

RADICAL BOOKSELLING HISTORY

Newsletter

Issue 9, December 2024

Contents

Editorial	2
Rick Seccombe 1950-2024	3
News items, old items, obits and odd bits	4
Radical Bookselling records and archives	9
Not Dead Yet	12
Bookfairs	16

Editorial

We bring you this edition of our *Newsletter* with heavy hearts, announcing the death in October of our colleague Rick Seccombe after a short illness. You can read a little about him on page 2 and we will publish a longer piece in our next issue, bringing together the numerous tributes and recollections that his many friends have been sharing with us since his death, including at a packed gathering in New Mills, Rick's home town.

This edition of the *Newsletter* is somewhat shorter than its recent predecessors. We have an article by Dave Cope, this time on book fairs, which for many years, right up to the present, have been a significant feature of the radical book trade. Dave draws out the variety of these fairs, reflecting the breadth of political focus within the trade.

Since our project started five years ago we have been looking to track down surviving records of radical bookshops and secure their preservation, alongside identifying where such archives already exist. In this *Newsletter* we publish a listing of the latter. It's not as long a list as we'd have liked, partly because there are undoubtedly archives we don't know about and partly because not many records survive. So if you know of archives we haven't listed, or records surviving in a cellar or attic, please let us know.

Following the review of Jane Cholmeley's book on Silver Moon Bookshop in our last issue we bring you Jane's story about how the book got to be written. The article is a great read (like the book itself). On Wednesday 15 January 2025 you'll have an opportunity to join us, and other radical bookselling colleagues, to discuss the book with Jane in our first webinar – see page 4.

We have our usual section of news items, old items, obits and odd bits, this time with some chunkier items than usual, including another book fair, an international conference and even a business opportunity!

As ever, we welcome any comments on this *Newsletter* or previous editions and we would also welcome any suggestions for future articles. Please help us to widen our readership by telling your friends and colleagues about us.

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

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

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Progressive Books 1975-85;
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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

Rick Seccombe

1950 - 2024

Rick died of oesophageal cancer on 24 October 2024. He was one of the founders of our Radical Bookselling History Project in 2019. He participated in all our activities, proving invaluable in interviewing, writing for and proof-reading our *Newsletters*, and his wonderful memory was a unique asset to us. He was a man of great integrity, and would not allow us to make poorly founded assertions especially if a person was not able to reply to them. He was patient, meticulous and generous. He was modest and happy to work in the background without seeking the limelight. He is irreplaceable and his death has brought home to us something that we knew before in theory, that our project is in some respects a race against time. We have done a lot in our five years with Rick and it will be harder without him in the future. It is such a pity he had to leave the race early. Our thoughts are with Sheila, his family and friends.

We will give a fuller description of Rick's career in the radical booktrade in the next issue.



News items, old items, obits and odd bits

Save the Date!

We're holding our first webinar - on Wednesday 15 Jan 2025 at 7.30pm

Jane Cholmeley, who's made quite a splash with her memoir of Silver Moon, *A Bookshop of One's Own*, will be with us (well, on screen) to talk about the book, its reception and the events that led up to its publication. And to discuss all that with you, so please save the date. Here's the Zoom link: <https://us06web.zoom.us/j/88326577169?pwd=6viBsR9Mbjo4UAy59jOrraWQVXeZGV.1>

The future of Left on the Shelf - a bookselling business opportunity

Dave Cope is planning to wind down his second-hand book business, Left on the Shelf, in order to spend more time on his research into the radical book trade. His wildly ambitious plans include a multi-volume history from 1780 onwards. Ideally he would like to see the business continue in some form. There are 27,000 items listed on ABE Books, and many more non-book items, which can be transferred to a new owner at the press of a button - the books would take a bit longer to transport! So if anyone is interested in taking on a ready-made and successful business, or knows someone who might, please contact Dave at Left on the Shelf: leftontheshelf@phonecoop.coop.



A reminder: calling everyone involved in the radical book trade 1979–92 - we need your help digitising the *Radical Bookseller*

We need your help to ensure that digital copies of the *Radical Bookseller* (1979 – 1992) are made available. The *Radical Bookseller* was run by and supported UK radical booksellers of the 1980s. It is an important and interesting record of the period. The Senate House Library at the University of London has acquired a full set of these magazines and is

hoping to digitise every issue from the 1979 pilot issue to 1992's final issue no.78, for eventual uploading to the Amiel and Melburn Archive <https://banmarchive.org.uk/>, an online database of socialist and radical writings.

However, a digitisation project needs as many of the copyright holders as possible to give their permission. We appeal to all readers of this newsletter who were involved in the radical book-trade at that time to contact Leila Kassir at leila.kassir@london.ac.uk to give copyright permission. You don't need to remember whether or not you contributed – if you were around at the time it is quite likely that your name appears. Leila, and all future historians of the radical book trade, will be very grateful. You can help even more by contacting your former colleagues and asking them also to give copyright permission.

Women in Revolt! Art and Activism in the UK 1970-1990

Women in Revolt! Art and Activism in the UK 1970-1990 has been touring Britain. Starting out at Tate Britain, London, it transferred to National Galleries Scotland: Modern, Edinburgh, from 25 May 2024 to 26 January 2025. There's still time to see it there or at the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, 7 March to 1 June 2025.

The Guardian reports that with 100 artists and collectives represented this is one of the largest shows mounted by Tate Britain. Feminists who lived through the period will see much that is familiar. Posters from the See Red Women's poster collective, photographs of Greenham Common, Grunwick and the First Women's Liberation conference, covers and page spreads from *Spare Rib*, *Shrew*, *Banshee* and *Red Rag* alongside other newsletters.

There is humour, in badges and posters and in the reproductions of Jill Posener's photos of graffiti on bill-boards – "If this lady was a car she would run you down" on Fiat's outrageous advert – "If this car was a lady it would get its bottom-pinchd". There is also much anger and agony. A video of a birth and the 3-minute video *Scream* by Gina Birch reverberate through the galleries making that clear. The exhibition covers so much it can feel overwhelming with sculpture (some crocheted), video, photography, installations, publications and tiny artworks made from domestic materials and put in the post. It covers women at work and in music, disability, black women's art and oppression, sex, sexuality, domestic life and much more. It is certainly worth visiting more than once.

Maggie Walker

Bookmarks' 50th Birthday Bash

Bookmarks had a party on 18 February 2023 to celebrate its first 50 years, with Brian Richardson MC-ing, Fergus Nicol, Shelia McGregor (talking about the Socialist and Trade Union Bookshop in Birmingham), Judith Orr, Ursla Hawthorne, Jeremy Corbyn, Hannah Lowe, Michael Rosen, Simon Hester and others. Here, rather belatedly, is a link to a video of the occasion:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IL5CHrh6WJw>

And this is the video that you catch the end of at the start:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILFpPrmeogU>

An article about Bookmarks' anniversary in their local newspaper, the *Camden New Journal*: <https://www.camdennewjournal.co.uk/article/shelf-improvement>.

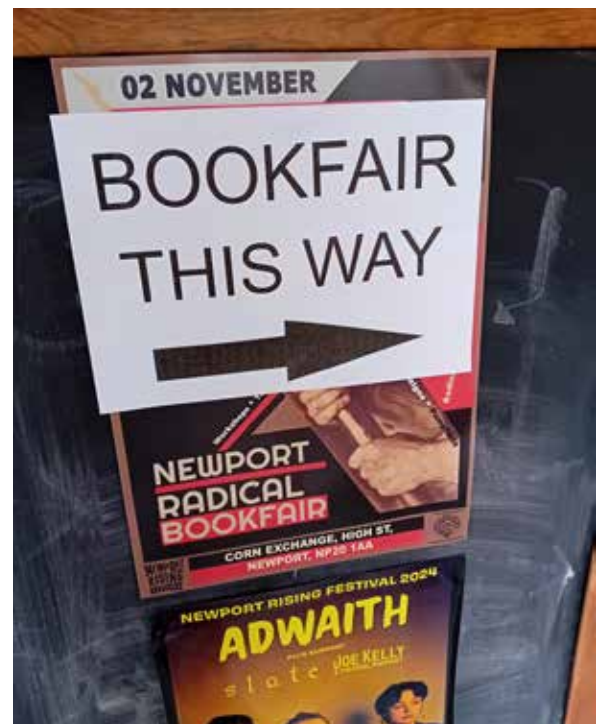
The Black-owned publishing houses that shaped the Windrush generation

This article, published on The Conversation website in June 2023, tells a story of how two black bookshops, *New Beacon* and *Bogle-L'Ouverture*, extended their work into publishing: <https://theconversation.com/the-black-owned-publishing-houses-that-shaped-the-windrush-generation-204843>.

Newport Radical Bookfair 2024

On 2 November 2024 the first radical bookfair Newport has seen for many years took place. Newport, if you don't know, is in South Wales, 12 miles from Cardiff, and 30 from Bristol. It's often described as having a radical spirit and independence which can be traced back to its chartist legacy, history as a port and place of heavy industry (steel) and an enduring diverse working class identity. Its thirst for and promotion of punk, hardcore and alternative culture has also been a mainstay despite or maybe because of several decades of economic mismanagement and neglect, so a radical bookfair felt like a no-brainer and long overdue.

In part, the bookfair also came about to complement the city's annual Newport Rising festival, which celebrates the Chartist Uprising of 1839, and gets bigger every year. Our Chartist Heritage, the local charity that runs the festival and a year-round programme of events from its base on the high street, teamed up with Red Shoes Poster Archive, a radical archive of working class poster art, to organise it. As it was the first one, and something of an experiment, it was decided to keep things very simple, so no talks or workshops



as such, just stalls. It was held in the Corn Exchange, a community owned venue in the heart of the centre, just 5 mins walk from train and bus stations.

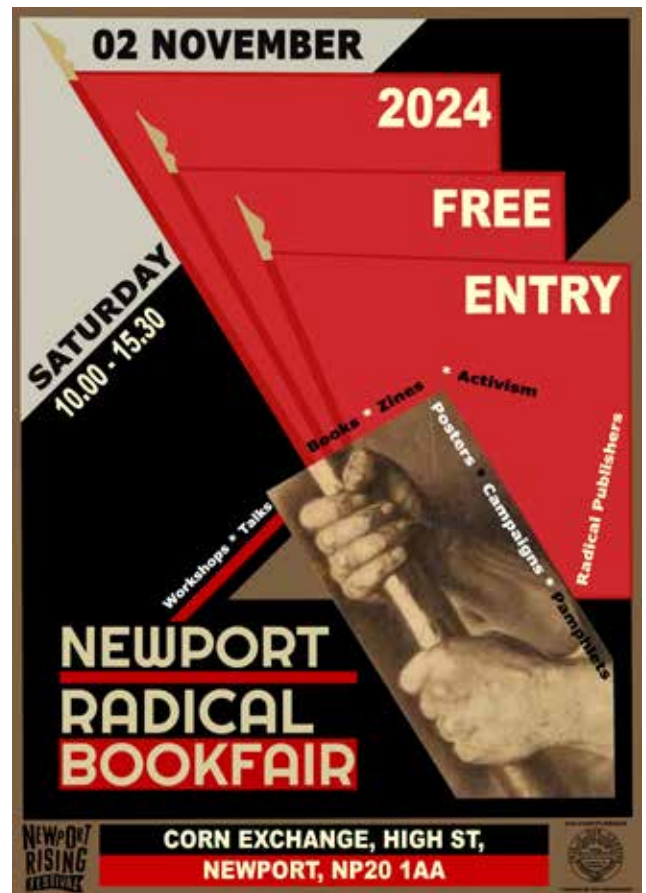
The stall variety ranged from anarcho zine makers and distros to more established national campaigns and publishers, in amongst which were artist-led book and creative material stalls and LGBTQ+ groups, with several local youth activist groups taking stalls on. There was also a display of radical posters.

The weather on the day was very crisp and dry which really helped with attendance numbers. Was it a success? Well, it had at least 200 visitors, 16 stalls and a constant flow of people and conversation across the day. 100% of stalls booked turned up. What probably helped boost attendance was the festival's annual torchlit chartist parade in the early evening. Folks hung around for that and so maybe lingered longer at the bookfair, had lunch, came back a second time or the other way round and were coming to the torchlight procession anyway so decided to come a bit earlier and visit the bookfair too, or chanced upon it. Either way the two aspects helped each other and anecdotal feedback from stallholders was that it was well worth it, and visitors were really enthusiastic.

Newport's ethnic diversity was only partly represented, as was Welsh language, so plenty to build upon and improve. But the plan is to do it again next year, with workshops and talks, and maybe an afterparty gig. It felt like a solid start had been made to establish this as a regular annual event.

Shaun Featherstone

Shaun Featherstone is unpaid curator and founder of Red Shoes Poster Archive: <https://linktr.ee/redshoesposters>



Bookselling Research Network

We at the RBH project have been getting to know the people at the recently established Bookselling Research Network, a group of academics and independent researchers from around the world (12 countries so far): <https://booksellingresearchnet.uk/>. We presented a webinar for them, about our work, on 22 November. The recording is here: <https://booksellingresearchnet.uk/event/radical-bookselling-in-the-uk-1970-2000/>

In September 2025 they are helping to organise a conference in Munster, Germany, in which we hope to participate: <https://booksellingresearchnet.uk/event/brn-conference-2024-bookselling-as-resistance/>

Marston Book Services

The long-established distribution company, Marston Book Services, went out of business earlier this year, owing publishers a lot of money. In Verso's case it was close on £1m and they had to run a fundraiser to survive – see <https://www.versobooks.com/en-gb/blogs/news/verso-books-are-not-on-sale>. Other radical and left publishers might have been affected – we'd be interested to know if that was the case.

The Bookshop Band

Be sure to catch the Bookshop Band if they're appearing near you, which it's likely they are: their 2024 tour took in 50 venues, including October Books in Southampton, Glastonbury Festival and Hatchard's in London's Piccadilly. They write and perform songs inspired by books, inspired by hundreds of authors from Shakespeare to Philip Pullman, and have released 14 studio albums featuring many of the authors they have worked with.

<https://www.thebookshopband.co.uk/>



On the Record's interactive map of radical bookshops

The map is almost ready. Watch out for news of the launch in our next *Newsletter*. Or maybe before that.

Your oral history of radical bookselling wanted....

We have a growing list of oral history interviews relating to radical bookselling. If we haven't yet interviewed you, and you had a part, large or small, in radical bookselling, then we would like the opportunity to interview you. We usually do the interviews using Zoom and have a list of prompt questions to help you prepare. Interviews can therefore take place in your own home at your convenience. Contact any project member or email us at rbh@phonecoop.coop.

Radical Bookselling records and archives

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

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

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

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

The RBH team

Bogle L'Ouverture, London

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

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

In Other Words, Plymouth

Records deposited at The Box, Plymouth.

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

Lavender Menace and West & Wilde, Edinburgh

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

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

The collections of Edinburgh Libraries and Museums and Galleries also have an archive of various Lavender Menace and West & Wilde paraphernalia, eg the wooden signs from both shops. The image library is here <https://www.capitalcollections.org.uk/>, and you can search on Lavender Menace and West & Wilde. This exhibition featured some of the items: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2023/08/digital-project-showcases-edinburghs-lgbtq-heritage/#>

New Beacon, London

Material held in the George Padmore Institute Archives above the old shop. <https://catalogue.georgepadmoreinstitute.org/> and search on New Beacon

News From Nowhere, Liverpool

There is an unsorted collection in the shop

Oakleaf, Milton Keynes

Records deposited at the Buckinghamshire Archives, Aylesbury
https://archives.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/records/D_335

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

Records deposited at the Warwickshire County Record Office, Warwick <https://archivesunlocked.warwickshire.gov.uk/calmview/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=02877>

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

People's Bookshop, Newcastle

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

Progressive Books, Liverpool

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

Federation of Alternative Bookshops/Federation of Radical Booksellers

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

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

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

34 boxes in the George Padmore Institute Archives

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

Archive of pamphlets distributed by Scottish and Northern Book Distribution

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

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

"The subject strengths of our archives and collections are Scottish left-wing politics, trades unions, campaign and pressure groups; Scottish social work, social policy and child welfare; Scottish public health; Scottish social enterprise; Scottish creative industries, and our contribution to the development of Scottish higher education from the late 19th century onwards (dating back to 1875 and the formation of the Glasgow School of Cookery). There is an overriding theme of Scottish social history and social justice present in our archives and special collections."

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

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

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

Not Dead Yet

A Bookshop of One's Own

It all started about ten years ago. Every now and then I would get emails from bright, eager young feminist academics, doing their PhDs creating the record about feminist publishing, the Women's Liberation Movement, the politics of the 80s and 90s. What could I tell them, what were my memories. Naturally I welcomed the interest. I welcomed the analysis, though I did find some of the language somewhat off putting. One researcher said 'Jane Cholmeley adumbrates the tensions...' I've never adumbrated in my life. I had to look the word up! People wanted to know, to set the record straight so I began to think, whose story is this? Whose voices should be heard?

At the same time, I had gathered together (from a friend's attic and my brother-in-law's garage) the Silver Moon archive. Archive is a rather grand word for a massive pile of STUFF: 2 crates, 6 boxes, 5 account books and 19 lever arch files.

This mountain of STUFF took over my tiny London flat. I only have two rooms so, in effect, I now only had one and a half. And there it sat for nearly three years. I could not open the boxes, the files. It was too painful, too loaded with emotion.

I call myself an historian and here I was sitting on all this primary source material. I was getting older and the phrase 'Not Dead Yet' was working around the edges of my mind, so in 2018 I opened the boxes and began to rediscover my life, my old purpose in life became my new purpose in life. I started writing my story.

I feel that I am an academic manquée and I imagined that this project would turn into a small academic book, and I'd be thrilled beyond measure to get published by, say, Pluto or Verso or maybe if I was really lucky, by Virago.

I've often heard writers – fiction writers - say their characters take over and lead a book in an unexpected direction, and I've thought 'What nonsense!' but it's true. Various things happened as I wrote. My own writing style bored me. It was earnest and serious, and I could feel Sue¹ sitting on my shoulder saying 'Don't be so pompous.' I remembered what fun we'd had, sure, our politics were serious but the shop was full of laughter. Sue was renowned for her utterly non-politically-correct humour. Only she could have written an obit. for Simone de Beauvoir that read "Roses are red/Violets are blue/It's Adieux to Sartre/ and it's bye-bye to you." I wanted to put in a chapter about Biff, our shop dog. This book was getting less and less academic! Furthermore, I had a revelatory thought, this book should not be, could not be my voice alone. So, I contacted as many Silver Moon staff as I could find and sent each of them a questionnaire asking for their memories and stories. The questionnaires came back, zoom calls were made between Sweden and Los

1 Sue Butterworth 1951 – 2004, co-founder of Silver Moon, my partner and friend

Angeles and the book came alive. I now had tone and energy and even stories of things I had no idea had happened. Also, if, as many bookshops do, you employ writers as staff, I had paragraphs of beautiful prose to retrieve my pedestrian style. Oh, this was going to be fun!

Authoring a book with twenty additional contributors meant a lot of checking. In all cases, I sent each 'Silver Moonie' a draft of their text so that they could approve it. Jane Anger's² contributions were especially important. As a co-founder of Silver Moon, I'd visited her in Nottingham at the very outset to tell her I was attempting to write a memoir of Silver Moon and to seek her blessing. Jane's support was clear-headed and utterly invaluable.

I finished my first draft in February 2019. It was 147,000 words long. The only way I knew to do it was to put everything in and then cut, cut, cut. As Zoe Fairbairns said in describing the writing course that she ran at Silver Moon "What is the role of the wastepaper basket?" When I look back at my first draft, I cringe. It's a mess, the tone is all wrong, the structure – well, there wasn't one really – important themes are drowned in trivia, but it was a start. Everyone repeated to me the mantra "kill your babies" in other words just because you think it's amusing and shows you in a good light doesn't mean it shouldn't be in the wastepaper basket. Version after version clogged up my computer.

In March 2020, the pandemic was finally declared. I was lucky. Although, like everyone else, life was disrupted and I got covid twice I had a happy and productive pandemic. I would go for a walk in the morning, following government instructions (unlike some), come home, write for four hours. At six-o'clock I poured myself a much-deserved large gin and tonic and watched TV. Another good day's work done.

Friends asked me if I would self-publish, and there's a lot to be said for that. It democratises the publishing process, but I'd been in the business for decades and I wanted a real publisher. I wanted the imprimatur of an established house.

So that meant getting an agent. These days, agents are the gatekeepers, they do much of the editing as well, and your MS stands a far better chance of being looked at by a publisher if submitted by an agent rather than landing on the hideously named 'slush pile'. J.K. Rowling may have been picked off the slush pile but that's a rare miracle.

Here I got lucky. I was writing a chapter about how nice all the people who work in the book trade are, in general. I wanted to tell a story about James, my Bloomsbury rep.

James had come into my office for his monthly appointment and had yawned his way through our meeting. I was not impressed so I challenged him. "Late night James?" "Am I boring you?" He shyly admitted that he'd been on an overnight shift for the Samaritans. I'd got it all wrong.

2 Jane Anger has recently retired from Five Leaves Bookshop in Nottingham

Aaah! What a lovely man.

I wanted to include this story, but suddenly thought, I wonder if there are issues of confidentiality? In September 2021, I sent him my few lines and asked if it would be OK to include the story. He came back to me saying that it was OK and BTW he was an agent now and would I send him something when I was ready.

Did I know James was an agent? Was my enquiry totally honourable or a bit of a fishing expedition? I honestly can't remember. Anyway, in April 2022, after four years of work, I had something approaching a finished MS and I sent it to James.

We had lunch. That's how it's done. At the end of lunch James gave me his business card with "Jane's agent" written on it.

And then – you start all over again.

James wanted edits and some restructuring. By December 2022, I was down to 110,000 words, on my 7th draft. I was finished (again).

Publishers go on holidays or have parties over Christmas, so James sent the MS out on 20th February (2023) to 45 imprints. Yes 45! And the agonising wait began.

I was told to expect nothing for six weeks minimum and I told myself that refusals come in first and fast. Positive interest is slower. Oh, the tension. The silence. The waiting.

By the 7th March James reported that I'd had "16 turn downs ... mostly very nice and admiring" and that 2 publishers were "talking to colleagues". He sweetly asked me "How are your nerves?"

Utterly shredded

The two publishers who were talking to colleagues were Faber and Harper Collins. I couldn't believe it. Faber, publishers of T.S. Eliot, Sylvia Plath, Alan Bennett and P.D. James, one of the finest literary houses, and Harper Collins, one of the biggest publishing companies in the world. This was a long way from the small academic press I'd had in mind at the beginning.

More waiting.

Ten days later (March 17th) Harper Collins made a pre-emptive bid. James asked me if I wanted to accept. You bet I did. This was astoundingly fast, a mere 25 days. I was now going to be an author with one of the largest publishing houses in the world, under their Mudlark imprint. Mudlark describes itself as a publisher of "high quality non-fiction aimed at a general readership – an eclectic mixture of memoir, polemic and narrative non-fiction".

I can live with that description I thought, and naturally the first thing I did was arrange lunch – with my agent and my editor. By this time, I was waltzing round my small flat hugging myself saying 'my agent and my editor, my agent and my editor'.

As I met Anna, my editor, for the first time I said to her “I don’t know whether to shake your hand or to throw my arms around you?” So we chose the latter. It’s lunch, I’ve got an editor, a publisher, I’m there – well not exactly. By the end of lunch Anna has asked me to cut a further 10,000 words, restructure a substantial section of the book and change the title. It was a good thing that Harper Collins paid for the lunch.

The MS was submitted under the title

‘Write On! The Story of Silver Moon – a Feminist Bookshop in Thatcher’s Britain’

Another title was

‘Write on! Smashing the Patriarchy, One Book at a Time’

But we felt that was a bit strong

Anna came up with *A Bookshop of One’s Own* which pulled the book towards the literary mainstream. Very clever.

I have to acknowledge that all the editorial changes that James and Anna pushed me through, though I may have raged and complained at the time, they were right, their editorial guidance made it a much better book.

Harper Collins asked if I would read the audio version. As I had no idea how to do that, I said ‘Yes’. Five days of recording were booked at a studio in Queen’s Park. Reading out loud for six hours a day is exhausting. Harper Collins additionally suggested practising for three hours in the evening, well, that didn’t happen, I was too knackered. I had a delightful producer whose concentration levels were astounding. Every now and then she’d stop me ‘You’ve missed an “and”’ and I’d have to re-do the sentence. I knew that the emotionally charged bits, e.g. coming out to my mother, would be hard, so those I did practise with a friend. First reading = tears. Second reading = tears. But in the studio, for my third reading, I read straight through, nailed it. However, at the end of the book, reading the paragraph about Sue’s death, I wept. ‘Let’s take 5’ my producer said, so I did, I composed myself and went back into the studio and managed to read the passage. I looked through the soundproof glass for a ‘thumbs up’ but my producer was not there. She was still having her coffee break. I read again and managed it. The audio book was done.

Publication was on 29th February 2024 and did we have a party! Daunts bookshop in Marylebone High Street had got in 125 copies of the book and sold every single one. The window was stripped bare, and they ran out of copies. They told me “This never happens”. They instantly re-ordered and I had to visit them again to sign a further 60 copies.

Hatchards chose me as their Book of the Month for March and my book was in the window placed between Earl Spencer and King Charles, flavour in the middle of the sandwich?

And so my year as an author began.

Bookfairs

Dave Cope

One of the things that fascinates me about the radical book trade is its relationship to the mainstream book trade. This was always ambiguous, ranging from hostility to mutual support and many points in between at various times and over various issues. Today, relations are smoother, partly because the radical trade is much smaller and partly because the problems faced by radical bookshops are very similar to those faced by all independent shops.

Radical bookfairs were always a site where commercial and radical tended to co-operate. There were other bookfairs, too. The mainstream trade fairs always had an international element to them - London from 1971, Frankfurt from the Middle Ages but 1949 in its current form - and publishers and distributors were the main stallholders, and the public might be excluded on some days. Larger radical publishers would exhibit regularly. The second-hand book trade had its first fair in 1972 and then they expanded rapidly with the Provincial Booksellers Fairs Association from 1974. Stalls at these are just for second-hand dealers and are aimed at the public, and there were always a handful of radical dealers at these fairs too. Perhaps the mainstream events that bear most similarities with the radical bookfairs are book festivals. The Cheltenham Literature Festival started in 1949 and it has spawned numerous others throughout Britain. Radical bookfairs have significant elements in common with these literary festivals: authors' readings, panels, debates, occasionally visits and displays in schools and of course the mass selling of books. They often lasted over a week. And it is also a fact that they have become more diverse and more socially and environmentally aware over recent years – this can be seen in the successful pressure by the campaign group Fossil Free Books in 2024 to force the investment management firm Baillie Gifford, with its huge investments in fossil fuels, to end its sponsorship of nine book festivals (including the three biggest – Cheltenham, Hay and Edinburgh).

A radical bookfair is a display of books, pamphlets and magazines and perhaps also non-book items like cards, posters and badges by multiple publishers, distributors and organisations which are radical, or mainstream ones which carry a fair number of radical or feminist or black titles. They are aimed at the general public, who can buy copies, bookshops, which can order copies, and librarians, who can also browse and find titles they may not have seen before. There are usually some workshops,



meetings and discussions and perhaps signing sessions. There are often social events in the evening. Excluded here are some events like the African Books Festival (with exhibitions rather than books for sale) and Human Rights Book Week, both from the 1980s. The Royal African Literature Society has an annual festival 'Africa Writes'. And there were very large events put on by organisations such as the Socialist Workers Party's annual 'Marxism' event, or the festivals organised by *Marxism Today*, both with massive book stalls. These all have elements of the book fair.

The categories of radical fairs are: Black Radical; Socialist; Feminist; Anarchist. I will deal with fairs from the Federation of Radical Booksellers era first (there were none prior to that) then look at some smaller local fairs right up to the present.

The bookfairs largely coincide with the golden era of the radical bookshops (mid-1970s to 1990). And they are intimately linked with these and with radical publishers as well. There are lots of overlaps between the fairs, and some interesting divergences.

Of the national radical fairs, the socialist and black fairs charged an entry fee of 20p/25p. I don't believe the feminist bookfairs charged anything and the anarchist fairs would never have considered charging (accessibility was everything to them). The black fair charged £1 for its programmes, which rose to £2 by the final one – but the value of these for the historian is immense as we will see.

International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books

I will deal with this one first, as it possesses the best written record, and it can serve as a template for comparison with the other fairs. There is no punctuation in the title: it is 'Radical Black...' and not 'Radical, Black...'. Some participants and commentators have added the comma unwittingly. And when John La Rose, the director of all twelve of these fairs, uses the term 'radical' he often adds 'and revolutionary'.

The complete programmes of the fairs were reproduced in *A Meeting of the Continents* – with opening speeches, a list of exhibitors with their descriptions, a list of participants with biographies, photographs, and the adverts – in themselves a source of information about the black publishing and cultural scene. There were an increasing number of adverts from international publishers and organisations. The book, of over 550 pages, also has an introductory section with more documents including an interview with John La Rose and a collection of memoirs from many participants. There is also an extensive index.

The Fair was founded by New Beacon Books, Bogle L'Ouverture Publications and Race Today Publications. The first two were bookshops and publishers, **and** the magazine *Race Today* (edited by Darcus Howe), which also published about twenty books and pamphlets and in some respects was a wide-ranging radical political project in itself. New Beacon was founded by John La Rose and his partner Sarah White. John had been a leading trade union activist in Trinidad and was general secretary of the West Indian Independence Party before moving to Britain

in 1961. Bogle L'Ouverture was set up by Eric and Jessica Huntley, who had already met John in Trinidad. Eric had also been a trade union activist when a postman in Guyana and he was on the general council of the left-wing, pro-independence People's Progressive Party. Jessica was also a leading figure in the PPP, a renowned speaker and community activist. Eric arrived in Britain in 1957 and Jessica in 1958.

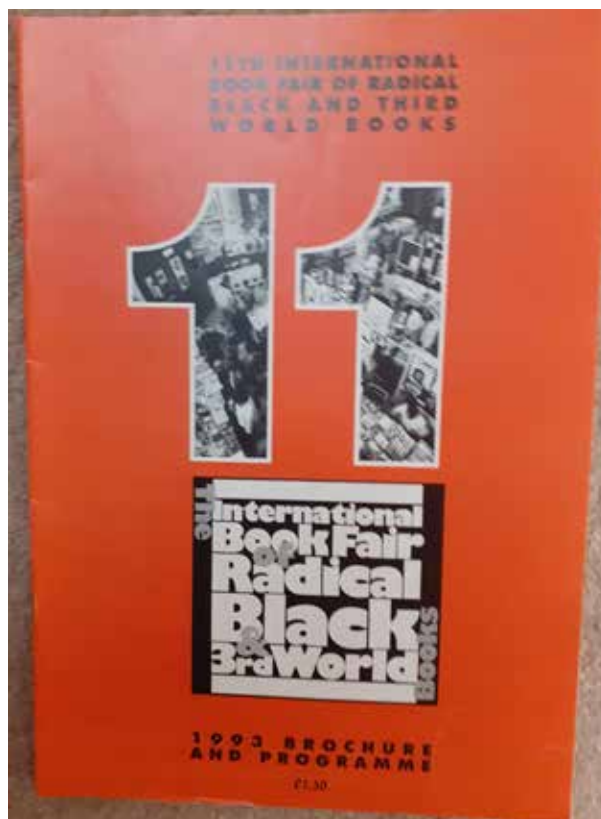
The three businesses had been meeting regularly to protest and mobilise against the racist and fascist attacks on radical bookshops, and they were determined not to be intimidated. They organised a talk on education and black children; a poetry reading in Bogle-L'Ouverture; and a gala in the Commonwealth Institute which would celebrate the tenth anniversary of the bookshop. The gala evening included talks, poetry readings, music – and bookstalls. The concert was a sell-out event. This was the basis for the format of the black bookfairs.

The intention, as stated in the organisers' first invitation (these were later titled 'Calls to the Book Fair') was to promote 'the growth of radical ideas and concepts and their expression in literature, politics, music, art and social life'.

Held between 1982 and 1995, the first ten fairs were annual events and the last two were held in 1993 and 1995. From the fourth, they were held in the Camden Centre. And from 1985 there were also Black Fairs in Manchester, Bradford/Leeds and, from 1993, Glasgow. The fairs themselves lasted three days and the cultural events were spread over a week.

From the start the fairs were ambitious. There were publishers and participants in forums and cultural events from five continents. A conscious decision was taken not to apply for grants – in contrast with the Feminist Book Fair Group who received financial assistance from the Greater London Council and UNESCO for their first event in 1984. If the organisers of the Black Fair had applied for GLC grants it's difficult to believe they would not have been knocking at an open door, but Ken Livingstone had only taken power at the GLC in 1981. John La Rose wanted the fairs to be completely free of any potential pressures from outside bodies. This meant guests, including speakers and performers and publishers from all over the world, had to pay their own way, but accommodation was arranged with friends and supporters in this country and they were given free entry to all events. There is no evidence this prevented speakers and performers of the highest quality from attending, though no doubt smaller third world publishers found it impossible to come.

There was a determination to ensure the Black Fairs succeeded whether there was support or not from the mainstream trade in the form of publicity or reviews. And there was little of either. This isolation was expected by the organisers, but it was not wished for or encouraged: it



was treated as a typical lack of interest in black culture and politics. However, in 1983 the fair was covered by Channel 4's 'Black on Black' which devoted a whole programme to it.

John La Rose consciously positioned the fairs politically in the tradition of the Pan African Congress of 1945 held in Manchester, and culturally in that of the Caribbean Artists Movement of the mid 1960s - early 1970s, of which he was a co-founder.

The book fair tradition 'has always advocated autonomous non-sectarian, radical and revolutionary discussion and action in the direction of socialism and mass democracy' (Introduction by the editors of *A Meeting of the Continents*).

The fairs had three components:

the book fair itself with radical black, third world publishers and mainstream publishers with radical lists/authors.

The second was the discussion forums. These included the following topics: black film, theatre, poetry, writers and critics; radical publishing – speakers included directors or owners from Women's Press, Virago, Zed, Race Today, Serpent's Tail, Saqi, Allison & Busby, Karnak House, Black Classic Press, and of course the three founding publishers. There were forums or discussions on Southern Africa, India, Nkrumah, socialism, new technology, the IMF & globalisation, black women & writing, Haiti, attacks on black and radical bookshops and so on. Linked to these it is worth noting the political interventions that the fairs engaged in, such as the attempt to save the life of Maurice Bishop in Grenada (recorded in the 1984 Fair brochure), the campaign in support of Salman Rushdie, and over the New Cross fire. Trade unions were given a role in the fairs, mainly the Trinidad Oilfields Workers Trade Union, a very militant union that went on to organise two Caribbean book fairs, and the National Union of Mineworkers immediately prior to the 1984/5 strike.

While there were obviously disagreements in debates, many commentators noted there was an absence of the sectarianism that British far-left groups brought to meetings and conferences. Politically, the fairs served as a place where white supporters of black radicalism were also invited to join in forums, and could learn more about black aspirations and politics. Feminist writers and publishers featured prominently. In 1986 Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Paule Marshall, Grace Nichols and Toni Cade Bambara were present for one discussion.

The third component was the cultural events. There were art exhibitions, poetry readings, music and dance. The very first fair included three major cultural events: an International Poetry Reading (Caribbean, African, Asian); a classical and folk Concert; and a variety concert. There was also an International Food Fair, and all this was spread over one week. The Fairs held regular workshops for school children.

Attendances were good: over 6,000 attended the first one.

Internationalism was a prominent feature. The impact extended beyond the Anglo-Saxon world – there was an award to *Présence Africaine*, the long-standing French radical journal and publisher. Similarly, the language extended beyond ‘standard’ English as poets, speakers and films reflected local patois, creole, pidgin English etc. For many British visitors it was the first time they encountered some of the world’s leading black writers and musicians. Among those invited to open the fairs were C L R James (who opened the first, providing a link to the 1945 Pan African Congress which he attended), Wole Soyinka, Edward Kamau Braithwaite, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Abdul Alkalimat, Margaret Busby, Jayne Cortez. The much-lauded International Poetry Reading at the first fair included poets from Barbados, Britain, Cuba, Guyana, India, Jamaica, Malawi, Malaysia, Montserrat, Nigeria, Pakistan, Trinidad and Uganda.

There was another cultural aspect of the fairs that many participants and visitors noted. This was the pleasure at the discussions that continued after the forums in pubs, restaurants and private houses. Many friendships were made while eating and drinking.

New individuals and groups joined the organising team as Race Today and Bogle L’Ouverture dropped out (there is a cryptic reference in Andrews to Jessica dropping out). The new groups who got involved with the bookfair included the Black Parents Movement, the Black Youth Movement, and an American publisher (Abdul Alkalimat’s Twenty-first Century Books). The role of John La Rose and his organising team from New Beacon gave a consistency to these fairs unlike any others, for example the programmes followed an identical format from the first to the last. His vision was followed from the start, and this was undoubtedly a reason for their success. But he could not resist changes in the market. John retired due to health issues at the beginning of 1997. The decision to end the fairs was announced in February of that year. There were intensive discussions and among the other factors was a consensus that the fairs were not so crucial to the organisation and expression of black culture as substantial advance had been achieved in getting the black contribution accepted in the mainstream of British culture, and there were many more black people winning seats in Parliament and on local councils, and in civil society organisations. International setbacks were another factor, especially politically in Africa, which led to the serious weakening of radical publishing and activism in Nigeria, for example. The political and economic climate in Britain had changed for the worse. The mainstream publishing industry had been hit by cuts so firms like Heinemann and Longman found it difficult to spare staff to attend; schools were also hit by cuts and a change in the political climate reduced school visits.

It was agreed to continue the work of the Fairs in other ways: political and cultural events in London focusing on the African, Asian and Caribbean diaspora; the publication of a history and documentation of the Fairs; the development of the George Padmore Institute, the educational and research centre linked to New Beacon.

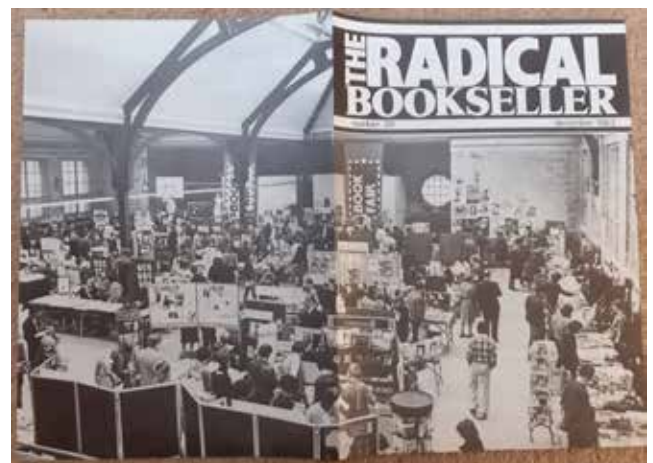
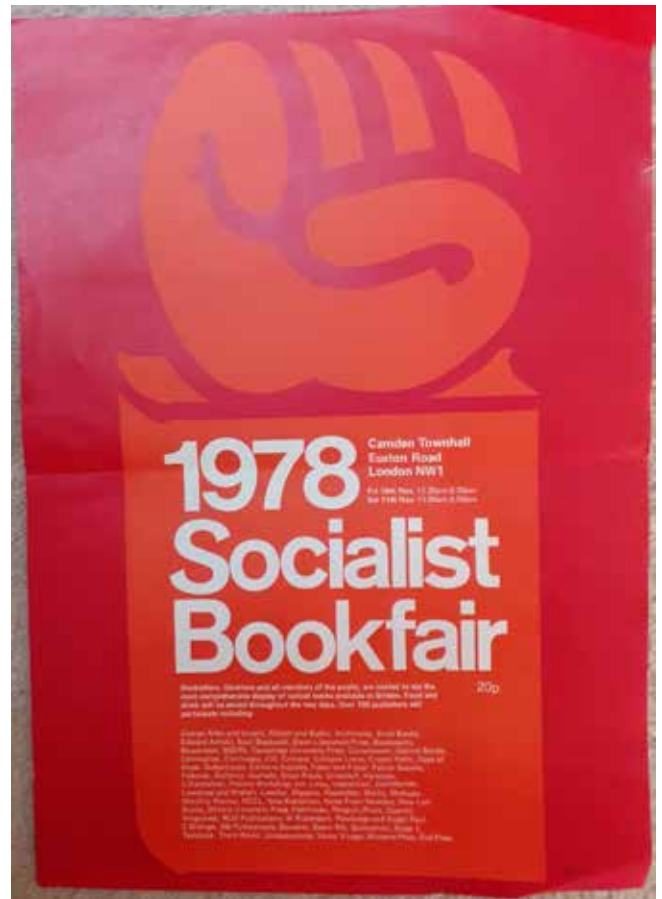
Socialist Bookfair

Pluto Press's Alistair Hatchett and Bookmarks called a meeting with half a dozen small socialist publishers to discuss a bookfair, around Easter in 1977. It was agreed to go ahead and they selected Camden Town Hall in November 1977. This gave publishers a chance to recover from the annual Frankfurt Bookfair held in mid-October. But it was not a huge amount of time to organise a national book fair. The Socialist bookfair, which would be annual, was to be for both the trade and the general public, and books would be for sale to the latter. Publishers were left free to decide which books they wanted to bring. Bookmarks took responsibility for organising the Fair and sales (and losses due to theft). The first Fair was a one-day event, later ones being held over two days. A meeting for radical bookshops was arranged, and this provided an opportunity for members of the Federation of Alternative Bookshops and non-members a rare chance to meet. There were no other events around the fair.

Fifty publishers attended, and sales to the public totalled £3,500. At the 1979 Fair this rose to £8,000.

At the planning meeting for the 1979 Fair only Bookmarks and one person from the distributor PDC turned up. This lack of support from publishers and distributors was surprising. There were still 2,000 visitors to the fair, including a good attendance from abroad. It is not known whether there was more consistent publisher involvement in the planning after this, but the *Radical Bookseller* could announce in its second issue of November 1980: 'The number of publishers exhibiting at it now approaches that of the [mainstream] London Bookfair'.

There were 58 stalls listed in the *Radical Bookseller*, plus one large communal stall for small or foreign or mainstream publishers who could not commit to a whole stall. The 58 includes 13 mainstream publishers, 5 distributors (all radical including two foreign - Bas Moreel & Critiques Livres) and two papers/magazines. The stalls covered a wide range of left-wing political traditions – Fabian Society, Labour Research Department, communist, Trotskyist, Maoist, anarchist, Irish Official Republicans, as well as black, gay and feminist publishers. It was planned for the rent from stands to cover publicity, the cost of the hall and other expenses. Invites were sent out to trade union journals, and major libraries. Radical bookshops were kept



informed, and adverts were placed in the trade press. The brochure listing the exhibitors had six display adverts - all from typesetters and printers, who must have thought they could reach potential customers through the fair.

The 1983 Fair was held in Jubilee Hall, Covent Garden. The number of stalls had increased to 61, plus nine on a communal one. Exhibitors included HMSO; ASTMS, recruiting members in publishing they had a joint stall with another trade union; the NUJ; the Workers' Educational Association; the Marx Memorial Library; and a united front of elite universities - OUP and CUP had a joint stall. This is of course a completely unjustified slur on these two wonderful presses who had radicals working for them in various positions (for example, Dave Wynn who had a very successful career at OUP after he had been manager of Central Books).

In 1984 the fair was held at the Camden Centre. 'The 1984 Socialist Bookfair was a successful affair in all respects except one - the public came in unprecedentedly small numbers. Non-trade attendances were down some 25-30% on the previous year. Trade attendance was unchanged or even increased, especially among librarians' (*Radical Bookseller* (henceforth *RB*) 36, December 1984).

Stuart Hall opened the 1985 fair at the Royal Festival Hall. He presented the 1985 Publishing for People Awards. By this time there were events held in conjunction with the fair: readings from books banned in Eastern bloc countries; readings by women poets; a debate 'Can Socialist Writing be Popular?' with Jeanette Winterson, Bill Buford, Margaret Walters (feminist writer and broadcaster, film critic for *Spare Rib*), Desmond Johnson (dub poet), Julian Rathbone (writer of political thrillers and Booker prize short-listed author mainly published by mainstream publishers but also by Serpent's Tail, Allison & Busby and the Pluto Crime Series).

This fair, 'Inspired by the 1984 Feminist Bookfair', was planned to be 'bigger and better than usual' - but attendance and sales slumped. The organisers tried to encourage local events, but with little response. The Fair received a small delayed post-event grant from the GLC, though only half the sum that had been requested. Without this grant the fair would have been 'well into deficit' (*RB*44, Jan/Feb 1986).

And this appears to be the last one.

The Socialist Bookfairs had very few discussions or debates, compared to the other fairs. What the fairs did put on were displays: banners from the print trade unions at the first, and there were posters and photographs at subsequent ones. They were very stretched for resources - it was soon all falling on Bookmarks and Fergus Nicol, the long-standing manager, and they had their own bookselling, publishing and distribution to get on with. On top of this Fergus was heavily involved in the production of the *Radical Bookseller*. While John La Rose's style was very much centre stage and leading from the front, Fergus never sought any limelight and worked behind the scenes juggling his varied responsibilities. Fergus and Bookmarks deserve much praise for establishing and then keeping the Socialist Bookfair going, as of course John and New Beacon do for their fair.

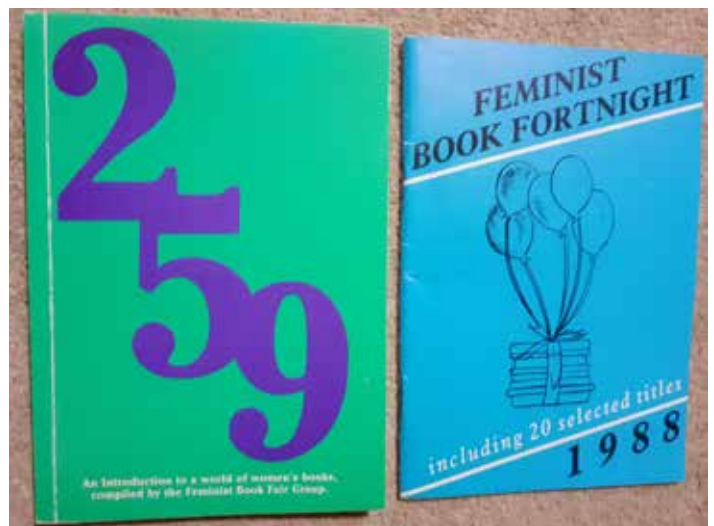
International Feminist Book Fair

This arose from conversations among a handful of women, including Carole Spedding of Sheba, who expressed dissatisfaction at the lack of feminist books on display at existing bookfairs (including the Socialist Book Fair and the Radical Black and Third World Fair), who then approached others and a workshop was organised at the Women in Book Trades Conference in Nottingham in February 1983, which attracted over 200 women. A group met in March 1983 at County Hall to discuss the First International Feminist Book Fair.

Carole Spedding worked full time on the fair. At an open meeting to organise for the Book Fair in April, 55 women volunteered for six specialist organising groups which went on to meet monthly, under the auspices of the general group which also met monthly. The co-ordinators of the National Feminist Bookweek Sub-Group were Gail Chester, Mary Hemmings, and Katrina Webster, and they were responsible to the First International Feminist Bookfair Committee. The decision had been taken that it would be aimed primarily at the trade, including schools and libraries, rather than the public and especially at the mainstream publishers to encourage them to publish more feminist books.

In June the group sent an update with a short survey to members of the Federation of Radical Booksellers asking for a contact name they could liaise with and asking if anyone wanted to help with local events. As the word spread about the forthcoming fair local groups set up and it was clear there would be a lot of interest, so the group decided on a week of events instead of two days as initially planned, and this was extended for the provincial tours. The national events started with a three-day fair in London, then a ten-day regional tour involving about 50 authors in 48 towns. News from Nowhere in Liverpool, for example, organised a day event with Barbara Rogers, Maud Sulter, Pat Barker, Shirly Mshiane; Madhu Kishwsar & Ellen Kuzwayo. Another article talks of 65 events all over UK, including London, and Ireland. Numbers can vary in different accounts but this appears to be due to shops and feminist groups self-organising and not reporting them fully to the organising committee.

Radical shops played an important role in promoting the local events, but these were also put on by women's centres, cultural venues, educational organisations and especially public libraries. Eleanor Careless¹ has written the most extensive analysis of the feminist fairs with an interesting emphasis on the regional events. She takes



1 Careless, E. (2022). Mapping Feminist Book Fortnight: Regional Activism and the Feminist Book Trade in 1980s Britain. *Women: A Cultural Review*, 33(3), 280–313. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09574042.2022.2139055>

as her starting point the reports in *Spare Rib* but makes much use of interviews of those involved and all available written reports, and some unpublished, judging from the extensive list of 'works cited' which is a wonderful source. The only item I can find that is missing is the little-known Margaret Andrews biography of Eric and Jessica Huntley.

Susan Ardil in an article in *Spare Rib* 143 about the Fair describes the exhaustive lengths the organisers went to in order to enable the fair to be truly international: 'they wrote to nearly every feminist in Britain and North America who was known to have made money out of having feminist thought published, asking for contributions to a fares pool for women from the developing countries'. Their aims were 'to put feminism, feminist writers, books and publishers squarely and firmly in the mainstream market place, onto the educational curriculum and on library shelves. The other aim was to move the spotlight of attention from Europe and North America, to search out and draw in feminists from around the world, particularly in the developing world'. The hopes for a good international response at the bookfair were more than realised: there were over 100 publishers from 22 countries. The bookfair, certainly the first one, did include Ireland. And it formally became more international with biennial fairs being held in different cities in Europe, North America and Australia.

Backing came from the Publishers' Association. Funds came also from the GLC Women's Committee (which paid for the equivalent of 2.5 full-time workers) and UNESCO.

By 1987 the big bookshop chains were supporting the fair. Michael Pountney of W H Smith wrote that 'there's been an enormous burgeoning of feminist publishing over the last few years, and we have a straight commercial interest to come in on that' (quoted in Jane Cholmeley). It is probably fair to say Pountney was one of the more open-minded figures in the big chains. Hatchards also extended their stock of feminist books, but one doesn't know if any orders came from Buckingham Palace.

Publisher participation extended to about 70 publishers large and small. Some produced lists specially for the fair. For example, Allen & Unwin had published an attractive pamphlet of eight pages, *Women's Studies 1984*, with 22 annotated titles.

Schools and libraries were also involved in events round the Feminist Book Fortnight, as it had become named.

A report-back to the FRB Conference in July 1984 remarked on the lack of support for disabled people, the lack of support in certain areas of the country, some problems with creches. Suggestions that it last for two weeks next time were made. After the FRB conference in July 1986, Mandy from News from Nowhere wrote a letter to the *RB* which proposed a raft of suggestions to improve next year's Feminist Book Fair. There had been some criticism that the sales of promoted titles had been lower than the previous year. The proposals included changing the date as June was not a good time for booksellers. The selection was not as commercial as previous years – 'we would recommend that some bookselling expertise is brought

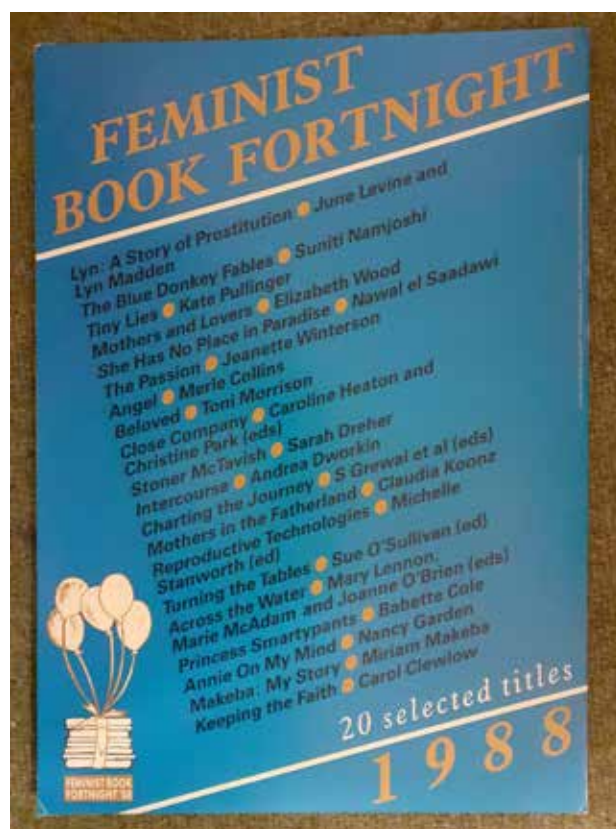
to bear on the selection as well as feminist expertise'. The selection of books for younger readers contained some that were not feminist. She suggested that the publisher fee for entry in the catalogue be waived for the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers to encourage more writing by working-class feminists. She asked for more information in advance for provincial bookshops on the availability of authors to speak. And she ended by thanking the organisers for their hard work. There were other criticisms of the organisers, such as advertising in the glossy magazines like *Cosmopolitan*. There had also been some criticism in 1985 of the fact that the fair had come to an arrangement with W H Smith to promote the company's involvement in the fair without mentioning local radical bookshops which were organising events in the same town. On the other hand, W H Smith had paid for 15,000 copies of the programme with their own imprint. There were always positive and negative consequences to engaging with the commercial world. In this case authors and publishers probably benefitted to the detriment of the bookshops.

This free annotated list of recommended books was produced for each annual event, after much discussion obviously. Limiting the recommended titles to twenty also came in for criticism, as well as the content of some of the titles, though following the FRB criticism there were booksellers on the selection teams, which were also quite broad. It was accepted that twenty was a somewhat restricted number but the aim was to have as broad a range as possible and not put people off with either too many academic titles or titles that were too strident – some were chosen because they were written in a 'popular' style. The crucial thing was to find new buyers for the books, and hopefully to turn them into regular readers. It did work: Eleanor Careless relates the memory of Jane Watts of York Community Bookshop of librarians buying every title on the list.

For the first year there was also a book, 259: *An Introduction to a World of Women's Books*, which got its title from the number of recommended books. There were also essays on the Fair and on publishing in Britain (by Cynthia Cockburn), Zimbabwe, India, the Nordic Countries and the US. For this book, the Book Fair Group had shown considerable skills in obtaining grants – on top of the GLC and UNESCO there were others from The British Council, the Canadian High Commission, the Arts Council, the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in Australia, the Australia Council, and a Swedish organisation.

The first catalogue had a print run of 20,000 - by 1989 this had reached 100,000 and it included details of FRB members, following protracted correspondence.

The Fairs were held annually until 1991.



Anarchist Bookfairs

Workers from the Anarchist Book Service (mail order), 'A' Distribution, Freedom Bookshop and Housmans Bookshop discussed the possibility of an anarchist fair. This is how all radical fairs started as we've seen. The last three companies had participated in Socialist Bookfairs and in the words of one attending this meeting 'None of us was particularly impressed either by the structure of the Bookfair or the ambience of it, i.e. as far as we were concerned it was no fun. First not only did we have to pay for the stall, but all the books we sold were invoiced to Bookmarks less a third and there was an entrance charge.'

Key figures in the early fairs were Dean from AK Press, Martin from A Distribution and Carol Peacock and Clifford Harper. Harper was known for his wonderful posters for the fair and generally for illustrations and book covers for the anarchist and co-operative press, and a much wider range of publishers and magazines - his best-known ones are probably for the *Guardian's* Country File column.

The founding groups produced a free magazine called the *New Anarchist Review*, and the first issue advertised the 1984 bookfair.

The 1985 November fair (there had been a May one as well) was at the Conway Hall (£175 to hire), and they continued there until 2000. They soon decided that an annual one was more than enough to organise.

One of the advantages of moving to Conway Hall was the facility to expand the social space of the bookfair by hiring more rooms for discussions, group meetings, creches, videos etc. The organisers were aware of the limitations of just having a bookfair and nothing else. But Conway Hall had poor disabled access, so they moved to the Camden Centre in 2001, but there were not as many rooms for meetings so some of these were held at the Friends' Meeting House, also on Euston Road. Fairs were later held at St Mary's College in East London.

As the fair increased in size, the organisers made conscious efforts to welcome first-time visitors and introduce them to individuals and groups. They also wanted to reduce the animosity between the different anarchist groups, and they wanted to broaden the attendance. The anarchist fairs were intended to be springboards for activism, with practical workshops on printing, organising together and discussions on tactics and involved fewer talks from well-known authors than other fairs. There was more input from their grass roots. In 1988 three groups held separate public meetings during the fair. It would be interesting to hear from participants on how successful these were. Alongside this there was never much effort put into inviting mainstream publishers, which was another marked difference from the other radical fairs.

There is little printed material on the fairs, which was also the case for the socialist fairs, but more on-line – documents, like the ones quoted below, memories, photographs. This is largely due to the continued existence of anarchist bookfairs.

Mo Mosley, who at different times worked at Housmans and Freedom bookshops,

reporting in a short article in *RB62* on the 1988 anarchist fair, makes several noteworthy comments. Firstly, that the majority of new titles on display were pamphlets and would not be easily sold in bookshops for that very reason. Secondly, that there were too many reprints and not enough new titles: 'There's no point in repeating all the old ideas as if the last hundred years hadn't shown the failure of the revolutionary movement in general, and anarchism in particular', he noted with commendable honesty. Thirdly, that there were good signs of co-operation between anarchist organisations in publishing pamphlets and books – one, *Everything You Wanted to Know About Anarchism But Were Afraid to Ask*, was a collaboration between Dark Star, Emma's Community Bookshop and Rebel Press.

He also reports that the fair covered its costs, which had been budgeted at c£500 to be covered by 10% of takings from stalls. He noted that a gig proved very successful but that a social event was a failure, which is a point that marks one difference with the black fairs. At the end of his report, he apologises for not mentioning more of the printed material, 'but I spent half the Fair looking after children in the creche and saw less of the Fair than I'd have liked'. In 1991, referring to that year's fair, Mo Moseley wrote in *RB76* that attendance was down – partly due to a poll tax demo in Brixton. By 2009 there were nearly 100 stalls and about 50 meetings, and an estimated attendance of 3,000. Sales of food at the fairs also helped finance them, and the anarchist fairs sometimes raised money for good causes - the first fair collected £150 for the striking miners in 1984.

After the 2005 bookfair, 'a small dispute escalated in a venue outside the building, leading to a large police presence and the cordoning-off of Holloway Road. According to Indymedia UK, seven arrests were made'. *Peace News* December 2017 'Bookfair Herstory'.

In 2017 There was a serious and disturbing fracas over issues arising from proposed changes to the Gender Recognition Act which led to the cancellation of the London Anarchist Bookfair for several years. Documents from all sides appeared in *Peace News* Dec 2017/Jan 2018 and can be seen on their website 'Taking a stand against bullying and censorship | Peace News'

The organisers of the fair issued a rational and well-argued rebuttal of charges that they had not catered for people with protected characteristics. And this statement has relevance for future fairs, and thus needs an open and undogmatic debate.

In the absence of a bookfair in 2018, a loose 'Not the Anarchist Bookfair' event was initiated 'by the organisers of the London Radical Bookfair' whereby Anarchist groups were asked to put on their own events over the same weekend and they would all be advertised from one national site.

There was a slight change of name with the Anarchist Book Fair in London 2023, indicating new organisers. There were 77 stalls. There was a very wide range of exhibitors, with the expected anarchist shops, social centres, distributors, cafes, magazines, organisations (including many little known like the cleverly named independent games company, Circle-A Studios). There were others not primarily

from the anarchist tradition, like Corporate Watch; Disabled People Against Cuts; East London Strippers Collective; Haymarket Books (the largest American socialist/radical publisher); Lawrence & Wishart; Migrants' Rights Network; Radical Poster Collective; Tony Bunyan Foundation etc. Many of these organisations, including the predominantly anarchist ones, would also exhibit at Radical Bookfairs, of course.

The Anarchist Book Fair in London 2024 was held over 6 venues with 80 stalls. About 10% were organisations and publications (often single books) from outside the UK. The anarchist fairs were certainly open to international organisations and there were UK based solidarity stalls, but there was not the same interest in attracting foreign publishers as with the socialist, feminist and black fairs, just as there was not the same motivation to invite mainstream publishers to bookfairs. Reasons for this include limited financial resources, the predominance of smaller publishers and the smaller input of publishers in the anarchist fairs, and perhaps a desire to concentrate on grass-roots level activities – plus an ideological hostility.

Imagination was one thing not lacking at the 2024 fair. Just looking at the facilities for children, free childcare was available during the day with qualified staff and a varied list of organised events involving, among others, fancy dress, improvised storytelling, discussions, recycled musical instruments with dancing, 'political and artistic children's literature', 'Duplo building blocks – let's build a utopia' and so on.

This fair issued an 'Anti-Oppression Statement'. Worth reading in conjunction with the 2017 document just referred to, it is accessible on-line at <https://anarchistbookfair.london/anti-oppression-statement/>.

The anarchist fairs' organisers went further in coming to terms with these issues of accessibility, transparency and inclusivity than any other fairs – but they had to, as these concerns were in their infancy in the 1970s and 1980s, and they had been the cause of the serious disruption mentioned above.

I have referred to Cliff Harper's posters. It is also worth mentioning the fine archive of Anarchist Bookfair posters at <https://anarchistbookfair.london/history/>.

These posters raise a perennial question for the anarchist movement - the issue of violence. They can contain images of anarchist violence, even if presented with humour and irony. The poster for the 2024 fair is a case in point. But the images, for instance, of violence against the police or of rioting which can imply that this is the new normal and is perfectly justified, are not helpful. Of course, the police and the state have historically and up to the present been guilty of their own violence and



criminal behaviour towards activists, especially anarchists, and BAME individuals and groups. Of course, this image of anarchists as bomb throwers is influenced by over a century of media hostility and stereotyping, but I do believe it does detract from the more important debate on the relationship between direct action and political change.

Other London Radical Bookfairs

The Alliance of Radical Booksellers organised the fair in 2017 and 2018, and Housmans and Goldsmiths University of London were credited for making the fair possible. It was Nik Górecki at Housmans who was the key figure at the ARB, and his involvement and energy in subsequent fairs were crucial. It is important to remember that the ARB has no financial resources - there is not even a membership fee – and Housmans were very generous in allowing Nik time off to organise the fair. Without this the London Radical Bookfairs would possibly not have taken place.

Resources for publicity were consequently very limited. Programmes and details were largely published on-line. See photo of the two-sided publicity leaflet/programme/map.

The fairs were helped by the ARB's two book awards – the Little Rebels Children's Book Award and the Bread and Roses Award for Radical Publishing. Separate groups organise these (Housmans again, the Letterbox Library and Five Leaves Bookshop) and the two £500 awards are funded by various ARB members. The awards are made at the fair.

'Quiet Revolutions: A Celebration of Radical Bookshops' was an event on 26 November 2022 at the Barbican Library. In effect this was the London Radical Bookfair, but with added input. Curated by Rosa Schling of On the Record, the publisher of a series of books and organiser of events based on oral histories about radical bookshops (Centerprise, Housmans, Newham Bookshop) and Nik representing the ARB. This fair was unusual in also being sponsored by the Barbican Centre's series of events curated by London artists and cultural workers – without the venue and publicity support the event would not have taken place. As well as the stalls from radical bookshops, publishers, artists and libraries, there were a lino printing workshop and two panel discussions, one with contemporary radical bookshops and one with an historical theme in the evening with Ken Worpole, Sheila Rowbotham, Farrukh Dhondy, Jane Cholmeley, Lynn Alderson and Michael La Rose.



The 2023 London Radical Bookfair was held on Saturday 4th November at Goldsmiths, University of London. It was organised by the ARB and supported by the university and the Barry Amiel and Norman Melburn Trust. There were 10 discussions based on recent books, publisher presentations, DOPE magazine, a sessions on Palestine, and a poetry reading. So the scale was smaller than the original socialist bookfairs, but there were still 1,000 visitors (*Peace News* December 2023/ January 2024).

Smaller and local fairs

What has been called London's first feminist bookfair was held to coincide with the 3rd annual conference of Women in Libraries at the Polytechnic of Central London on 12 March 1983, the theme of the conference being 'Women and Books'. Most of the feminist publishers appear to have attended, plus some academic ones and Airlift (mainly a distributor of books from America). There was a stall by Books Plus (we have very little information on this feminist shop – can anyone help?) and a stall of second-hand books from Jean Clitheroe. The bookfair was free and for women only and opened at noon, presumably so as not to interfere with plenary sessions of the conference, the afternoon being devoted to workshops. Speakers included Dale Spender, Maggie Hewitt (Centerprise), Philippa Brewster (Pandora), Rose Taw (History of Women Writers), Gail Chester (Ultra Violet Enterprises), Mary Coghill (Sisterwrite), Michele Roberts, Ros de Lanerolle (Women's Press), Jan Parker (*Spare Rib*) and Rosemary Stones (Children's Rights Workshop).

The Feminist Book Fortnight was revived in 2017. Five Leaves Bookshop organised a conference 'Feminist Publishing: Then, Now and In the Future'. Arising from this, in 2018, Jane Anger, an early member of Women in Publishing and working at Five Leaves, played the key role in initiating a revival of the Feminist Book Fortnight. The shop did not have the resources to organise a national effort but provided the structure – website, social media sites and posters - for shops to organise their own events and 52 independent shops participated. This was at a time when there were only two specifically feminist publishers in Britain – Virago (part of Little, Brown Book Group) and Honno, the Welsh publisher.

There are problems identifying some fairs as they were advertised and later cancelled, especially during the Covid pandemic, but publicity material can stay on-line for ever, even if events did not take place.

There was a Halifax Left Book Fair from the FAB era that was announced by John Bibby: 'all main left publishers should be represented' and it would be advertised nationally was the bold claim in the FAB newsletter, but I have never found out if it did in fact take place.

Some local ones were organised by bookshops. These can be categorised as local versions of the four main strands of fairs – anarchist, socialist, feminist and black.

Under the anarchist label, it is clear these were - and still are at the time of writing - the most numerous. In the years since 2010, there have been fairs in Belfast, Bradford,

Bristol, Cardiff, Derry, Dundee, Glasgow, Halifax, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle and Sheffield – plus an ‘anarchist feminist’ one in Edinburgh. Some were one-offs (Dundee), others lasted longer (Belfast had its 12th in 2019).

In conjunction with Children’s Book Week, Oakleaf Bookshop organised a ‘very successful’ one day bookfair in a local school in late 1980 with visiting authors. (RB3 Dec 1980). Their second event, much more than a bookfair, was reported a year later in RB10. The journal printed an account from Jane Scullion, and it sounds like an impressive affair. Two classrooms were turned into a haunted house – the theme was ‘fantasy’, ghosts and science fiction. Unlike the first fair, there was a small charge. The shop already supplied the school bookstall and there was a lot of consultation between the two, as well as the parent teachers association. There was story telling for all ages, library exhibition, authors, illustrators, painting, films and refreshments. Being a Saturday, many parents came as well.

Another early bookshop-organised radical bookfair was set up by the Glasgow Books Collective and some other individuals at the McLellan Galleries in Sauchiehall Street on 26 February 1983, reported as successful by the organisers (RB22).

If we jump four decades, another Scottish shop, Edinburgh’s **Lighthouse Bookshop**, organised a radical bookfair in November 2023 at the Assembly Roxy. And this was bigger. Spread over four days from Thursday to Sunday, there were over 40 publisher and activist stalls and 18 events and discussions covering climate change, on-line extremism, solidarity and censorship, Palestinian fiction and alliances. There were readings, a zine workshop, a poster making workshop and a feminist cabaret. It was professionally filmed and live-streamed: you can watch the recordings [here](#). This was a proper twenty-first century bookfair. It was repeated in 2024 (see the poster, designed by Lindsay Grimes).

Before Lighthouse Books, the premises belonged to Elaine Henry’s Word Power, which had started the annual radical bookfair in 1996. Word Power also organised the Book Fringe during the Edinburgh Festival, and this has also been taken on by Lighthouse.

‘Radical bookfairs’ was the term used after the demise of the Socialist Bookfair, and it was intended to be inclusive of all four types of fair and, in an age of decline for radical shops and publishers of all persuasions, they worked well for all. The self-defined local radical bookfairs include: Belfast, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Dorset, Hull, Newport, Nottingham (Five Leaves), Peterborough, Swansea (‘a radical community Festival’) and Swindon. And there are some undoubtedly that have escaped me.



An early series of bookfairs in London initiated by Peckham Books, a radical shop, started in 1979. The first was held in a church hall, the second in a tenants' hall. For this one, bravely spread over three days, there were events with music, poetry readings, advice service stalls, multi-cultural events, and the involvement of children. Organised by a committee of ten people, local Asian bookshops were also involved. Clowns gave out leaflets in High Street to advertise the fair. (*RB3*, December 1980).

Some were still a little on the sectarian side. There was a 'Merseyside Marxist Bookfair' from 2019 in Liverpool. In November 2024 stalls were booked by the CPB ML (the organisers), CPGB (M-L), CPGB (Weekly Worker), the Korean Friendship Association (i.e. North Korea, of course), NCP, Northern Herald (Bob Jones' decidedly unsectarian second-hand business) and the RCG. The order of the listing appears to be by ideological purity. The organisers, Red Book Fairs, announced there would be fairs elsewhere but none appear to have materialised.

There was a radical bookfair on Saturday, 13 September 1986 at the Town Hall in Sheffield. Sponsored by the town council as part of a festival, with the collaboration of the Independent Bookshop. Alan Beevers, from the Central Library, was the organiser. Sheffield council also hosted a Third World and Anti-Racist Bookfair over two days, Friday and Saturday, October 25/26, in 1985. The venue was the Bow Centre, in Holly Street. It was organised by Sheffield Education Department, Third World Publications, and the Independent Bookshop. Speakers included A Sivanandan, D Blunkett, Jacob Ross (on Grenada), and Morgan Dalphinis (an expert on Caribbean languages and history – two of his books were published by Karia, one being a collection of his poetry). Six years later the Sheffield Multicultural and Anti-Racist Bookfair was put on by Sheffield Libraries and Sheffield Racial Equality Council at All Saints School, Granville Road on Saturday 15 June, 1991.

There was another series of bookfairs organised in London by Anand and Minnie Kumria of Soma Books in South East London which specialised in books from the Indian sub-continent. It was called a Multi-Cultural Book Fair, and held at the Commonwealth Institute over a week. Targeted at teachers and librarians, it was also open to the public, and the Institute organised evening events – films, theatre, music and children's events. The first was in 1979, and it was followed up by another in 1983 organised jointly with the National Book League and publishers, which was a three-day affair. There were 52 major British publishers according to the report in the *Radical Bookseller*. This second fair included booksellers and librarians in its target audience. Another was planned for 1984 but was cancelled due to a mix-up over dates with the venue, the Institute of Education.

There were several women's bookfairs outside London in the 1980s. The indefatigable Sheffield Libraires organised one on 7 June 1986 as part of that year's Feminist Book Fortnight. It was held at the Crucible Theatre, and there were book stalls, readings, music and dance. Two new books were launched there – a collection of women's writings and a collection by the Sheffield Women Against Pit Closures.

This must have inspired Birmingham Public Libraries to organise their own

Birmingham Women's Bookfair, held over three days in November the following year. It was held in the central library and a prime aim was to draw public attention to the services that the library offered. Events were planned which included workshops, music, poetry reading, films, creative writing and seminars. There would be stalls including a bookstall organised by the Birmingham Women's Bookshop. There was a display of covers of romantic novels organised by Mills and Boon - 'this will be one of the lighter sides of the bookfair'. They also expected 'major personalities' to make an appearance. (RB54, July/August 1987).



Some of the characteristics of bookfairs have been mentioned. There are others which deserve a mention and more research. The role of librarians was especially helpful in local fairs, as we have seen. Some of the librarians would have been radicals keen to support them, but others would have been open-minded professionals who were impressed by the diversity of publishing made available at the fairs and this would undoubtedly have filtered through into public libraries. Austerity and cuts in public expenditure have reduced this impact, and the cost-of-living crisis has also had a negative effect.

The success of feminist and black publishing in breaking through into mainstream culture has been discussed and perhaps they do not need specialist fairs as much as they did in the 1970s and 1980s, though the ones that remain still participate willingly in radical bookfairs. This success has been reinforced by the impact of the Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements. It is reflected in the huge increase in book sales of black and feminist fiction and non-fiction in recent years, and the appearance of these books in national and international book awards. This extends to LGBTQ+ and disability rights literature. Of course, this does not mean that all the demands of these movements have been met. Far from it. But there have been significant shifts in social attitudes and this is vividly seen in mainstream publishing, bookselling and libraries.

Green publishing has not been mentioned, though the environment has been an issue visible at all the fairs mentioned. The anarchist movement was involved, with the green movement, in the creation of Extinction Rebellion, and its off-shoots. The socialist movement has had the least visibility in publishing terms since the FRB period, with the brief but exciting exception of the Corbyn period Labour Party when there was an upsurge of interest in books about socialist ideas and strategies. This was most vividly seen in the massive 'World Transformed' events organised at the fringe of the Party's annual conferences which can be seen as a new iteration of the socialist bookfairs.

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Photo credits

Anarchist Bookfair 2024 - unknown

London Radical Bookfair 2017 – Asya Geffer

Edinburgh's Radical Bookfair 2024 - Lindsay Grime

Others are from the author's collection.