Cultural Determinants: publishing the Australian literary estate 1990–2000

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Publishing houses play a primary role in the transmission of literary culture across the national and international spheres. One of the major sites of struggle within the Australian literary field is the opposition between the independent Australian publishing houses and the large overseas companies (which eventually transformed into the multinational conglomerates of the 1990s) that dominate the market. This has been a long-standing and, at times, bitter division. The growth of the local industry through the 1950s and 1960s made the publishing industry an attractive target for overseas business speculation. There has been an almost constant protest in the literary world against the latest 'cycle of ruthless takeovers' that was seen as threatening local cultural enterprise (Lewis 104). These business maneuverings have been chronicled by commentators such as Michael Wilding, Valerie Haye and Wallace Kirsop.

But in this paper, I am not interested in the ownership narrative as such. There are several reasons why it is problematic to tie the many shifts within the industry solely to ownership changes and overriding economic forces. In the 1990s, corporate strategies carefully positioned each local operation, transplanting and then embedding the activities of these transnational companies in the distinctively Australian cultural locality. In addition, the personnel who often drive individual creative projects, initiate lists, and engage with and motivate authors and marketers, are the unacknowledged and highly mobile taskforce of senior publishers and editors who move freely across the borders of the large and independent houses. This factor of individual agency is also a critical determinant in the cultural politics of the publishing house. It is often hidden, however, behind the showcase identity of the company brand name as it presents its publications in the marketplace. These two forms of 'carriers of culture' (Featherstone 15), the multinational and the independent, are tied together within the Australian system of production,

functioning under the same government policies and working the local market. Each is vying for legitimacy and cultural credibility in what is today regarded as a mature or static market (Poland 110).

The architecture of the house

As an active contributor to the field of cultural production each publishing house adopts a position from which it can contribute to and influence the functioning of the field and the opportunities for achieving published outcomes. It is important to recognise that different sectors of the book industry cater to quite diverse markets or groups of readers, and therefore operate according to different rules. Melbourne University Press (MUP) or the specialist poetry publisher Paperbark Press, for example, are positioned in very different sectors of the publishing field to Random House Australia and the agendas, selection and production priorities of these presses vary accordingly. Each house develops a governing ethos or commitment to a particular literary, cultural and economic agenda that will determine its list. The list, in turn, feeds into the identity and reputation of the press in an ongoing cycle of creation and appropriation of economic and symbolic value.

By adapting the management principles of the economist John Kay to business activities within the cultural field, it can be argued that each publishing house (or cultural institution for that matter) will develop a distinctive external and internal architecture (66). This architecture is based on its adopted position within the cultural field, its inhouse culture and the special knowledges that have been built through past and present activities, its personnel, authors, lists of publications, and its inhouse practices. In this way, individual presses acquire specific capabilities that enable them to instil value in each book produced. This structural identity is also expressed in a series of networks of internal and external relationships between companies, arts institutions and individual players that create long-term value. Obviously the relationship between the University of Queensland Press (UQP), Text or Fremantle Arts Centre Press (FACP) and their distributor Penguin Australia, plays a critical role in the ongoing operations of these smaller independent companies. By taking advantage of the expertise and scale of operations of the Penguin distribution 'machine', these companies buy access to a broader sector of the marketplace. Of course, this service is provided at a high cost, eroding potential profit returns.

The networks of relationships that an experienced editor cultivates are also part of the firm's distinctive architecture and an important asset. It is a form of cultural capital that can be appropriated by a publishing house, author or an individual title, and is also transferable if an editor changes house. There are many examples of authors' loyalty to their editors, such as the very different authors Ruth Park and Graeme Base following Robert Sessions from Nelson to Penguin, or Helen Garner, Drusilla Modjeska and Tim Winton following Hilary McPhee from Penguin to Pan Macmillan. This professional editorial force is part of the infrastructure of an effective publishing culture, a pool of expertise within the Australian literary field, which is often ignored.

The independents[1]

These various institutions of literary production, the local and the transnational, strategically define themselves and their position in the cultural field. The independent presses in Australia communicate their position and their commitment to their staked territory strongly and clearly. Hyland House, for example, produces quality Australian titles, has done so for 25 years and 'remains resolutely independent'. Hale & Iremonger publishes 'quality Australian books' and is a 'constantly evolving and innovative publisher'. UQP publishes general interest, and literary and academic titles, and 'deliberately fosters new writers'. Spinifex Press is an independent feminist press publishing 'innovative and controversial books'. According to its own marketing profile it is not big but 'certainly international'. Both Fremantle Arts Centre Press and Wakefield Press have a strong regional focus.

The small indigenous publishers emphasise a broad mission across the cultural, social and political spheres. Magabala Press aims 'to promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures; to encourage people to pass on their stories; to protect indigenous copyrights; to increase understanding of and respect for cultures'. IAD Press declares its national mission 'to provide a voice for Aboriginal people that celebrates the diversity of our cultures'. In spite of many articles lamenting the limited opportunities for poetry publication, presses such as Five Island, Black Pepper, and Paperbark continue to publish work from this specialised sector of the literary field.

The operative phrases and values adopted centre on quality, creativity, innovation, controversy, providing a voice. It is in this high risk, pioneering realm that the small independent presses play such a crucial role in enlarging that 'space of available positions' from which to speak, write or operate (Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production* 65). Whether individually inspired by social, political or aesthetic motivations, these publishers offer an outlet for emerging authors, build new lists and explore new directions. Diane Brown, formerly of Tantrum Press (South Australia) has stated that 'independent publishers have very deliberately pushed at the boundaries of conventional modes of commercial publishing and this is one of their strengths' (personal correspondence). According to McPhee, 'The not-for-profits are where change always begins and the mainstream often looks second rate and ultra-cautious' (23).

In this publishing environment, the risk factor is high since the longer production cycles delay the return on investment and the scale of production is significantly smaller. The orientation to future success or a broader mission means that there is an expectation of long-term cultural and social value. It is important not to underestimate the power of working in this field and the almost 'sacred value of its stakes' in some sections of the industry and also across the wider fields of power (Bourdieu, *Rules of Art* 230). This prestige or symbolic capital functions as 'a commodity second only to money itself' which 'can be a most effective weapon' (Galassi 81). It also functions as a powerful motivator for the individual agent dedicated to altruistic cultural or literary ideals.

In commenting on the plight of the small publisher, Andrew Wilkins (formerly with Hyland House) referred to the sense of self-righteousness and virtue inherent in 'being small and being Australian', a virtue that he extolled passionately at every book launch, media event and sales presentation (Wilkins 12). This sense of moral superiority is countered by the (usually) precarious financial base of these companies. Although many independents have learned to manage their lists effectively and negotiate financial benefits from this narrow base, it is still apparent that being independent and being small can be a daily functional disability. As Wilkins again observed:

> The traditional small publisher gripe is that major retailers shun them,
> literary editors and festivals ignore them, trade organisations marginalise
> them, larger publishers pilfer them and literary agents overlook them. (12)

The challenge for the independents lies in this struggle to achieve and maintain visibility in a saturated marketplace. It has always been difficult to gain access to effective and affordable distribution channels. Today it is also about 'getting and holding on to retail space' (Adler 96). Craig Munro of UQP claims that the Australian-owned sector of the book industry 'accounts for as little as 12% of available retail shelf space' (Munro 2).

This problem of scale and visibility does not apply, however, to Allen & Unwin, the largest of the independent publishers. In terms of the Australian book industry, this firm is an exception, existing in its present incarnation as the result of a management buyout of the Australian operation in 1990. Allen & Unwin publishes about 250 books per year, is a major importer and distributor and has an annual turnover of approximately $33 million (Dun & Bradstreet). Allen & Unwin has the considerable advantage of having been established as an international company, so that their facilities, networks, structure, and management approach have been developed on this larger scale.

It is interesting to look at the formation of Text Publishing within the Text Media Group as an example of the distinctive architecture that a publishing house will deliberately embrace and cultivate. Following the absorption of McPhee Gribble into the Penguin enterprise in late 1989, Diana Gribble set about building Text, initially as a joint venture partnership with Reed. This press 'doubled in size every six months' through the early 1990s, the worst years of the recession (Giese 4). The first Text publication was a football glossy, *At Last*, released one week after Collingwood won the Grand Final and with a distribution deal arranged with the *Sunday Age*. Gribble commented that, 'I kept thinking, 'This is not a book, this is a magazine. What am I doing this for?' (15). But the book was a financial success, immediately enabling more publications. However, there soon developed a clash in the cultural and economic ethos in this working alliance with Reed, in both the type of books being published and the large investments demanded by bigger books and bigger print runs. This dissimilarity in publishing practice led Text and Reed to 'disentangle' their relationship in 1993 (28).

Gribble set about recreating the Text publishing environment, asking Michael Heyward (formerly co-editor of *Scripsi*) to join the company. The intention was to build a list that, 'I was proud and pleased to publish and could identify with; that represented much less risk [and] a much greater possibility of eventually being very profitable', and that positioned the book division at the 'aspirational' and 'intellectual heart' of the company (29). The literary reputations and skills of both Gribble and Heyward attracted authors to submit manuscripts, while ideas for books were also 'suggested' to suitable authors. The professional editorial culture that pervaded the operations of the McPhee Gribble press appears to have travelled with Gribble to Text, with a growing reputation for quality publications and editorial excellence.

But my house is bigger

But this commitment to 'quality publications' does not only exist within the independent, locally owned publishing companies. Within the large multinationals, in recent years, individual contributions by publishers and editors committed to nurturing and developing Australian writers and Australian book culture have become an accepted part of the literary environment. The enlargement of the Australian book market through the 1980s led to an unprecedented level of investment in local authors.

In 1988 Louise Adler was appointed at Heinemann (which became Reed) 'to aggressively develop their Australian list' (45). Traditionally this was a relatively slow process of building networks and actively scouting for new manuscripts, reading unsolicited manuscripts, or repackaging material from the backlist. In the 1990s, the fast-track formula for acquiring a prestigious list was 'by the effective method of outbidding most other publishers most of the time' (Lurie 16). This method of chequebook list-building escalated in the 1990s, with Jane Palfreyman from Random House roaming with a seemingly unlimited budget. The size of advances to authors, the promises of active promotion, the obvious importance placed on presentation and packaging of the 'book as product' have presented attractive alternatives to many Australian authors. For these writers the immediate financial benefits of a large advance is reinforced by the equally important commitment by the publisher to a coordinated marketing effort to maximise sales.

In a speech to the Australian Booksellers Association, Richard Flanagan praised the 'courage and flair' with which Pan Macmillan published and marketed his novel, *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, which sold over 100,000 copies in an 18-month period. He acknowledged

> the remarkable force [Pan Macmillan] have become in Australian publishing. Their success in crossing over writers – of who [sic] I am only one of many – from the literary ghetto into the mainstream mass market has been an extraordinary commercial and cultural achievement'. (Flanagan 1)

Random House Australia has consistently demonstrated its enthusiasm for its literary fiction and quality non-fiction lists with considerable financial investment in promotion of its authors (for example, the high visibility of literary authors Roger McDonald, David Foster and Sue Woolfe). A Random House catalogue is a major book production in itself, enticing and beautifully designed. These companies are systematically creating a legitimate space to operate, fostering an atmosphere of cultural credibility and prestige, and an acceptance of the 'necessary' corporate structures, ideologies and policies. The benefits accrued are both symbolic and economic.

In an article on the worldwide book industry, Gordon Graham states that there is, among the multinationals, a recognition that 'book publishing appears to prosper best with maximum decentralisation, using editors who know how to build lists and win authors' (Grahame 247). Robert Pullan notes that the Bertelsmann philosophy is that 'editorial autonomy protects morale and therefore the bottom line' (Pullan 20). Australian publishers and editors appointed to positions of influence in these companies have gradually been allowed more autonomy, but still function from an ambiguous position combining a commitment to management with a cultural and creative disposition immersed within the Australian literary world. This duality can create complex ideological and ethical tensions, although there are often heated denials of any conflicts of interest. Curtain claimed this is because, '[t]he people making the publishing decisions ... see themselves as Australian publishers and it is for this role they are employed' (45).

The networking capabilities of editors or publishers across the cultural, social and political divide have also been officially recognised by management with appointments of Senior Publishers from outside the ranks of the book industry: for example, Susan Ryan to Penguin Australia, and Jennifer Byrne from *Sixty Minutes* to Reed. With a full colour glossy cover in the *Australian Magazine*, the media previewed Byrne's 'reinvention' as book publisher (cover). This 'industry profile by personality' article made full use of romantic *Women's Weekly* rhetoric with a rather breathless description of her clothes and her dyed blond hair, wide grin and 'large luminous eyes' (Jinman 14). The summative comment is made that, '[d]espite the relatively low profile of her new job, she still has the afterglow of celebrity' (14).

This article also introduces 'The Black Pack' (with photos), the new wave of female senior publishers described as 'literature's new tastemakers. ... The hope is that the new breed will spot the hot new writers, revitalise lists and attract another generation of readers' (14). What is interesting here is the pragmatic, worldwise approach adopted by this group, and the apparent lack of ambiguity in statements of their publishing philosophy. Julie Gibbs of Penguin, for example, 'won't take a book on unless she is convinced it can be marketed effectively' (14). Pan Macmillan's Nikki Christer 'has few illusions about commercial realities. Poetry, for example, is off the menu. 'If it's not going to sell, I'm not going to publish it' (15). It would seem that the journalist's summation that '[t]hese new industry representatives are determined to re-cast publishing in a harder-edged nineties mould' is validated by their statements (14). And yet Christer is the same editor that Richard Flanagan

praises for remapping the boundaries of the literary fiction market, 'a most remarkable publisher' (1). Palfreyman has great confidence in the ongoing success of her literary fiction list declaring at the time of the Random House takeover that, 'it's one area where Bertelsmann won't have to take a risk' (Pullan 17). So there *are* qualifications, contradictions and anomalies here.

The great divide

In spite of these selected examples, however, there is an ongoing concern for maintaining the quality and diversity of the Australian literary estate in face of the twin evils of market driven publishing and an oversupply of imported titles in the marketplace. The high profile given to a small group of senior editors and publishers does not allay concerns about editorial standards, and the need for ongoing training and support for this often hidden professional taskforce. Apprehension and alarm for Australian quality fiction and non-fiction lists surround every corporate takeover or merger as publishers reposition their lists and remake their public image. Although nearly every takeover begins with an avowal that there will be no major changes, restructuring is inevitable.

The original announcements of the Random House and Transworld merger, as a result of the Bertelsmann purchase of Random House, included the pacifying statements that the companies would continue to operate independently. Jane Palfreyman stated that lists were 'both separate and complementary' (Pullan 19), and authors would be advantaged by the increase in in-house editorial staff. The inevitable restructure revealed a revamped, combined operation, changes of managerial staff, rationalisation of lists, combined premises, and loss of editors and sales and marketing personnel. Michael Wilding is convinced that each takeover results in fewer opportunities and fewer jobs as the combined tally of publications of two major publishers are rationalised, lists are downsized and imprints are lost: 'Whatever way you look at it, something is lost. That something tends to be literature, quality, dissent' (63).

The other losers in this game of Pacman are the authors who are packaged and passed on to the new owners. Unless an author negotiates a specific clause requiring their written consent regarding any change, the publisher can legally assign contracted books and authors to the new owner without consultation. There are some extraordinary tales of authors' efforts to find out what was happening, if their book was to be published, when and by whom. Whether the author is Tom Keneally writing *The Great Shame*, Tom Gilling writing *Sooterkin*, or a young author writing a first or second novel, the tales of confusion, lack of communication and disruption are similar (Lurie 19). Obviously an experienced writer can deal more effectively and more opportunistically with the dilemma; for example, Bryce Courtenay would seem to have benefited substantially from every shift. As Lurie observed, '[s]ome authors managed to roll with the punches, ending up wiser and not necessarily sadder' (20).

Writers whose books have already been released are also in a dilemma, as the new owners are not necessarily interested in books they have not published. One author

travelling from Heinemann to Reed to Random and then Bertelsmann described the frustration of negotiating a subsidiary rights deal from his book, claiming that 'requests for a [film] option might as well be sent out to sea in a bottle' (Lurie 22). What is never measurable in these situations is the number of books and ideas for books that are lost in the upheaval, the opportunities missed, the authors discouraged, the contracts invalidated.

Conclusion

This interplay of ownership and management, the strengths and weaknesses of individual publishing houses, the networks of relationships between institutions and individual agents, and these interactions across the cultural field are complex. These critical determinants continue to influence the policies, practices and published outcomes of publishing houses as corporate takeovers and overriding economic forces continue to destabilise the operations of the Australian publishing and literary fields. In this paper, I have outlined one perspective on the structure of the publishing field and the processes involved in clearing a space for Australian voices, in all their multitudinous and contradictory positions, for all the various target audiences. Even though Wilding lists in detail the almost overwhelming obstacles involved in creatively publishing into the controlled and manipulated book marketplace, he remains convinced that, '[a]s established commercial channels become more restrictive, alternative models develop' (68). The commitment to a cultural and literary 'mission' beyond the purely economic boundaries of the business world will continue to motivate and inspire individual players to build new companies, initiate lists, innovatively challenge established positions and maximise opportunities to speak. As UQP's Laurie Muller observed, '[w]riting and publishing in Australia will remain a perilous business yet the need for Australian books and writers will remain culturally critical as our world continues to change. That's a good enough reason in itself to be involved' (3).

Notes

[1]   All quotations in this section are from various promotional brochures.

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