

# **RADICAL BOOKSELLING 1970-2000**

Report of a Conference  
held on 26th October 2019  
at the Methodist Central Hall in  
Manchester

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# Introduction

The aim of the conference was to draw out the history of radical bookshops in the UK, concentrating on the period 1970-2000. It was conceived and organised by Dave Cope, John Goodman, Rick Seccombe, Ross Bradshaw and Maggie Walker. All of us had been in the trade during the 1970s and 1980s, Dave and Ross were still in it (Left on the Shelf and Five Leaves respectively). We contacted people who were involved at that time via the ARB (Alliance of Radical Booksellers), current radical bookshops as well as our personal networks. We wanted to include discussion on every type of radical shop – BAME, green, gay, anarchist, peace, community, political party bookshops and just general ones! We also wanted the event to be a celebration of the phenomenon of radical bookshops and a chance to meet up with old friends – with plenty of time to chat during the day and with socials on the Friday and Saturday nights. Our intention was for all attendees to have the chance to participate in the reminiscences and discussions and to record and transcribe the event to support further research. Recognising that the UK had possibly the most vibrant radical bookselling scene in the world, we hoped to draw some participants into doing further work on this history, to ensure that surviving material is rescued and archived possibly leading to a dedicated website building on the work already done by Dave Cope at [www.leftontheshelfbooks.co.uk](http://www.leftontheshelfbooks.co.uk).

Participants had responded to an invitation to bring memorabilia and archive material which was displayed around the room. A guidance note on archiving had been produced by John Goodman and circulated in advance (available from the organisers).

As can be seen in Section 5, the conference stimulated plenty of discussion about how to continue this initiative and some commitments to future action, as the organisers hoped it would. If you want to get in touch with further ideas then please do: we'd love to hear from you.

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The organisers are grateful to Central Books for their sponsorship of the conference



# Conference Session 1. Introduction

After the organisers had introduced themselves Dave Cope gave a brief introduction on the genesis of the conference and his research into radical bookshops.

Ross Bradshaw set the scene by giving an amusing run-through of the history of radical bookshops from dingy basements and disorganised booksellers, dedicated party hacks and ambitious collectives setting up in small towns. He referred to the problems of importing from the USA with book parcels seized or going missing and several shops winning cases to retrieve their imports. Radical bookshops sold items that WH Smiths banned such as Gay News and Private Eye and many imported multiple copies of Spycatcher, a banned title on the British Secret Intelligence Services. The far right caused trouble, gluing locks, spray-painting and even physically attacking staff and customers. Radical bookshops stocked Salman Rushdie's Satanic Verses which laid them open to attack by Islamist Fundamentalists. More positively shops and publishers came together to run Socialist, Feminist, Black, Third World and Anarchist book fairs.

Many of these bookshops closed in the 1990s. The end of the Net Book Agreement meant that chains, supermarkets and later Amazon offered discounts that small bookshops couldn't match and rent increases spelled the end for many shops operating on very tight margins. Ross finished by recognising that a few shops, such as News from Nowhere and Housmans, survived throughout and that there was a welcome recent revival of shops who have created the Alliance of Radical Booksellers.

# Conference session 2. Our Shared History

Everyone attending was then invited to speak for 5 minutes on their experiences in the radical book-trade. Themes that emerged included:

- the different structures and ways of running businesses
- how shops tried to deal with personnel problems in different way from mainstream shops (e.g. long-term absence including for mental health issues) and efforts to diversity collectives to include black members
- low wages and volunteers being essential
- fascist attacks
- the different dynamics of women-only shops
- outside funding (Arts Council, MSC job creation schemes, council grants, trade unions, EU, Co-op movement, Quakers)
- shops as publishers and their importance as community information centres.

Bookshops run by left-wing parties and those run by individuals and by collectives were represented. The personal impact of working in the radical book trade was emphasised by several speakers and it played a part in the future careers of others.

Distributors such as Publications Distribution Co-operative (PDC) provided a link between shops as did the Federation of Radical Bookshops and networks such as Women in the Book Trade, Women in Publishing and Women in Libraries. For a period, supportive university lecturers referred their students to radical bookshops for textbooks and some shops raised funds from their supporters (long before crowd-funding) as well as some shops selling to public libraries. A lack of business skills, being on a fast learning curve, and accountants who couldn't understand our approach were also mentioned.

One thing that became clear was that initially, in the period we concentrated on from the late 1960s to the 1990s, the shops were more ideological and that commercial pressures forced shops not only to diversify their stock beyond books but also to look more to mainstream stock. Some suggested that a way for future shops to survive would be not as 'radical' or 'alternative' shops but to have radical sections within what could be called a mainstream community shop.

# Conference session 3. Feminist Bookselling

Gail Chester was introduced as a life-long radical feminist who has been involved in and studied the radical book trade. She is currently a Trustee of the Feminist Library and has been on the Board at Housmans.

Gail spoke of the feminist book trade in the UK being closely linked to the history of the radical book-trade as, unlike in the USA and Germany, there was not a network of specifically feminist bookshops. Her own experience had started as the person doing bookshop distribution for the publication Women's Report. When she heard about the plans for Publications Distribution Co-operative (PDC) she became one of its first workers. PDC had a good proportion of feminist publications amongst its output, especially pamphlets, and later on some books, but fewer feminist periodicals, which tended to be distributed locally to women only.

Gail also co-authored a book *Rolling our Own, Women as Printers, Publishers and Distributors* which she hopes to reprint as it is in demand from academic libraries. She read an extract from a chapter called Sexism in the Radical Book Trade which spoke of the disappointment of some women in mixed collectives that male collective members who theoretically supported feminism, still didn't 'get it' in their collective. "The problems are the same as those encountered in other parts of the industry. Women are denied access to skills, to the decision-making processes, and to financial responsibility, feminism denied or diminished as a political force, books from the women's movement used cynically to make money. What makes it harder to bear here are that our expectations are higher, because everybody involved maintains they are doing it out of political commitment and we are thus more disappointed than usual when practice fails to live up to theory." Gail asked that in our history we recognise the sexism that existed as well as the allies that feminists had in the radical book trade. And that we include controversial issues such as the view held by feminists involved in the mixed radical bookshop First of May that other feminists who opened the short-lived Women Zone shop in Edinburgh are to blame for the former shop's demise.

Gail praised the revival of Feminist Book Fortnight, referring to the difficulties she had in organising the first International Feminist Book Fair in London (1984) and in 27 cities and towns around Britain and Ireland before computers and the internet. A major issue at that time was that the Feminist Book Fair, on behalf of the publishers, struck a deal with W H Smith for their stores to carry promotional material, even where there was a local radical bookshop organising events.

Skipping forward Gail was optimistic that there was again a focus on books by women and non-binary people although she urged caution regarding

feminism being incorporated into capitalism and forgetting its radical roots. However, in the age of self-publishing at low cost she saw opportunities to bring out radical books again.

In the follow-up discussion, Mandy from News from Nowhere agreed that she had had an ambivalent attitude to the larger feminist publishers, pleased they existed but also feeling that they marginalised the small radical shops. She has minutes of meetings of Women in the Book Trade discussing these issues and another participant spoke of the importance of getting feminist titles into mainstream shops. Another told of some of the issues involved in organising a Women in Book Trades conference in Manchester when Onlywomen Press were still sore that Women's Press had taken their original name.

Another speaker confirmed that over the last seven years the number of recently published feminist books had increased, but cautioned that while we might welcome interest in giving children examples of 'inspiring' women in history, did we want that to include the fascist Coco Chanel or the Tory Margaret Thatcher, as mainstream publishers have done?

The value of holding events in their bookshops was emphasised by several speakers, some of whom had fond memories of meeting inspiring women such as lesbian nuns or Maya Angelou, and of providing their heroines with overnight accommodation in their own homes.

Radical bookshops supported feminist authors who had no control over the marketing of their work. When feminist books were published with sexist covers we put stickers on them. We also had some creative methods of keeping books (eg *The Joy of Lesbian Sex*) away from a prurient male audience, such as controversial women-only areas in some shops. There was discussion of how feminism has changed and the impact of neo-liberalism and what younger feminists were doing now, including zines and collectives and plans to open new radical or feminist bookshops.

# Conference session 4. Distribution

The final session in the afternoon was about distribution introduced by Tony Zurbrugg (Third World Publications, Global Book Marketing) and Bill Norris (Central Books).

Tony spoke about his experiences as a book rep and about the importance of the role as an interface between publishers and booksellers. He said it had been a great privilege to have had that role and that both booksellers and publishers had taught him a lot about literature. Many of the books that he had represented had not been British: they were published from South Africa and Latin America or about those regions or on other third world issues. He told a number of anecdotes about times when life as a rep had not been a happy one. These included occasions when appointments had been cancelled after he had travelled a long distance to visit. He also talked about the good times when sales of particular titles had been substantial following on from his meeting with an important retail book buyer. He emphasized the importance of publicity for forthcoming titles and related an anecdote about one of the nicest experiences he had had when a book buyer had read a review that morning about one of the titles he was promoting. He greatly appreciated the support that he had from radical bookshops over the period. He also touched on some controversies, in particular about promoting South African publishers during the 1980s boycott of South African goods.

Bill spoke about how he had worked at Central Books since 1976 and since that time had seen enormous changes. Incidentally, December 2019 was its 80th birthday. In 1976 the bookshop was located on Gray's Inn Road (London) and was a showcase for the collected works of Marx, Engels and Lenin and titles published by Lawrence and Wishart. He described how books from the Soviet Union had arrived and how the Central Books distribution department was obliged to handle a number of Soviet publishers in return for a small subsidy. In his words, this was a subservient relationship that was "bad for the soul" and when it ended Central Books distribution developed into handling several hundred small publishers. The retail bookshop closed in 1992.

He described how, for a small publisher, having Central Books as a distributor was a phenomenal way to disseminate its product. Central Books sells large quantities of material through around 10 large companies each having worldwide distribution channels. He spoke about the present flurry of new bookshops opening, the non-traditional bookselling outlets at art galleries and museums and how the book as a printed object was doing pretty well. Many had predicted 10 to 15 years ago that the book would be in decline. But book distribution is very competitive and margins are forever being squeezed. He was hopeful but not complacent about the future.

The discussion then opened to other participants. A number had worked at the Publications Distribution Co-operative (PDC) and its subsequent split into two co-operatives, Scottish and Northern Book Distribution (S&N) and Southern Distribution (SD). PDC had started in 1976 with the idea of bringing together magazines, pamphlets and books and attempting to distribute to a range of outlets, not just bookshops and in particular radical bookshops but also wholefood shops and newsagents. It also used unorthodox carriers such as wholefood distributors. But, initially it was ill-equipped for the complexity of the task to cover the whole of Britain from London with a small number of staff and no computer equipment to enable the high level of data management required. In 1977 offices in Yorkshire and Edinburgh were opened and in 1979 the organisation split into the two sister co-operatives, one based in Edinburgh and Manchester and the other in London, both of which survived into the 1980s. The co-operatives were structured as worker co-operatives and with the benefit of hindsight some thought that it would have been better to have publishers and booksellers as well as staff involved in the ownership and management.

Discussion then moved onto distribution of related items such as badges, posters, postcards, calendars, diaries and T-shirts. York Community Bookshop had a vibrant distribution network for badges around the campaigns of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Radical bookshops were an important outlet for Anti-Nazi League badges, which were an effective tool for the anti-fascist campaigns of the time. Leeds Postcards had started its enormous range of postcards in 1979. (A book about the history of Leeds postcards was published in 2018.) The Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers (FWWCP) was also an important network, started at Centerprise Bookshop, for the production and promotion of working class literature. A number of these community publishers had titles distributed by the above distributors. Women's Revolutions Per Minute (WRPN) was an important distributor for women's music, mostly from the US and not otherwise available here.

# Conference session 3. Follow up & Future Plans

Concluding remarks focused on moving forward from the conference.

## A radical bookselling archive

Debate then moved on to building a history of the radical bookselling movement. The radical bookshops movement from 1970 to date was a significant social and cultural phenomenon at a significant period in British history and it ought to be possible for future historians to write histories of everything that the conference had been talking about and there ought, therefore, to be efforts to make it easy for them to do that.

The website that Dave Cope had created at [www.leftontheshelfbooks.co.uk](http://www.leftontheshelfbooks.co.uk) (which has a listing of radical bookshops and a bibliography of the radical book trade), was a useful resource that could be expanded, as was the current Alliance of Radical Booksellers website [www.radicalbooksellers.co.uk](http://www.radicalbooksellers.co.uk). Housmans were working on their own history with *On the Record* <https://on-the-record.org.uk>.

There was hope that academics would wish to write about the histories of shops. Lucy Delap from Cambridge University had written about feminist bookshops in *History Workshop Journal Issue 81*. Gail Chester had written a chapter for a book recently published by Cambridge University Press: *Cambridge History of the Book in Britain, Volume 7*. Her chapter (27) is *Sex, race and class: the radical alternative and minority book trade in Britain*.

Alison Read encouraged everyone to consider producing a Wikipedia entry for their shop: she was learning how best to do this and planned, with others involved, to put up a history of PDC.

A debate about building an archive followed. Archiving materials from radical bookshops, the locations for those archives and possibilities for recording oral histories from people who worked in radical bookshops over the period were discussed and it was hoped that by sharing contact details they would be taken forward.

A number of suggestions for the collection of archives were debated:

- That there should be a central archive for radical bookshops. There is a Federation of Radical Bookshops (FRB) archive at the Working Class Movement Library (WCML) in Salford, which could be that location and radical bookshop archives (members of the FRB at that time) could be placed within that archive.

- Alternatively, a shop's archive could go to the local record office or local university collection. Some people thought that future historians would find it more difficult to find things the more scattered they were, but others were of the view that historians were used to trawling amongst dispersed archives – that was part of their craft.
- The People's History Museum in Manchester was suggested as another possible archive location.
- If materials were archived locally they could be under the umbrella of a whole archive and we could share information about where archives were located
- We should speak to archives and libraries about these possibilities.
- Past workers at Grass Roots/Frontline Books to follow up with WCML.
- Contemporary bookshops need to be archiving what they do now.

There was a long discussion about oral history and the need to find particular people interested in collecting oral history stories. The organisation On the Record was mentioned and the Heritage Lottery Fund could be a source of funding.

It was agreed that conference participants would list archives in their possession (either as individuals or shops). News from Nowhere had a couple of cases of material that Dave Cope had offered to help them sort.

### **New radical bookshops**

At least three participants were keen to start new radical bookshops and there was a wide-ranging discussion about some of the practicalities of doing this in the current bookselling climate and the help that could be available for them.

Suggestions included:

- Ask another bookshop. People from News from Nowhere, Five Leaves Bookshop and Housmans Bookshop were present at the conference and were happy to give prospective radical booksellers advice.

- Open accounts with Bertram Books and Gardners Books for general wholesalers and Central Books and Turnaround for radical books and magazines for starters.
- Central Books have an attractive offer for a first order – good idea to get in touch with them and discuss your plans.
- Wholesalers and publishers give better terms than 25+ years ago with 40% discounts and maybe up to 45% being more common. Again find out from the above radical bookshops about their experience.
- Contact publishers and try to find out who their rep is for the area. Discussion was had about how important reps could be for bookshops as the interface between the publishers and the booksellers.

As the conference drew to an end delegates were invited to continue conversations over drinks and a meal nearby.

# Participants

## **Dave Cope**

Progressive Books (Liverpool) 1975-85; Central Books 1986-2004

## **John Goodman**

Wedge (Coventry) 1977-79; Publications Distribution Co-operative/Southern 1979-80

## **Rick Seccombe**

Grass Roots (Manchester) 1974-79; Scottish & Northern 1979-83; Frontline 1990-95

## **Maggie Walker**

Grass Roots 1976-82

## **Ross Bradshaw**

Mushroom (Nottingham) 1979-95; Five Leaves publishing & bookshop

## **Mandy Vere**

News from Nowhere (Liverpool) 1974-present

## **Andrew Bibby**

Oakleaf (Wolverton, nr. Milton Keynes) 1979-83

## **Geoff Brown**

Manchester IS Bookshop 1976

## **Bill Norris**

Central Books 1976-present

## **Tony Zurbrugg**

York Community Books 1976-81; Africa Book Centre 1988-2005; Third World Publications 1981-88; GBM; Merlin Press 1998+

## **Jeremy Piercy**

York CB 1976-80; Shared Earth 1986+

## **Jane Cholmeley**

Silver Moon 1984-2001

## **Fergus Nicol**

IS Book Service 1967-73; Bookmarks 1973-93

## **Maeve O'Connor**

Scottish & Northern 1984-86; Turnaround 1986-88; Lamp (Leigh) 1988-90; Frontline 1990-95

## **Janet Slade**

Grass Roots 1976-80

## **Jane Watts**

York CB 1977-85

## **Jane Anger**

Silver Moon; Sisterwrite

## **Fran Devine**

Grass Roots 1979-80

## **Gay Jones**

Grass Roots 1976-82; In Other Words 1982-2007

## **Jane McIver**

Grass Roots 1978-84

## **Nik Gorecki**

Housmans 2007-present; ARB

## **Catherine Barter**

Housmans 2012-present

## **Cristina Rios**

Housmans 2015-present

## **Chas Ball**

PDC 1975-79

## **Martin Spence**

Days of Hope (Newcastle) 1979-84

## **Jenny McCarthy**

Quaker Bookshop

## **Magda Oldziejewska**

Feminist Library

## **Judy Nitz**

York CB 1981-85

## **Alison Read**

PDC 1978-82; Compendium 1982-89; Sisterwrite

## **Dainah Pryce**

Black Feminist Bookshop project

## **Gail Chester**

PDC 1976-78; Ultra Violet Enterprises, Researcher

## **Neil Swannick**

Frontline 1990-2000

## **Julien Hage**

French academic; writer on European radical book trade. Worked in French radical bookshops.

## **Maggie Murdoch**

Grass Roots 1988-89

## **Keith Chadwick**

Birmingham Peace Centre Bookshop 1973-81

## **Alison Page**

Grass Roots 1989-90; Front Line 1990-99

## **Lisa Lorenz**

planned bookshop, Stockport



