

Fyfe, A. (2005). Societies as publishers: The religious tract society in the mid-nineteenth century. *Publishing History*, 58, 5-41 [Author's Accepted Manuscript]

SOCIETIES AS PUBLISHERS: THE RELIGIOUS TRACT SOCIETY IN THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY

by AILEEN FYFE

INTRODUCTION

Publishing houses in the early- to mid-nineteenth century were usually owned and run by individuals. It is therefore hardly surprising that the histories of these houses are intricately linked to the biographies of their owners, and that their business interests are assumed to follow those of the proprietors.¹ Yet, despite the indisputable prevalence of owner-managed firms, there were alternative forms of management. Though the limited-liability company would not become widespread until the 1880s and 1890s, publishing societies were common throughout the century.² Such societies were usually devoted to philanthropic aims: promoting working-class education, supporting the temperance cause, or, most frequently, improving the religious condition of the nation. They were typically run by an elected committee reporting to an annual meeting of all members, and some committees were assisted by paid employees. The management structure of such organizations was quite different to that of the owner-managed publishing firms; it bears instead a resemblance to the boards of directors reporting to shareholders that would become a feature of the limited companies. In a publishing house run by committee, decisions had to be reached by consensus, and hence there was discussion – and, if one is lucky, a record of it kept – in ways that are rarer in traditional houses.³ Those decisions had to reflect what its members were presumed to want, and could not simply reflect the proclivities or prejudices of one person.

In the 1820s Thomas Babington Macaulay had declared that he was living in ‘the age of societies’, a sentiment shared by Sir James Stephen. Ford Brown has dedicated an entire chapter to ‘Ten thousand compassions and charities’ and identified

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no fewer than twenty-six societies founded by evangelicals, between 1790 and 1840, which had some involvement in publishing, not counting those founded solely by dissenting evangelicals nor those organised with secular aims.⁴ These societies varied tremendously in size, scope and success. Some were small enough to be run entirely by volunteers, and were often short-lived, such as the Scottish Association for the Opposition of Prevalent Errors (c.1846).⁵ Medium-sized operations, such as the Wesleyan Bookroom or the Trinitarian Bible Society, could hope for greater longevity, but these usually had spheres of influence restricted by their limited resources. Then there were the large-scale organizations, which were important charities and significant players in the publishing trade. These included the British and Foreign Bible Society (founded 1804), the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (1698) and the Religious Tract Society (1799).⁶ They had substantial turnovers, as shown in Fig. 1, and were responsible for producing enormous numbers of religious books, tracts and bibles. The Religious Tract Society, for instance, was one of the five most important publishers of series in the late-nineteenth century, along with Macmillan, Longman and Routledge.⁷

The focus of nineteenth-century publishing histories on owner-managed firms has given the impression that the publishing societies were atypical, possessing unusual structures and following different strategies. At least some nineteenth-century publishers shared this view. William Chambers, himself a successful publisher whose publications were often in competition with those of the societies, argued that 'a society cannot, as a rule, compete with private enterprise'.⁸ An anonymous critic of religious publishing societies claimed further that societies not only could not but should not compete with private firms, for 'when a charitable society enters into competition with individual interests ... commercial injustice is almost sure to result'.⁹ According to this view, publishing societies were inferior imitations of commercial publishing houses, and could be disruptive to the financial workings of those establishments.

This essay will reassess the role of publishing societies in the nineteenth-century book trade, and will demonstrate that being a society did not necessarily result in either commercial mediocrity or injustice. The Religious Tract Society was one of

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the largest and most financially successful of the publishing societies, and, although it faced accusations of meddling in the book trade, its officers regarded it as being utterly grounded within that trade. The first section introduces the Society and its key critics. Criticisms arose partly because people did not realize that the Society had transformed itself by mid-century from its small tract-selling origins into a large, complex and experienced publisher of a wide range of materials. The second section demonstrates how firmly grounded the Society was in all aspects of the book trade, both in production and distribution, and shows how it answered its critics. Finally, I will examine the Society's committee structure and consider how it could be so successful despite such an apparent handicap. It can be argued that the Religious Tract Society was not a typical publishing society – it was richer, had more employees, and produced more publications than most. But that very success demonstrates that a society *could* function both effectively and on equal terms in the book trade, if it had the right committee members, officers and administrative structures.

I. THE RELIGIOUS TRACT SOCIETY AND ITS CRITICS

The Religious Tract Society (RTS) was founded in May 1799.¹⁰ Its founders were evangelicals belonging to the London Missionary Society, who saw the need for missionary work at home as well as overseas. They were delighted with the apparent progress of Sunday schools in improving literacy levels among the working classes, yet at the same time they worried that there was a severe shortage of suitable cheap reading material for these new readers. The new Society was to collect subscriptions to be used for producing and distributing religious tracts among the workers and their families. Free distribution was thought to be the best way of getting suitably religious reading matter into households with little money to spare and even less inclination to spend it on the apparent luxury of print.¹¹

For its first two decades the Society remained relatively small in scale. Its committee operated out of one half of a rented shop in Paternoster Row, and it employed only one person to perform all the functions of subscription collector, warehouse keeper and bookseller. The Society made contracts with printers for the

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production of the tracts, which were then either sold to middle-class benefactors (at little more than cost price) or donated to other tract-distributing societies (the costs being covered by subscriptions and donations). By the late 1810s the Society had begun to produce broadsheets and handbills in addition to its tracts, but its mode of operation remained the same.

At this point in its history, the Society occupied a very particular niche in the book trade. It was not the only publisher in the tract-producing business, but it was the largest of the societies involved.¹² Few of the respected literary publishers were as yet interested in the working-class readership, and thus the activities of the RTS were of little threat to them. Indeed, most of the criticism at this time came not from the book trade but from those evangelicals who thought that the Society should do more. Where the RTS did compete with the book trade was with the chapbook and ballad publishers, whose publications it described as corrupting, 'immoral and disgusting in their contents' and utterly lacking in religious sentiments.¹³ The Society's Hawkers' Series of 1805, and its successors, were intended to mimic chapbooks closely enough to be able to supplant them. Although the RTS would later claim some success, it seems likely that there proved to be enough room in the market for both the tract and chapbook publishers.

In the 1820s the Society began to expand. Its children's line was developed into an important range of tracts and books, and a periodical, *The Child's Companion*, was launched in 1824. From 1825 it also began to publish bound books, beginning with church histories, treatises on Scripture and the writings of eminent divines.¹⁴ At the same time the Society took on more paid staff, employing not only a cashier but also a corresponding secretary and an editor, and expanded its premises. These changes brought the RTS into closer rivalry with other members of the book trade, and in response the Society issued a statement explaining that it 'does not at all desire to hurt, or even to interfere with, the booksellers'.¹⁵ The extent of potential competition remained limited by the Society's focus on theological and other religious books.

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In the 1840s, however, the Society voluntarily and purposefully entered into competition with a larger section of the book trade. Just as when it was founded in 1799, the Society was still concerned about the provision of suitable reading material for the poorer classes. It was opposed to cheap publications which had a corrupting content, such as atheism or pornography, and to those which failed to mention Christianity at all. The latter publications might seem inoffensive, but they were really 'an enemy cruising under a neutral flag'.¹⁶ The RTS noticed that publishers were now paying more attention to the working-class market, but it felt that most failed to recognize the spiritual needs of that audience. W. & R. Chambers and Charles Knight were issuing cheap books and pamphlets that aimed to instruct the same readers that the RTS sought to help, but they offered a vision of self-improvement that was secular rather than spiritual.¹⁷ By the end of the 1840s, the Society also had to come to terms with the rise of cheap magazines which did not even aim at improvement.

Distributing religious tracts was no longer enough to protect the spiritual health of the nation because readers, faced with so many choices, were becoming discriminating enough to ignore such unpalatable material. The Society decided to begin a much larger – and hopefully more attractive – publishing programme, which it described, in Thomas Arnold's words, as being on 'common subjects, written in a decidedly religious tone'.¹⁸ In other words, the Society would no longer limit itself to theology, but would publish history, biography, geography, the natural sciences, and almost everything that its competitors were publishing.¹⁹ Its works would include religious sentiments where appropriate, would never be anti-Christian, and the Society's cardinal rule, that every publication should contain an explicit statement that the way to salvation was through faith in the atonement, continued to apply. From December 1845, when the publication of the first volume of the Monthly Series marked the beginning of its new secular publishing programme, the RTS was explicitly in competition with the book trade for the working-class and lower-middle-class market.²⁰

William Chambers' claim now became an issue: was it possible for the Society, as a society, to compete effectively in the literary market-place, and thus to supplant the secular and atheistic products? One answer to the question is to point to

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the continued and substantial growth in the Society's sales income from the 1840s to the 1880s (as shown in Fig. 2), only part of which can be attributed to the growth in the book trade as a whole.²¹ Another way to consider the question is to ask why contemporaries thought that a publishing society might not succeed in competing effectively. Chambers made his comment as an explanation of the failure of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (SDUK, 1826-46), which had been one of his own firm's early competitors. That society had had enormous initial success, but had been unable to sustain it. Sales of its *Penny Magazine* and of its later treatises dropped off, and it became increasingly embroiled in ever-expanding grandiose projects which rarely or never made it to completion. The SDUK eventually closed in 1846 without officially losing money but, as Scott Bennett has shown, this was due to the largesse of its committee members and the willingness of publisher Charles Knight to absorb around £20,000 of losses during his involvement with the organization.²² Chambers commented that the SDUK had problems in targeting its publications at a suitable level for their intended readership, so that they were not as attractive as Chambers' own offerings. If that were not reason enough, he added, then the explanation had to lie in its being a society, and thus structurally disadvantaged in an enterprising world.²³

Another critic of religious publishing societies had been more forthcoming about the perceived problems of societies as publishers. In 1847 a pamphlet appeared, entitled *The Power of the Press: Is it rightly employed?* The anonymous author seems to have been an evangelical Congregationalist from the Paddington area of London.²⁴ He criticized religious organizations for failing to do more to combat the efforts of the secular and irreligious publishers, and he proposed a complete reform of the RTS. His suggestion would entail the Society ceasing all of its publishing operations and concentrating on distributing the publications of others. He clearly felt that distribution was something that a society could do well, whereas the production and publication of works was not.

This pamphleteer believed that societies, by their very nature, could not compete effectively as publishers, for he agreed with Chambers that: 'Individual enterprise must always lead the market in the matter of mere production.'²⁵ The main

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problem was that societies, being run by committees, lacked 'the stimulus of personal interest and identity in production'. This resulted in money being lost in 'bad speculations, or indifferently worked good ones', because a society, unlike an individual, would not learn from experience. He also suggested that part of the problem was that, because a charitable society did not actively look for profit, it was therefore satisfied with the certainty of mediocre results rather than the possibility of excellent ones. In addition, he did not think committees could be innovative, claiming that 'the works of a society will seldom bear the stamp of originality', thus increasing the tendency to mediocrity.²⁶ Moreover, the pamphlet writer claimed that 'when a charitable society enters into competition with individual interests (as it does by commencing production) commercial injustice is almost sure to result'.²⁷ Christian organizations were morally obliged to avoid unjust behaviour and so, he argued, they ought not to become publishers.²⁸

The RTS occasionally received specific accusations of injustice during the 1840s. Two disgruntled booksellers wrote to the secretary to complain that its publications constituted unfair competition because they were, the booksellers alleged, subsidized out of the Society's benevolent funds, and sold at prices that were too cheap for any other publisher to match.²⁹ The booksellers' suggestion that the Society should restrict its output to religious tracts implies that it was its expanded involvement in book publishing which lay at the root of the complaints. A more subtle complaint of commercial unfairness was made by the Glasgow bookseller, James MacLehose.³⁰ MacLehose was a devout Christian, yet, on receiving a visit from the Society's commercial traveller in September 1849, he voiced 'strong objections to the Religious Tract Society as a publishing establishment, and affirmed that no private publisher could compete therewith'. He summed up his argument by expressing his 'conviction that thus it stood in the way of enterprising publishers, who otherwise would have equally well supplied the market at a fair price'.³¹ MacLehose appears to have suggested that, although there were no direct subsidies to RTS publications, there was nevertheless indirect subsidization resulting from certain advantages that a charity possessed over a commercial firm. He claimed that, as a religious institution, the Society paid no rent on its properties, and was exempt from national taxes and

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local rates. He also suggested that the Society's system of making donations of publications (for example, to Sunday schools and foreign missions) allowed it to dispose of unsold stock without having to show a loss in its accounts. From MacLehose's perspective, the RTS was succeeding in competing despite the problems of being a society, but only because of certain advantages of its position as a charity which disrupted fair trade. Though the RTS denied these criticisms, the fact that they were made at all indicates the doubt and uncertainty surrounding a charitable society's prominent participation in the book trade.

II. RELATIONS WITH THE TRADE

In response to such criticisms, the Society's officers maintained that every effort was made to conform to current book-trade practices, both in its dealings with suppliers, contractors and distributors and in the way it competed in the market-place. Although the Society's management structure was quite different from the owner-managed firms, in its arrangements with paper-makers, printers and binders, and in its use of such distribution methods as advertising, agencies and travellers, it was remarkably similar. Critics focused on production-related issues, claiming that the Society had unfair advantages over other publishers. In reality, it was in distribution that the Society was occasionally unorthodox, but the financial value of the goods involved was so small that such schemes did not attract adverse attention.

In keeping with its desire to be a part of the trade, the RTS routinely kept an eye on what other publishers were doing, not just in terms of titles published but in their treatment of staff and in their responses to legal changes. The Society contributed to the funds for amending the bankruptcy and insolvency laws in 1849 and for the Booksellers' Retreat in 1855, because that was what 'leading booksellers' were doing.³² It investigated the claims of the Association of Booksellers' Assistants for shorter hours in 1844, and set up a contributory benefit fund to cover sick pay for its employees in 1846.³³ On learning that 'the Publishing Houses were making arrangements for their Assistants to visit the Great Exhibition, and giving them various sums to meet the expence, [*sic*] according to their stations', the RTS decided

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to do likewise.³⁴ It did not, however, grant its assistants a Saturday half-holiday – as was being done in the wholesale trade in 1853 – because they already started work two hours later than assistants in wholesale houses.³⁵

The RTS had insisted, since the 1820s, that ‘in its arrangements with printers, and binders, and other tradesmen, while the necessary attention is given to the fairness of prices and charges, no attempt is ever made to grind down, or cause unfair competition’.³⁶ This desire for fair dealing extended to concern for the condition of the employees of its contractors. In the early 1840s it investigated claims that staff at William Clowes & Sons were made to work on the Sabbath, and it was relieved to learn that Clowes only permitted Sunday work for urgent government printing.³⁷ In January 1852 the RTS secretary, William Jones, made a point of reporting that he had personally given New Year’s gift books to every worker in the three main binderies used by the Society, and had been ‘much gratified with the general appearance of the workpeople. They appeared to be kindly and liberally treated by their employers.’³⁸ The committee could thus rest assured that its workers were not being badly treated – an important issue, given the bad publicity surrounding the allegations against the Bible Society for relying on ‘sweated’ female labour only a few years earlier.³⁹ As far as its own staff was concerned, the RTS acted as a paternalistic employer. It organized quarterly meetings for ‘prayer and exhortation’, and, for more secular needs, it agreed in 1845 to close the depository an hour earlier (at seven in the evening), so that staff might benefit from ‘healthful recreation, mental improvement and the duties and enjoyments of domestic life’.⁴⁰

Production and Distribution

One thing which ensured that the RTS was a fully-fledged member of the book trade was that it was a publisher in its own right. The SDUK and the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK), in contrast, lent their imprimaturs to the publishers Charles Knight and J. W. Parker, and thus neither society risked its own money nor was actively involved in the process of tendering for paper, print or bindings. The RTS, however, had to deal with paper merchants, printers, binders, wholesalers, and retail booksellers, and it therefore maintained contact with a large number of

participants in the book trade, principally in or around London. In 1850 alone, the RTS dealt with three paper merchants, twenty-one printers, twelve binders and seven engravers.⁴¹ The only portion of the production process that came to be done (partly) in-house was the binding. From some point in the mid-1840s – probably from the opening of its new building in 1844 – the Society had its own binding department, run by the experienced Thomas Dix.⁴² Nevertheless, it still relied heavily upon the services of John Davison, V. F. Zaba and James Key, and used nine other binding firms more occasionally.⁴³ Similarly with its printers, the Society used a hardcore of regular contractors, and a larger number of occasional ones. In 1850 the bulk of the work was done by just ten firms, varying in scale from large concerns like Clowes and Childs & Son to individuals, such as W. J. Perry and Edward Gover, who have left no record except their imprints. Clowes, Childs and Gover were all long-term printers for the RTS.⁴⁴

The Society's printing work was divided among so many printers because there was so much of it, especially with the new secular publishing programme at mid-century. But it had also become fragmented over the years as printing partnerships broke up, and both partners applied to keep their share of RTS business. When John Blackburn and Benjamin Pardon dissolved their partnership in 1848, both men 'solicit[ed] a continuance of the Society's business', which was granted to Blackburn, whose association with the Society predated his partnership with Pardon, and thus to the new concern of Blackburn & Burt.⁴⁵ At Ward & Griffith's split in 1850, Bailey Griffith was able to secure RTS work for his new employer, Mr Macintosh.⁴⁶ The Society also made an early commitment to colour printing – for its children's books, and to help 'reach a lower class than the papers of the Society are at present doing'⁴⁷ – which brought it into contact with a new group of printers. It employed George Baxter and J. M. Kronheim for five jobs in 1850. (Colour printing, of course, was still very expensive – in 1854 Kronheim quoted the Society a price of three shillings per 100 for handbills printed in five colours, compared to tenpence per 100 in black and white.)⁴⁸

The Society routinely put new projects or other requirements out to tender. Tyler & Reed secured the printing contract for the new 'Monthly Series' (sixpenny

books with a planned print-run of 10,000) because of the low quotation they put forward. Four months later, they raised their prices but kept the work because their revised price was still lower than that of their closest rival.⁴⁹ The Society's finance sub-committee regularly inspected samples of paper and printing and examined quotations. In October 1844, for instance, it requested tenders from three of its regular paper-makers, and from at least one Scottish manufacturer, for paper to be donated to overseas societies. In the following month, the members scrutinized the quoted prices and examined the samples sent. The two favourites were printed upon and then re-examined. The committee members finally decided to buy 2,000 reams from Dickinson & Co., even though their quotation was not the lowest. They also asked for an additional sample, in demy, from Spicer Bros (whose quote had been three shillings a ream cheaper) in case it was suitable for India.⁵⁰ Spicer and Dickinson were, in fact, two of the RTS's main paper suppliers, but the tendering process enabled the committee to be confident that they were getting the best deal, in terms of both price and quality.⁵¹

The Society's reliance on committees of volunteers to seek and assess quotations made it a little different from other publishers, but the overall process was similar. The RTS was of necessity involved in the extensive networks of credit that underpinned the book trade, although it tried to act responsibly by paying its accounts on time and in cash. By the late 1840s it had agreed to set up running accounts with its major creditors (including Clowes, the printer, and Dickinson, the paper merchant) to ease everyone's cash flow.⁵² This high level of involvement in the book trade made it essential for the RTS to follow regular trading practices, if it were to maintain cordial relations with all those on whom it relied.

In distribution, the Society was also closely involved with the trade, especially by mid-century. Its tracts, like those of other tract societies, generally did not pass through the trade, but were distributed gratuitously by philanthropic individuals and organizations. But whereas the Bible Society actively avoided the trade, and used its auxiliaries to develop its own national distribution system, the RTS frequently proclaimed that 'the largest portion of our books are sold through Trade channels'.⁵³ Once the RTS became a major publisher of books and magazines – which had to be

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sold, not given away – it saw clear advantages in distributing them through existing channels, rather than trying to replicate an already well-established system. The RTS behaved as other publishers: it advertised, published catalogues, sent out monthly announcements of new publications, arranged with publishers in Edinburgh and Dublin to act as regional agents, and hired a commercial traveller to contact retail booksellers and encourage them to stock RTS publications. There were also facilities in the depository for customers to make purchases in person or by post.

Advertising was essential for publishers, but the RTS faced the additional difficulty that there were few periodicals in which advertisements would reach the targeted working-class reader, instead of the middle-class readers of the monthlies and quarterlies. Like most of the big publishers, the RTS advertised in the *Publishers' Circular*, but whereas other publishers would also insert notices in the *Literary Gazette*, *Athenaeum* and *The Times*, the RTS confined itself to the religious monthly magazines and the evangelical *Patriot* and *Record* newspapers, as well as its own members' newsletter, the *Christian Spectator*. In the early 1850s, in a concerted effort to reach a wider circle of readers, especially for its new *Leisure Hour* magazine, the Society increased its use of provincial newspapers. In 1852 John Chapman, publisher of the *Westminster Review*, estimated that publishers spent about twenty per cent of their sales income on advertising.⁵⁴ The RTS figures for 1849-50 reveal that the tiny sum of £363, or 0.7%, was spent on advertising.⁵⁵ This was partly a difference in style: the RTS did not employ large display advertisements (except on special occasions), and its target audience was not the readers of the fashionable literary weeklies and monthlies.

The Society printed a complete catalogue of its works each year, which included tracts, 'Books, adapted chiefly for adults', a children's section, and a list of foreign-language publications (in over a hundred languages by 1850). This was sent to all subscribers with the annual report, and to other religious organizations and publishers, but also to booksellers. It was supplemented by a one-page list of new publications, printed every month and sent to booksellers.⁵⁶ By the mid-1850s that had developed into an order form which could be returned to head office at Paternoster Row.⁵⁷ Booksellers might also receive an occasional visit from the Society's

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commercial traveller, Joseph Youngman. From 1841 he travelled in Scotland, Ireland and the north of England, and in his first three years he claimed to have opened 113 new accounts, and secured extra sales of £9,300.⁵⁸ During one month in spring 1844, he visited Cork, Limerick, Coleraine, Ballymena and Londonderry, and convinced ten new booksellers, including four in the predominantly Roman Catholic south of Ireland, to take the Society's publications.⁵⁹ It was Youngman who would encounter the cogent criticisms of James MacLehose, while visiting the latter's store in Glasgow's Buchanan Street in 1849.

In its dealings with booksellers, the RTS offered terms very similar to those of other publishers. There was a trade discount of twenty-five per cent, thirteen books offered as twelve, and with a further ten per cent for the settlement of quarterly accounts in cash.⁶⁰ The Society also made arrangements with booksellers in Edinburgh (Oliver & Boyd from 1842)⁶¹ and Dublin (William Curry, Jun. from 1844-48,⁶² and then John Robertson)⁶³ to act as its agents. Agents were allowed six months to settle their accounts, and would be entitled to further discounts if annual sales passed a certain level. Furthermore, they carried RTS stock on a 'sale or return' basis, allowing them to showcase more publications than they would otherwise have risked doing.⁶⁴ Shortly before going bankrupt, Curry was holding £600 of RTS stock.⁶⁵

Although the RTS seems to have been quite adept at using the regular trade channels for distribution purposes, these alone could not satisfy its aims. *Chambers's Journal* had acknowledged the problem in 1847, when it commented: 'Our object all along has been to reach the masses, but we cannot get to them. In vain... do we cheapen literature to the verge of non-productiveness, the persons for whom we write and incur hazards are not those, generally speaking, who become our purchasers.'⁶⁶ The Society's *Christian Spectator* quoted these remarks, reiterating the assertion that 'the only sure way to reach the masses is to act aggressively – take the booksellers' shop to their doors and firesides, and let them see and handle what is going on in the department of literature specially addressed to them'.⁶⁷ Certain classes of readers could not be reached through usual channels.

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Neither W. & R. Chambers nor the RTS could force booksellers to promote their wares more aggressively, but both considered the use of hawkers. Chambers cited examples of unemployed people they had supplied with instructive tracts to help them eke out a living, and the RTS found inspiration in the enormous network of colporteurs developed by the American Tract Society.⁶⁸ Such itinerant vendors sought out working-class readers directly, in their homes or at meeting-places. Thus, said the RTS, they could 'frequently gain access to places far removed from all other agencies'.⁶⁹ The Society referred with awe to the statistics of the Town Missionary and Scripture Readers' Society, whose five hawkers apparently sold no fewer than 68,000 RTS publications and 24,000 bibles in 1848.⁷⁰

Chambers carried out a few experiments, but they could not run a national network of book hawkers. The RTS made more extensive efforts in the early 1850s. It hired two men (on weekly wages) to work in London in 1851; by the summer, each was selling around £2 worth of publications a month, but this was not enough to cover the cost of their licences, and the venture was short-lived.⁷¹ For its fifty-year jubilee celebrations, the Society tried to hire ten hawkers to work in Ireland. The task of finding men who were both suitably pious and physically fit proved too much for Revd William Urwick of Dublin, who could recruit only three.⁷² These early efforts at using itinerants to distribute cheap books and magazines were unsuccessful, but the idea was sound. When specialist societies, such as the Church of England Book-Hawking Association and its auxiliaries, emerged in the later 1850s, the RTS was happy to work with them and offer them discounted publications.⁷³ As far as the Society was concerned, this was not unfair competition with booksellers, but an important extension to their activities.

The RTS did have its own auxiliaries at a local level – these had sprung up in the early 1810s, and numbered around 400 in 1849 – but they tended to be better at handing out free tracts and (in some cases) raising funds than at selling publications.⁷⁴ Some auxiliaries tried to organize bookshops, but they tended to be very small, short-lived and prone to financial troubles. The Totnes auxiliary was in debt to London for at least three years, while in Liverpool the member in charge of the depository went bankrupt in 1845.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, the RTS increasingly came to see the setting up of

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small shops or bookstalls – or getting their publications stocked in such outlets – as an important way of reaching those who would not enter more established bookshops. In 1850 it received warnings that ‘great efforts were being made in Manchester and other large Manufacturing Towns, to open small Shops in Poor districts for the sale of cheap and irreligious publications’. Not only, it was informed, did these shops sell corrupting reading material, they sold it ‘on the Lord’s Day’.⁷⁶ Six months later, in the annual report, a Manchester clergyman estimated that ‘in his small parish he has at least one [irreligious] shop to each 500 of the population’; and in London, a City missionary reported that ‘there are *thirty-eight* shops wholly or partially supported by the sale of such trash, in the parishes of St John’s and St Margaret’s, Westminster’.⁷⁷ The annual report concluded that the only solution was ‘the establishment of similar shops conducted by pious persons’.⁷⁸

The committee apparently assisted the Manchester auxiliaries to set up such shops, though their success is not reported.⁷⁹ It was also involved in similar activities in London, and between 1843 and 1856 it acquired the use of a bookstand in the Soho Bazaar in London, and possibly one in Baker Street.⁸⁰ The Soho stand was run by a widow, Mrs Stratford, who had ‘passed through much affliction and therefore calls for kindness and sympathy’.⁸¹ For the first few years, the stall sold around £200 of books a year, which the Society was convinced went ‘into Channels which would not have been otherwise reached’,⁸² and it cleared a profit of around £3 a year.⁸³ Unfortunately, the Society had not made allowance for Mrs Stratford’s inexperience in accounts-keeping, and on several occasions the sums did not add up, to the Society’s annual loss. After the third of these, in 1855, by which time sales had fallen from their original high point, the Society decided to discontinue the experiment.⁸⁴

The willingness of the RTS to use not only the normal distribution outlets of the book trade, but also the unusual ones of auxiliary societies, bazaar stands and hawkers, is illustrative both of its willingness to be part of the trade – unlike, say, the British and Foreign Bible Society – and of its evangelical dedication to circulating its publications as widely as possible. For the commercial publisher, profit was the reason for selling books, and the main audience had to be those with purchasing power – the middle classes. For the RTS, on the other hand, selling books was a way

of bringing souls to salvation (or keeping the converted on the straight and narrow road). This meant that the target audience was potentially the whole of society, though the working classes were the group of most pressing concern. Profit was merely of secondary importance, as a means to increase charitable work at home and overseas. The RTS's aim, therefore, was to avoid making losses. Critics might describe such an approach as being timid or likely to lead to mediocre performance, but it was actually the result of shrewd attention to production costs combined with experimentation in distribution. Running a distribution outlet like the stand in Soho, which barely paid for itself at the best of times, was still acceptable as long as it *did* pay for itself. Although there was no financial incentive to run the stand, there was a strong moral obligation, which, for the Society, was more than enough.

Competition

The Society claimed that, far from interfering with the trade, it had 'much assisted both Publishers and Retailers of books by the dissemination of healthy knowledge, thus encouraging the desire for reading'.⁸⁵ 'Small works have led to a demand for larger ones', it said, and thus the wide circulation of the Society's publications should be seen as increasing the market for the publishers of more substantial ones.⁸⁶ The RTS could thus argue that it was working alongside, rather than competing with, such firms as Blackie and Collins. But those two firms were both run by pious Christians. Where the RTS did admit to engaging in direct competition was with those firms that could be regarded as deliberately leading their readers astray. The firm of W. & R. Chambers was often mentioned in the RTS correspondence of the 1840s. It was the very success of Chambers' secular publications – and also presumably those of Charles Knight – which drove the RTS to provide instructive works of a highly Christian tone that would compete effectively for the same readership. If correspondents protested that the Society's tracts and other small works were not as cheap as they might be, the standard response was: 'We furnish our Subscribers and the Trade with 44 pages for each penny we receive, which is far beyond even the popular monthly Tracts of Mr. Chambers.'⁸⁷ The RTS and Chambers actually had much in common in their desire to provide cheap reading material for the improvement of the working classes, but their contrasting approaches to religion

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ensured that Chambers always constituted 'the competition' for the RTS. It is not clear whether Chambers realized this, or even cared – in their first few decades of business, they had been far more conscious of the activities of the SDUK.⁸⁸

When the RTS was accused of unfair competition, it was most often on the alleged basis that its prices were subsidized from charitable donations. In the Society's early decades, subscriptions had certainly been collected with the aim of funding the publication as well as distribution of their tracts. But by the 1820s it was beginning to publish other kinds of material, and to realize the importance of separating its charitable activities from its publishing side so as to ensure that subscribers would not think that their money was being misappropriated. Separate Benevolent and Trade Funds were set up, the latter to be self-supporting, while the former would continue to use the donations, subscriptions and legacies for grant-making. By the mid-1830s the Trade Fund had succeeded in its aim of becoming self-supporting. The 'Financial Statement' published in the annual reports was structured so that it was easy for subscribers (and for critics) to see that the RTS was spending more each year on grants than it was receiving as benevolent income; from which it could be gathered that charitable income was not subsidizing publications, but rather the reverse. Fig. 3 shows the Society's balance sheet for 1849-50, laid out with the same headings and sub-totals as in that year's annual report. Under both 'Income' and 'Expenditure', the Benevolent Fund is listed first. Benevolent income amounted to £5,215, plus £847 in legacy funds, while the first 'Expenditure' sub-total shows £8,699 being spent on various grants. The Trade Fund had income of £52,843 against expenditure of £47,506.

This 'Financial Statement' is, however, a carefully constructed document, and a careful scrutiny reveals that £7,193 of 'Benevolent' expenditure (i.e., everything except monetary grants, the China mission, and collector's commission) was used to enable other charities and private individuals to buy RTS publications at a reduced price. This money never went to the recipients of grants, but was paid directly into the Trade Fund, so that the fund could be credited with the standard prices on all publications 'sold'. Depending on your point of view, it could be argued that the Benevolent Fund was subsidizing the Trade Fund, which would otherwise have run at

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a loss of around £1,800 because of selling so many of its products at reduced prices. On the other hand, the RTS firmly maintained that this was not a subsidy, but a legitimate business transaction between its charitable and publishing divisions, in which the Benevolent Fund part-purchased publications to use as grants. In any case, it was certainly not true (as some booksellers seemed to believe) that RTS publications were sold to the trade at subsidized prices. The subsidized prices were only available to grant applicants, and they usually applied only to tracts. The Society made donations of tracts amounting to £4,608 in 1849-50, compared with only £1,213 of book grants to ministers, teachers, libraries and workhouses.

More subtle allegations of unfair advantage arose in James MacLehose's conversations with Joseph Youngman, the Society's commercial traveller, where MacLehose claimed that the Society was exempt from rent, rates and taxes. Bibles were indeed exempt from paper duties, and this greatly assisted the Bible Society – though not the RTS. With regard to the other accusations, Youngman insisted that the RTS 'pays moreover all Taxes and Rates (poor's rate included) precisely as any other house of business'.⁸⁹ It is only fair to point out, however, that the Society had applied for exemption from local taxation as a charity, but had failed.⁹⁰ MacLehose also asserted that the Society's grants allowed it 'to work off such portions of stock, as through the ordinary channels would be perfectly unsaleable'.⁹¹ Youngman responded by pointing out that these mostly consisted of tracts – publications that did not pass through 'ordinary channels' anyway. He could have added that, since the schools, libraries and clergymen in receipt of the grants usually chose the books themselves, those particular titles could not be classed as 'unsaleable'.

There are a few cases in the committee minutes where the Society did at least consider disposing of unsold publications through the grant system, though there is no evidence that it did so to claim them as 'sold' in the Benevolent Fund accounts. In 1845, for example, it decided to dispose of 114,000 odd numbers of the *Child's Companion* to the London City Mission, the major tract societies of Scotland and Ireland, and other societies as far afield as Toronto.⁹² In August 1850 the finance sub-committee received a report that the Society's warehouse was holding 64,000 copies of thirty-seven titles in which booksellers had no apparent interest, and the sub-

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committee did suggest that these books should be given away or disposed of to the colonies.⁹³ In this case, twelve titles had earned a reprieve within a month, and by the following February, only eight titles remained on the list; the others returned to the catalogue at half-price.⁹⁴

The Society was actually very loath to write off its bound publications. It could have cleared its warehouse immediately, and made a small amount of money, by selling its overstocks to a remainder merchant or for waste paper. But its goal was always to maximize circulation, not profit; thus, the key point was to break even. As long as that had occurred, the Society could be creative about dealing with surplus copies. If there was even a remote chance that they would eventually sell, they would be kept, and the price cut to no more than cost. If there seemed to be no chance of their selling (as with out-of-date, odd numbers of periodicals), then giving them in grants at least secured their circulation and was a better option than pulping them.

Despite the grain of truth in MacLehose's criticisms, the Society's traveller felt confident that he could 'disabuse' the bookseller of the 'misapprehensions, which have only served to prejudice this important Establishment in your esteem'. He did so, after consulting the annual report, by writing a letter bombarding MacLehose with facts and figures – thus demonstrating another usage for the carefully constructed financial statement.⁹⁵

The particular criticism that the Society took most seriously came not from its trade competitors – who would gladly have wished that it were true – but from fellow evangelicals. The Manchester merchant, James Dilworth, suggested in November 1846 that the Society's publications were more expensive than they ought to be.⁹⁶ His cannot have been the first such claim, as the subject had been discussed at length in an article in the *Christian Spectator* in January 1842. In it, the Society's editor had made clear the committee's conviction that the best way to fulfil the Society's mission – and to maintain it in future – was not by using charitable funds to subsidize publications, but by running an efficient business. The route to maximizing circulation was by 'offering a superior article at such a price as shall promote the sales', while at the same time 'allowing a fair and sufficient profit to all concerned in those sales in the

way of business, and leaving proceeds enough to secure reproduction'. The article concurred that the Society's sales were now more than sufficient to do this, but added that they had also 'defrayed all the expenses connected with visiting the auxiliaries' and 'supplied a considerable sum in aid of the subscriptions'.⁹⁷ Moreover, making profits on books and periodicals was essential to allow tracts to be sold at no more than the basic costs of paper, printing and stitching, leaving out 'any additions for Stereotype plates, sums paid for Copyrights, Editorial expences etc.'⁹⁸ The committee was adamant that the pricing of its books and periodicals was appropriate, considered from either viewpoint: it was cheap enough to be attractive to the buyer, but it also generated important funds for the Society's charitable works. No true friend could in all conscience suggest lowering book prices when that would reduce the number of religious tracts circulated.

III. PUBLISHING BY COMMITTEE

Apart from its focus on circulation rather than profit, the way in which the RTS most obviously differed from other trade practitioners was by being managed by committee. In the owner-managed firm, such as Chambers or Collins, the owner or owners were involved in the business full-time. There was a short chain of command between them and their staff, and they were involved in decision-making on a daily basis. The RTS was an organization of about 3,600 members in the mid-1840s, and those members came from both the Established Church and the dissenting tradition, and from all parts of the British Isles.⁹⁹ How could such a large, disparate and dispersed organization be a successful publisher?

The business of the Society was controlled by a committee which met weekly, usually in the morning, before the start of the working day. This committee consisted of three honorary officers (who rarely attended), twelve elected ordinary members, the six trustees of the Society, and a varying number of *ex officio* seats for secretaries of similar organizations (who also were rarely in attendance). Committee meetings were also attended by the senior salaried officers: the cashier, the corresponding secretary/superintendent, and the editor. The eighteen regular committee members and the trustees were 'professional men and merchants of high respectability', who

volunteered part of their time to the Society in addition to attending to their own businesses.¹⁰⁰ These men typically displayed great dedication to the RTS, both in terms of regular attendance and long-term commitment. In 1850 five of the six trustees had been involved with the Society for over twenty years, often having started out as ordinary committee members.¹⁰¹ A record of attendance was kept for the ordinary members, as the three least regular attendees were required to resign each year, to be replaced at elections. This ensured that ordinary members attended regularly, and even the resigning members had often attended over forty meetings each year.¹⁰² The trustees, who were not subject to re-election, provided the Society's legal continuity and functioned as its institutional memory of past experiences, even when the committee membership had changed over the years. Most committee members had in fact served almost as long as the trustees, and held as keen an interest in the fortunes of the Society as any owner of a publishing firm.

The existence of the three senior officers, who in turn were in charge of sixty employees, indicates the extent to which the Society had grown since its early days. It was no longer possible for a committee of volunteers to deal with all of its business with the help of just one employee. The officers were responsible for the day-to-day running of the Society's publishing operations, based at the depository at 56 Paternoster Row (the warehouse, the editorial department, and the retail and wholesale departments) and at nearby 65 St Paul's Churchyard (the administrative offices). All decisions about charitable activities were made by the committee members, particularly the adjudication of grant applications. The committee also had to approve decisions made by the officers, and had the oversight and ultimate responsibility for the publishing house. By the 1830s it had become increasingly difficult to deal with the business agenda at one weekly meeting, so various sub-committees were set up. The most important of these were the finance and copyright sub-committees, each with about six members and meeting monthly, at the end of the working day.¹⁰³

The finance sub-committee set the wages and salaries of the Society's employees and negotiated over holidays, pay rises and benefits; and it dealt with insurance policies, legal affairs, and all aspects of the Society's finances. There was

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some overlap with the copyright sub-committee, which had oversight of the editorial department, keeping records of assigned copyrights, acquiring new manuscripts and paying writers. The full committee still had to approve the decisions of its sub-committees, but the result was to remove the bulk of the discussions from the early-morning weekly meeting, leaving extra time for the grant applications and overseas correspondence.

The committee structure of the RTS meant that the decision-making process was relatively slow. The Society's first editor was William Freeman Lloyd (1791-1853), who was already the secretary of the Sunday School Union, editor of the *Youth's Magazine* and the *Sunday-School Teachers' Magazine*, and author of numerous works for children. Writing at the time of his retirement in 1847, Lloyd explained that where a commercial publisher 'can give an answer at once' to a potential writer, the RTS had to put the matter to a committee.¹⁰⁴ A submitted manuscript would be read by the editor and two readers, and their reports delivered to the copyright sub-committee. If the sub-committee accepted the work, that decision still needed to be ratified by the full committee (although this was usually a mere formality). Since the committee almost always agreed with the sub-committee, which had usually accepted the editor's recommendation, the process could have been streamlined by allowing the editor to make the decision in the first place. However, Lloyd went on to explain why this would not be a good idea. Since most RTS publications were anonymous, the Society itself was the sole authority for what it published. Most other publishers, said Lloyd, incurred 'no responsibility for the contents of the Work'. The Society's decision-making process thus had to take into consideration not only the question: 'Is it likely to sell for a profit?', but also whether it was appropriate for the Society's evangelical aims and reputation.¹⁰⁵ The range of interests represented inside the committee – which was always a mixture of Churchmen and dissenters, with a few foreign representatives – reflected those of the membership as a whole, as no single officer could do.

Although the decision-making at the RTS might seem ponderous, it was very efficient compared with certain other publishing societies. In the SDUK, for instance, the editorial work was done by the committee itself, and not by a paid staff. As John

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Kitto, the deaf shoemaker who became a respected biblical scholar (and who published with both the RTS and SDUK), reported:

I find that passing a book through the Committee, must be a great bore to poor authors. Six copies have been sent out to different members of the Committee. Two of them have come back with remarks, corrections, etc. I do not know whether I am to expect the others; but it is understood that the person who does not send back his copy has no objection to the publications, and sees nothing to correct.¹⁰⁶

This was a slow process and had no definite completion date. Kitto reckoned that the committee's review process would slow the publication of his book by three months. Time was not the only problem. In the absence of editorial co-ordination, each reader acted independently and could give advice that was inconsistent with the others. In the RTS, Lloyd, as editor, would summarize the recommendations of the in-house reader and an external expert in his own report, seeking a third opinion if there were significant disagreements. The result was a definitive editor's report on a manuscript, with specific suggestions for the author to act upon, rather than the uncoordinated 'remarks and suggestions ... written in the margin' that Kitto was told he was 'not bound to adopt'.¹⁰⁷ The SDUK's editorial problems were exacerbated by the practice of typesetting the work at an early stage to supply printed proof copies for the committee's perusal. Thus, any changes would incur hefty correction charges, while a rejection would mean writing off money already expended.

The SPCK worked in a similar manner in the 1840s, with its process slowed even further by the need for approval at an episcopal level for all published works.¹⁰⁸ Potential publications were put into proofs and posted to five bishops, any one of whom could veto the work. If approved by the bishops, the work then needed unanimous approval from the monthly general meeting – which was in theory open to all members of the society. There was no system whereby an editor could make advance revisions in consultation with the writer before seeking committee approval – as at the RTS – and so the SPCK's manuscripts had to stand or fall entirely on the merits of their original form.¹⁰⁹

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The RTS thus seems to stand somewhere between the two extremes of the commercial publisher and the charitable benevolent society. It had to work with its subscribers and its committees, and this undoubtedly slowed its operations compared with an owner-managed firm. However, the businessmen on the committee took their duties seriously and attended meetings regularly, and did not have to wait for responses from absent colleagues or distant bishops. Furthermore, in the task of approving manuscripts, the committee generally followed the editor's recommendation. Thus the reading and revising of manuscripts was left to full-time staff, who could ensure that controversial works were revised wherever possible rather than being rejected outright. Larger decisions about publishing policy, or suggestions for new publishing programmes, were left to the committee, though the ideas often originated within the editorial department. Where they originated in committee, the editor's presence at meetings ensured that such ideas were practical.

It is therefore clear that the editorial department, and the editor in particular, exercised a great deal of control over the publishing operations of the RTS. The editor was constrained to some extent by the committee structure, but his very existence enabled the Society to function far more effectively than those in which everything was done by committee. By the time that the Society's first editor, William Freeman Lloyd, retired in 1847, the editorial department consisted of four editorial assistants and two full-time readers, plus some part-time readers. The in-house readers were typically young men, sometimes the sons of committee members, whereas the assistants tended to be older men who had followed professional careers. They were all well-educated men, who were appointed more for their pious Christian virtues and sound literary opinions rather than for any relevant publishing experience. One exception was John Allan Quinton, who was appointed in 1849 as an assistant in the children's department.¹¹⁰ He had been 'brought up a printer', and was formerly employed in the business of a Mr Birston of Ipswich, where he became 'fully acquainted with the Printing business in all its branches'.¹¹¹ Doubtless, the RTS would never have considered employing such a man, had he not won the Society's competition for a prize essay 'On the Sabbath, by Working Men' in 1848.¹¹²

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Lloyd's obvious successor was the senior assistant, Charles Williams (1796-1866). Williams had been in the editorial department since 1838, and possessed the rare combination of a theological education and practical experience in the book trade: by the age of twenty-two he had become principal manager of a bookshop in Piccadilly but, on becoming a lay preacher, he had left to train for the Congregational ministry.¹¹³ Yet, despite these apparent attributes and his previous decade of experience with the RTS, Williams did not do well as editor. By the end of 1849 he had faced two disciplinary hearings and been dismissed at six months' notice. He continued to plead his case, sending a printed statement to every committee member, and prolonged the discussion of an expenses claim until summer 1851.¹¹⁴ But the committee remained convinced of 'the dissatisfaction, on various grounds, that existed through a considerable period of time'.¹¹⁵

The controversy over Williams focused on the accusation – formulated at a special meeting of the (expanded) copyright sub-committee on 2 February 1848 – that 'Mr. Williams has inefficiently and negligently attended to the duties entrusted to him, by which they consider that the Society has been materially injured'.¹¹⁶ Williams was summoned before the committee, but, despite giving unsatisfactory explanations, he was permitted to continue as editor under a new set of 'Regulations for the future government of the Editorial Department'.¹¹⁷ A year and a half later, however, after an unminuted discussion, the sub-committee recommended, in 'the interests of this institution', that Williams should be given the requisite six months' notice.¹¹⁸ The grounds of the alleged offence were various, but they centred on the claim that Williams was not giving enough oversight to the Society's publications. Reading between the lines of the new regulations, it seems that he may have been accused of spending too much time on his own writing, of being careless in the selection of writers and in the correcting of proofs, and of not attending sufficiently in the office (he was expected to be there from 10 a.m. till 7 p.m.).¹¹⁹

The new departmental regulations also required increased communication between the editor, and the other officers, and the committee. The committee was to preview detailed plans for forthcoming series, and there were to be formal monthly meetings of all the officers, where the editor would have to report on his department

and on the book trade in general. The overall effect of these new regulations was to remind the editor firmly that he was an employee of the Society, and as such answerable to the committee. Williams' arguments in favour of the utility of his own writings – among others, he had written several series of children's works on natural history – were deemed irrelevant to the charge of neglecting the Society's larger interests. Williams' dismissal demonstrated that the committee expected to control its paid employees, no matter how senior, and that there were ways of exerting that control. With Lloyd as its editor, the Society had successfully expanded its field of operations from the production of tracts to other theological works, and ultimately to more general books, and demonstrated that a committee structure was not necessarily a bar to an effective publishing strategy. But Lloyd had proved better than Williams at managing the critical relationship between editor and committee.

The comments in the anonymous pamphlet *The Power of the Press* of 1847 assumed that commercial businesses were driven solely by the desire for profit, and that the lack of such desire in publishing societies made them uncompetitive. In its stewardship of the Lord's wealth, the Society had to avoid squandering its talents and making an overall loss, and, to that extent, the pamphleteer was right to complain that the mere certainty of mediocre results was all that was required of it.¹²⁰ But it was the certitude that was crucial, not the mediocrity. In fact, the Society positively welcomed trading surpluses from its books and magazines, as that money allowed it to make more generous charitable grants – the larger the surplus, the greater the good. What drove the committee and the officers was the wish to increase circulations, which could be achieved either by direct sales, or by the grants and free distribution of texts that trading surpluses could fund. This evangelical mission could be just as powerful as the need for profit.

Equally important, it is not true to say that the committee system was structurally incapable of originality or innovation. The RTS did not leap into any new venture without careful thought. It was very conscious of having to look after its bounty, and therefore to avoid risky projects. In the late 1840s one of the most pressing developments concerned the launch of a new weekly periodical. The Society had started a half-penny weekly periodical, the *Weekly Visitor*, in 1833, in response to

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the *Penny Magazine* and *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal*, but it had survived only three years in its weekly format. By the late 1840s it had become a monthly with a falling circulation, and was utterly ineffective against the challenge of new titles like the *London Journal* and *Reynolds's Miscellany*, which were achieving enormous circulation figures with contents that the RTS deemed most inappropriate.¹²¹

The copyright sub-committee began, in February 1848, to consider 'the publication of a cheap weekly periodical to counteract the pernicious works, now so largely circulated', but it concluded that in the book trade's current economic state it would be a risky undertaking.¹²² The committee referred the idea back to the sub-committee on several occasions that year, before finally accepting the latter's conviction that, 'while a cheap weekly periodical is desirable, it cannot be undertaken by the Society on account of the large outlay that would be required, and the Weekly loss that would take place'.¹²³ The new periodical would not be launched until January 1852, and this *Leisure Hour* soon claimed a circulation of 60,000-70,000 every week, ten times more than that of the old *Visitor*.¹²⁴ This story might be interpreted as a key illustration of the committee structure delaying a necessary innovation, but it should be looked at in context. The years 1848 and 1849 were bad ones for the book trade. There was a widespread economic depression, several cheap magazines and book series ceased publication, and a few publishers (including Charles Knight) went bankrupt. The copyright sub-committee's awareness of the risks probably saved the Society from the losses which might have resulted from the over-enthusiasm of its full committee. It would have been very rash to have speculated the Lord's bounty upon a project which had a reasonable chance of failing. When the economic situation recovered, the two committees were able to act quickly: the discontinuance of the *Visitor* was broached in July 1851, and the *Leisure Hour* launched six months later.¹²⁵

As a large organization with a flat management structure, the RTS might even be more able to innovate than a small owner-managed firm. It had a large pool of talent to draw upon, and suggestions for new publications or new distribution strategies could emerge from any part of the staff and membership. The editor's was the name most frequently mentioned in the minutes in connection with new ideas, but

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other committee members were also actively involved. It was a committee member, in January 1851, who 'called the attention of the Committee to the spread of Socinianism and Infidelity among the working classes', which resulted in a series of 'short and simple Tracts on the Evidences of Christianity'.¹²⁶ Other committee members suggested using colporteurs for distribution in London, and opening an additional shop in the West End, both of which were adopted.¹²⁷

The Society's writers frequently offered specific topics for publications, and they occasionally offered broader advice. The committee thanked three of its long-serving writers for offering 'important suggestions' and 'valuable hints' regarding the new weekly periodical in 1851.¹²⁸ Even ordinary Society members occasionally wrote in with suggestions, varying from the impractical to the significant. In February 1852 a member suggested 'the publication as a Monthly Volume of ... part of Mr. Smith's Voyage and Shipwreck of St Paul', but the copyright sub-committee rejected this idea 'on account of the work being Copyright'.¹²⁹ A member from Manchester drew the committee's attention to the rise of small shops in the manufacturing districts.¹³⁰ Another member from the north of England, in summer 1844, argued the need for volumes 'to meet "the new development and growing intelligence of the times"', and to "supply a large number of people who could only spare time enough for the perusal of a small volume, and whose means would not allow of a large purchase" with works of acknowledged merit and worth on literary or scientific subjects'.¹³¹ Despite the Society's extensive experience with tract production, and the success of Chambers' tract-like secular instructive pamphlets (which sold at one penny or three halfpence), the Society did not begin to publish non-religious tracts until the early 1850s – with the Biographical Series – and never used the format extensively, despite the obvious advantages of a lower unit cost. In 1844 the committee took up its correspondent's suggestion for 'short volumes' with enthusiasm, and began planning a series of sixpenny books in paper wrappers.¹³² The result was the hundred volumes of the Monthly Series (1845-54) and the Society's move into non-religious book (and later magazine) publishing.

CONCLUSIONS

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The Religious Tract Society, therefore, offers a clear example of a society acting as a commercially successful and responsible publisher, participating fully in book-trade practices – though sometimes supplementing them – and certainly not limited to a dull and mediocre existence. Critics in the book trade had prejudices against societies and suspected them of unfair behaviour. Sometimes they were no doubt justified. Indeed, the *Christian Spectator* informed its readers that the circulation of SPCK publications ‘still requires and receives aid from the subscriptions’, with sums amounting to more than the RTS’s total benevolent income.¹³³ With such prominent examples, it is perhaps not surprising that RTS officers had so much trouble in convincing critics that they played fair.

The accusation that the RTS was not motivated by profit alone was certainly true, but this did not lead to dullness. The RTS did seek modest profits, but more important was the evangelical mission to increase circulations. Again, while it is true that the committee structure slowed proceedings down, it did not make them inefficient. It may even have made it easier for new ideas to emerge, thus enabling the Society to be, at least occasionally, both innovative and original. This was the Society, after all, which published not only the ‘Monthly Series’ and the *Leisure Hour* in the 1850s, but the works of Hesba Stretton and the *Boy's Own* and *Girl's Own Papers* in the 1880s.¹³⁴ Surely its prominence in the book trade, especially in children’s publishing, could not have been so long maintained, and at such a high level, if societies had been intrinsically unsuited to being publishers.

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NOTES

¹ See, for example, the entries for publishers in Patricia J. Anderson and Jonathan Rose (eds), *British Literary Publishing Houses, 1820-1880*, in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 106 (Detroit 1991).

² On corporate forms, see Alexis Weedon, *Victorian Publishing: The economics of book production for a mass market, 1836-1916* (Aldershot 2003), p.57.

³ The minutes of committee meetings often provide useful information about discussions relating to new projects, and may have summaries of readers' reports on manuscripts. Of course, minute books are also carefully edited, and cannot be presumed to be full records of complete discussions. The Religious Tract Society archives [hereafter cited as RTS] are held as part of the United Society for Christian Literature deposit, at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

⁴ Ford K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians: The age of Wilberforce* (Cambridge 1961), pp.329-40; Macaulay and Stephen quoted at p.317.

⁵ On this society, see James A. Secord, *Victorian Sensation: The extraordinary publication, reception and secret authorship of 'Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation'* (Chicago 2000), pp.288-9.

⁶ See Leslie Howsam, *Cheap Bibles: Nineteenth-century publishing and the British and Foreign Bible Society*, Cambridge Studies in Publishing and Printing History (Cambridge 1991); William K. L. Clarke, *A History of the SPCK* (London 1959); Aileen Fyfe, *Science and Salvation: Evangelicals and popular science publishing in Victorian Britain* (Chicago 2004).

⁷ Leslie Howsam, 'Sustained Literary Ventures: The series in Victorian book publishing', *Publishing History*, 31 (1992), 5-25, at p.7, Table 1.

⁸ William Chambers, *Memoir of Robert Chambers with autobiographical reminiscences* (New York 1872), p.213.

⁹ *The Power of the Press: Is it rightly employed?* (London 1847), p.38.

¹⁰ There are three anniversary histories of the RTS, which become both shorter and less detailed as the number of years covered increases. They are: William Jones, *The Jubilee Memorial of the Religious Tract Society: Containing a record of its origin, proceedings, and results. AD 1799 to AD 1849* (London 1850); Samuel G. Green, *The Story of the Religious Tract Society for One Hundred*

Years (London 1899); and Gordon Hewitt, *Let the People Read: A short history of the United Society for Christian Literature* (London 1949). A belated bicentenary volume is due for publication: Dennis Butts (ed.), *Scriptural and Entertaining Books: Children's literature and the Religious Tract Society* (Cambridge, forthcoming).

¹¹ The RTS only applied the concept of gratuitous distribution to very cheap publications; their counterparts at the American Tract Society were willing to give away books as well as bibles – see David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious publishing and the birth of mass media in America* (New York 2004), ch.4-5.

¹² Driss Richard Knickerbocker, 'The Popular Religious Tract in England 1790-1830', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 1981.

¹³ Jones, *Jubilee Memorial*, p.119.

¹⁴ 'The Bound Publications of the RTS, II', *Christian Spectator* (Mar. 1841), p.26.

¹⁵ Reprinted in [George Stokes], 'The Bound Publications of the RTS, III', *Christian Spectator* (Apr. 1841), 33-5, at p.35.

¹⁶ [Coventry Patmore], 'Popular Serial Literature', *North British Review*, 7 (1847), 110-36, at p.117.

¹⁷ Aileen Fyfe, 'Expertise and Christianity: High standards versus the free market in popular publishing', in *Science and Beliefs: From natural philosophy to natural science, 1700-1900*, ed. David M. Knight and Matthew D. Eddy (Aldershot 2005).

¹⁸ RTS Annual Report [hereafter cited as RTS AR] (1846), p.106.

¹⁹ Even, eventually, fiction – although always with a high moral tone.

²⁰ This series is the focus of Fyfe, *Science and Salvation*.

²¹ Simon Eliot, *Some Patterns and Trends in British Publishing 1800-1919* (London 1994); and 'Patterns and Trends and the NSTC: Some initial observations. Part One', *Publishing History*, 42 (1997), 79-104.

²² Scott Bennett, 'Revolutions in Thought: Serial publication and the mass market for reading', in *The Victorian Periodical Press*, ed. Joanne Shattock and Michael Wolff (Leicester 1982). For the SDUK, see also Harold Smith, *The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, 1826-46* (Halifax,

NS, 1974), and Valerie Gray, 'Charles Knight and the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge: A special relationship', *Publishing History*, 53 (2003), 23-74.

²³ Chambers, *Memoir*, p.117.

²⁴ The anonymous author wrote to the *British Banner* (a Congregationalist weekly paper), and signed from Paddington, see 'Religious Literature and the Christian Instruction Society', *British Banner* (7 Jan. 1848), p.15.

²⁵ *Power of the Press*, p.38.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ On Christianity and doing business, see E. Jane Garnett, 'Evangelicalism and Business in Mid-Victorian Britain', in *Evangelical Faith and Public Zeal: Evangelicals and society in Britain 1780-1980*, ed. John Wolffe (London 1995), 59-80; Aileen Fyfe, 'Commerce and Philanthropy: The Religious Tract Society and the business of publishing', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 9:2 (2004), 164-88.

²⁹ See W. Jones to J. V. Hall & Co., 30 Aug. 1845, and Jones to E. Thompson, 1 Sept. 1849, RTS Correspondence[all letters are from this file unless otherwise stated].

³⁰ Youngman to J. MacLehose, 3 Sept. 1849. On the latter, see James MacLehose (ed.), *Memoirs and Portraits of One Hundred Glasgow Men, who have died during the last thirty years, and in their lives did much to make the city what it now is*, 2 vols. (Glasgow 1886), ii.343-6. My thanks to Morag Fyfe for this reference, and for tracking MacLehose's business through the Post Office Directories.

³¹ Youngman to MacLehose, 3 Sept. 1849.

³² RTS Finance [sub-]Committee Mins. [hereafter cited as RTS FCM], 15 Aug. 1849, 1 Aug. 1855.

³³ RTS FCM, 26 June 1844 and 9 July 1845; 17 June 1846.

³⁴ RTS Executive Committee Mins. [hereafter cited as RTS ECM], 20 May 1851. The term 'executive committee' was not used by the RTS in the nineteenth century, but this is how the committee is referred to in the archive.

35 RTS Copyright [sub-]Committee Mins. [hereafter cited as RTS CCM], 15 June and 20 July
1853.

36 Formal statement of relationship with the book trade, issued in 1820s, and re-stated in
[Stokes], 'Bound Publications, III', p.35.

37 Jones to J. H. Harris, 4 Jan. 1842.

38 RTS ECM, 13 Jan. 1852.

39 Howsam, *Cheap Bibles*, ch.4.

40 RTS FCM, 19 Jan. 1848 and 9 July 1845. The quote about 'healthful recreation' was actually
from the memorial addressed by the staff to the committee to request the early closing.

41 These are the firms to whom the RTS paid bills in 1850; see RTS ECM.

42 The first mention of Dix in the employ of the Society was in 1845; RTS FCM, 21 May 1845.
Dix married the daughter of John Davis, the first Superintendent. His daughter Martha married Richard
Jones, son of William Jones, the second Superintendent, and himself the third Superintendent. See RTS
Misc. Papers, which includes a partial family history of the Jones family.

43 Again, I have examined the bill payments found in RTS ECM for 1850. The reference to
'three principal binders' is at RTS ECM, 13 Jan. 1852. Davison and Key had both been in business
since the late 1820s; see Charles Ramsden, *London Bookbinders, 1780-1840* (London 1987).

44 Clowes, Childs and Gover appear in RTS ECM for 1839 and again in 1850. The extensive
premises of Childs and Clowes are mentioned in Charles H. Timperley, *The Printer's Manual* (London
1965), pp.952, 920.

45 RTS CCM, 9 Feb. 1848.

46 See RTS FCM, 19 June 1850.

47 RTS CCM, 19 Sept. and 17 Oct. 1849 (children); 15 Jan. 1854 (working classes).

48 RTS CCM, 28 Nov. 1854. The committee decided to inquire about the cost of printing in two
or three colours.

49 RTS FCM, 23 Mar. 1846.

50 RTS FCM, 18 Oct. and 13 Nov. 1844.

51 Dickinson also supplied the Bible Society; see Howsam, *Cheap Bibles*, p.227, n.66.

52 On the paper supplier accounts, see RTS FCM, 20 Oct. 1847. Clowes' account was already in existence at this time.

53 Jones to Hall & Co., 30 Aug. 1845; see also Jones to E. Thompson, 1 Sept. 1849. On the Bible Society's distribution, see Howsam, *Cheap Bibles*, ch.2.

54 John W. Chapman, 'The Commerce of Literature', *Westminster Review*, ns, 1 (1852), 511-54, at pp.517-18.

55 Figures from RTS AR (1850), pp.138-47.

56 Some monthly listings included non-English-language publications, perhaps as space fillers.

57 Copies of these monthly lists for 1842-59 can be found in RTS Publications List.

58 RTS FCM, 26 June 1844.

59 RTS FCM, 10 Apr. 1844.

60 Jones to E. Thompson, 1 Sept. 1849.

61 In 1847 the original five-year arrangement was renewed; RTS FCM, 16 June 1847. Oliver & Boyd were still listed as agents in the 1900 RTS AR.

62 RTS FCM, 10 Apr. 1844.

63 RTS FCM, 19 Jan. 1848. Robertson held the agency until at least 1886; see cover of RTS AR (1886).

64 The 'sale or return' policy is implied by RTS FCM, 11 Dec. 1844, and 16 June and 14 July 1847.

65 RTS FCM, 16 June 1847. Curry had originally been sent a stock of £638, of which half was sold within six months; RTS FCM, 11 Dec. 1844.

66 'Booksellers', *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal*, ns, 7 (1847), p.88.

67 Quoted in *Christian Spectator* (Mar. 1847), p.210.

68 'Booksellers', pp.88-9; RTS AR (1845), p.87.

69 RTS AR (1845), p.87.

70 RTS AR (1849), App. III, item 8.

71 They were being paid 10s a week on top of the difference between trade and retail prices; RTS CCM, 18 Dec. 1850. Sales after ten weeks, RTS FCM, 16 Apr. 1851; after almost six months, RTS ECM, 29 July 1851.

72 RTS FCM, 6 Sept. 1848, 16 Jan. 1850; RTS ECM, 25 June 1850, 29 July 1851.

73 The activities of the East Sussex Book-Hawking Association in the mid-1850s are discussed in Sheila R. Haines, 'Am I My Brother's Keeper? Victorian tract societies and their work, 1840-1875', unpublished DPhil thesis, University of Sussex, 1979, ch.5. For RTS comments on hawkers, see RTS AR (1850), 'Colportage', unnumbered app. before catalogue; cf. RTS AR (1891), pp.245-6.

74 Jones, *Jubilee Memorial*, p.185.

75 RTS FCM, 13 Mar. 1844, 21 Jan. 1846.

76 RTS ECM, 29 Oct. 1850.

77 RTS AR (1851), p.123.

78 Ibid.

79 On Manchester, RTS ECM, 13 May 1851.

80 On Baker Street, RTS FCM, 20 Jan. and 2 Feb. 1847. This project disappeared from the minute books after its plans seem to have been finalized.

81 Jones to Capt. Trotter, 29 Apr. 1847.

82 RTS FCM, 13 Mar. 1844, 20 May 1846. Jones to Capt. Trotter, 29 Apr. 1847.

83 RTS FCM, 19 Dec. 1855, 12 Feb. 1845. Mrs Stratford was paid 12s a week and 10% commission on all sales over £4 per fortnight.

84 Jones to Capt. Trotter, 5 May 1847. RTS FCM, 19 May 1847, 18 Dec. 1850, 19 Dec. 1855, 16 Jan. 1856.

85 Youngman to MacLehose, 3 Sept. 1849.

86 Jones to Thompson, 1 Sept. 1849.

87 Jones to Hall & Co., 30 Aug. 1845. The same example is used in *Christian Spectator* (July 1845), p.50; and in Jones to Dilworth, 6 Nov. 1846; RTS Corr.

88 Chambers, *Memoir*, pp.212-13. I have found no references to the RTS in the Chambers correspondence (held at the National Library of Scotland, Deposit 341).

89 Youngman to MacLehose, 3 Sept. 1849.

90 The RTS was granted exemption from rates, under Act 5 Victoria c.36, in 1844, but this right was soon contested and withdrawn. See RTS ECM, 9 July 1844; RTS FCM, 11 Dec. 1844 and 17 Dec. 1845.

91 Youngman to MacLehose, 3 Sept. 1849.

92 RTS FCM, 9 July 1845.

93 RTS FCM, 21 Aug. 1850.

94 RTS FCM, 18 Sept. 1850, and 15 Jan. and 19 Feb. 1851.

95 Youngman to MacLehose, 3 Sept. 1849. MacLehose's criticisms can be deduced from Youngman's responses.

96 Jones to Dilworth, 6 Nov. 1846.

97 'On the Publications of the RTS Generally', *Christian Spectator* (Jan. 1842), 9-10, at p.9.

98 Jones to Dilworth, 6 Nov. 1846.

99 For the estimate of membership, see Aileen Fyfe, 'Industrialised Conversion: The Religious Tract Society and the development of popular science publishing in Victorian Britain', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2000, p.31. On the RTS's success in reconciling evangelicals of different varieties, see R. H. Martin, *Evangelicals United: Ecumenical stirrings in pre-Victorian Britain 1795-1830* (Metuchen, NJ, 1983), ch.2.

100 William Henry Jones, *Memorials of William Jones of the Religious Tract Society, compiled from his private papers and other authentic documents* (London 1857), p.87.

- 101 Jones, *Jubilee Memorial*, pp.67-9, gives brief sketches of the trustees.
- 102 Ibid. 67n.
- 103 RTS CCM, 3 June 1840.
- 104 RTS Additional Deposit (item 23), Lloyd to Jones, 15 Sept. 1847.
- 105 Ibid.
- 106 Quoted in John Edwards Ryland, *Memoirs of John Kitto, DD, FSA, compiled chiefly from his letters and journals. With a critical estimate of Dr Kitto's Life and Writings by Professor Eadie, DD, LLD, Glasgow* (Edinburgh 1856), p.543.
- 107 Ibid.
- 108 My discussion is based on Clarke, *History of SPCK*, pp.172-83.
- 109 Ibid.149.
- 110 RTS FCM, 28 Mar. and 18 Apr. 1849. His Christian names are given in 'Working Men's Essays on the Sabbath', *Examiner* (30 Dec. 1848), p.843.
- 111 RTS FCM, 28 Mar. and 16 May 1849.
- 112 His departure from Ipswich was reported in 'Public Breakfast to Mr J. A. Quinton', *British Banner* (4 July 1849), p.428.
- 113 'Charles Williams', *Congregational Yearbook* (1867), pp.326-7.
- 114 RTS ECM, 12 Nov. 1850; RTS CCM, Jan. to May 1851.
- 115 RTS ECM, 12 Nov. 1850; see also 26 Nov. 1850. The committee won in the end, and it may be a measure of their annoyance that Williams was written out of the official histories.
- 116 RTS CCM, 2 Feb. 1848.
- 117 RTS CCM, 9 Feb. 1848.
- 118 RTS CCM, 17 Oct. 1849.
- 119 'Regulations for the Management of the Editorial Department', RTS CCM, 9 Feb. 1848.

- ¹²⁰ On the RTS as stewards, see Haines, ch.2.
- ¹²¹ On the new magazines, see Patricia J. Anderson, *The Printed Image and the Transformation of Popular Culture 1790-1860* (Oxford 1991), ch.3-4.
- ¹²² RTS CCM, 23 Feb. 1848.
- ¹²³ RTS CCM, 20 Sept. 1848.
- ¹²⁴ *Visitor* circulation had fallen to 6,800; see RTS CCM, 19 Sept. 1849; and also 16 July 1851. For *Leisure Hour* figures, see *Christian Spectator* (Mar. 1852), p.697 (which claims 70,000), and RTS FCM, 26 Sept. 1855 (sales had risen to 67,500 from 60,000 in first year).
- ¹²⁵ RTS CCM, 16 July 1851. The timing was also determined by the death of the *Visitor*'s long-time editor in mid-1851.
- ¹²⁶ RTS ECM, 7 Jan. 1851.
- ¹²⁷ RTS CCM, 18 Dec. 1850 (colporteurs); RTS ECM, 31 Dec. 1850 (new shop).
- ¹²⁸ RTS CCM, 17 Sept. 1851.
- ¹²⁹ RTS CCM, 18 Feb. 1852.
- ¹³⁰ RTS ECM, 13 May 1851.
- ¹³¹ W. H. Jones, *William Jones*, p.124. Note that the phrases quoted by Jones in this passage are those which also appeared in the promotional material for the Monthly Series. It seems highly probable that the account of what the 'friend' had said has been shaped by the advertisements, rather than vice versa.
- ¹³² The decision was made by the committee (the volume of ECM for mid-1844 to 1849 does not survive), and passed on to the copyright sub-committee for action, RTS CCM, 14 Aug. 1844. Although the RTS chose paper wrappers to keep the price down for the working-class and lower-middle-class market, more highbrow reviewers were not impressed. The *Baptist Magazine*, 38 (1848), p.28, bemoaned the fact that the first volume of the series had 'no covers corresponding better with the character of the interior, than thin glazed paper'. Although the RTS subsequently offered the option of cloth gilt binding for 10d, it maintained that cheapness was essential in encouraging young readers (and their parents, teachers and librarians) to *use* books rather than just admire them. The Society's *Christian*

Fyfe, A. (2005). Societies as publishers: The religious tract society in the mid-nineteenth century. *Publishing History*, 58, 5-41 [Author's Accepted Manuscript]

Spectator (July 1846), p.145, recommended the 6d volumes for being 'so cheap that we need not care if they are destroyed!'

¹³³ 'On the Publications of the RTS Generally', p.9.

¹³⁴ On the RTS as children's publishers, see the forthcoming Butts (ed.), *Scriptural and Entertaining Books*.