

PUBLISHING IN SCOTLAND

Submission from the Scottish Publishers Association

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‘This collections of books and manuscripts (...) may be considered as the Nation’s memory.’

(The late Donald Dewar, MSP, at a celebration of the refurbishment of the National Library of Scotland)

CONTEXT

The position of Scottish writers has never been more favourable. It can be argued with some justification that the most prominent ambassadors for the country at present are its writers: from Ian Rankin, to Irvine Welsh, to J K Rowling and Alexander McCall Smith. All began their careers in some way in the world of Scottish publishers and literature support. This submission will present the case for the ‘springboard’ that has given so many writers their start, the publishing industry of books and magazines in Scotland, and will argue that the transmission of ideas and voices with a distinctive Scottish flavour has to begin in some way at home.

THE SPA

The Scottish Publishers Association (SPA) is the representative organisation for publishers in Scotland. Its aims are to provide advice and training facilities in order to foster high standards in publishing, and to assist publishers in Scotland to market their books as widely as possible. Member publishers must adopt a Code of Practice in dealings with authors. The SPA is especially committed to advising small and developing publishers, to assisting those working in geographically remote areas, and to ensuring that creative writing, literary work, educational material and culturally significant studies are developed as fully as possible. Scotland’s publishing industry is relatively small but it has a disproportionately high level of cultural influence; its output records much of the historical, social and political life of Scotland. The SPA believes that books provide a window on Scotland to the world.

CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND EDUCATION

Writing and reading are activities that are valued, respected and enjoyed by a significant part of Scottish society. Yet those who are passionate about books and reading often overlook the publishing process (often mistaking it for simply manufacturing or printing the books), which joins writer to reader: publishing is the conduit, the delivery mechanism or interface between them. An obvious fact is that if books are not published, literature cannot flourish. The process of bringing work to print is highly skilled, creative, and makes a vital contribution to the integrity and quality of what the writer offers the reader.

‘There is... a sense that what (the publishers) do helps sustain a sense of community and core values and promotes cultural vibrancy. In contrast, therefore, if a solely commercial imperative drove the publishers then such Scottish content might be lost, and with it, diversity, pluralism, heritage and creativity.’

(‘Review of Publishing’, 2004, PricewaterhouseCoopers/Napier University)

The output from Scotland's 80-plus publishers covers the whole spectrum of books: fiction and poetry, biography, academic, educational, children's, photography, maps, business and self-help, art, music, history, reference, medical. Most of the significant publishers in Scotland are independent organisations: they believe strongly that what they publish matters and that they have a cultural mission to publish material that would otherwise be lost, neglected and ignored.

Publishing is a vital support for Scotland's indigenous languages, Gaelic and Scots. It is important that Gaelic publishing is sustained, as it is the carrier of Gaelic written tradition, without which the language may ultimately die. The responsibility for this lies within Scotland and depends on the knowledge and skills of its publishing sector. Scots language survival requires the publication of major language dictionaries, and books written in the language, particularly for children.

AIMS: Future development of a strong indigenous educational publishing strand is important to retain cultural knowledge and a social identity. Partnerships between education bodies and publishing should be explored and facilitated. Scottish literature should be a mandatory topic in Scottish schools.

WHERE DOES PUBLISHING FIT INTO A CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE?

If book publishing is part of the process of recording the nation's intellectual life (it is squarely in the business of producing the kinds of sustained, dense thought that newspapers cannot carry), then Scottish publishing is crucial. Should it be thrown to market forces or external businesses? Six large conglomerates, managed from SE England, owned in London, New York and Germany, dominate the book trade. Over 80% of UK book sales come from these six publishing groups. Of these, only two are now UK-owned. Chains managed from the South East of England now dominate Scottish bookselling. Unparalleled expansion in Scotland by these chains has brought a homogeneous, sophisticated veneer to the bookselling market, but it has also been damaging to the cultural identity of the books on offer as local identities are quashed beneath central buying systems instituted by the chains. As has been said recently, there are lots of books on offer but they're increasingly the same books.

Many authors, who have made a promising start thanks to the efforts of their small publishers, depart for the large and richer London houses once they are established. However, large companies are risk-averse and rarely take first books. It is gratifying that Scottish writers are enjoying unprecedented popularity, but what if Scottish publishers could no longer afford to take risks with new writing, to be the nurseries for new talent, or if London taste and fashion moved on to something else, the next big thing? The danger is that the publishing infrastructure may no longer be there: should the current London fascination with Scottish writing not last, new writers may discover that there has been a diminution of outlets for their work. Scotland cannot rely on having its writers published elsewhere, nor should Scotland's cultural ideas be filtered wholly through an external lens.

AIMS: to develop an infrastructure which allows Scottish writing, culture and ideas to be recorded through a knowledgeable, skilled and professional workforce, with strong commitment to its location.

PUBLISHING: THE CARRIER FOR EDUCATION, IMAGINATION AND IDEAS

‘Publishing as a process is a set of skills and core competences consisting of the acquisition, selection, editing, project management, marketing and sale of content. Although, traditionally, publishing has been linked with the production of printed material, it is too limiting to think of it solely in those terms. The death of print has been greatly exaggerated; the medium in which content reaches its end user can take a number of different forms including digital media such as CD-Rom or DVD.

‘Publishing is a cultural and educational industry. Literature represents only one, albeit the most glamorous, sector of publishing. If culture is given a more inclusive definition, perhaps along the lines of UNESCO’s “all distinctive spiritual and material, intellectual and emotional features which characterise a society or group”, then publishing as a cultural industry can be seen to encompass a wider range, including educational, than just creative writing. Its outputs are part of the cultural life and education system of the nation....’

‘...Publishing as a ‘cultural industry’ enjoys a particular public esteem... A recognition of the cultural worth of publishing in carrying Scottish values, representations of its communities, past and present, to audiences here and in the other nations of the world must be accompanied by an acknowledgement of its economic and employment impact that includes its role as a source and a training ground for other ‘high profile’ media such as film and broadcasting.’

‘Review of Publishing’, PriceWaterhouseCoopers/Napier University,

The processes of publishing add value and shape to writers’ work. In Scotland some 70% of work published in books is commissioned (ie., the ideas originate) from the publisher, and the initial concept of a book, as well as the nurturing and editing process which helps the writing, makes a profound difference to what reaches the reader.

Although Scotland’s publishers publish mainly in the English language, this is not necessarily as advantageous as it first seems. In countries whose national boundaries define their language, publishing requires little infrastructure support as the indigenous industry delivers foreign literature, bestsellers, and educational resources as well as work from its own writers without competition from other countries. In English-language territories, which border a larger neighbour, especially in Scotland, Ireland, Wales and even Canada, there is a danger that the more powerful US and UK-wide companies may squeeze indigenous publishing out of existence. Such companies may have the (often temporary) view that Scotland is a reasonable ‘local’ market to publish for, but it is not a priority for a global corporate publishing entity.

There is strength in numbers: Scottish publishers make a collaborative voice heard when individually it might not be possible. Publishers join forces through the SPA to sell books into all markets, including export markets. Distribution worldwide for almost fifty publishers and around 4000 titles is provided by the SPA’s offshoot, Book Source, in Glasgow. Direct sales through websites are a growing success and a major recommendation from the *Review of Publishing*, to develop an e-commerce website for Scottish books, is under development.

‘The use of web technology, both internet and intranet, by distributors is still in its infancy but may have potential in offering portals for Scottish books and other cultural

products ... The Welsh Books Council, for example, run a site, Gwales.com, which offers information on over 17,500 Welsh titles. The impact of one well-designed site with e-commerce facilities can be seen to be greater than a fragmented set of websites from each publisher though of course it doesn't preclude the publisher having their own site.'

(Review of Publishing, 2004)

AIMS: To consider the best means of ensuring that publishing skills are available in Scotland, that money for investment in the sector can be accessed and that work is done to raise the profile of publications from Scotland, especially in libraries and schools.

THE FUTURE

What of the future? Is there to be a Doomsday scenario, in which books are no longer read? Will publishing become a partnership between new technologies and new media, exploiting 'content' in every form? All grand predictions need to be viewed carefully. There is already pressure on time spent reading, especially for children who, it is estimated, spend around 5 hours a day on screen-based activity. The Harry Potter phenomenon, however, shows that it only takes a really good story to beat off the competition. Web 'content' providers will need conventional publishers' skills to provide what is in demand. Academic and reference publishing will offer more work online, though there is an expectation at present that information on the Web should be free, with the consequent threat to Copyright law. This may change in future.

However, the prediction that the Web will kill off the printed word is not realistic. Commentators have concentrated on the changes brought about by publishing directly on the Web, but technological advances in the publishing industry are happening all the time as print methods alter, television transforms leisure habits, and the cinema devours stories. Even more profound are the advances that offer a wider range of production methods, costs and delivery. Short-run print technology has allowed minority-interest work to be produced economically (so benefiting high-level academic research), and digital technology is increasingly able to offer a range of print-on-demand facilities that will revolutionise the publishing supply chain. Scottish publishing needs to keep abreast of these changes, to maintain its place in this new technology. Its size and independence may allow it to lead and innovate as has already happened with Canongate's use of short films on its website to build a keen young readership community.

The media, critics, libraries and readers all help keep Scotland's published output alive, through their belief in the value and importance of what is produced and created in the home market. The sector must engage with the media in all its forms to ensure that it retains the attention and commitment of a public increasingly bombarded with sophisticated consumer marketing.

AIMS: To harness new technologies to reach out as widely as possible, to promote Scottish culture, languages and writing wherever there is interest and appetite for it and to work with media and with marketing professionals to create and nourish that interest and appetite in the future.

SUMMARY

Publishing support helps the framework for literature just as support for theatres, galleries and concert halls provide the interface between creative artist and audience.

Literary publishing is high-risk and needs capital expenditure: now that reading as an activity is in competition with new leisure pursuits, there is a need to support the infrastructure of the sector as a whole.

There is a need to ensure that new technology is developed within the sector to allow access and delivery to keep pace with social and commercial change and expectation

Books are a uniquely democratic art-form, portable, affordable and available wherever the reader wishes them to be.

That there is a strong appetite for books from Scotland is very clear; it is important that the identity of Scotland is maintained and carried abroad with the work of the country's creative writers.

Edinburgh, September 2004