

September 2007

BOOKZ WHILE U WAIT

BY Iain Fraser Grigor

THOSE TEMPLES of the book – our greater libraries – were once havens of solemn and sepulchral calm. Green baize, guard-book and leathered spine loomed in pools of shaded light. At the reference desk, earnest readers bent in murmurous discourse with pretty young assistants (especially, the pretty ones).

At dusk, as the stained orange of the silent city stretched forth from the citadel of knowledge, there might even be – indeed, often was – an overwhelmingly elusive sense of immanent but fugitive romance.

Not now, of course, as our libraries thrash in a frenzied sea of laptop hunt-and-peck and accidental – but agreeably full-volume – mobile tones: the Ode to Joy, perhaps, though Scotland the Brave, double-time on the bagpipes, deserves to be popular.

Ambrose of Milan is to blame. People travelled for days to gape in wonder at his preposterous innovation of reading in silence. Till then, everybody read out loud, which must have made the libraries of antiquity a right old bag of laughs. (Perhaps the custom is now ripe for re-introduction, after in-depth testing, naturally, in the theses reading rooms of university libraries).

But the book – in manuscript, hot-metal or computer typeset – survived it all. And it still does survive, as the principal repository of our society's knowledge and sense of self. In Scotland, books – and their publishers – have played, and continue to play, a critical role in that process of sense of national self.

But the industry, always a fragile one for a relatively small market, may now be on the very brink of obliteration at the hands of digital technology and the Internet. These technologies have, after all, transformed the world of libraries in the last decade or so, and continue to do so at frightening speed and in ways that not many years ago would have seemed quite fabulous.

Not for nothing then, were these challenges discussed at last week's Publishing Scotland conference at the Scottish Storytelling Centre in Edinburgh.

For the meantime, of course, Scottish publishers are healthy if not necessarily wealthy. The Scottish Publishers' Association has fifty-odd members, and some of them make a major contribution to Scotland's ongoing debate with herself, her past – and her future.

Canongate has a prestigious history in the publication of fiction, while Mainstream has a long record of important titles from Scottish politics and history.

Birlinn, comprising Polygon and John Donald, is among the best. Polygon made a reputation for itself with the Determinations series in the 'eighties, and John Donald was the first Scottish house to seriously tackle the publication of doctoral theses – among them, James Hunter's magisterial study of the making of the crofting community.

Among forthcoming titles from Polygon is Kenneth Buthlay's edition of Hugh MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, and – from John Donald – Peter Jones' book on surgery in 19th century Scotland.

Dunedin stays at the academic end of the market, with the likes of Mary Verschuur's *Reformation in Perth*, A. C. Cheyne's work on the 1843 Disruption, and Donald Meek's study of the quest for Celtic Christianity.

Edinburgh University Press has Eric Richards on the Highland Clearances, Jeffrey Stephen on Presbyterians and the Act of Union, and Christopher Whatley recent study of that same Union of 1707.

You won't find these titles at the supermarket checkout desk, even in Byres Road or Nicolson Street – but that's not the point. They do sell to libraries worldwide, and sustain and nourish the academic study of Scotland on a global scale.

Titles such as these are also a critical contribution to Scotland's own intellectual, educational and cultural life. After all, if the news media holds a mirror to the surface rush of daily life, publishers such as these – and their authors – reflect concerns for deeper and slower currents in national affairs.

But for how much longer – in the exploding world of the Internet – will authors need their services? And for how much longer will there be a demand for their products?

Hence last week's conference on the digital market and print-on-demand technologies, on e-books, podcasts, and the “repackaging and repurposing of content”, as that concept is unblushingly described. There was even a case study on how to produce a podcast, in the context of last spring's One Book-One City campaign in Edinburgh, when 25,000 copies of *Kidnapped* were given away, including a “specially purposed” version for what was described as “reluctant readers”.

(Intellectual property lawyers might care to notice at this point how old-fashioned words on a printed page have effortlessly and ominously morphed to “repurposable content”: assuming, that is, that they have quite finished-off their “reluctant reader” version of *Kidnapped* – which they will, of course, have read out loud).

For the young people I sometimes meet in Ardnamurchan High School (remote? not any more!) most of these technologies are as familiar, as commonplace, as the sun rising on Morvern in the morning.

But paper-book publishers still have a long way to go in coming to terms with the revolution now engulfing them. In the age of the blog and the website and dedicated online publishers, writers have less and less need of them. There is no shortage of “content” either: for a start, there are thousands of dusty doctoral theses in the Scottish universities, which could be scanned very cheaply, and posted online.

There will be no shortage of writers either. They write because they want to, and not for money (which is just as well). For them, the electronic revolution in publishing is an unprecedented liberation, and one whose cross-genre possibilities they have barely begun to explore.

Electronic publishing is hugely cheaper. There is no storage, transport, booksellers’ margin, printing or binding to pay for – and just consider the text-casting possibilities of this month’s new wi-fi and wide-screen iPod.

Meanwhile, the next generation of on-site printers will be extremely high-speed, offering a while-u-wait service in mini-bar and burger-bar, in coffee shop and station concourse.

In short, the 500-year model established in the majestic wakes of Gutenberg and Caxton is gone for ever (or at least for ever, not counting some catastrophic electromagnetic Armageddon).

This doesn’t mean, of course, that the repurposed content has to be read online in silence. Not at all. Reading aloud could be brought back by reserved will of Parliament. This should appeal, after all, to our security services. An overnight amendment to the Terrorism Act would do the trick.

Spectator galleries (with 24/7 mini-bar, burger stall and online poker) could be built in our theses reading-rooms just as quickly. Crowds of “reluctant readers”, copyright lawyers and secret policemen might throng to listen in awe to the scholarly cacophony of repurposed content.

I have, indeed, a very strong feeling that they would.

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