492 6024 6.

Formed in 1978, the Co-operatives Research Unit (CRU) at the Open University aimed to develop research into co-operatives as well as providing advice, information and training aids.

The article was commissioned by CRU as one of 16 case studies of worker co-operatives, part of a wide-ranging research project during the period 1984-86, which culminated in the publication of a book *Developing Successful Worker Co-operatives*, by Chris Cornforth, Alan Thomas, Jenny Lewis and Roger Spear, Sage, 1988.

There are several versions of the article, with minor variations: this is the one that was published, subject to minor corrections to punctuation and typographical errors. Surnames have been added, in square brackets.

With thanks to Jane Donaldson, archivist at the Co-operative Archives in Manchester, for her help with images and for supplying a missing section of text.

Aude Leonetti died in 2016. Her obituary by Charles Edwards: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/oct/20/aude-leonetti-obituary>

Ben Plumpton has retired from a career in IT/online learning/libraries, most recently at University of Leeds. Now a granny and climate activist

Andrew Bibby is a journalist and member of the author-run publishing co-operative Gritstone <http://www.andrewbibby.com/> and <https://gritstonecoop.co.uk/>

Jane Scullion now works in the public sector

Jenny Painter is an artist

Carol Barac is chair of Milton Keynes Forum

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Record in the Open University repository: <https://doi.org/10.21954/ou.ro.00015ba7>

Introduction

Oakleaf Books was Milton Keynes' radical and community bookshop, owned co-operatively and run collectively. It aimed to combine the function of a community bookshop for the local area of Wolverton with a radical shop serving all Milton Keynes and a considerable area beyond. It opened in March 1979 and succeeded in its own terms for nearly seven years before closing down due to lack of financial viability at the end of 1985. This study looks at how Oakleaf was set-up, how it was structured and developed, the working experience of those involved and the reasons for its final closure.

oakleaf books

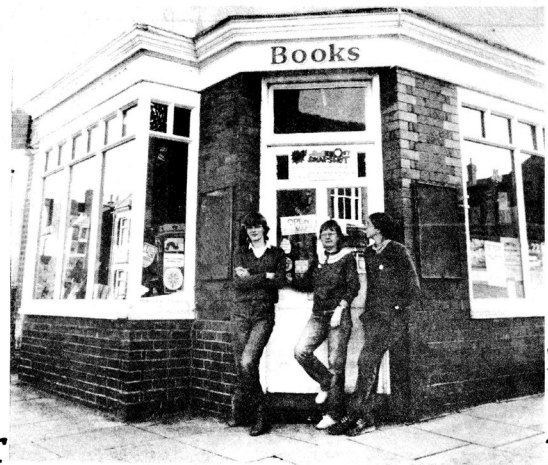
I worked at Oakleaf from October 1979 to January 1986, and at the time of writing I am still involved in the winding-up process. The sources of information I have used - apart from my own memory! - are Oakleaf newsletters, accounts, minutes of meetings and shop diaries. I was also able to refer to the entire remains of the Oakleaf filing system, currently occupying my spare room. All of Oakleaf's ex-workers have seen a draft of this study and have made comments which, where possible, have been incorporated into the text. Oakleaf learned a lot from other co-ops, and I hope that this account in turn will be useful to other co-ops and radical enterprises of all kinds.

Before beginning the story it would be useful to set out the aims of Oakleaf, which were:

1. To make available, and promote as widely as possible and on a non-sectarian basis: literature supporting radical social change; and cultural and political publications which commercial considerations normally prevent bookshops from holding in stock.
2. To practice and encourage anti-sexist, anti-racist collective working methods.
3. To provide employment which brings both satisfaction and a reasonable living wage.
4. To play an active part in the wider radical bookshop movement.
5. To provide an information centre and contact point for local cultural and political activities.

The shop was set up essentially for a political purpose, to make available radical publications. This is difficult to achieve in the market, consequently Oakleaf Books was never really a commercially viable business. It survived so long only because of the commitment, both from its workers and from the wider network of supporters, to that political purpose, part of which was to run co-operatively. We didn't see Oakleaf as a failure because it closed down. On the contrary, as the final Oakleaf Newsletter said, "We

calendar



1984

feel a sense of achievement that we have sustained for so long a specialist bookshop in the back street of a small town”.

Background and History

The development of Oakleaf must be seen in the context of the growth of the radical book trade in general. The widespread development in the 1970's of grassroots political action, the expansion of socialist and feminist publishing and the growth of 'radical academia' all helped to create a market for specialist radical bookshops. Some developed as general 'radical' bookshops, some were linked to political parties or particular political movements, and some aimed to be 'community' bookshops providing a service in a working-class area traditionally poorly provided with bookshops and cultural activities. Over time as the market grew, major bookshops moved into the radical sector, selling the more popular, more profitable lines, thereby marginalising radical booksellers.

It is also important to understand the local background. Milton Keynes is a new city built mainly in the 1970's and covering a wide area, including several established towns such as the railway town of Wolverton in the north. The new city was obviously lacking in traditional networks and political organisations, and it was an exciting time as the community developed - there was a feeling that things could perhaps be done in a different and more progressive way. A conference in 1975 on 'Alternative Enterprises' gave rise to Alternative Cooperative Enterprises Ltd (ACE), a members' co-op created as an umbrella group to develop various projects. ACE's largest project was the establishment of a wholefood shop, Acorn, in 1976. Run by volunteers, Acorn began to stock a small selection of books and magazines, which gradually expanded in number and range. The publications sub-group of ACE began thinking about opening a bookshop, and by 1978 ACE had agreed to open Oakleaf Books. After searching several areas of the city for a suitable and reasonably cheap building, a shop near Acorn in Wolverton was bought with the aid of loans from ACE members, a setting-up grant was negotiated with East Midlands Arts, and Oakleaf opened its doors for the first time in March 1979. There was no market research done before starting, which was partly due to lack



ANOTHER
Oakleaf Books
AMAZING
charabanc trip!

Come with us and visit

MARX'S GRAVE (Marx centenary visit)

and the

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF LABOUR HISTORY

PLUS! PUB LUNCH — HAMPSTEAD HEATH VISIT — TEA-SHOP

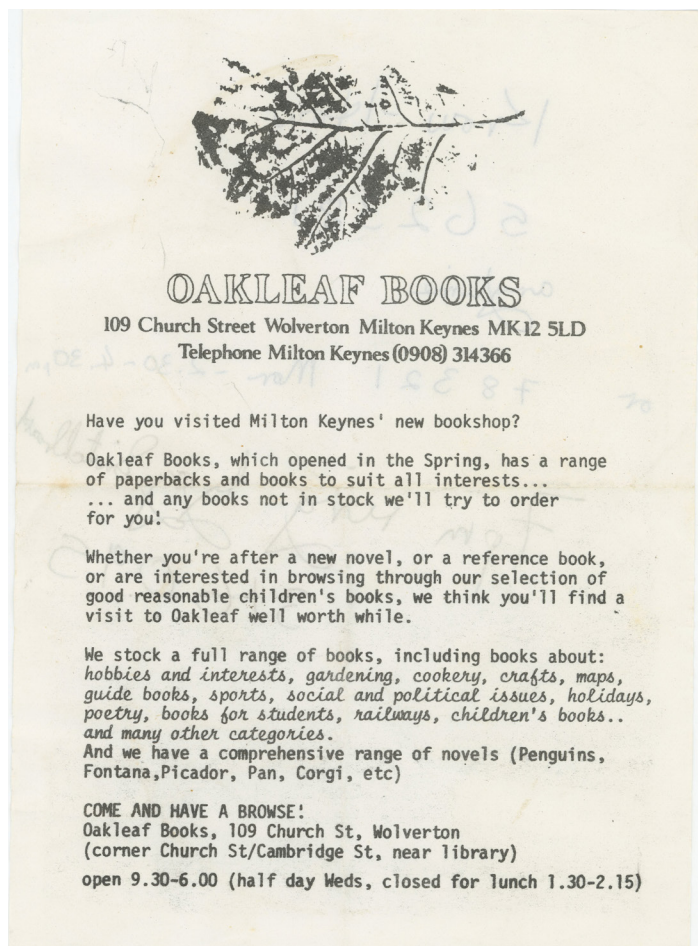
SUN 13 MARCH

Phone Oakleaf Books (MK 314366) immediately to reserve your place on the coach (£1.75 waged, £1 unwaged). Coach leaves Oakleaf, Wolverton 9.30am; Starting Gate, CMK 9.45am; returning about 5.30pm.

of business experience but also because the motivation for starting the shop was political rather than commercial. In general, business skills and knowledge of the book trade were picked up gradually from experience and from contacts with other radical bookshops.

The main driving forces behind the establishment of Oakleaf were Jane [Scullion] and Andrew [Bibby], who put in a tremendous amount of time and effort in the early days of the shop and became its first paid workers in July 1979. (Note that the wages paid were very low - and remained so. See the 'Development of the Business' section for a discussion of this issue). There was also substantial involvement from other ACE members (including myself) in the working parties to convert the building and as volunteer shop-workers. This set a pattern which was a vital feature throughout Oakleaf's existence - that we could call on an extensive network of supporters for help with tasks such as maintenance and publicity. Supporters were encouraged to become involved with the shop, especially by 'shop-sitting', and a regular supporters' newsletter was produced. The supporters' network was essential because it helped to keep costs down, and because, together with the running of endless bookstalls, it helped to establish and maintain strong links between the shop and the local radical political and cultural scene. It also became a social network - there were even a couple of 'Oakleaf Outings'. Although the workers were always a bit ambivalent about the use of volunteer labour (which could be considered to be exploitation), I think most of the volunteers enjoyed their work for Oakleaf and felt they also gained something from it.

During 1979 a big prestige glass-and-marble covered shopping precinct, the 'City Centre', was being built in the middle of Milton Keynes. Oakleaf was worried (with hindsight, quite correctly) that this would draw shoppers away from the traditional centres such as Wolverton, and so began discussing the possibility of taking a market stall there. Oakleaf couldn't consider a bid to be the main bookshop there, since the shop's politics were anathema to the private management of the centre and anyway the financial scale was well beyond Oakleaf's means. Eventually

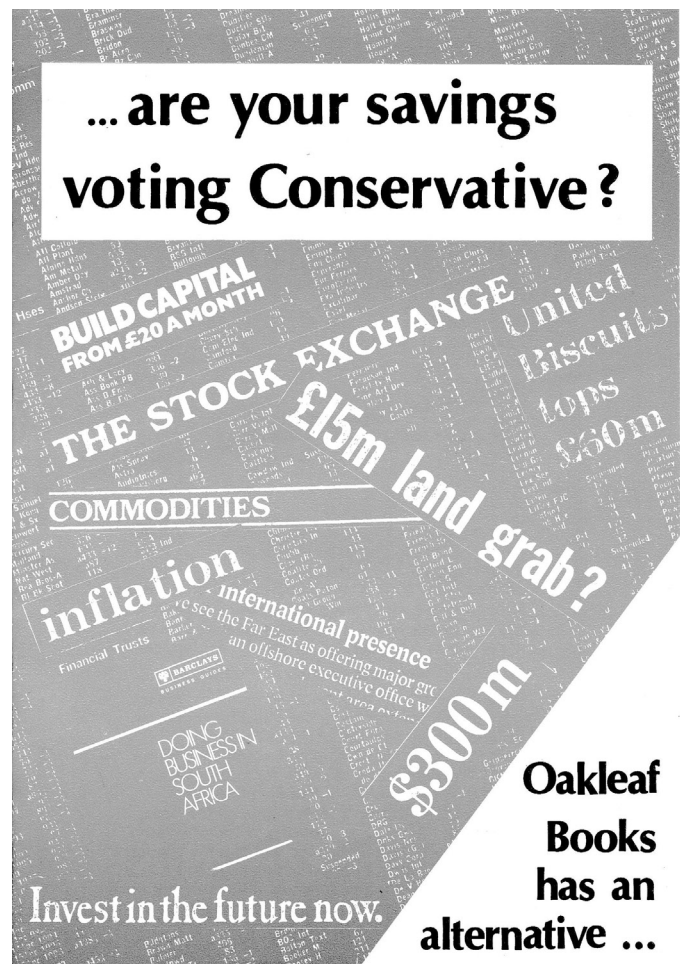


the lease of a tiny shop unit in the rather out-of-the-way 'Specialist Arcade' was negotiated, a grant from East Midlands Arts was obtained for shop-fitting and the new shop finally opened in November 1979, just in time for Christmas. In order to cope with two shops, a third worker, myself, was appointed in September. Looking back, it seems incredible that we could run two shops with only three workers - mainly due to help from volunteers. The three workers even had a fortnight's holiday together the following summer, leaving the shops in the care of a rota of volunteers!

At this time we suffered considerable fascist harassment. The city centre shop was picketed, our locks were glued up and young fascists tried to intimidate the workers and customers. We had much welcome support from local anti-fascists and eventually the trouble stopped. Throughout Oakleaf's life we occasionally had fascist trouble - at the Wolverton shop too - threatening phone calls, visits, stickers and leaflets and our windows broken on a number of occasions. We were thankful that we were never physically attacked or firebombed, as happened to other political bookshops, particularly black bookshops, and we tried to give support to others in these situations.

By the end of 1980 we realised that the city centre shop was making a continuing loss, so we decided to close it down and consolidate our activities at the Wolverton shop. We applied for another grant from the Arts Council, to pay for increased stock and equipment, which we got on the understanding that it would be our final grant. I think it is important to say that we felt that the various grants Oakleaf obtained facilitated our essential aims rather than compromising us in any significant way.

During the first few years we also took on a number of extra activities. We ran a distribution service, 'Root and Branch Distribution', for locally produced books and pamphlets, taking them round to other bookshops, newsagents, etc in the area. The books were mainly from the local 'People's Press', which also had an office in Oakleaf's building in the early days where Writers Workshops were held. In 1981 we also published our first



**Oakleaf
Books
has an
alternative ...**

OAKLEAF

newsletter

NOVEMBER 1982

You are invited to

O A K L E A F ' S A G M

on Thursday November 25th

at Labour Hall, New Bradwell, 8pm

FOLLOWED BY A

S O C I A L

with bar open.... plus music!

(All friends and supporters welcome:
only Milton Keynes Community Bookshop
members may vote)

Formal notice

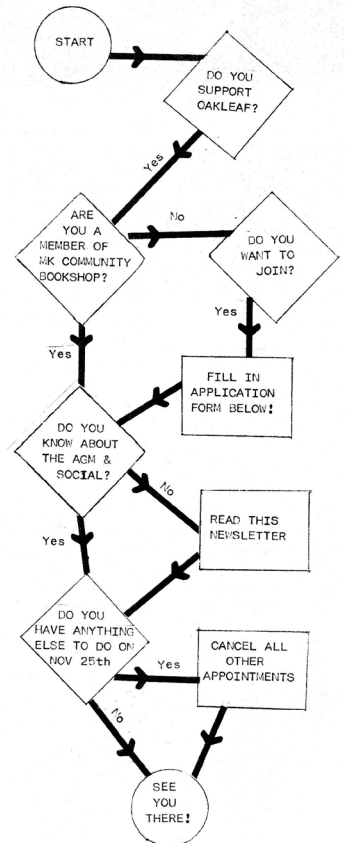
The 1982 AGM of Milton Keynes Community Bookshop Ltd and Oakleaf Books (Milton Keynes) Ltd will take place on Thurs Nov 25th 1982 at 8pm at the Labour Hall, New Bradwell.

AGENDA FOR AGM: please see over.

Return to Oakleaf Books, 109 Church St, Wolverton, Milton Keynes

I wish to apply to become a member of Milton Keynes Community Bookshop Ltd, and enclose £1.50.

Name:
Address:



(and only!) book, *D for Doris, V for Victory*, an autobiographical account of Doris White's war-time Wolverton experiences. Neither of these activities made much money, but they were examples of our continual desire to encourage and promote the writing of 'ordinary' people. Later in the shop's life we also helped to establish a Women's Writing Group and a group called 'Speakeasy', which organized poetry readings by both local people and nationally known poets.

We also began to supply books to institutional customers, and inspired by the success of Grassroots Bookshop in Manchester, we started producing 'Community Information' booklists for libraries. We persuaded the Manpower Services Commission to fund a one-year 'Community Information Project' to develop this work as one of their Community Enterprise Project schemes, and Aude [Leonetti] was employed for this in October 1981. In fact, she became an equal member of the collective, and the community information work was shared out (as were her wages, since the MSC paid more than Oakleaf did!).

Oakleaf's commitment to the wider radical bookshop movement was expressed in our active membership of the Federation of Radical Booksellers (FRB). We received much advice from other shops in our early days, and always found the regular FRB conferences a useful source of information, ideas and solidarity. We were involved in the production of a handbook, *Starting a Bookshop*, the organisation of a 'Women in Booktrades' conference, the start of a new trade magazine *The Radical Bookseller* and many more FRB activities. From January 1982 to March 1983 Oakleaf became the Co-ordinating Shop for the Federation, a job which was paid at one person-day a week and which involved producing newsletters, organizing conferences, answering queries and initiating projects.

During 1982 the Oakleaf collective decided to end the link with ACE (see 'Development of the Co-operative' section) and set up a new company, Milton Keynes Community Bookshop Ltd, with a two-tier structure combining day-to-day control by the workers with ultimate ownership by a wider membership of the shop's supporters. We also raised loans from supporters to buy the building from ACE, to reflect the reality that Oakleaf was doing all the work of ownership - dealing with tenants, organising maintenance etc. Two particularly memorable problems we had with the building were the time a friend set it on fire when burning paint off an upstairs window frame (we had to call the fire brigade - the only casualties were a lot of wet books!), and the time we discovered dry rot in the floor (the shop had to be closed for a week to deal with it).

In August 1982 Jane became the first worker to leave and we decided not to replace her since we couldn't afford to pay four workers from turnover once the MSC Project money finished. Andrew later decided to follow her and left in February 1983. There was then a difficult period with only two workers, until Jenny [Painter] joined us in May 1983. We felt particularly short-staffed at this period, especially as Aude was also ill for some time (which gave us a chance to discover the mysteries of Statutory Sick Pay!). We did find time, however, to produce a 1984 calendar featuring photographs of local political events. Considerable work during 1983 went into supplying institutional orders, and the resulting income meant we almost broke even that year without any grant funding, a trend we hoped would continue.

Aude left in March 1984 and Carol [Barac] was almost immediately appointed to replace her: the collective then remained constant until the shop closed. Because of the rather rapid staff turnover at this stage, more time and effort had to go into learning and doing the basic work of the shop, so there was not much time for new projects. Jenny's artistic skills were put to good use in producing new posters, publicity material, Christmas cards and wonderful window paintings for our window displays. Carol concentrated on school and library supply. We also continued our tradition of organising author visits and book related events, including two very successful feminist book days.

During 1984/5 it became increasingly clear that we were running at a considerable loss. Shop sales were constant (though not keeping pace with inflation) but institutional sales had decreased alarmingly despite our efforts - largely because of cuts in the education and library services. We

decided as a temporary way out of our cash-flow problems to take out more loans from supporters against the increased value of the building. But by the summer of 1985, with no increase in turnover and no new sources of subsidy, we were beginning to realise the shop would have to close sooner or later. A financial assessment in September convinced us it would have to be sooner (see the 'Development of the Business' section for the options considered at this stage), and a special meeting in October agreed to closure after Christmas 1985. We felt it was important to close down before we became insolvent so that our supporters would not lose any of their savings that they had lent us. The building was put on the market and raised enough to pay off the loans, tax bills and the remaining debts to publishers, with a small surplus to be donated to local co operative and community projects.

Development of the Business

When Oakleaf was established we expected that for an initial period the business would need a subsidy in the form of grants, but that the turnover would gradually increase until we became self-supporting. This expectation was based on the experience of other radical bookshops and the planned expansion of Milton Keynes. The actual economic history of the business can be traced from the table below:

| | 1979 | 1980 (2 shops) | 1981 | 1982 (CP scheme) | 1983 | 1984 | 1985 |
|--------------------------------------|-------|-------------------|-------|------------------------|-------|-------|--------|
| Turnover- | | | | | | | |
| shop sales | 14061 | 23694 | 19153 | 19750 | 19523 | 19693 | 20191 |
| Turnover- | | | | | | | |
| institutions | 3013 | 8496 | 9702 | 10038 | 14119 | 7651 | 6298 |
| Total turnover | 17074 | 32190 | 28855 | 29788 | 33642 | 27344 | 26489 |
| Gross Profit | 5566 | 10102 | 9678 | 9226 | 10635 | 7124 | 2446 |
| Total expenses inc. wages | 4905 | 14682 | 13101 | 18179 | 12660 | 13602 | 14182 |
| Net profit | 661 | -4580 | -3423 | -8953 | -2025 | -6478 | -11736 |
| Rent & misc income | 350 | 1150 | 787 | 1968 | 1737 | 1691 | 2575 |
| Grants | 3500 | 1923 | 5500 | 4771 | 0 | 304 | 134 |
| Surplus | 4511 | -1507 | 2864 | -2214 | -288 | -4483 | -9027 |

The gross profit was always less than the total expenses, except in the first year when expenses were extremely low and wages were not paid to start with. Therefore there was always a trading loss. The income from renting out the rest of the building to tenants helped a little, but the main things that enabled the shop to keep going were the grants. We received:



£3,500 from the Arts Council via East Midlands Arts in 1979 to set up

£1,923 from East Midlands Arts in 1980 for the city centre shop

£5,500 from the Arts Council in 1981 as a final grant for stock & equipment, and

£4,771 from the M.S.C. in 1982 for the Community Information Project.

The business was permanently undercapitalised, as many small co-ops are. It's worth pointing out that after the first few years, the stock value was over £13,000, and even that seemed a pretty minimum level for credibility as a 'proper' bookshop. The large stock values (associated with reasonable stock levels) seem to cause financial problems for the whole book trade.

Apart from the loans to buy the building, the working capital to finance the stock came partly from the initial grant, partly as small loans from supporters and partly as 'sweat capital' during the period when there were no paid workers. There was no risk capital available, e.g. for the city centre shop. The fact that the first year's turnover there was insufficient to pay the very high rent and rates of the shop unit meant that we were forced to cut our losses and move out. Many other shops in the city centre were also making losses but could afford to wait it out until the volume of trade increased enough for them to break even.

Wage Levels

Some radical bookshops are run entirely by part-time volunteers. But at Oakleaf there was a determination to pay wages in recognition that the efficient running of a bookshop demands considerable commitment from its workers, and that the individuals' interest as workers were to some extent separated from their collective interest as a business. Partly for this reason, and partly out of a general desire for solidarity, Oakleaf workers also joined a trade union, ASTMS.

Wages went from £133.50 per month (similar to a student grant) in 1979 to £176.25 per month in 1985. Part of the problem was that we were caught in a 'poverty trap', whereby increasing wages by small amounts would have made little difference to the workers because we would have lost state benefits, but it would have cost the shop more. Essentially though the difficulty was that the business could not afford to pay decent wages, and we were all aware that we were exploiting ourselves in the interests of the shop's survival. Note though that wages in the book trade generally are very low. We always took care to keep our wages above the minimum for National Insurance, so that Oakleaf workers wouldn't be financially penalised later in life for their commitment to the shop. Business expenses other than wages were kept to an absolute minimum.

Turnover

Referring to the table on p.6 shows that the turnover from shop sales after the first couple of years remained constant at just under £20,000. We believed that the reasons why turnover hadn't increased as anticipated were twofold. Firstly, a general lack of money to spend on books - due to the recession, to relatively high unemployment and low wages in the area, and because it seems that people regard books as a luxury which is one of the first things to go when money is tight. Secondly, we suffered from competition from the City Centre - largely because people became increasingly inclined to do all their shopping there and not make special trips to Wolverton. Even our supporters often bought 'ordinary' books elsewhere, perhaps not realising how much we needed these sales to subsidise our 'radical' stock. It was also significant that staff at the main bookshop in the City Centre, Fagins, were active in the burgeoning Peace Campaign, and Fagins became an unofficial organisational centre for the peace movement. Peace activists would tend to support their friends there (despite the profits going to their right-wing owner). Also Fagins began to stock more of the 'trendier' radical subjects (e.g. peace, feminism, vegetarian cookery and later black writing) and took away a lot of our custom in these areas, which of course were the higher turnover ones.

We tried many ways to increase our turnover through the shop, with little success. We worked hard on publicity. to attract new customers and encourage old ones. We couldn't afford much paid advertising, so we relied mainly on free advertising, e.g. posters, book reviews in newsletters, and the back-breaking work of endless bookstalls. We organized many author visits, bookfairs, poetry evenings etc, and produced a regular Oakleaf Newsletter. We also tried new areas of stock - greetings cards and second-hand books did best, but they didn't significantly affect takings.

The main area of expansion was in sales to institutions (again, see table on p. 6). We were always keen to supply books on credit to local institutions (e.g. Milton Keynes Development Corporation, the Open University, union branches, school book clubs), and we tried to develop any contacts we made. Our concentration on sales to libraries, especially in the community information area, got results, particularly in 1983, when we received a number of large initial orders. Later however cuts in library funding, coupled with their loss of interest in this area, meant that our library sales dropped dramatically. We didn't realise this at first since we were still servicing numerous orders, but increasingly the orders were for small numbers of cheap pamphlets. We also worked hard at supplying local schools, a difficult field to break into and a less lucrative one, since they demanded discounts of 10% or 15% when we frequently only got 25% or less ourselves. Just as we were starting to make some headway in this area, schools were also badly hit by cuts. In the end, our institutional turnover in 1984 was only half what it had been in 1983, and 1985 was no better, so this really spelled the beginning of the end for Oakleaf.

Survival tactics

In 1982 Oakleaf had raised loans from supporters (plus a bank loan) to buy the building. The price we had paid ACE was low, since they were prepared not to make a profit, and over the years the building had increased in value.

Hence, in 1984/5, when we had no other sources of subsidy, we made a considered decision to take out more loans against the building to finance the trading loss. We were aware, obviously, that we couldn't keep doing this, but we hoped that this would see us through a difficult time. The loans were raised once again from supporters (and note that the interest rate paid, as decided by MKCB meetings, was much lower than a bank loan would have been). We always found it weighed heavily on us to be responsible for our friends' savings.

We also set up a group from the wider membership of Milton Keynes Community Bookshop to look into longer-term fundraising, or other means of keeping the shop going. This group came up with a range of suggestions, all of which would have involved much more work for the already severely stretched workers, who felt none of the suggestions were really practical. The shop managed to raise about £1,000 during 1985 from special second-hand book sales and a sponsored bike ride, but this was really a drop in the ocean.

The decision to close

In the summer of 1985 the workers faced the fact that takings for 1985 so far were no improvement on 1984, in fact marginally worse. We were unhappy about taking out yet more loans, so we had a valuation done on the building and did a stocktake of the business, valuing all our assets and liabilities realistically. Our initial sums led us to believe we could continue for another year, but when we realised we would be liable for Capital Gains Tax on the building the picture became much bleaker. We took three options to a special meeting of Milton Keynes Community Bookshop:

1. Find an immediate large chunk of capital and continuing subsidy;
2. Stop paying any wages - change to a volunteer run shop; or
3. Close down after a pre-Christmas sale.

Option 1 was not possible - no fairy godmothers materialised! Option 2 was rejected mainly because the workers were unwilling to work for nothing, nobody else wanted to either, and anyway it was felt that a shop with lots of volunteers coming and going would become inefficient and gradually 'dribble away'. So we decided to close, hopefully leaving a good reputation and good memories, and while we were sure to be able to pay back our supporters' loans.

Development of the co-operative

Structure

The structure of Oakleaf has been somewhat complex, mainly because of its origin as part of ACE (see 'Background and History' section). When Oakleaf was being set up, ACE had to consider what kind of legal structure to choose for this new enterprise. The ACE membership wanted to separate the capital assets (the buildings) from trading, so that a disaster in one of the shops didn't affect the rest of ACE. We also wanted the shop workers to have control over their day-to-day operation with ACE retaining ultimate control. The option of setting up Oakleaf as a workers' co-operative in its own right was rejected partly for practical reasons - ACE as an established body could apply for grants and get credit. Also, a one or two person workers' co-op with no safeguards could become like a traditional business. We were also unhappy that, because at that time there was a seven member minimum to register as a co-op, the majority of non-worker members of the co-op would have a lot of say and the rest of ACE none. So we finally

decided on a separate ‘off-the-shelf’ company, with the shares used not as a means of raising equity capital but to establish the ownership of the shop. The shop workers were the company directors and had one share each, ACE had 51 shares and the rest were unissued. Oakleaf Books (Milton Keynes) Ltd was registered in February 1979.



Over the next few years, while Oakleaf became established, ACE as an organisation declined, with few new projects and much of the membership moving away or becoming involved in other things, until its role became merely that of landlord. Simultaneously, Oakleaf’s own supporters network blossomed (see ‘Background and History’ section). The workers became increasingly unhappy with this situation, whereby control was in the hands of what was basically a paper organisation, and the shop’s supporters had no formal voice. So we devised a new structure which would retain the workers’ self-management, make explicit the non-profit aims of the shop, and give ultimate control to the wider community the shop aimed to serve. A new company, Milton Keynes Community Bookshop Ltd (MKCB) was incorporated in July 1982 as a company limited by guarantee, with rules adapted by the workers from the ICOM model rules for a company limited by guarantee. There were two classes of membership: employee members, who formed the Workers Collective (Board of Directors), and general members - sympathetic individuals or organisations admitted to membership by the Workers Collective. The membership eventually reached 66.

We decided not to wind up Oakleaf Books Ltd and transfer its assets to MKCB as this would have been complex and expensive. Instead, MKCB bought all Oakleaf’s shares, thus becoming a holding company. In retrospect this was a mistake because it caused a lot of confusion about the structure - among tax people, supporters and even the workers! (We also had to do two lots of accounts and other paperwork). Although the structure reflected our desire to be in control of our work but at the same time accountable to a wider community and to have the support of that community, the two-

company arrangement obscured the basic principle and perhaps meant that the general membership felt more remote than had been intended. There was never a problem with the workers feeling 'pushed around' by the general membership - in fact I think the workers felt that the wider membership perhaps didn't take on as much of the responsibility as they would have liked. During the final financial crisis the wider membership was unable to produce miracles as the workers half-consciously hoped that they would, but I doubt if any other structure would have helped at this stage!

Decision-making

MKCB

The main power of the MKCB General Meeting was to fire directors. In actual practice, the Workers Collective would take to the General Meeting major questions such as opening and closing shops, whether to raise more loans, and the interest rate to pay on loans, as well as the formal AGM business. General Meetings would also advise on stocking policy, publicity etc and give the workers support and encouragement. Meetings were held once or twice a year, and apart from the formal business, it would generally have a report from the workers and a long general discussion, often generating useful ideas for the workers to follow up.

Workers Collective

In the early days, decisions were taken informally whenever a question arose, but regular collective meetings were soon necessary. Anything someone wanted to discuss, e.g. new ideas, problems, letters needing response, changes in work organisation, would be written down and put in a special 'meetings tray'. The meeting - usually one morning a week - would then work through the tray, with the occasional tea break! The aim was always to make decisions by consensus, though MKCB rules allowed a vote after no consensus in two meetings, and disputes could be referred to the MKCB General Meeting. In practice, in such a small group we could run our meetings informally and genuinely decide things together.

If we disagreed on something important, we would postpone the decision and discuss the issue again until we reached a solution. It was interesting that, given the chance to think about things between meetings, fairly polarised attitudes could swing completely from one meeting to the next. People's opinions were often influenced by the particular work role they had at the time (see under 'Work Organisation' below). For example, the Christmas

Bonus Discussion became a standing joke, because the 'accounts' person would always say we couldn't afford one, and everyone else would always demand one anyway. The people in these roles would be different each year, but the result was always the same - we awarded ourselves the bonus!

The workers took it in turns to 'service' meetings, which involved drawing up the agenda, being in charge of the 'meetings tray', taking minutes and informally chairing. Meetings were seen as an important part of work, and so were held in work time (with a volunteer to shop-sit if necessary) and everyone attended. There were no formal guidelines on what individuals could decide on their own and what had to go to a meeting - it was a question of judgement and practice. Many minor decisions were made by quickly checking with everyone else at the time. Drafts of documents, e.g. important letters, grant application, would be shown around and re-written taking into account everyone's comments until everyone was happy. New workers would gradually become more confident and take less of the smaller questions to the meetings.

The collective also held occasional evening meetings to discuss big issues and long-term policy, because otherwise these subjects would tend to get lost amongst the day-to-day business. We tried to make these evening meetings pleasant social occasions too, by having a meal together and a few drinks too!

Work Organisation

Initially, work was done by each person taking on things as they came up. However, as the work became more complex and record-keeping systems were improved, we agreed it would be more efficient to share the tasks out more systematically. The plan was to divide the main work into three job roles, and rotate these on an approximately annual basis, so that eventually everyone would know each area of work thoroughly. The three basic roles were ordering, accounts, and dealing with institutions, with smaller jobs like wages or book token returns added in depending on people's workloads. Irregular tasks like advertising, the newsletter, dealing with maintenance and tenants were discussed at a meeting and taken on by whoever had the time and inclination. 'Housework', opening mail and parcels and getting the lunch were organised on a weekly rota, and everyone took their turn at the two most important things - sitting at the shop desk and making the tea and coffee!

In the early days, the job rotation worked well, but it was hard to incorporate new workers because it took time for them to feel confident about taking major responsibilities, and pressure of work meant it was difficult to give the necessary attention to training. Just after changing roles, people would be feeling a little unsure about the new tasks and perhaps reluctant to give up something they felt they'd got good at, so there would be a period when the 'old' person would be giving the 'new' person a lot of advice and help. Anyone feeling overloaded could always ask for help, and we would re-divide the tasks occasionally as some would expand and others contract.

Later, after a 2/3 staff turnover, the roles stayed almost static because of lack of time for training and because our financial situation meant we couldn't afford to make any mistakes. This was unfortunate, because the 'accounts' role at this time was particularly unpleasant, and Jenny had to suffer it for nearly two years! It also meant that Carol never got a chance to cover the 'accounts' or the 'ordering' roles, and so had a less thorough knowledge of the business. This probably meant that I, as the only one who had experience of all the roles, had more power in the collective, though it didn't feel that way to me. At this stage, skill-sharing was seen as something to be postponed temporarily whilst we were fighting for survival, and then once we had decided to close there didn't seem to be any point in changing roles.

Working in the Co-Operative

This section is based on my own experience of working at Oakleaf - the costs and benefits for me and the conflicts that I saw.

Before coming to Oakleaf I had been an unhappy struggling research student, and I was glad to make the decision to 'give up' an academic career in favour of the politically useful work I saw Oakleaf as being. The first benefit for me was the restoration of my self-confidence in my abilities. We took it for granted that we could each learn to do anything we needed, and I valued the opportunity to learn all the skills of running a business. Just being around books was pretty good too! I enjoyed the feeling of collective creativity, both during the initial development of the shop and in the many 'extra' activities we took on during the shop's life. It was important to me that we worked collectively - we each had equal say, we took decisions together and we shared the responsibility (though this had the disadvantage that we all worried about everything also!). I wanted control over my work, and I valued the support, trust and strong friendships that grew from our working relationships. Usually, I was happy that my work life, political

activities and social life were interlinked. And I was glad to be working in an environment where I didn't have to 'dress up' or hide my sexuality or my politics.

The main cost of working at Oakleaf was the extremely low wages, which left us feeling permanently poor. Low wages also mean low status in the eyes of the rest of the world, and despite rejecting that value judgement on a conscious level, unconsciously I found it a problem. I felt that others on the left could sometimes, from relatively high-waged 'careers', undervalue the work we did and even regard us as capitalistically inclined because we had to be efficient in our dealings with money in order to survive. We worked under considerable pressure, which was quite a strain at times, and the financial difficulties meant we were forever economising (so much that we were often cold in the winter). Some of the work was tedious, but it could sometimes be a relief to settle down to some relatively mindless stock-control! Overall though I found the benefits of working at Oakleaf far outweighed the costs and I found it a very satisfying job.

I think that other workers saw similar costs and benefits, with perhaps a few differences. For example, the way work life extended into home life (e.g. running evening bookstalls and working frequent Saturdays) was more of a problem for people with family responsibilities. Conversely though, family life extended into work too - children could visit or telephone their parent at work, and we could be quite flexible when children were ill. Workers' children often also ended up helping at bookstalls and other shop events!

As far as the workers' backgrounds are concerned, I think it is important to say we were all pretty well educated (graduates etc), which meant we had a range of skills and confidence not available to everyone. Some of us had many years of varied work experience, some hardly any, and some had been unemployed or working in the home. But I think that educational qualifications give you a certain amount of security to fall back on, which can be important if you take the decision to work in a low-paid 'alternative' job.

There were of course many disagreements and conflicts at Oakleaf over the seven years, but before discussing particular examples I think I should stress that in general the collective process worked well. Focusing on problems can give a false impression of endless difficulties. I should also say that I am writing from my personal memories and I cannot speak for the other Oakleaf workers.

The first area where some problems arose is that of relationships between the workers. We had a close-knit working situation, where the 'personal' relationships between individuals were bound to affect how they worked with each other and with the rest of the collective. For example, Jane and Andrew were 'a couple', and although I felt they tried very hard not to have 'personal' discussions at work, any emotional tension in their relationship would still be there at work and would affect the rest of us too. The extension of our work friendships to social and emotional relationships outside work could be both good for the co-op, since it helped to forge a stronger group identity and personal commitment, and also bad for the co-op, because work relationships could become vulnerable to 'outside' emotional problems. At times there were also personality clashes between individual workers, where people simply didn't get on, which of course can happen anywhere.

Although Oakleaf had a strong commitment to anti-sexist working, there were difficulties we had to face on this issue. Sexism was most obvious in our external relations, when outside people (e.g. bank managers, grant bodies) often expected there to be a man 'in charge' and so expected to deal with a man. I found this easier to deal with when we were an all-woman collective, because then we simply (simply??) had to overcome our own internalised sexism. When we were a mixed group, I felt we tended to collude with other people's sexist assumptions by having a man do the 'wheeler-dealing'. We discussed this and the women tried to take on more of these roles. Sexism within the collective also became an issue around the question of who did the cleaning, watered the plants etc. We more or less solved this problem by putting the 'housework' on a rota, so everyone took their turn (though different people had different standards...) The women workers had to deal with constant sexist assumptions and remarks from customers and some publishers' reps. 'Female shop assistants' are expected to be pleasant and smiling however the customer behaves - we usually were, in the interests of the shop's reputation, but it could be quite trying.

It seems to me that one of the areas we had trouble with was the appointment of new workers. We looked for an ability to learn and do the job, a political commitment to the aims of the shop, including collective working, and for someone we would all get on with. All this is hard to evaluate from application forms and interviews, and you can only really tell if the person is right after working with them for a while. Some co-ops have a trial period, but Oakleaf rejected this as unfair on the individual - if someone was prepared to accept our lousy wages and change their life round to

commit themselves to the shop we felt it would be unfair to then reject them several months later. We thought that if some feel the wrong choice has been made, it is then up to the whole co-op to deal with the problem. Many potential workers were put off the idea of working at Oakleaf because of the low wages.

Another problem occurred when volunteers had put considerable time and effort into the shop and then applied for a job, but we felt we wouldn't be happy working with them on a permanent basis. In that case we tried to explain in a non-hurtful way that we valued their contribution but felt they were not the most suitable candidate.

Once a new worker has been appointed, with a small group working closely together it can be difficult for a new member to take on a full role and feel an equal part of the collective. In my case, when I joined Oakleaf, Jane and Andrew had to make a positive effort to stop discussing work at all hours of the day and night as they had before, otherwise I would have always felt an outsider. This situation was helped by the development of a strong friendship between the three of us and we saw a lot of each other outside of work. Some friends who ate with us eventually put a ban on Oakleaf people 'talking shop' at dinner! I think this friendship made it difficult for the next new worker, Aude, to 'break in' to the group. Later on, the friendships were not so close because the workers lived further apart and were involved in different things, but this is always an area needing to be worked on when a new member joins a small collective. I think there was a difference between the earlier workers and the later ones in their attitude to the shop. In the early days people were more immersed in the shop and the motivation was more intense perhaps because getting something started is more exciting than keeping it going. I felt this caused some strains after the initial period, when the 'older' workers perhaps had over-high expectations of the newer ones' commitment, but this was not a particularly crucial problem.

It seems reasonable to expect that, for personal reasons and because of different past experience of work, different workers will give their work a different priority at different times in their lives. These differences sometimes led to some people perceiving others as either over-working or under-working. The issue of over-working came up at Oakleaf when my response to the pressure of work was to work longer hours, because I felt I would rather spend longer at work and get everything done than feel constantly pressurised by the amount waiting to be done. Because I then did more than my share of the work, I seemed to take more over, and the others felt guilt-tripped and pressurised (i.e. if I was working harder so

should they be). As I recall, we were reluctant to discuss this at all, but once we did we agreed to be more explicit about what we expected of ourselves. We set a 40 hour week (later reduced, instead of a wage rise, to 36), with our own version of flexitime.

At other times, different people were felt by others not to be pulling their weight or not to be taking a full share of the responsibilities, and resentment built up. Because of our joint responsibility for the whole undertaking, I think we felt a justifiable interest in how well other people were working, but were loath to say anything if we felt something was wrong for fear of damaging important work relationships or seeming to act in an authoritarian manner. I felt we were extremely bad at dealing with these problems; they tended to flare up in occasional arguments but were rarely discussed and dealt with. Part of the problem came from the difficulty of defining what 'counted' as work, and what priorities were in the best interests of the shop. For example, someone chatting to friends in the shop could be seen by one person as a waste of time but by another as dealing with customers or developing useful contacts. Co-ops generally seem to have difficulty in dealing constructively with these sorts of problems - when they become severe usually someone leaves or is pushed out, in this respect co-ops can sometimes be worse employers than conventional businesses.

Although everyone who worked at Oakleaf shared the general political aims of the shop, we obviously still had political differences. For instance, I remember one heated argument in the shop over whether or not all men are potential rapists! These differences showed up mainly in questions of stocking policy, e.g. whether to stock books on paedophilia, or an anti-militarist cartoon book that was sexist. As I recall, usually if someone remained unhappy about selling a particular book or books we would end up not stocking it. Politics was also behind general discussions of our stock, both within the collective and between us and the supporters. How far should we devote space and resources to books because they might sell well and how far should we stick to the radical books which often didn't sell? Our stock was always a mixture, with half the space given over to the radical stock and half for 'general' books that any bookshop might stock, thus reflecting our desire to be both a radical bookshop and a bookshop for the local community. Our window displays perhaps exemplify this balance. We wanted to interest passers-by and draw them in, whilst simultaneously being open about the shop's politics and avoiding frightening off local people. So a 'safe' subject like gardening or cookery might be followed by a display on the miners' strike or peace campaigning. We always tried to

avoid stocking books we saw as oppressive, e.g. racist or sexist, but found, particularly with children's books, that to be very strict about these criteria would leave you with no stock! So we would carry a range of stock that wasn't too bad, and try to recommend particularly books we thought both presented positive images and were enjoyable. Of course we were always compromising between political purity and commercial considerations, but different people would want to compromise in different positions! I think this is an eternal and inevitable conflict in radical and community bookshops and just has to be continually discussed.

When Oakleaf's finances began to take a downward turn I certainly found work increasingly stressful. Once we started taking out loans against the building to finance the trading loss, we knew deep down that unless we could find new solutions this was the beginning of the end. We had to economise all the time, which was unpleasant (e.g. lack of heating), expensive to us personally (e.g. paying for phone calls) and generally time-consuming. Coupled with our very low wages, I felt there was no part of my life where I wasn't poverty-stricken. It was hard to feel positive and creative in this situation, and fighting against depression was draining. I'm sure the others had similar feelings, and I think it added a lot of strain to our working relationships, especially over the last few months. I think we were reluctant to deal with tensions at this time because we knew the shop was closing.

Conclusions

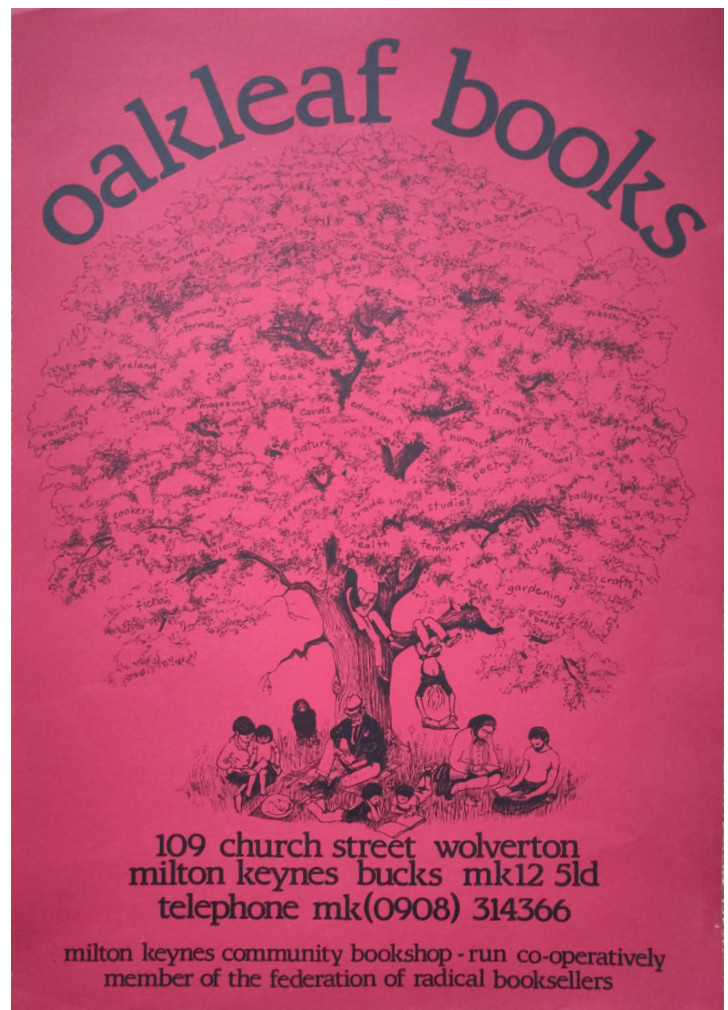
In summary then, the main achievement of Oakleaf Books was to have existed at all, and to have substantially fulfilled its aims (see 'introduction') over a seven year period. Purely as a business venture Oakleaf was never a viable proposition, and we were enabled to survive by a combination of subsidy and determination, hard work and commitment from workers and supporters.

Oakleaf's role as an information centre and contact point was always a useful and successful service to the community. It became perhaps less vital as other networks developed in the growing Milton Keynes, but I think these other networks tend to be more specialised, so that the overall function of making links between many different concerns has been lost. The increasing tendency of 'straight' bookshops to carry radical stock will help to alleviate Oakleaf's loss to the political community, but nevertheless its closure has been quite a blow to the left and the women's movement in particular, and it will be sorely missed.

Other important achievements have been the skills acquired and developed by Oakleaf's workers. We learned an enormous amount about the book trade and all the necessary business skills, e.g. financial, promotional and administrative skills. We also learned to work collectively, to operate politically and to deal with authority. Through the many and varied activities the shop took on we were able to develop our organisational abilities. Working at Oakleaf helped to build our confidence in ourselves, and past Oakleaf workers have gone on, two to work in Co-operative Development Agencies, one to do administrative work at the Open University, and one to work for a Rape Crisis Centre. Volunteers, particularly unemployed people and women working in the home, also gained more confidence and experience, which in a number of cases helped them to get paid work subsequently.

The development of a co-operative structure combining workers' self-management with wider community control has been taken up elsewhere in the co-op movement and has helped to fill a need for more accountable structures. The community control aspect of Oakleaf was important, and I do think it meant that the people we aimed to serve felt much more involved with the shop than is usual for radical bookshops, whilst leaving the workers in basic control of their work. The main drawback was the amount of energy the workers had to put in to service the structure, but I think this was more than compensated for by the support we received.

Oakleaf's basic problem was our inability to increase turnover to a point where we could be independent of subsidy, and so when the various grants ran out closure became inevitable. This was largely due to the particular situation in Milton Keynes with the competition from the City Centre. We can speculate that had the City Centre been built earlier (or had the idea to start a bookshop come later), Oakleaf might never have decided to set up in Wolverton. Instead it could have grown from a market stall to a small



shop in the City Centre, with perhaps more hope of long-term survival. Who knows? It is worth pointing out that radical bookshops in general are going through a difficult time (the only ones that are doing well are in large cities and/or have local government subsidy) so the problem is not unique to Milton Keynes.

A consequent problem was the shop's inability to pay decent wages. This meant that all the workers had to be prepared to accept a large degree of self-exploitation. Paradoxically, I think this led to a greater degree of solidarity amongst us, but this commitment could not be maintained for ever. The political commitment among the workers to the shop's aims enabled them to tolerate this for longer than would otherwise be possible.

I think we had our fair share of problems and tensions in the collective, and I think we were often bad at acknowledging their existence and dealing with conflict. I felt on balance though, that we worked together well, and that learning to work collectively was an important part of our experience at Oakleaf.

I'd also like to think that some of the ideas and information that we helped to spread have, perhaps in a small way, begun to change people's lives and perspectives and helped to change the world for the better.

On a final note, if I was asked to distil Oakleaf's experience into one sentence I'd say it shows that miracles can be performed with enough commitment, but that anyone thinking of setting up a radical bookshop now needs to look long and hard at the financial planning side!

Federation of Alternative Bookshops and Federation of Radical Booksellers

Dave Cope

This article is based on FAB/FRB archives in the Working Class Movement Library, and on collections built up separately by John Goodman and myself, that we will hand over to the Library to fill in any gaps they have. We are not in a position yet to state what proportion of the total production of FAB/FRB documents this includes but I can see very little missing after a quick assessment. There is a fine run of Newsletters, unsorted correspondence (internal and external), details of campaigns, a large collection of lists of members, a small amount of financial material and much more. Given the regular rotation of co-ordinators and somewhat haphazard record keeping by some shops, it is a surprisingly large collection. So, a big thank you to all co-ordinators. If anyone has any isolated documents, or knows of the existence of collections in any institution, please contact me so we can fill in even more gaps.

The article is not a short history of radical bookshops, but a first attempt to record one part of that history, and it is an important part.

The Federation of Alternative Bookshops (FAB) was set up in Autumn 1974 and had a membership of co-operatively run bookshops. It became the Federation of Radical Booksellers (FRB) following the 'Working Together' Conference in September 1980 which opened membership to shops affiliated to political parties. It appears to have ceased to exist sometime after 1992, possibly as late as 1994.

There is some pre-history to the FAB, which involves a curious and rather primitive distribution service. Agitprop, a London shop started around 1970, specialising in anarchism, feminism and Ireland, was involved in a project called Circuit Books. Nothing has been written about it to my knowledge. Susie Zienau, from Coventry, was involved in setting it up. Coming into an inheritance, she set up a Trust which ran a van, a converted VW campervan. It was a mixture of a travelling shop, distributor and bookstall. Stocked by Agitprop, it had a fairly regular route with stages where it would be collected and taken on by a new volunteer or volunteers, who had their own route and dropped it off at the next stage. Maurice Herson got involved in early 1972 and became the Durham link. He remembers picking the car up at Scotch corner and dropping the van off in Dundee to Yvonne Edwards. He joined the trust and remained involved in Circuit Books until it folded in mid/late 1973. One cannot help thinking of the meanderings of the Clarion vans.

Maurice thinks there were probably half a dozen routes organised by different individuals. The idea was to visit different towns and events, and not just sell, but leave books and pamphlets there and take unsold ones back and also to pick

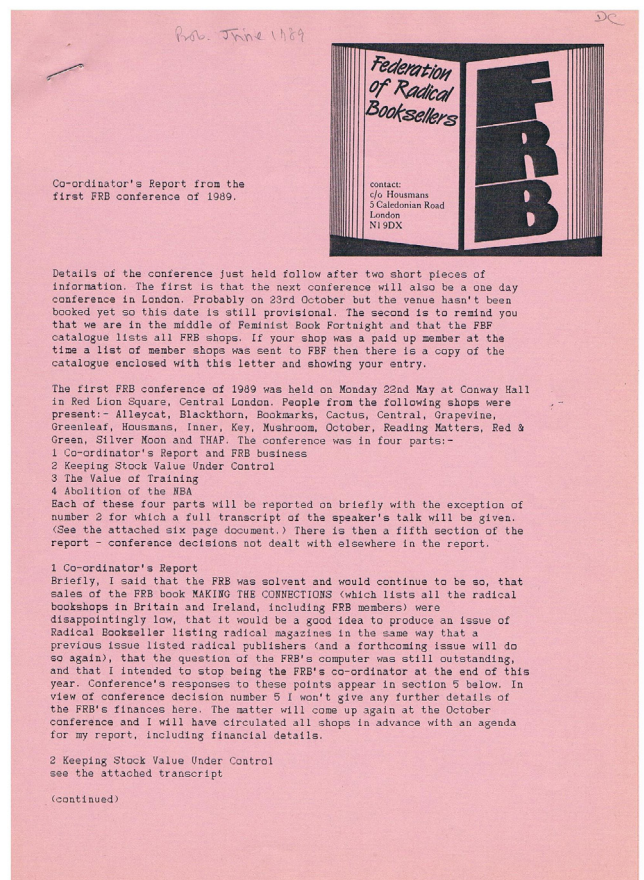
up new local magazines if available. It would be very interesting to know which shops and bookstalls they visited, as this was really just before what we call 'the FRB era' of upsurge in radical shops. Rising Free took over the stock of Agitprop in February 1973 when they opened at 197 King's Cross Road - one of those addresses that weaves a thread through the history of the radical book trade. (Maurice Herson and Sarah Harrison interview - see sources).

Rising Free did not take over the full distribution role of Agitprop, but they did provide a unique service providing 20 to 30 shops and stalls with radical books on sale or return, and also helped in setting up shops. One of the shops was the short-lived Revolt in Swansea: 'We got all our stuff from Rising Free - mostly obscure pamphlets/mags re Stoke Newington 8 etc...It was very much of its time' (Ian Bone in email to author).

Chas Ball did come to talk about PDC and distribution to Rising Free and he told them, in Sarah Harrison's words, that 'thanks to Rising Free, there was now a network of shops'. I'm sure some of the contacts made earlier by Agitprop must have been with people who were to set up the first FAB shops.

There are two major sources of information from the FAB/FRB - Newsletters and Reports of Conferences. These are of very mixed quality, and some can be very frustrating. There was no regular procedure for recording workshops, plenaries and any decisions taken at the conferences, or even names of those attending. Reports of conferences often omit the date and year. Some workshops provided detailed reports, most a few lines and some none - and this would vary from conference to conference. The July 1987 conference report was exemplary in providing reports of workshops, and named the notetakers, but never mentioned the names of any speakers. Invitations to the March 1987 conference in Lancaster were sent out without any workshops arranged for the second day.

Newsletters also varied widely. At their best they were monthly - when Mandy Vere at News from Nowhere was doing them in 1978, or Brian Moseley of Housmans in the late 1980s. Many were undated, or occasionally wrongly dated (Jan 1984 was dated 1983). On repeated occasions the co-ordinator is not named (either as individual or shop); names were



often only first names, surnames and shops themselves were misspelt. The FAB, the Federation of Alternative Bookshops, sometimes even described itself as the 'Federation of Alternative Booksellers', including on headed paper. The Newsletter following a conference usually began with what were variously called 'Minutes of Conference' or 'Report of Conference'. Sometimes two conferences were reported on in the same Report or Newsletter (Feb and July 1985).

The other source of information about the FRB is the *Radical Bookseller (RB)*, which came out in October 1980, after much preparatory work and a pilot issue, at much the same time as the FRB was established, and ended with No.72 in 1992. It was independent from the FRB, but worked closely with it, and the long-standing editor was Fergus Nicol who represented Bookmarks at many FRB Conferences.

There are cases of shops that were announced in *RB* or Newsletters but that never got off the ground due to lack of finance, or difficulties in finding premises. Two such businesses were Katalyst in Newcastle and Blackbird in Wolverhampton, both members of the FRB. There were probably at least two dozen others all over the country that did not get this far after first announcing their hope to start a new shop, ranging from Beckton, Harlow, Northampton, Leeds, Peterborough, Southend, Sunderland, Portstewart, Walthamstow, Welshpool, York. A close look at the FRB correspondence file in the Archives, as well as the Newsletters and the *RB* will reveal more. Most were hoping to set up shops, some were bookstalls which hoped to become shops and most were in the earliest stages just seeking information or help. One, in mid Wales, hoped to set up a bookshop/café with a screenprinting and 'bikeshop' sideline. And of course some that did open were very short-lived, and left few traces. It was a precarious business model.

I have used this article as an opportunity to list all members of the FAB/FRB on a spreadsheet available on the research pages of Left on the Shelf's website (<https://www.leftontheshelfbooks.co.uk/research.php>). There are a few anomalies due to the process of being accepted into membership, as applications had to be ratified at a conference at which the shop had to be present. So shops might have thought they were members once they had applied or sent their fee, but officially it may have been into the following year before they were accepted. And records were poorly kept. LAMP Bookshop wrote to the co-ordinator in 1981 saying 'we applied before the Nottingham Conference but didn't understand whether we were accepted'. One co-ordinator criticised the membership organiser: 'We have never had a full report on membership from Acorn and the list with this newsletter is still a 'best attempt'.

Even though some were occasionally accepted as full members, I have excluded distributors but it needs to be said that Third World Publications (a member from

1975), PDC, and its successors including Scottish & Northern, at times played a very supportive role in the FRB and at its Conferences, though PDC faced some slight hostility in some FAB Newsletters with one shop questioning why they should be present at every meeting.

However defined, and we will discuss definitions later, the total number of radical bookshops fluctuates, and figures need care when being quoted. Here are some more to throw into the discussion. PDC in 1977 reckoned there were about 60 'left/alternative/radical bookshops' and this would probably include some wholefood shops that sold only magazines, perhaps with some pamphlets, and some cookery books. Russell Southwood, one of the authors of *What a Way to Run a Railroad: An Analysis of Radical Failure*, had worked for or volunteered with PDC, the *Leveller*, Minority Press Group and Comedia, spoke to an FRB conference in 1987 and said that the number of radical bookshops had fallen from between 150 and 200 to between 30 and 70. And the same trend applied to radical publishers, printers, magazines and community newspapers. Another estimate was that there were over 100 radical bookshops that were not members of the FRB. (Co-ordinator's Report, 20 July 1987, reporting the conference earlier that month).

When the first issue of the *Radical Bookseller* (*RB*) appeared it claimed there were over 100 radical bookshops, 20 independent radical publishers and a large radical distributor, PDC. The *Radical Bookseller* published its own lists, with the help of Southern Distribution and Scottish and Northern (*RB* 17/18 and *RB* 34) but some were not really radical (Fred Holdsworth in Ambleside, who opened in 1956) but the reps probably enjoyed a visit to the Lake District and it was, and still is in 2023, a good small bookshop. Ekos Books (Glossop), Crabapple (Shrewsbury), Environmental Factshop (Nottingham), two 'women only' shops in London (Women's Arts Alliance and Kentish Town Women's Workshop), Turangalila (St Columb, Cornwall) and Websters (Croydon) – all are long forgotten. Some may have taken a few radical magazines so were on the lists of reps from radical distributors. These shops that were not specifically political may have had an owner or buyer who was radical.

The list in *RB* 34 does differentiate between shops that are not strictly radical but stock a significant number of radical titles – Book Case (Hebden Bridge), Leeds University Union Bookshop, Chorlton Bookshop, Bakewell for Books. But it still includes Fred Holdsworth. TWP were responsible for the inclusion in the *RB* lists of Development Education Centres (DECs), which were certainly not traditional bookshops, though two did join the FRB briefly. Bookselling could be a small part of their multifaceted functions. They were progressive organisations, strong on education and development issues, to the extent of being targeted by the far right:

the Third World Centre in the East End of London, established in 1984, was fire-bombed in May 1988. The first floor of the building was gutted and a bookshop, library and café were destroyed. It is good to be reminded of the impact of radical bookselling and publishing outside bookshops. So overall I think we gain from their inclusion.

This list could also include City Lit Bookshop, Institute of Contemporary Arts, Serpentine Gallery, Whitechapel Art Gallery and Tate Modern (all in London). The galleries were certainly big buyers of radical magazines into the 21st century, an interesting phenomenon that reflects the growth of cultural politics, but were not radical bookshops and would not have dreamed of joining the FRB. So there was always a significant difference between the lists from the *RB* and the FRB, which naturally only included paid up members.

The first detailed list in the *RB* was spread over three issues (40, 41 and 43 in 1985). It was produced after asking shops for details on opening hours, specialist subjects, booklists produced, whether they supplied libraries and had a mail order service, and what other facilities they provided. They were also asked to provide a stock figure (though if this was the number of titles or books and other items stocked is unclear) and judging by the responses the shops were unsure and many appear to have produced some wild estimates. Did Metro in Bury and Bookworm in Derry, who both claimed 10,000, have over twice as many as News from Nowhere, or did Response Community Bookshop in London have more than Silver Moon? Did LAMP in Leigh have 25,000 (more than Bookmarks and Collets)? I think not – there must have been an extra zero added onto the figure somewhere along the line, as happened with John Sheridan Ltd in Hull who claimed 50,000 but corrected the figure to 5,000 in *RB* 49. The smaller figures are interesting and are also more likely to be realistic: CND Bookshop in London had 350, the National Museum of Labour History 130, Give Peace a Chance in Brighton 75 and Earthwise in Nottingham 50+. But this should not disqualify any from the status of radical bookshops. Unfortunately many did not provide any figure at all, including Grass Roots Books in Manchester, and Central Books and Housmans in London. Out of the 151 shops listed, which included shops in Ireland, there was no response at all from 56, never mind the request for a stock figure, and this included the WRP chain, most of the DEC's, and Compendium.

Were these figures ever looked at in any detail? There does not appear to have been any correspondence in the Newsletters or in the *RB*. With hindsight, two questions that are glaringly absent from the survey are turnover and date of opening, but turnover figures are always a sensitive subject and would perhaps not have produced a useful working figure. Shops did fill in anonymised rough figures to FRB questionnaires which are of interest.

Numbers 49 and 61 of *RB* were given over completely to a listing of radical bookshops and were some of the few issues to be priced: they were intended to be sold also as stand-alone issues, as the journal was otherwise only available on subscription. There were companion issues with 56 and 65, both lists of radical publishers, and 71, a list of radical magazines. All these were extremely useful for shops and publishers – and still are for historians. The lists in *RB* 49 (*Radical Bookshops in Britain and Ireland 1986-7*) and *RB* 61 (*Radical Bookshops in Britain and Ireland 1988-9*) contained 149 and 128 respectively. They had done nothing to sort out the problems of definitions, though there were some changes to stock figures from the three earlier issues from 1985. There were some radical updates from some shops, unless errors were all attributable to the *Radical Bookseller* which is very unlikely. News from Nowhere's stock was 4,800 in *RB* 41 and 9,500 in *RB* 49 – a more realistic figure. The Clock Bookshop in Lowestoft opened in 1987 and immediately claimed a stock of 12,000, which would be some achievement in a small town. The CND Bookshop went from 350 in 1986 to 75 in 1987. There was a strange typographical error repeated in both issues, that led to the Labour Party Bookshop being listed twice.

A final point about membership is how long it took for some shops, who were never eligible to join the FAB, to join the FRB – Central Books, Gays the Word, Freedom, Walter Rodney Bookshop (previously Bogle L'Ouverture), New Beacon and even Housmans did not join immediately. Some never applied, including Compendium and Collets. Some dropped out: East Oxford Advertiser, believing it could not achieve much; Bookplace in Peckham thought the organisation was not relevant to them as they were more educational in their function and 'aimed at the working class rather than alternative' (sic). Grass Roots resigned temporarily after a policy difference: because a decision taken the previous year to employ a worker for three days had not been implemented. And many did not renew membership due to financial constraints.

So that is an overview of background, sources, listings and problems facing the researcher into the organisation. Let us now turn to a closer look at what the sources reveal.

Federation of Alternative Bookshops

We have not discovered yet who took the initiative in calling the first meeting of the Federation of Alternative Bookshops, or its date or location.

The earliest members' list I have seen is of attendees at a national conference on 2 November 1975 in Manchester. It is worth reproducing this list as it will contain the originators of the FAB. The shops were: 108 (Cardiff); Amamus (Blackburn);

East Oxford Advertiser; Fourth Idea (Bradford); Grass Roots (Manchester); Mushroom (Nottingham); News from Nowhere (Liverpool); Partisan Books (Luton); Peace Centre (Birmingham); Public House (Brighton); Rising Free (London); Single Step (Lancaster) and Third World Publications, the distributor. Apologies were tendered by Bogus Books (Hull); Prometheus (Birmingham); Women's Books (Bristol); Women's Liberation Workshop (London). On top of these (and of course it is possible some others didn't send apologies) there is the Other Branch in Leamington Spa 'who attended last year's conference' and who would be offered membership. It is this reference to the previous conference that gives us the date of 1974 as the year of formation, and this is confirmed by Rick Seccombe who recalls going to an FAB conference somewhere in the Midlands at this time with fellow workers from Grass Roots. He thinks it may have been organised by The Other Branch in Leamington Spa. This shop produced a booklet to celebrate its tenth anniversary, and it states it hosted one of the first national meetings of the FAB. There is no date given and it only includes a partial list of shops that attended, but it does appear that it could have been the first, though the reference above to it 'attending' might then have said 'hosting'.

If we take all these just listed as members (and exclude TWP the distributor) we have a total of 17 shops (though the Women's Liberation Workshop does not sound like a shop - perhaps it did bookstalls or was an associate member if it was one of the feminist groups of the time that produced a *Women's Liberation Newsletter* in rotation). A geographical breakdown gives 12 shops from the Midlands and North; two from London; two from the South and West; one from Wales.

The first public list of members appears in a pamphlet, *Social Work and the Welfare State*, published by SCANUS dated April 1976. SCANUS, where incidentally Chas Ball, later a founder member of PDC, had worked, was a unit of the National Union of Students that 'provided advice and information to students involved in community action, environment and counter-course projects'. This list of 16 shops and TWP drops the two women's organisations and adds Earth Exchange in London. Only one of these existed before 1972 (Grass Roots, 1971). The list in the 1976 pamphlet, probably unpaid publicity rather than an advert given the respective financial resources of the NUS and the FAB, describes the FAB as 'a network of autonomous worker-controlled radical bookshops'.

A one-sided A4 leaflet, undated but probably 1978, was headed 'This Shop is a Member of the Federation of Alternative Booksellers' (sic) which listed 47 full members and some associated members. This would indicate that the period 1976-8 was a period of rapid growth for the FAB.

Keep

**This shop is a member of
THE FEDERATION OF ALTERNATIVE BOOKSELLERS.**

This means:

NO BOSSES

We work collectively and are all equally responsible.

NO PROFITS

We want to make a reasonable living wage – most of us don't, and no one gets any excess profits.

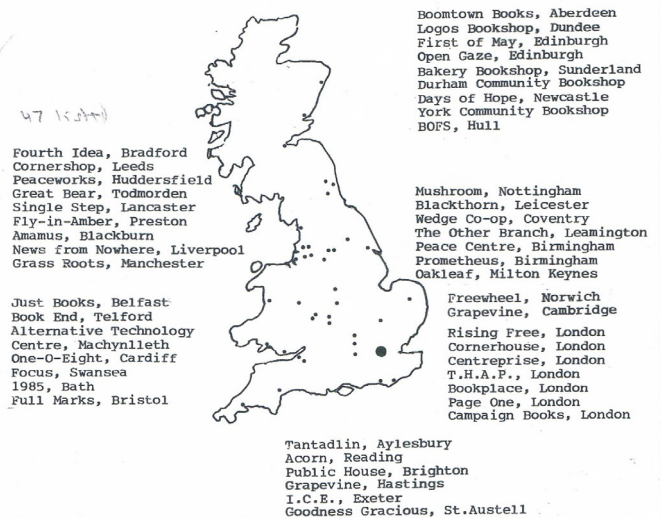
There are over fifty shops connected with F.A.B. throughout the country – ask for a list.

The leaflet was uncompromising about the FAB. Being a member meant 'No Bosses. We work collectively and are all equally responsible. No Profits. We want to make a reasonable living wage – most of us don't, and no one gets any excess profits'.

The FAB Manchester meeting in November 1975 recorded that Partisan were to act as the official FAB contact, treasurer and organiser of the next conference, and News from Nowhere was to be responsible for advertising and the proposed monthly internal Newsletters. There would be an annual business conference and an annual discussion conference. We will see how the FRB changed these tasks around in an attempt to find the ideal structure and sharing of responsibilities. There were minor discussions on recycling of excess stock between shops at the conferences, though this took up a lot of space. There was a long description by Bob Dent (News from Nowhere) of his hassles with placing a £20 advert in *Spare Rib* on behalf of the FAB and there was an issue between Books (Leeds) and some Federation shops.

Was there a meeting of some sort before the next record which is of the meeting or conference on 11 July 1976, which was held at the premises of Rising Free in London? There were only reps from four shops (108, Partisan, Mushroom, and Rising Free, plus the ever-committed TWP). But the report of the meeting was comprehensive and well written. Chas Ball was present to talk about the plans of PDC North. There was the first reference to a pamphlet on 'Setting Up a Bookshop'. There were quotes from the letter Rick Seccombe of Grass Roots had sent in which he writes about the conditions for membership in very firm terms: 'We in no way wish to see the Fed elitist, but because of the nature of the federation it is only for those bookshops who accept its aims, who qualify for membership and who are known to us to be OK people to deal with...' and shops had to be proposed by current members. I suspect the phrase 'OK people' refers to the dealings Grass Roots had had with Books (Leeds). Rick was one of those who was later to change his mind on the broadening out of the FAB. Like Ross Bradshaw of Mushroom, they both embraced it after the event.

There then follows a strange period when there were suggestions to set up a Northern FAB and, slightly later, a Southern FAB. There was also one meeting



in Leicester for Midland shops, mentioned in a Newsletter of December 1977. These weren't 'unofficial' meetings, but their powers never appear to have been discussed. On 18 October 1977, there was a meeting of northern FAB members in Huddersfield, hosted by Peaceworks which was based there, with two people from each of Cradlewell (Newcastle), Grass Roots, Peaceworks and York Community Bookshop. This meeting was a response to a meeting in Birmingham described by Jon Walker of Peaceworks in his report as 'really depressing and pessimistic, and which concluded that a national FAB is a waste of time'. The first item in the minutes of this meeting was short and dismissive: 'FAB. Agreed that it was not functioning at present'. Those present agreed to continue with the policy of excluding 'aligned' shops (linked to political parties or groups) and only accept 'non-aligned/collective, non-hierarchical, non-profit shops/projects'. The desirability of establishing some form of interchange with shops outside this definition was discussed, but the proposal for some form of associate status was left open. There was another Northern meeting held in January 1978 in York, with a better attendance, 26 people from 13 shops, plus Chas Ball. Chas appeared to favour the option of two regional FRBs, perhaps because it may have fitted with the structure of PDC.

Between these two Northern meetings there had been an 'unofficial meeting' held during the Socialist Book Fair on 3 November 1977, involving about 20 radical bookshops that were present - all were invited, not just members of the FAB. The main issues were security and the increasing attacks from the far right (and arising issues such as insurance and mutual aid). There were shorter discussions on trade unions for bookshop workers, the Booksellers' Association, and communications between shops - all issues that would appear regularly at FRB conferences over the next few years. This may have convinced some FAB members of the advantage of a broader organisation, especially given the role of Bookmarks in organising the Socialist Book Fair.

In March 1978 there were meetings of FAB North supporters in Leeds, with only five people attending from three shops, and FAB South in Bath which did a bit better with 12 people from five shops. The introductory session at the latter discussed the options of different legal status of shops and introductions from each shop: 'This whole discussion was rambling and incoherent' was the summary reported by the minute-taker. These appear to be the last manifestations of local meetings.

Then in May 1978 there was the FAB conference in Coventry, at which Wedge argued in favour of an opening up of the membership, but they were in a minority. Those who wanted a North and a South FAB were not deterred by the better

turnout of shops (19 shops and one distributor). Other discussions noted were on helping new shops set up, and what was perceived as the poor performance of PDC, with late runs and irregular visits to shops. The next national conference in September 1978 decided against a full-time worker and opted for one day a week, which Carol Skilbeck of Acorn took on. This set the pattern for the future of the organisation and limited its potential growth. This was probably inevitable as there was no stomach among the shops for paying increased membership fees which might have allowed for the eventual appointment of a full-time worker. Shops were weighed down with their own financial problems, added to which the burden of having one worker doing other work for even one day a week must have been a deterrent. However, we will see that some sterling work was done by some individuals and shops who acted as co-ordinators.

Federation of Radical Booksellers

York Community Bookshop sent out invitations to all radical bookshops, not just members of the FAB, to attend a conference called 'Working Together' on Sunday 21 September 1980. This was to be followed the next day by a conference for FAB members only which would discuss their response. Workshops at 'Working Together' were listed: Publisher Relations, Supportive Network, Skill Sharing, Collective Working, Women's Workshop, Men's Workshop, Shoplifting, Fascist Attacks, the *Radical Bookseller*, Periodical Wholesaling, Context of Shops in Politics and Community. This list of pro-active, re-active and caring (the personal is political) themes reflects the major concerns of radical businesses at the time and might even have been looked upon with some envy by staff in mainstream bookshops. The letter also advised those coming to bring a sleeping bag – 'we'll arrange sleeping places (floors!). Let us know if you will need a bed, or special accommodation'.

A report of both conferences, and the workshops, appeared in the November 1980 Newsletter – the first from the newly created Federation of Radical Booksellers. Not all the workshops had notes taken, but some interesting comments appear from the ones that did. At one workshop registration as a co-operative was raised: some thought ICOM (the Industrial Common Ownership Movement, set up in 1971 and the best-known umbrella organisation in the UK for worker co-operatives through its model rules) was the simplest option, but others argued 'it was part of the patriarchal/straight systems and/or a more 'acceptable' form of capitalism'. There was some interest in FAB having a clear and well worked out presentation on structures – there were no volunteers to establish a working party on this!'. Talk was to be easier than action at these meetings.

Questions from discussions at the Working Together conference were noted but there were no decisions: 'Is selling expensive books like New Left Books especially important?' And 'Are our low wages bringing down wage levels in other shops?'. There was a discussion on whether there should be a union for alternative bookshop workers or not – and if so should it be with existing trade unions or not? Given that half the members of the FAB received no wages at all (or perhaps just some unofficial expenses), and the rest could barely pay a decent living wage this was somewhat irrelevant. And the natural union to join, USDAW, was looked down upon as too right-wing or ineffective by most FAB members. This author did join USDAW and found it glad to welcome an active new member, though there were no disputes when the union was needed. Trade unions were not used to environments with no traditional management. Disputes and differences that arose in radical shops were of a different nature and could be bitter and personal and prove disastrous – very few shops developed mediation processes.

The Collective Working workshop 'was just starting to get going when it had to end – so no conclusions!' reports the note-taker. Unfortunately discipline over time-keeping was rather lax at FAB/FRB conferences, as was a sense of realism about radical publishing, the wage structure in mainstream bookselling, the influence of the Federation and the role of trade unions.

The exclamation marks in the preceding passages are in the original reports and indicate an awareness of the way some of the proceedings could be perceived by outsiders, i.e. as a caricature of anarchism. It is easy to mock some of the extremes of anarchist organisation and I have been guilty of this myself, usually to introduce a lighter note into the narrative. However, all of the shops were experimenting with new ways of working collectively, and the emphasis on consensus, which also influenced feminist practice, was laudable if not taken to extremes. But the context was of very difficult financial problems for the shops. It was this that led some commentators to despair at what they saw as the financial incompetence of many shops, and a naïve approach to 'profit' (see *What a Way to Run a Railroad*). And there are indeed many references to 'profit' as a dirty word, without an understanding that a surplus of income over expenditure had to be created to survive. Charlie Unsworth described Fourth Idea: 'It was a radical, hippyish bookshop and all of us were ideologically opposed to the concept that business was something to be taken seriously'.

One conference workshop in York on shoplifting had among the suggestions for dealing with the problem to put up a notice 'Shoplifters not welcome here – please go somewhere that can afford it'.

But the major decision of this 1980 conference was the transformation of the FAB into the FRB. The discussion raised some interesting differences but the debate was conducted in a friendly manner. The main division was between those who felt the organisation should give as much importance to the way books were sold as to the content of what was sold. So the former wanted a commitment to collective decision-making. This position could be described as a more fundamentalist anarchist one. Some on the other extreme of the debate questioned 'the feasibility of effective working by consensus' and argued that the issue of shop structure was irrelevant. And all those in the FAB who demanded that nobody take a profit out of a shop should have known that this never happened. At most, political parties may have occasionally raided their shops, but there were no rich pickings; the founder of Collets never took any profits. In fact they probably continued putting money into the business. Housmans profits at one stage did finance *Peace News*, but none of this is exploitation. None of these shops were eligible for membership of the FAB.

Attempts to define what constituted a radical bookshop were difficult – one suggestion was that 'the stocking of radical periodicals and pamphlets' was one criterion, and 'a commitment to radical social change' was another. There was a consensus that there was a need for a wider group of shops to increase the public presence of a Federation. There was also recognition that the problems facing larger shops (currently outside the FAB) were different from smaller ones, but these large shops (Bookmarks, Central, Collets and Compendium) could give any Federation much greater clout, though the latter two, both privately owned, never joined. Perhaps of equal importance was the recognition that the black and purely feminist bookshops had never been drawn to the FAB. This was partly because the FAB consisted largely of small shops and largely of provincial ones, especially in the early days, so they were more isolated, could afford fewer staff and these were often less experienced. Some of the London shops had a national profile and tended not to be community shops in the same way as many outside the capital. There were exceptions, obviously, but the pattern holds true. There were tentative suggestions of creating a new grouping for the shops outside the FAB, or setting up a working party to discuss future enlargement, but it was agreed that this would be just delaying a decision. It was left to the FAB conference the next day to decide, but the general feeling was in favour of immediate enlargement. There was a footnote to the September 1980 conference reports thanking York Community Books for the organisation 'in the face of such a massive turnout' which was a very encouraging sign, and then a second footnote: 'The debate about whether the best workshops were in the queue for loo or in the loo still rages'. A nice humorous touch for a minute-taker.

It must not be thought that the content of every Newsletter was deadly serious. There was one, June 1982, which has a description of Red Herring Books in Grimsby: 'Founded in 1976, it moved to its present premises in 1978 after trading for two years from a converted trawler moored in Grimsby Harbour. The shop also has a meeting room, available for community groups etc, and it is planned to open a small wholefood café in the basement next year. Red Herring Books have published *Memories of the Dogger Bank* (1979), and *Memories of Edo Venturer II* (1981).' Reading this quickly, and assuming it was announcing a new member, almost made me add it to the list of bookshops we have built up, but a reference to the 'six full-time and part-time workers' did not sound quite right – highly improbable if all were paid. Anyway, a close textual perusal of the context revealed that it was a sample of an invented shop created to show how entries of shops should be written for a booklet that was going to list all radical bookshops. It did remind me of the J R Hartley *Fly-Fishing* phenomenon when a tv advert showed a customer visiting second-hand bookshops in search of the book, and only succeeding thanks to the 'Yellow Pages'. Viewers actually started requesting the fictitious book; an enterprising writer then published a book with this title and author which became a Christmas bestseller, and was bought by many non-anglers. Some enterprising radicals should have done the same and created Red Herring Books – it deserved to exist, the reps would have loved a trip to the coast and it would have boosted tourism in Grimsby. Or sunk without trace.

Structure & Organisation of FRB

The November 1980 Newsletter contained the Reports of the September conferences; General Information since then (correspondence, book fair dates); quarterly accounts; a list of members and Associate Members as at November 1980 (which didn't include the new members – these would be ratified at the next conference); 'Building the Federation', the initial notice of the next conference (to be held in Manchester on 1 and 2 February 1981) and the 'Aims and Methods' to be discussed there. So it is one of the most important documents of the Federation. In June 1981, the co-ordinator, York Community Bookshop, produced a one page report to speed up decision making at the conference, and this plaintively stressed 'we need a decision on how we make a decision'. The membership criteria were changed slightly over the years. In 1989 a letter to potential new members started with the following words: 'Membership of the FRB is open to all bookshops with the FRB's three-fold commitment to anti-sexism, anti-racism and radical social change. (There is also a preference for non-hierarchical forms of working)'. Membership was between £10 and £40 p.a. depending on turnover.

Following the September 1980 FAB conference, Acorn resigned as membership co-ordinators, and Tom Wilson (Mushroom) resigned as co-ordinator because 'my personal feelings of the importance of collective working were at such variance with the consensual expression that what we sell is very much more important than how we sell it'. In the absence of volunteers, Tom offered to act as co-ordinator until the next conference, Building the Federation, which would be held in Manchester on 1 and 2 February 1981. Jeremy Piercy had expressed a similar view in a different way in a Newsletter: 'Hierarchies are damaging, both to individuals who work in them and in society as a whole', which has some truth but is not an absolute – or perhaps it is for some anarchists.

It is a pity Tom and Jeremy could not see that pluralism in ownership of shops could be positive. It meant the availability of more radical material to a wider audience, and the stock of radical shops owned by individuals, trusts or political groups, overlapped in many ways – all these shops carried a wide range on feminism for instance, though this does not mean all groups were as equally committed to feminism. No party shops could survive by just selling their own literature, they needed to appeal to a much wider audience. And even small left-wing or green groups could reach new audiences with their activists organising book stalls in thousands of venues. Bookmarks and Central Books alone organised massive stalls at trade union conferences, for instance. Housmans, a Trust with a manager, had stalls at punk gigs in many different towns as well as the Green Gathering at Worthy Farm and subsequent Glastonbury Festivals on the same site. As for the structure of these businesses, anybody interested in how Central and Housmans changed their ownership structures and opened them out to staff should read the books about them (see 'Sources' below).

The 'Aims and Methods' describes how the Federation functions. It is through regular conferences rather than through an elected, or volunteer, committee. The Conference is the decision-making body, so attendance is an important part of membership, and thus merits a capital 'C'.

Conferences ratified new members, and there were occasions when shops rejoined after a lapse (Days of Hope) and at the Liverpool Conference in 1982 three shops rejoined – East Oxford Advertiser, Peace Centre Birmingham and Corner House (London). Both FAB and FRB could be quite strict over membership issues. In 1981 the latter refused EOA permission to circulate the FRB members with details of anti-nuclear stickers it was selling, as it was selling them to anti-nuclear groups at a discount of 35% thus undercutting bookshops. There are hints at protectionism in some of the conference discussions as well. The same year the Brent Bookshop Co-operative was only permitted associate membership, because

they did not attend the conference in person. The 1983 Lancaster Conference ‘after some discussion’ admitted Concord Books, ‘a distributor of selected vegan and vegetarian titles’ as a full member, a rather odd decision.

The Federation is also open to individuals and groups not eligible for full membership or unwilling to join. These associate members receive the Newsletters and can attend the conferences but would not be involved in the consensus process (I nearly said ‘vote’). As a sample, in November 1980 the full list of these associate members was as follows:

Distributors: Scottish & Northern; Southern Books/Full Time Distribution; Third World Publications; Bas Moreel (Dutch distributor).

Representing publishers: Dave Musson (Merlin); Glen Thompson (Writers & Readers); Keith Smith (Inter Action); Mark Jones (Zed).

ICE (Exeter).

Individuals: Grainne Morley (Community Information Project, Library Association); Kay Stirling; Steve Owen; Mike Hargest; Jackie Eubanks (Brooklyn College Library). Associate members, and others, attending the Working Together conference were from the *Leveller*, *News from Neasden*, *Radical Bookseller*, Esperanto Book Service, Federation of Worker Writers, Countermove (distributor of the *New Statesman*, *Tribune*, *Socialist Challenge* & *Socialist Worker*), and Liz Cooper and George Michaelson. It is unclear why some of these were not on the list of associate members.

Role of co-ordinators

There was quite an animated debate that started in the July 1978 FAB Newsletter about employing a full-time co-ordinator. Mandy at News from Nowhere wrote strongly against the proposal. Firstly because she had been organising the Newsletters and had voluntarily taken on answering enquiries though this was not part of the job, she thought it ‘was a hell of a job’. She also argued that it gave too much power to one individual and would lead to less communication between shops: it would be tempting to leave all difficulties to the co-ordinator; there was already a problem with communications between shops – some never responded. Finally there was the cost. She would be unhappy paying £3 a week (1% of their turnover) to someone who would be paid 2½ times what she was being paid (same as Social Security figure). She agreed anyone who did the job should be paid a living wage. One problem about the discussion was that she was one of the few people to have seen the proposal (it was in a Newsletter she sent out) because Wedge had been late in sending it in, which meant members would only see the

proposal a few days before the meeting to discuss it, which was not acceptable. This was agreed and the decision was postponed to the meeting after that and it was unsurprisingly defeated.

The July 1985 Conference Report announced that 'both First of May and Single Step are keen to shed duties as membership co-ordinators and co-ordinators respectively. However, because there was a lot of confusion as to what exactly the jobs were, all were reluctant to take them on'. One firm decision taken at the conference was that proper invoices should be sent out in January each year, to avoid confusion as to when subs were due, and a statement should follow in April. This should have been happening before.

It was sometimes difficult to get co-ordinators: reporting on the conference of July 1987 in Liverpool, Brian Moseley (Mo) writes that there were two applications, and one later withdrew, leaving himself as co-ordinator. At this conference, the co-ordinator was asked to ring round shops and ask for news which could be incorporated in the Report. The first time this was done some were taken by surprise, and couldn't think of anything to report.

Three years later in 1990, the job description for the co-ordinator's role was re-written before being sent out in an advert to replace Mo. It included: subscriptions and running the bank account; organising conferences, presenting a report and producing a conference report; sending out other reports/documents of interest; send list of members to the Feminist Book Fortnight; phone the shops four times a year; answer correspondence – and 'do anything else necessary or useful'. One day a week at £20 a day, though he adds that he had spent two days a month doing the job.

It must be said that the amount of correspondence was extremely high (and more may be lost). Some was from and to shops, but the bulk appears to be requests for lists of the members, for advice, from job applicants, from publishers, and orders for the publications of the Federation.

The Co-ordinator's Report of the Lancaster conference of 1987 noted the decline in sales in radical bookshops, at the same time as there was an increase in mainstream shops. The rapidly expanding bookshop chains were putting huge resources into marketing books in order to compete with other leisure activities, as well as with each other, and had improved the 'bookshop experience' through thoughtful layout, piling books high, introducing sofas, cafés (which a few radical shops had done from an early date) and other initiatives. The only major growth area, as Bookspeed pointed out from their distribution experience, was in 'mind, body, spirit' titles and 'Many present expressed ideological opposition to such things'.

There was also a declining level of shop involvement in the FRB – there had been only 11 shops, one publisher and one distributor present at the conference.

The need for the FRB to ‘clearly define itself and what it has to offer’ was much discussed at this conference as it had been at others. Suggestions were put forward for outreach work: a conference on the state of bookselling, reaching out to sympathetic individuals in the mainstream trade, appealing again to any radical shops not yet members. But first the Federation had to be clear on its functions and priorities. This was inextricably linked to the role of the co-ordinator. Should it be full-time and was this possible financially? Should the co-ordinator be an individual or a shop? The suggestions for the role were long, a dozen, and would have to be cut down to essential and realistic tasks. A workshop later came up with the following proposals. Employ a part-time co-ordinator for £20 a day for 50 days a year, days worked being flexible to account for high level of work around conferences, still seen as essential for the FRB and still set at three a year. An innovation was a committee to assist the co-ordinator which would meet three times a year between conferences. It consisted of Fergus (Bookmarks), Graham (Grapevine), Sally (Independent), Mandy (NfN), Craig (Changes). There do not appear to have been minutes from this committee.

The budget involved was set as follows: £1,000 wages; £300 phone; £500 travel; £200 admin.

The main reason for declining attendance and involvement in the FRB was surely the pressure of time. Shops with one or two paid workers would find two days, even a Sunday and Monday, which could involve significant travelling distances (venues rotated and included Bethesda in North Wales, Edinburgh, Liverpool, Lancaster, Portsmouth, London, Norwich) was a burden, especially as money became more of a problem. Shops with volunteers not only faced a possibly high turnover of staff but different levels of commitment and experience, which might mean a reluctance or inability to attend conferences which were often held three times a year.

I’ve mentioned some criticisms of the FRB, and in fairness it is worth pointing out some of the problems faced by co-ordinators. Full Marks were fairly new to the Federation when they took on the job in 1983 and they point out the problem with all workers being volunteers and the consequent high turnover. This led to problems with continuity in the shop’s work as co-ordinator. Also, being new meant that they didn’t know how to reply to all the queries and spent a lot of time asking around. But they enjoyed producing the Newsletter.

Conferences

There was a conference on 1 & 2 February 1981 in Longsight Library in Manchester, which was the first to include newly admitted party shops - Bookmarks, Progressive Books and October Books attended. It is worth recording that no other party shops got immediately involved, whether CP, SWP, WRP, IMG or Maoist, so if the fear had been that the co-ops would be swamped by entryist tactics, this did not happen. Despite the earlier policy that 'shops that exist to promote the ideas of any one party are not admitted', there is no evidence that this was the fear: what some were concerned about was the lack of commitment to non-hierarchical practices, i.e. they weren't co-operatives and had a 'manager'. And of those new shops that did get involved, Bookmarks played an exceptional role in setting up the *Radical Bookseller* and Socialist Bookfair – the latter was somewhat a misnomer given the strength of anarchist and feminist participants, but at least it was based on a principle of inclusion. So mainstream publishers who published radical lists would be welcomed.

There were women's and men's workshops at the conference in Liverpool in 1982 – separate ones of course. The minuted note for the latter was succinct - 'Wide-ranging discussion. It was felt that in future it might be better to split up into smaller groups on more specialised topics'. The possibility of an FRB book club was raised at various times but nothing ever came of it – at a 1983 conference the consensus was that it was just easier to give a discount to regular customers. Video rentals was on the agenda in 1982: Birmingham Trade Union Resource Centre was at the heart of this initiative.

The November 1982 conference had a plenary session on accounts and finance. Part of this was a frank contribution by Roland Rance on why Fourth Idea had failed and been forced to declare itself bankrupt over the summer. Longer term trends were 'the disappearance of community from which Fourth Idea grew: university courses, radical theatre groups'; recession; the prices of radical publishers' books were too high and aimed at mainstream bookshops; unquestioned shop practices which led to 'a lack of efficient financial control'; stock turn of less than two and excess stock – individual workers were too attached to their section and would not consider reducing stock. These were the longer term trends. In the short term, changes of staff meant lost experience, including not preparing for the start of academic term and the consequent lost sales; a 'coup' due to internal differences; a flood which closed the shop for three months and some shop workers using shop time and resources for political work. One lesson for other shops is the necessity of an ownership structure that had limited liability – otherwise the staff would be personally liable for debts. This was a rare opportunity to reflect on failure.

Other topics included wages, staffing, volunteers and the practicalities of running a business. It was in 1982 that there was a first reference to employment contracts. A small number of shops in 1982 complied with these legal requirements, as well as grievance procedures. 'Sisterwrite is trying to get round to this' and asked other shops to send any samples they were willing to share. 'Claiming money back from the state' was a suggested topic at one conference. It referred to SSP (Statutory Sick Pay), maternity pay etc. – 'Oakleaf know a bit but more experience welcomed'. Employment rights and responsibilities were always difficult issues for radical shops, and reflected the fact that workers in them were often young, and rarely had business experience.

The 1983 London Conference was the main item in the July 1983 Newsletter, and it came in for some direct criticism. 'It has to be said that in many ways the London Conference was not a success. Very few shops attended and very few publishers were present. As a result, it was impossible to have the sort of discussion with publishers that we would have liked'. While the organisers were new to this task, the Federation needed to learn lessons. As if to emphasise the point, there was an appeal later in the Newsletter from Jenny (one of the organisers?) for those shops who had paid by cheque for their registration or food to cancel them and send replacements as they had been lost.

Conferences discussed a host of practical issues. Fourth Idea pushed for collaboration at an early date between shops against right-wing attacks: they suggested a regular newsletter and forms of mutual aid. This was to be a topic that reappeared regularly at conferences, and a security fund was set up, but rarely accessed. It stood at nearly £1,600 in 1983.

As many FRB shops were co-ops, conferences discussed the practical issues they faced, and one presentation by Beechwood, an organisation that encouraged the setting up and training of new co-ops, led to 'a broader philosophical discussion of the co-op movement as a whole', generated by the concept of the 'Social Audit', probably the first time the phrase was used within the FRB. There was discussion of staff briefly working in other shops to learn from their experience: this had happened on a very small scale, but more shops were prepared to offer to host other shops than had time to visit other shops.

The April 1986 conference was touted as important: 'ATTENTION ALL FRB MEMBERS: WHY YOU MUST COME TO THE NEXT FRB CONFERENCE...It became apparent at the last conference that the FRB was not functioning as well as it might or meeting the needs of its members'. A working party with members from Grass Roots, Single Step, Silver Moon and Sisterwrite had two meetings and had prepared material.

The host of this conference was Grapevine in Cambridge, which sent out the application form together with the working party's document, and a letter signed by Grapevine's Mike Weaver with his thoughts on the FRB. He writes that he's been told that the FRB's conferences used to be more political, compared with the last two/three years during which he had been involved. It's as if the FRB had taken its politics for granted. He accepts some re-organisation is necessary but will this really ask, or answer, what the FRB is for. He speculates whether most of the practical issues it handles cannot be better answered elsewhere – CDAs (Co-operative Development Agencies), specific groups and publications, even phone calls between shops. And if perhaps the main interest of the conferences may not be social. 'I think that the educational and support aspects peculiar to the FRB, even if more dynamically organised, cannot lift the FRB from being an energy absorbing organ into the realms of energy creating ones. We need a role or aim in which continuous growth (in some direction) plays a major part, a role which arises out of what we are. Is not our basic role as radical bookshops information mongering, spreading the info supporting radical change?'. Consequently he suggests the Aims of the FRB could be to assist the growth of retail and distribution outlets of radical material and also to develop links between all sectors of the radical book trade. In effect it would be a federation of authors, shops, publishers, magazines and distributors, and there could be a more open, collective and political discussion on what could be published. There would be co-ordinated publicity campaigns and political debate.

I have quoted extensively from this letter as it is one of the most thoughtful individual contributions to the debate on the role of the FRB. The FRB structure working group report did not involve any changes in the Aims and Constitution. But they did suggest the following:

- a. Possibly becoming a secondary co-op
- b. Decisions made at Conference and carried out by a paid co-ordinator, supported by a management committee, elected at Conference or even geographically based and rotated. The committee would be elected as individuals.
- c. Under ICOM (Industrial Common Ownership Movement, the national body for worker co-operatives] there would have to be an annual AGM, which could be one of the three conferences.
- d. A very rough estimate of cost was £2,000p.a.

These suggestions came back to the March 1987 conference. By this time it was proposed by the co-ordinating committee that 'the FRB should restructure itself

in such a way that it concentrates on providing support and instruction for its members through two conferences a year rather than attempting to maintain a more ambitious plan'. 'One of the main decisions to come out of the Lancaster Conference of March 1987 was to re-advertise the job of co-ordinator'. Adverts were placed in *City Limits* and *The Bookseller*.

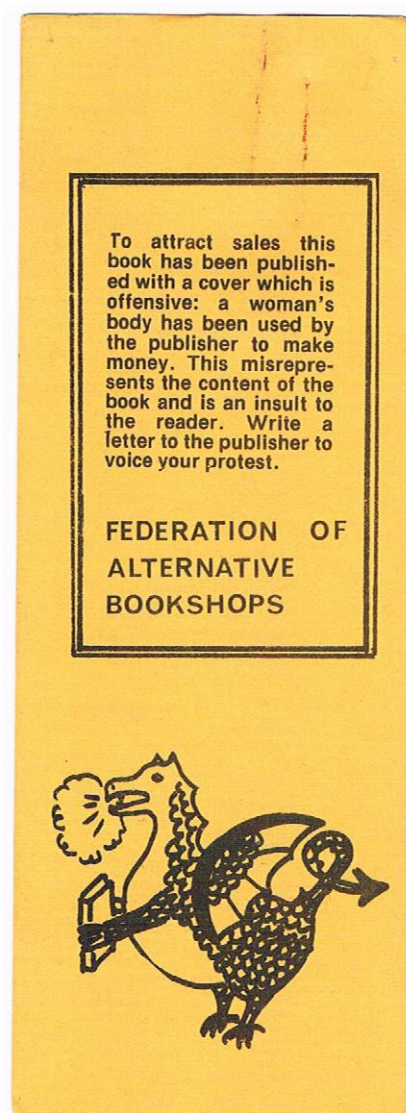
Later conferences discussed financial surveys, economic environment and the probable end of the Net Book Agreement. They had training sessions, starting in 1989 with one led by a member of the 'straight' Booksellers Association, of which some larger shops were members (Grass Roots and Frontline, News from Nowhere). It would be ironic if any workers in these shops were against the expansion of the FAB, but that remains unknown. It is worth noting that the BA itself engaged in some co-operative self-help: in 1987 the FRB workshop on computers noted that the BA produced a free computer pack for members and had a list of members who used computers and who were willing to welcome other bookshops to explain their systems.

Computerisation was increasingly discussed at conferences and in 1990 there were three reports from different shops, including an offer from Red and Green to all FRB members to help install a software system they had developed which they would provide free but shops would have to pay £300 for the six days spent installing it and tailoring it to their needs and that would include unlimited post-installation support.

International issues were very rarely discussed, in Newsletters or conferences – though the *Radical Bookseller* did make up for this. There was one workshop on Co-operatives in Zimbabwe, but little was about the book trade. Another workshop discussed the issue of radical publishers selling books into South Africa. A later Newsletter (1987) included the unusual news from Just Books in Belfast 'that they were about to have a visiting worker from West Germany for three months'. Contacts with foreign bookshops were very rare.

Early in 1982 the conference had speakers on non-sexist working practice, working as a feminist in straight publishing, working in an all-women collective and working in a mixed collective. The FAB and FRB had campaigned regularly on the issue of sexism. It commissioned the famous stickers, it produced a 'bookmark' for insertion in books with sexist covers, helped print an alternative cover for *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, and co-ordinated complaints to publishers.

Another conference workshop discussed the lack of black workers in radical bookshops. One speaker referred to the problems faced by a



single black worker in a collective and believed that their isolation often led to frustration and to that person leaving, but no examples were given. The starting position for an all-white shop was well put by Mandy from News from Nowhere: establish a good range of books in a black/multicultural section, get involved in anti-racist campaigns, and ensure black customers were made to feel welcome. Grass Roots were aiming at a 50% BAME workforce and their employment policy was being used for this (did they reach this? Probably not). Centerprise in Hackney were only recruiting black workers and aimed at being an all-black co-operative. There was a rare workshop on black workers. Also disabled people and radical bookshops – a partially sighted man challenged the selling of radical books and not catering for people like him. Also the lack of accessibility to radical bookshops.

One issue which cropped up at various times was the lack of involvement from the black bookshops. All existing black bookshops had been specifically invited to attend the Lancaster Conference in 1983 to talk about their work, but none replied. Walter Rodney Bookshop had been offered assistance from the security fund after a graffiti attack but did not respond. The black bookshops faced specific problems, and from the earliest days they worked together in organising events. They faced even more regular attacks from the far right than left-wing shops, and passive responses from the police combined with hostile treatment in the courts to an extent not experienced by other radical bookshops. From 1977 they formed Book Shop Joint Action which protested against attacks and called for more protection from the authorities. The most significant events organised by black bookshops were the 12 International Book Fairs of Radical Black and Third World Books, which featured wide-ranging cultural events as well as BAME publishing.

The FRB and black bookshops did collaborate more as the 1980s progressed, and more did join the FRB: Grassroots Storefront in 1988, Walter Rodney Bookshop (originally Bogle-L'Ouverture) in 1990 and Soma about the same time. Centerprise, not originally a black bookshop, had been an early member of FAB. At the final conference of 1987 in London John la Rose, founder of New Beacon with his partner Sarah White, spoke on black bookshops.

All Reports are useful as a source of information about shops. The long lists from Mo's ring-rounds are particularly interesting for information that might never otherwise have been recorded. As instances, from August 1987, there was Bookmarks' comment that 'things were going all right except for cheques bouncing'; Centerprise 'had three new sections – Jewish, Irish and Asian'; Freewheel (Norwich) 'were just finishing their one month display called the Third World and Women for the Open University summer school'. In August, there

were 24 responses, most just a snapshot of current trading, bookstalls and staff movements. Birmingham Women's Collective had plans to open a shop, but this had fallen through; Acorn's rent was going to go up 130%; Brent Community Books were 'in a state of limbo, following the burning down (some months ago!) of their main outlet, the Triangle Theatre' (it was to re-open in 1989); Mushroom had £200 of T-Shirts stolen; one in five of Silver Moon's sales were of Maya Angelou's titles. Grapevine 'had just a got a till (their first!), apart from the fact that it didn't have a key'. All the above examples are just from 1987.

In these summaries I omit much content of a practical nature that would have been of interest and use for members – how to produce press releases; working with libraries; publishers' initiatives; distributors; producing publicity material; computerisation, teleordering; 'Books and pamphlets received'; exchanging details of useful ways of diversifying stock – badges, cards, posters etc.

Other material is found in the *Radical Bookseller*, which contained perhaps meatier bits of news that the shops thought of interest to make an effort sending in, as opposed to what came to mind when faced on busy Saturdays with Mo's request for news. The role of the *Radical Bookseller* in analysing the successes and failures of the shops is important. There were a few periods when debate about radical bookshops and reasons for their failure raged in the journal. Dave Berry's article in *RB* 42 and subsequent responses, merged with Fergus Nicol's four-page review of *What A Way to Run a Railroad* in *RB* 44.

In November 1986 there was a meeting of the Management Committee of the FRB which discussed the failure to organise a conference in October and the decision then taken to delay the appointment of a part-time FRB worker. Mandy Vere from NfN argued for a continuation of the existing arrangement with a pro-active part-time worker and the annual three conferences. There was a counter proposal from Mel Hill of Grass Roots to abandon the FRB as a formal organisation and in future to just have a looser network that could meet two or three times a year to exchange news and experiences and each meeting to be self-financing. Mandy argued, as reported in *RB* 50, that it was not lack of interest in the FRB that was the problem but the pressures of work. The FRB had achieved a lot: it had established its identity to the extent that the co-ordinator was receiving two or three letters a day; regular conferences had been kept up for 10 years; expertise had been shared; solidarity against attacks had been invaluable; it had campaigned against sexism in publishing; produced *Starting a Bookshop*; negotiated with publishers etc. Brian Moseley added that the FRB served as a focus for the whole radical book trade, as there was no co-ordination among publishers, magazines or distributors. Mandy's view prevailed.

It is clear reading the FRB reports and the *Radical Bookseller*, which itself would never have seen the light of day without the FRB, that if the informal alternative had prevailed none of the discussions at their meetings would have been seriously summarised or disseminated – this was overall poor enough. The job description for the worker included organising conferences and co-ordinating implementation of decisions taken; dealing with subscriptions and accounts; routine administration; working with the FRB Committee and members on publicity etc. The pay was £20 a day for 50 days a year.

In 1988 there was dismay at the decrease in attendance at conferences – and for that year it was decided to only hold two, rather than three, though they would be for two days not just one as was proposed by one member. There was one weakness in the organisation that jumps out from the minutes, and that is the often poor organisation of workshops. Invites to the conferences often asked for subjects for the workshops and these could be last minute decisions, as few shops replied. This almost certainly accounted for a decline in attendance, as the statutory three conferences per year was reduced to two. Workshops were not always well prepared. Practical workshops attended by those who knew little on the subject could find that it was not led by people who **did** know.

In 1989 Jane of Silver Moon gave a presentation on stock control. The one day format was deemed very successful. The second conference of that year was also held at Conway Hall on Monday 23rd October. The co-ordinator reported that the organisation was just breaking even, but it was only paying a co-ordinator for one day a month. He suggested the subscription should go up from £10 to £20 to cover this, and argued that this was still good value as it covered a sub to the *RB* and the *Feminist Book Fortnight Catalogue*. It was agreed that the ring-round be quarterly and suggested a business survey of members. By the May 1990 conference membership was about 40. The bank balance was £150. There was a new discussion on reviving associate membership. Ross, the new co-ordinator, was in favour of extending this to individuals in mainstream shops who were interested in radical books. In June Ross would meet the management committee to outline his views.

Activities and Campaigns

The FRB decided early on to promote their brand through the logo, plastic bags, and asking shops to refer to their membership. The FRB immediately pressurised Macmillan over its low discount to small shops.

There was a speaker from the British Printing Corporation dispute.

The Association of Assistant Librarians asked for an article for their journal (early 1981), and about the same time the Arts Council asked to attend a conference. In 1982 the Society of Young Publishers requested a list of members as they were organising a meeting on Alternative and Feminist Publishing in June 1982. Also in 1982, the FRB was invited to attend various meetings and conferences, including a Library Association Conference, the Green Gathering at Worthy Farm in Glastonbury; and a Work for the Future Conference on socially useful work in 1984. In response to a letter from the FRB critiquing a 'March for Military Books' promotion by the Book Marketing Council, the Sales Director of Blandford Press, who chaired the promotion committee, replied he did not entirely agree with the letter, but took the content seriously and would welcome 'a co-ordinated book trade campaign in support of peace/disarmament books'.

Pergamon Press wanted a list of members as they now published a wide range on women's studies, disarmament, international relations and environmental subjects, and wanted to send them to the radical shops.

Tim Godfrey of the Booksellers' Association offered to come to a 1985 conference to speak about VAT on books.

The Federation was making waves.

Campaigns the FRB engaged in included: Against VAT on books – 'It seemed a good idea to campaign against VAT on books by acting as respectable small businesses and all writing to our Tory MPs etc.' was how the workshop in October summarised the discussion.

The Stop the Clause campaign was of national importance (Section, or Clause, 28 of the Local Government Act, 1988, stated that 'a local authority should not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality'). There was a speaker at the 1988 March conference. The FRB decided to produce window displays and join in the national campaign. There was support for the 23 sacked journalists at Robert Maxwell's Pergamon Press.

There was massive support from the FRB, and mainstream book trade it must be said, for Gays the Word after the raids by Customs and Excise in 1984, having seized thousands of imported books. Gays the Word only joined the FRB in 1984 at the conference that discussed this solidarity. There was a week of action in April 1985.



The Net Book Agreement, which enforced the sale of books at a fixed price for all booksellers, small or large, radical or otherwise, was a constant subject of discussion throughout the whole book trade in the UK. It was challenged by the chains – Pentos in particular, whose CEO Terry Maher became an object of some odium. In 1989 the FRB sent a letter, written by Jane Cholmeley of Silver Moon, to the *Bookseller*, the weekly journal of the Bookseller’s Association. The substance of the letter was as follows: ‘If Pentos unilaterally break the NBA i) we would never again recommend a customer we could not supply to a Pentos shop ii) for publishers supplying books to be discounted by Pentos we would take a further 30 days credit. In both these examples we would only be following Terry Maher’s example – like him in pursuit of ‘fair’ competition’. The Office of Fair Trading saw the letter and sent the FRB a warning letter to which Mo replied with a curt statement saying that the FRB had not, and could not, take a decision to enforce any policies on its members, but it was a suggestion of what it might discuss.

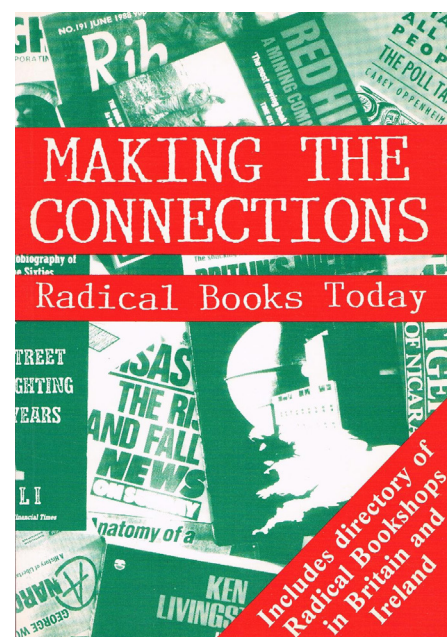
On a smaller scale, it was agreed at a 1984 conference that ‘the Co-op Bank should be tackled concerning their refusal to handle anti-nuclear cheques’.

In March 1989, 20 shops (though six were not FRB members) wrote to the Guardian deploring the threats against Salman Rushdie and promising to continue ordering and stocking *Satanic Verses*. The letter also took the opportunity to criticise the attacks on freedom of speech represented by the Customs and Excise seizure of gay books, the arrest of a Pathfinder Press rep in Ireland, and the racist attacks on black bookshops. They also pointed out the need to fight against the racist backlash that followed the threats against Rushdie.

Among the FRB’s achievements was the publication of two books of some importance.

Starting a Bookshop: A Handbook on Radical and Community Bookselling in 1984 (with a print run of 1,500). Orders for this came in from all over the world – from America to Malta and Japan (but almost always only for single copies) – a real drain on the co-ordinator’s time. Some of these requests (plus general correspondence) expressed admiration for the FRB, as there were very few equivalents abroad.

The other book was *Making the Connections: Radical Books Today* in 1988. There was also a pamphlet *List of Shops 1987*, published for sale.



Other Meetings

Newsletters brought details of other meetings to the attention of members, and provided reports of them. Conferences received information on other radical meetings involving the book trade and reports back.

The FRB, as an organisation and through individual shops, played a role in organising specialist meetings. Not under the aegis of the FRB but involving FRB shops were the Lesbians and Gay Men in the Booktrades Conference 1982 (organised by Lavender Menace and Gay's the Word, about 30 attended); Women in the FRB met separately to organise a Women in the Book Trade conference in 1979 and again in 1982. There were over 100 women present at the second one, and among the discussions there were questions raised about the 'relative absence of black and working-class women'. And they decided to start a Newsletter and establish an International Bookfair in Spring 1984.

In June 1991, Brighton Peace Centre organised a Conference of Peace, Environment and One World Centres, which included shops and also charities and fair trade companies. There was a working group from a wide range of bodies and the conference decided, possibly learning lessons from the FRB, not to set up a new umbrella organisation but to hold annual conferences, with Brighton Peace Centre acting as co-ordinator. The one held in 1992 would have workshops on management, finance, retailing and networking, and general debates.

Relations with publishers

This was another major recurring theme discussed at conferences and in Newsletters, and in the *Radical Bookseller*.

The 'Working Together' Conference of 1980 discussed some minor issues of ordinary business, including several about publishers' terms e.g. the particularly stringent terms for small shops from Harvester Press, and some book clubs and pre-publication selling which handicapped small radical shops.

In 1984 Alan Sedgeman from Blackwells talked about his company's history and policies and stated that they, as a publisher, need radical shops more than the shops need Blackwells.

The Women's Press could make an interesting case study of relations between publisher and bookshop. In 1985 the Women's Press Book Club wrote to the FRB asking 'if we would mind them organising a public meeting, with one speaker, to promote their book club, at Sheffield Polytechnic'. The co-ordinator, feeling that this could take some student trade away and that the publisher 'could more

usefully promote themselves in the many areas not serviced by radical bookshops', rang round seven shops to gauge their views and six of them, with varying degrees of passion, felt that such a promotion in their area would indeed tread on their toes'. Women's Press then agreed not to go ahead.

When faced with a charge from the FRB that they were bypassing FRB members unfairly, Mary Hemmings from Women's Press said that their loyalty to radical shops had not changed but the ratio of sales had moved in favour of the mainstream shops. Women's Press support was shown in their help for start-ups, offering sale books to radical shops, prioritising supplies of the *Women Artists Diary* etc. They did have some issues with radical shops – they were more often on stop, placed very small subscription orders (one or two copies) which could lead to missed sales, and they would like more shops to carry larger backlists. Bookmarks asked if there could be better terms for stockholding shops.

In the Archives is a letter to the FRB dated 18 February 1988, from Mary again, addressed to Mo at Housmans, who was the co-ordinator at the time, saying she had phoned the shop 'and got a very angry and abrupt response for bothering them about FRB business which "is nothing to do with them"'. This is a rare example showing the stresses that shops could be under due to the role of a worker having a position in the FRB – and publishers for that matter, as Mary had an urgent question to do with a Women's Press publication date.

This complaint that the larger radical and feminist publishers engaged in direct selling of radical books that bypassed radical shops is repeated on several occasions. The FRB had written to Virago about a promotion that involved free 'Collector's Cards' given with every direct purchase. Kate Griffin replied from Virago that in future all their publicity material would direct readers to bookshops in the first instance, but they would continue to supply to individuals who had difficulty obtaining copies as these requests tended to come from rural areas and abroad. She also pointed out that the practice started from the earliest days of the company when many mainstream shops would not stock Virago titles. Radical shops would have been well aware of this lack of interest as it was one of the key factors in the setting up of radical shops, and its reversal one of the factors for their decline.

Rick Sissons from Pluto Press replied around the same time to a complaint that their titles were offered through *City Limits* and *New Socialist* at 50% discount. As in the Virago case, the letter from the FRB was not demanding

an end to the practice – it was hardly in position to do that – but asked that publicity material mentioned radical shops. Pluto wrote quite a lengthy reply based on the premise that they had to use all available methods to reach their potential audience, given that radical bookshops were ‘very thinly spread around the country’. They cited the examples of their workers’ handbooks which mainly sold to trade union branches or through leaflets distributed by unions to members. As for the adverts in question this was a very unusual practice. They were not paid by the publisher, but the magazines made money when copies sold through them, in fact they received 50% of the cover price. Pluto could not afford to pay the usual cost of £200 for each half-page advert, and he argued that the heavy marketing this promotion involved helped sales generally, and particularly radical shops. He cites the case of the 1973 *Big Red Diary* which sold over 500 copies through City Limits; for two months there was a half-page advert, and at the same time shop sales were higher than ever. He ended repeating the support Pluto had always given to radical shops – opening stock, terms, sale or return for conferences, pressing Penguin to do Tony Benn signings jointly with the radical shops, etc.

There is an argument that it was harder for Pluto to get their books into mainstream shops than for Virago. Once the tide of feminism, helped by the high number of supportive and articulate women in the book trade, media and libraries, and the spread of feminist magazines, had swept away much of the prejudice against women’s writings – and, simultaneously, had convinced mainstream publishers and bookshops that there was a growing market for these books – then the very identity of feminist publishers became a positive factor. Virago spinners could be seen in many bookshops. Mainstream bookshops gave birth to feminist sections. Feminist bookfairs and the Feminist Book Fortnight were well marketed and hugely successful. Pluto, despite an eye for popular political titles, probably had very few spinners, and faced a sceptical establishment in many shops and chains when reps visited, though an increasing number of radicals found congenial work in these shops.

S&N had a criticism of some radical shops: sometimes, perhaps dissatisfied with their service, they would shift orders to publishers directly and change back without notice, which made it harder for the distributor to judge quantities they should order from publishers.

Wholesaling was an area where distributors could help bookshops by supplying good sellers from mainstream publishers quickly when they ran out of stock – or were on stop with publishers.

S&N also had mixed views of wholesaling – shops appreciated it, but it was a distraction from the priority of servicing the publishers they had exclusive rights for. Central also discovered the same problem and eventually stopped. As for the small-scale distribution that Grass Roots and Housmans engaged in, partly to help smaller shops by making imports and smaller UK publishers more accessible, but also because they all thought it would increase their own turnover, they too found that time-consuming and increasingly unprofitable and stopped. These changes were always recorded in the *Radical Bookseller* and FRB Newsletters.

The reference at an FRB conference to expensive Verso titles and their importance, or implied lack of it, was noted above. It was rather an extreme reflection of several negative positions in some shops. There was occasionally an anti-intellectualism; a lack of interest in the problems and difficult choices that radical publishers faced; and almost an unwillingness to face up to economic reality in the book trade. I think it had its roots in a lazy version of anarchism but it was thankfully only a small number of individuals that manifested it.

Thorsons, publishers of vegetarian and vegan cookery, alternative medicine, astrology, occult and religion, supplied quite a few radical bookshops and had received increasing complaints from shops as they planned for growth. Their Sales Manager attended a conference in 1985, and while he was sympathetic to the plight of radical bookshops and came up with some suggestions of assistance, he did say the company operated a strict credit control policy and that shops should approach them if they were having trouble. Nobody could deny this was a problem with radical bookshops – for both mainstream and radical publishers. However, Sue Pritchard of Full Marks wrote in a Newsletter ‘it seems clear that Thorsons are no longer an alternative publisher that is solely the preserve of radical bookshops, but a commercial enterprise now running along the same lines as the major publishing houses’.

There was a brief exchange of letters, reported in *RB* 50 and 51, between the FRB and the Feminist Book Fortnight (FBF), when they asked for £2 from each shop for an entry in the listing of shops in the programme/catalogue. Carole Spedding, the main organiser, replied to the FRB that the booklet was self-financing through publishers, and the big retail chains paid for the run-on copies they distributed. And its benefits go to publishers, librarians and bookshops. There is no doubt the FBF was supportive of shops and was not trying to make money from them. The FBF hoped the FRB might

pay for all their members. By 1990 the FBF was charging what they called a nominal charge of £2 per shop for an entry in the catalogue, which that year came to £82.

Finances

The finances of the Federation were always precarious, though the shops hosting conferences did manage to get a little local funding on occasions - East Midlands Arts and Birmingham CDA helped two conferences.

In 1981 the Manchester Conference gathered information from 20 full members who responded to a form that was passed round which indicated that their turnover would generate £635 in subscriptions. The co-ordinator's wage at the time was £520 a year so little was left for anything else.

In 1984 figures for the period up to mid-October showed that expenses totalled £548 (actually the figure given was £448 but someone had made a mistake adding up) out of which £435 was for the co-ordinator and £73 for Newsletter printing.

At a 1985 Conference it was announced that FRB running costs were approximately £900p.a.

At the 1989 October Conference the minimum sub went up from £10 to £20 and the maximum from £40 to £50. A session in the final conference of 1987 was on finance and Conference decided to really win over some of the shops that weren't members. They halved subscription rates: now £10 for first year of membership, then 0.05% of turnover with minimum of £10 and maximum of £40.

In 1989, Mo was still co-ordinator, and had to pester members for their subs. 'Please pretend the FRB is a publisher you want to order from but who's put you on stop' – otherwise they would not get an entry in the Feminist Book Fortnight Catalogue. He emphasises that he works full time at Housmans, so the co-ordinator's work has to take this into account. He usually did the ring round on the last Friday of the month and sent a mailshot to all members shortly after this.

The finances of the FRB were always a bit of a mess. There were rarely full accounts available at conferences, and this was the body that was supposed to ratify administration decisions; there was usually one shop that acted on membership, and accounts, apart from the co-ordinating shop and liaison was weak between the two. At the July 1984 conference only 14 out of 64 full members had paid their membership fees (that had fallen due in January), and some had not paid for 1983.

End

The agenda for an FRB conference in November 1990 contains a desperate attempt to revive the FRB. It proposed 'That the FRB relaunch in autumn 1991 as an organisation of radical shops, distributors, mail order and library members working in the general trade...That the *RB* be asked to become the journal of the relaunched group...called the Radical Booksellers Group' and the FRB management committee be charged with drawing up the details for the relaunch'.

Ross resigned as co-ordinator in February 1991, apologising that he 'had not been a good coordinator', largely due to being overwhelmed at Mushroom. But the decline in members left no room for stopping the downward drift – nobody could have done a good job by then.

The last manifestation of the FRB was in the Winter 1992 edition of the *Radical Bookseller*, when Mike Weaver, the last FRB Co-ordinator, apologised for his long silence – he had been moving home several times and had not had time to deal with FRB business. He announced that the current membership of the FRB was eight shops and AK Distribution. The last decision of the FRB seems to have been to set up 'a national support group for radical bookshops, to organise events, conferences socials and publicity as a contribution to the continued survival and health of radical bookshops throughout Britain and Ireland. Anybody not currently working in a radical bookshop but concerned for their survival could consider joining the network' (*RB* 78, Winter 1992 – the last issue). But this never got off the ground.

Co-ordinators & Conferences

Coordinators

FAB Federation of Alternative Bookshops

| | |
|---|--------------------|
| News from Nowhere | 1978 |
| First of May, Joyce | |
| Acorn, Carol Skilbeck | May 1978 |
| Other Branch (L Spa), Mike Hargest, Swaziland then Zimbabwe) | Jan 1980 (Moved to |
| Mushroom, Tom Wilson | Sept 1980 resigned |

FRB Federation of Radical Booksellers

| | |
|---|--|
| York CB | early 1981 Sarah, Tony, Jane, Judy, Jill worked jointly as co-ordinators. And a wage of £10 for one day a week was agreed. (<i>RB</i> 5, March/April 1981). |
| Oakleaf | Jan 1982 - March 1983 |
| Full Marks | April 1983 – Feb 1984 |
| Single Step | Feb 1984 – June 1986 |
| Mia Moseley then Brian Moseley (Mo), Housmans | June 1986 (Mo from July 1987 -1990). |
| Ross Bradshaw, Mushroom | June 1990 – Feb 1991 resigned as co-ordinator |
| Mike Weaver, | 1992 |
| Grapevine, Lifespan | |

Conferences

FAB

| | | |
|------|------------|--|
| 1974 | Autumn | Leamington Spa - The Other Branch? |
| 1975 | 2 Nov | Manchester. Grass Roots hosted. 12 shops + TWP |
| 1976 | 11 July | London. Rising Free – in their premises. 4 shops, plus TWP |
| 1977 | | Birmingham |
| 1977 | Oct | Huddersfield - Peaceworks |
| 1978 | Jan | York - YCB. 13 shops (26 people) |
| 1978 | 28/29 May | Coventry - Wedge. 19 shops, 1 distributor |
| 1978 | 30 July | Leamington Spa - Other Branch |
| 1978 | 17 Sept | Todmorden - Bear Bookshop (Great Bear) |
| 1979 | 28/29 June | Hebden Bridge 13 shops + PDC North |
| 1979 | 17/18 June | Nottingham - Mushroom. 12 shops |

1979 21/22 Oct Milton Keynes - Oakleaf
 1980 1/2 June Leamington Spa - Other Branch
 1980 21/22 Sept York – ‘Working Together’ Conference/FAB
 Conference. York CB

FRB

1980 24/25 Feb Cardiff
 1981 1/2 Feb Manchester - Grass Roots
 1981 May/June? York – York CB
 1981 11/12 Oct Edinburgh
 1982 14/15 Feb Leicester – Blackthorn
 1982 18/19 July Norwich – Freewheel. 11 shops, 2 distributors.
 1982 21/22 Nov Liverpool - NfN
 1983 20/21 March Bethesda, North Wales - Word Games
 1983 19/20 June London – Inter-Action
 1983 16/17 Oct Lancaster – Single Step
 1984 12/13 Feb Southampton – October Books
 1984 8/9 July Edinburgh – First of May (14 shops + publishers/
 distributors)
 1984 21/22 Oct Nottingham – Mushroom
 1985 24/25 Feb Birmingham – Third World Publications (22
 shops)
 1985 21/22 July Manchester – Grass Roots
 1986 Feb? Lancaster – Single Step ‘UNLESS SOMEONE
 ELSE VOLUNTEERS’. May not have taken
 place
 1986 6/7 April Cambridge – Grapevine
 1986 13/14 July London – Sisterwrite (Judith) + Ruthie
 (Turnaround) + Fergus (Bookmarks)

Third conference cancelled- no shops came forward to organise it

| | | |
|------|--------------------|--|
| 1987 | 1/2 March | Lancaster. Single Step. 11 shops |
| 1987 | 5/6 July | Liverpool – NfN |
| 1987 | 1/2 Nov | London, Toynebee Hall – THAP |
| 1988 | 13/14 March | Southampton - October Books |
| 1988 | July | cancelled due to postal strike? |
| 1988 | 2/3 Oct | Nottingham but cancelled due to postal strike? |
| 1989 | 22 May | London – Conway Hall. 16 shops. First single day conference. <i>RB 66</i> says first conference in 1989 was in June. |
| 1989 | Nov | London – Conway Hall, again. 9 bookshops. (2 conferences) |
| 1990 | 30 May (April?) | London – MML. 1 day |
| 1990 | 19/20 June | London. (2 conferences) Housmans & The Other Bookshop. 31 shops |
| 1990 | 5 Nov | London |

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