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ATG Interview: Fred Gullette/Richard Abel & Co.

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Against the Grain Interview

— Fred Gullette *Reflections on Richard Abel and Company*

interviewed by *Dora Biblarz*
(Arizona State University)

The enthusiasm for a bit of nostalgia extends into the academic library-bookseller relations, as we saw at the 1990 Charleston Conference. There is a deeper significance to some of these reminiscences, though, as we try to learn something from past experience in the hope of avoiding the same pitfalls in the future.

Herewith is the perspective - oral history, if you will - of one of the "original" Abel-ites, in what we hope to be the first of a series exclusively for *Against the Grain*.

ATG : Fred Gullette prefers the title "book peddler" to any other. He describes his career - particularly the early days, when he learned the business under Richard Abel. He tells the story in a wonderful, humorous manner - the levity does not detract, however, from the valuable insights we can draw from the narrative.

GULLETE: My first job in the book trade was back in the not too late 50's when I was going to school at Reed and I went to work for Dick Abel. Dick needed some part-time student help in the Reed College Co-op of which he was the manager.

Later, after having been cast out of a number of academic departments as not suitable to become a senior, I returned from a trip and went in to shop for books. Dick saw me and wanted to know if I wanted a job and I did. That's the way I got into books. It was very early in Abel days. Actually, it was not the Abel Company. It was Reed College Bookstore Incorporated. You might be interested in the way

that all this went. Dick was a graduate student at Cal Berkeley during the McCarthy years. His thesis advisor, Kantorowicz, the guy who wrote *The King's Two Bodies*, I think it was, was pitched out because he wouldn't sign the oath, and that effectively cast Dick out as well.

He had gone to Reed, and was in touch with somebody there. They said they were looking for an assistant to the President, and would he like the job, and he said sure. When he came to interview, they said, "We've changed our minds. We don't need an assistant to the president."

This left Dick in kind of a tight situation. He had a wife and at least one kid, had spent approximately his last sou getting to Portland for this interview. They came up with an alternative, "Well, why don't you manage the bookstore?" The bookstore in those days sold text books, some candy, and pencils. Dick took it over and eventually turned it into a very, very respectable, scholarly bookstore. In those days the Co-op was the property of the Reed Student Body, so Dick's main boss was the Student Council, and they made his life a misery, well, at least some members of the Council did.

I can recall one Christmas Eve about 5:30 in the evening working in the back room for Bookstore Inc., that is the book jobbing operation, and one of the outspoken student council members came in and was asking Dick what everybody was doing here. Then he, in a "pseudo-Abelian" remark, said, "Christmas off? Christmas off? You want Christmas off? You had Christmas off last year!"

Initially, Abel had the bookstore in the basement of the student union. It was quite cramped, but Dick made it adequate to handle both the servicing of the Co-op, that is the student store,

and the Bookstore Inc., which was wholly owned by the Co-op. This was a peculiar arrangement, in that it was a profit making corporation that works, but apparently it worked all right for awhile. But it didn't work so well that the college attorney didn't get nervous and agitate for getting Abel off campus and away from any kind of student or campus ownership. It must have been around '63 or '64, that they made him an offer he couldn't refuse. Dick was doing all the buying, but he was saying that this book goes to the Co-op for open shelf and this book goes to Reed College Bookstore, Inc. for the non-open shelf, for sale to some of the early academic customers. So \$30,000 bought the name, the going concern, and some inventory. He then changed the name to Richard Abel & Company, Inc.

In those days the going concern was to sell books to the Library Association in Portland. One doesn't think of Abel as having been a public library jobber, but the Library Association of Portland was a very impressive, scholarly library in those days. And they needed a lot of books.

What Dick had done which made his service stand out among the traditional bookstores and booksellers, was that he had stocked imprints for sale like Free Press, Brookings Institution, and Praeger. Some outsiders, who happened to be librarians, came in, saw this inventory and said, "You have a lot of the kind of books we think that only we would buy. Do the students here really buy those?" Well, yes, students and faculty did a little bit, but the big college library bought a lot more of them. So then the question naturally arose, "Well, what about selling to us?" the public libraries in the city and county of Multnomah, which contains Portland. And yes, Dick thought that

would be satisfactory.

By the time I'd come to work for Dick, he was selling approval plans as far as Stanford, which I think was not his first approval customer. Stanford had the university press approval plan which they paid for out of the Jewel Fund, an endowment made up of the proceeds of the sale of Mrs. Stanford's jewels. It yielded something like about \$12,000 or \$13,000 a year, and that was enough to cover the University Presses in those days, plus a few others, like Falcon's Wing Press, King's Crown Press.

Falcon's Wing Press was a Free Press imprint. I asked Fred Praeger about it at a meeting not more than a year ago. He said, "Oh, I'd almost forgotten about that Falcon's Wing Press. Yes," he said, "I think I had an author that wanted me to use that so I created it." And King's Crown was one of the imprints which I think Columbia University Press has now gone back to using. Anyway, it was Stanford and Washington State University Library.

They also had, I think it was, the University Press approval plan. And the Library Association of Portland which I think just ordered the University Press books from Dick because he had a good inventory and could fill a lot from stock.

ATG: You know there's a difference between selling books and having an approval plan; do you know how Dick developed this concept? Did he start with something like the Greenway Plan?

GULLETE: The first that I can remember was Dick remarking about Collett's in London. Collett's had a Russian "blanket" plan; it was not approval. Libraries did sign up with Collett's, and Collett's would supply books on Russian culture, Russian history, or Russian science, or all of those things, or only just Russian fiction. They had a few options.

I have no idea where Dick got wind of it, probably in *The Bookseller*. Even in those days, he was reading virtually anything he could get his hands on that touched the book trade. *The Bookseller* was one of those things. Anyway, he knew about Collett's and what they were doing, and from that he made this leap to "why not do something like that with university press books?" He may have developed the concept even before that. I do remember his remarking that one of his customers had said, "How come you have these books on your shelf? How did you know that we were going to want this book? Until a faculty

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member asked for it, I didn't even know we were going to want this book. You know more about what we're going to be needing than we do. Maybe you ought to just send us all these books when you get them." Some remark like that. Part of it was jocular.

Then he went to University of Washington, Washington State, Oregon State, University of Oregon, and Stanford. Those were the early firm order customers and were obvious subjects to be approached for an approval plan.

The early approval plans were, chiefly, University Press. It was at a time when you could get virtually every University Press book for \$10,000 a year. And then with the approval of libraries, Dick added some imprints like Praeger, Free Press, Brookings Institution, Twentieth Century Fund that produced books of the same caliber. It was from there that the approval plan took off.

I'm thinking now about the complaints that we have some unsatisfactory approval plans and approval plan service out there, and I was reflecting, why should this be? The difference that I can see from the days still right up until the collapse, was that Dick himself was very actively engaged in making the approval plan go. His involvement included taking home a leather sack full of catalogs and periodicals every night. He read through *Science*, glanced at *Nature*, always read *PW* and *Library Journal*. The things would come back the next day marked up in Dick's almost illegible scrawl in 4H lead pencil.

"See if we have this on order" or "been treated on approval."

This is something that I think is not being done nowadays. I think people tend to go to databases, MARC is obviously the clear choice. You pick up books that appear in MARC and put those on your approval plan, and you've got probably 2/3 to 3/4 of an approval plan already done.

Now, it doesn't take care of all the constantly entered series names, and it doesn't take care of the imported books that arrive on this shore, some of them unheralded. It's happened that a publisher gets his copy and begins shipping and then he thinks about sending a copy to LC for cataloging so as to get into the CIP program. It never does get into CIP because, after all, the book has been finished completely, printed elsewhere.

But I think of what Dick managed to turn up through spending something in the vicinity of five hours a day, seven days a week, reading catalogs, magazines, and so forth, a day when, admittedly, there were not as many books being published. But I think he single-handedly turned up probably well over 80% of the books that were being published and were appropriate for his early approval plans. It was, I think a very, very rare University Press book that slipped through his fingers.

ATG: To go back to Fred Gullette's career at this young age; what did you first do?

GULLETE: The job in the early days was, first thing in the morning to do the billing. This was billing the books that had been made ready the night before. We had some great big four by eight tables that were made out of very heavy plywood with several legs under them so that they would bear the weight. On these tables there were big stacks of books, and each stack of books appeared over a label that said WSU, Washington State University, or SU, Stanford.

The other guy who was doing billing at that time was a fellow who didn't last with Abel too long. But he preceded me in the business as an employee of Reed College Bookstore Inc. So he and I were on opposite sides of this room, and we were specialists. I always billed Washington State and he always billed University of Washington. The attempt was often to sort the books themselves into alphabetical arrangement rather than sorting slips. I can remember some very inept clerical practices in those days. Often the book was actually billed from its own spine, rather than being billed from the slip that the library had sent as an order. This was done on old Underwood typewriters, and we would bang out up to four carbon copies, sometimes. Then we'd double check the thing and pack the books. We did everything up to the point of having an accounts receivable copy ready. Then that went into a stack someplace, and somebody, in the early days, Dick, or maybe his wife, shuffled through those things and kept a record of the receivables.

ATG: These are firm orders, not approval. We're not in approval yet?

GULLETE: That's right. These were firm orders. Generally, that and some other activities took the morning. Then the mail would come. We were in a daylight basement. The road served the level above us so Dick had installed a nasty aluminum sheet-

covered wooden slide that would allow the postal truck driver to throw these books in this hole. They would come whizzing down into the basement on this slide. Especially after a weekend, if you laid your hand on the bottom of the box, you came away all black from this aluminum oxide that had built up over the weekend. It was a very jerry-built arrangement, but it worked. We then stood at the bottom of this slide. Right after lunch Dick would come with his 4H pencil behind his ear. Mac and I had by this time unpacked the books, stood them against a wall at the edge of this slide. Dick would then come, pull off the publisher's invoice. Mac and I would each have a stack of library order slips. Dick would call out a name, and we'd go through the order slips. One of the other of us would find it. And we'd then search through the stacks of books, find the book, pull it out. And Dick would look at what discount he had gotten from the publisher, then would indicate what discount we should give to the library.

We would make a note on this document that had been our open order slip file, then throw that onto a stack of books appropriate to Stanford or Washington State. For at least the first 10 years that I worked with Dick and up until the time that he had at least three offices outside of Portland, he was himself still doing the first sorting of orders as they came in in the morning. Nowadays in book jobbing operations, one finds that the greenest recruit, the lowest paid employee, tends to be the one that gets thrown into the breach and told to go pick books out of inventory. There could have been a lot of things that would have sunk Abel Company had it been managed by somebody else, but Dick was a real hands-on manager during the good years. He continued to pick the books.

He was making a trip, I think to Southern California for a week, sometime after I'd been with him for two years. He was going to let me take books off the shelves. Now, it wasn't just a question of going to the shelves and pulling off a book. It was a question of pulling off the book, looking at the number of copies left and deciding

whether another one should be ordered. In those days, Dick deliberately reordered books, deliberately kept the inventory in-house. He was able to do this because he had a very good brain for remembering that here was a book and its author was Veaner, and he was big guy in what we would now call automation, or robotics, or cybernetics. And he would remember that he started with two copies and that Stanford had bought one and Washington State had bought one, but the University of Washington hadn't yet bought one, and that the Library Association of Portland should be buying at least one, maybe two. He would deliberately re-order these things.

A thing that I believe nowadays, except for the obvious big mass market titles that go out of Baker and Taylor, and Ingram, is just not done. People make an initial buy, and if they exhaust that, they thank God and wouldn't dream of ordering more copies. Another part of the stock pick was just knowing what people were buying. Early on in my emancipation, that is after I got out of Portland office and got an office of my own, I can remember going into a library with Dick and his saying to somebody on the staff that he noticed that they were buying more books on tropical agriculture. Why was that? Did they have a new professor? Were they teaching new courses? I can remember the stricken look on the face of this librarian who said, "Oh, yeah. That's right. We do have a new curriculum. I hadn't noticed those orders before." Dick would do that kind of thing.

On Saturday all of the re-orders that he had thought of during the week while he was picking books plus all of the library orders that had come in and he had not been able to pick from stock—all of which by this time would have been converted to some kind of single title order document—were assembled and filed into alphabetic boxes.

Within each box on the file tabs, Dick would have noted five/40 meaning five assorted copies would get you a 40% discount. Although he

didn't really need that guidance too much, those notes were in there. So Dick would sit down and start at the A's, and he would say, "here, we only have four copies of Basic Books going off, but we've got to get this order going. Let me see *PTLA*." Then he'd pick a title. Very often he would pick a title out of his head. If he didn't pick it out of his head, he would look at *PTLA* and pick up a Basic title and bang out five copies, then hand this mess to Mac. There were two of us working simultaneously, one of us was doing the shuffling through *PTLA* for Dick, and the other one was shuffling through *Books in Print* for the addresses. The way that we put addresses on things was I would sit there and hand write an address for Basic books or hand write an address for Abelard Schuman.

The last thing of the day, after we got through this box, usually about 4:00 or 4:30 on a Saturday afternoon, was that somebody had to go to the post office because those orders lie around and age over the weekend. They should be moving over the weekend. That was pretty much a conventional day, and that's the way that I got into the book trade with Dick

It was quite soon after I came to work that Tom Martin, who also had been a part-time employee, while he was a student at Reed, came sauntering back in. Some job that he had lined up fell through, and Dick offered him a job. Tom and I were with Dick right up until the collapse. Tom is still with Blackwell.

ATG: So how did you graduate from this stock clerk type of activity into the next level of your development with Abel Company?

GULLETTE: Well, the next step was to run an office of one's own. Fairly soon after the formation of the Richard Abel and Co, Inc., and because the attorneys were still nervous about having a profit making entity on campus, they urged him to move out,

and he moved about 10 or 12 blocks away. We remained with the same branch post office and did not impose any longer trip upon any of his employees (actually, two).

He moved into an old garage with cast concrete walls and monstrous great beams that stand something like 50 feet and were made up of a single piece of wood that measured something like three feet deep and maybe 12" or 14" wide. When Abel

People make an initial buy, and if they exhaust that, they thank God and wouldn't dream of ordering more copies. Another part of the stock pick was just knowing what people were buying.

got so crowded in there he began putting in balconies, so that you worked on two levels in this rather tall building. There was no way of getting under these beams so there were lots of people with black eyes and bruises on their foreheads. That was the Zilck building. I moved there with Dick and I think Tom Martin did, too.

The first office to be opened was in Los Angeles, and Tom was sent to get it going. It was a very successful move. The response of the Southern California librarians was just ever so much better than anything Dick had ever been able himself to stir up by his trips from Portland. From that Dick concluded, probably correctly, that one could do a lot better selling job if one had an office near the library.

So his next move was to send me to San Francisco. I was glad that I was the one not to go to the first office in Los Angeles. That was my first move out of Portland. After that I only went back to Portland for occasional visits, except during the last grizzly two years of the death

throes.

It was in that office that I worked by myself for about two months, something like that, hardly ever went traveling, occasionally would telephone people and say, "I'm here and you should send me some orders." And it worked pretty well. They did. Dick's success was the Los Angeles, then the San Francisco, and later on the other offices because my next move from there, after about four years, was to the Chicago office which is where I met Lyman Newlin.

My arrival in Chicago, actually Zion, Illinois, coincided pretty nearly exactly with the "Great Society." It was the opening of the purse strings in Congress. It was the post-Sputnik time. There was just money for anything that a library wanted to do. As a matter of fact, there was money for more stuff than even the most ambitious librarian

wanted to do in some institutions. I could march into an institution such as Southern Illinois University Library, and walk into a meeting with half a dozen librarians, who were considering this question, start the meeting at 9:30 or 10:00 or 10:30, and walk out with a luncheon at 11:30 or 12:00 with the decision having been reached by these people that, yes, they wanted a full blown approval plan. And now the question was just how much time do they need to write the profile or do they want all books published. That happened repeatedly in my territory, and happened also over and over again in the East Coast. Fairly shortly after I opened in Chicago, I think maybe it was six months or so, Tom Martin had gotten out of Los Angeles and had opened the office in Blackwood, New Jersey. I think maybe it wasn't exactly on the same site that Blackwell now occupies in Blackwood; same town though.

Tom had the same experience. It was less a selling job than it was a scheduling job. Well, who are you going to put off when three people want to see you next week about

setting up approval plans? A wonderful time to be drumming books. In those days the branch offices followed very much the pattern that Dick had established in Portland. The branch manager did the stock pick. He opened the mail in the morning. Or if he didn't open all the mail, he at least opened the orders and sorted through them, went back to the shelf, picked those books he thought he might have in stock and had a chance to re-order books that should be in stock that weren't there and had really very, very broad authority. This was always one of Dick's assertions that his success was based upon the fact that his peddlers could walk in a library and say, "You want us to list things on the invoice in reverse alphabetic arrangement? We'll do it." And they knew they would do it because they could do it because they were on the line and they were in operations and they would do it.

On the other hand, competition would have a drummer in who would say, "Well, I guess I'll have to talk to

my billing people about that. I'll get back to you." It made a lot of difference in the kind of respect that the drummer got when he walked into a library and could commit the company to do something, some things that other drummers might not be able to do.

ATG: You think this is because you had the local offices that were personally attended to by the manager as opposed to a central office in the Midwest somewhere that served the entire country?

GULLETTE: Yes. If it became a question of would Abel be willing to supply books published in Albania, well, that was something the branch manager could not do. A branch manager did not buy from overseas.

By the time of the Chicago and New Jersey offices that Tom and I

had opened, the Abel Company had come sufficiently systematized that there were two levels: the San Francisco office was a second level branch, and it did its book ordering through Portland. It did not deal directly with publishers, except in case of a rush. And it certainly could deal with publishers when a publishers rep would walk in. But the volume was done out of Portland for the "not yet published" books.

Then there was the higher level branch such as Chicago and Blackwood, New Jersey, that did do their own buying and eventually did have a string of their own subsidiaries that sent orders to them for buying.

In these early days of the approval plan, one of the reasons that Abel's plan was so good was the way that it was run: Dick would pick the books, virtually all of them; sometimes



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because a sales rep had come in from the publishing house to sell it to him and sometimes because he had seen it advertised or seen it in a bibliography someplace. Books were brought in, and the moment they got there, somebody would sit down and give them pretty good descriptive cataloging. No attempt was made to do any kind of subject cataloging. It was about this time, that the approval plan began to be automated.

This descriptive cataloging was entered into a "flex-a-writer," a punch paper tape machine. The first arrangement was to take that tape and feed it back through the same machine time and time again to get as many copies of these three-by-five slips out as could possibly be needed. If Abel at that time had a total of nine approval plan customers, he would run this tape through nine times. After a while, he got sophisticated and ran it through 12 times for University Press books because there were three more University press approval plans than there were general. But it took very

little time after the opening of the branch offices that Dick found that even having somebody run it at night, this one flex-writer couldn't keep up with making all these forms.

In the final development, Dick had moved to a larger facility in Portland. There was kind of a long, bowling alley of a room and struck down one side of it were about six or seven flex-writers. From the first flex-writer to the second, there was a tape that would feed down. It would dip down toward the floor. And at the floor, there was a sensor that would shut off all the downstream machines if the tension on this tape got too tight. Because if one machine would slow down, the machine ahead of it wouldn't slow down so it would pull the tape and break it.

When I saw this operation, I had been back in Illinois by this time. there were at least a half dozen of these machines. There were at least five pressure sensors that felt this loop of the tape where it dipped down to the floor. But when every thing

was running, all of these machines were going clackity-bang, and they were running forms that included up to as many as a 12 part form. Some of the designing there allowed for a lot of creativity or applied a lot of ingenuity among managers that had to do this. The library would say, "Well, we want a p-slip and that has to be blue. And we want a notification to the catalog department and that should be yellow. then we want an orange slip that goes to the faculty member who requested the book. And then we need five copies for the invoice, and I want these to break up in these forms, and so we had perforations on the left and the right. Some of these forms were real thick, so these flex-writers had to hit real hard. This hell room sounded like war. You'd open the door and just clash, bang, bang, bang.

end of part 1 — watch for part 2 of the Gullette interview in the April, 1991, issue of Against the Grain. ✎