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A Short History of Academic Library Bookselling in America: Or A Tale of the Two Richards

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read the *New York Times Book Review* for free on the Web, but the price I'm paying for an **IDEAL** subscription is increasing by 8 percent next year. Why is that? Mainly because the Internet is a great forum for advertisers. The *NYTBR* may be free to me, but that doesn't mean that the *New York Times* isn't getting paid – it means the *New York Times* is getting paid by advertisers who want me to see their messages.


This brings us to the issue of organization. The Internet may well make information cheaper to end users – in fact, it already has – but by so doing it's also making much more of it available, which exacerbates the need for what we have traditionally called "cataloging." Is cataloging going to be the same thing ten years from now that it has been for the last hundred years? I certainly hope not. I don't think I'll court too much controversy here by saying that the LC and Dewey systems, impressive as they are, are completely inadequate to the organizational tasks ahead of us. I'm convinced that future cataloging models will have much more to do with relationship trails between documents than with categories, but that's a topic for a different forum. Here's another interesting thought,

though: Suppose that at some point in the future we get to a point where advertising underwrites all information production. So in a sense, all information becomes "free" to end users – they pay with their attention instead of with money. Even in that scenario, two things become pretty obvious: first, some form of copyright control will need to endure, because what advertisers pay for is the ability to draw people to their advertising. Advertisers won't pay if you can't deliver readers, and publishers can't deliver readers unless they can control the availability of their content. Second, there will continue to be a need for publicly-funded entities to organize information in a way that benefits the public, since the marketplace will push organization schemes that merely maximize profit.

I've clearly strayed a bit from the acquisitions arena, so let me drag myself back to it. There are some who worry that a move from paper to electronic formats will lead (indeed, is leading) to a move away from an "ownership" model to an "access" model in libraries, and that this move is going to hurt patrons. I disagree, for one simple reason: that type of thinking betrays a misunderstanding about the library's place in the information economy. Libraries have *never* "owned" the information they distribute. All we've *ever* provided is access – we don't own the content in our books any more than we own the

content in our online databases. What's changing now is not the degree of ownership, but the format of access. I don't want to minimize the importance of the format question – it has serious ramifications for ease of use, for copyright law, for long-term archiving – but I do believe that it's an issue less fundamental to librarianship itself than we sometimes think.

So let's suppose that in the future, all academic publishing will be done online. Will libraries still need an acquisitions staff? And if so, what will they do? It seems to me that the answer to the first question is definitely "yes." Since information is never going to be entirely free, libraries are still going to have to choose what information to purchase, and they're going to need purchasing agents who know how to go out into the publishing world and bring stuff back with them, and who can then

turn around and deliver that stuff in a coherent way to the folks who organize it and who help patrons find it. We're still going to be ordering, even if ordering really means "setting up access." We're still going to be claiming, even if claiming becomes a matter of saying "Why can't I access your product?" rather than "Why isn't your product in my hands?" We're still going to be making sure that invoices reflect the charges previously agreed to. Increasingly, we're going to be negotiating license terms. Increasingly, we're going to be coordinating the technical specifications of online products with those who sell them. In short, libraries will still need people who can purchase access to information and make sure that that access is delivered appropriately and on time. That is what we have always done with paper products, and I believe it's what we will continue to do with electronic ones. 



A Short History of Academic Library Bookselling in America: Or A Tale of the Two Richards

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This short history of bookselling to academic libraries in America can be written in three chapters. Chapter I is not so much bookselling, as book buying from the academic librarian's perspective. Prior to the 1950's, those of us who were around, were around to serve the needs of the public library market and some of us, like **Blackwell's of Oxford**, to serve the academic needs of a university town and the export trade. This early period was about collection development and less than ideal acquisitions facilities.

Chapter II, and the origin of my subtitle: "A Tale of the Two Richards" begins in the late 1950's and the early 1960's, and of course the two Richards are **Richard Abel** and **Richard Blackwell**. These two men are primarily responsible for English language academic bookselling as we know it today. One, Richard Abel, is responsible for approval plans, standing orders, comprehensive firm order services and the beginning of shelf-ready processing. The other, Richard Blackwell, had the vision to expand bookselling from the narrow Oxford-based university bookstore to an internationally known bookseller serving academics worldwide through retail, library wholesaling, mail order and publishing. These two Richards shaped all of the modern, academic booksellers.

Chapter III, today, is a direct result of the work done by academic booksellers over the past forty or more years, and the economic needs of the librarians we serve. Tightening budgets, the reversal of the split between money spent for books versus that spent for journals, and the availability of affordable computer technology has led booksellers to offer the highest levels of service and efficiency libraries have ever seen.

Chapter I. Prior to the 1950's, the most interesting collection development was being done at those institutions of higher learning with the largest budgets (whether from tax dollars or wealthy donors at private universities). These libraries could afford to pay for large, first-class staffs of individual subject bibliographers. Their collection development excellence was in the hands of trained and educated professional bibliographers. It was up to them not only to build the complete collection based on currently published books, most often ordered directly from individual publishers, but it was also in their hands to ferret out the old, rare and out-of-print titles which were missing from their collections. Often, these bibliographers had close personal relationships with bookshops and distributors around the world. Often, they would travel the globe to meet with their col-

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leagues. And, just as important, they could also afford to pay for these acquisitions.

So, while most American academic librarians in the 1950's were ordering primarily directly from publishers, with some use of local bookshops, wholesalers, and international exporting firms, there was also developing a small, but growing need for better ways of acquiring books. As **Richard Abel** said in a 1993 interview: "There was nobody really set up in those days [1952] to sell books to academic and research libraries, anywhere in the country...University presses were a continuing problem, the scholarly presses were generally hard to get."¹ Starting first as the bookstore and coffee shop manager of **Reed College Co-op** in Portland, Abel grew the service at the Co-op to the point that the libraries of the **University of Oregon, Multnomah County, University of British Columbia** and **Cal Tech** in Pasadena were all sending him orders. And, as he said: "It just started to grow like topsy, because there was an enormous need out there for a bookseller who was devoted just to selling scholarly and scientific books from academic and research libraries."² The business grew, spurred by his innovative services and the money flooding higher education. But the Reed College trustees began to worry. Would this burgeoning bookselling business run afoul of IRS not-for-profit rules and regulations? Better safe than sorry, Reed College decided to close down the bookselling business and thus, in 1960, the **Richard Abel and Company** was created.

At much the same time, our other Richard, **Richard Blackwell** was expanding his book export business from 50 Broad Street, Oxford. Of the book business, he would write..."new bookselling can be appropriately described as the operation of getting too many books written by too many authors and published by too many publishers in to the hands of too few customers."³ To expand the book business, Richard Blackwell realized that he had a number of factors on his side. Writing in 1971, he could report that "**Blackwell's**...has a staff of 750 and annual sales of some \$17 million, one-third of which...is in periodical subscriptions. The firm took 70 years [from its founding in 1879] to reach annual sales of a million dollars."⁴ He was also quick to add that "The rapid growth in recent years is due to...the explosion in education expenditure in all parts of the world, whether in developed but ever-expanding countries like the United States of America, or in developing countries..." This "explosion of finances" caused



problems for libraries and opportunities for booksellers. Suddenly many libraries had the need and the means to develop comprehensive collections but lacked the staff to do it. Booksellers filled the need with approval plans, standing orders, comprehensive firm order services, and shelf-ready processing. Booksellers began to change from mere suppliers of books to suppliers of bibliographic, acquisitions, and technical services that improved the efficiency of libraries.

Chapter II. Going into the early 1960's, both Richards were pleased with the growth of their respective businesses. Firm orders, generated by acquisitions librarians, subject selectors, bibliographers and faculty members, often encouraged by printed catalogues and review, were coming in at a steady pace. But both firms and both men would soon face a major issue: How to deal with the amount of money flooding higher education. As **Martin Warzala** reported: "From the early 1960s to the late 1970s, vast amounts of money were being pumped into academic libraries for book acquisitions. Academic library personnel budgets were not increasing at a corresponding rate, and book selection and ordering procedures were labor intensive." Warzala continued: "Simultaneously, relatively affordable computer technology emerged which supported data processing that facilitated performance of library collection development functions by library material suppliers."⁵ The environment was set for the new booksellers to develop their innovative services.

Richard Abel tells how a phone call from **Don Smith** at Washington State University was the true beginnings of approval plans.

Smith had asked Abel how it was that Abel could get books supplied to the library so quickly. Abel replied: "I said I figure out what libraries want to have and so I've got those books in stock....The next time I went to Pullman, I sat down...and hammered out the basics of the approval plan. We would define the subject areas, fields and levels of difficulty...that WSU was going to collect. And then as new titles came in that fell within these parameters, we would send the books up to them. But it would be on approval....Then we got the second big idea, using computers."⁶

H. William (Bill) Axford, formerly dean and university librarian at the University of Oregon, writing in 1980, noted that Abel envisioned "a partnership that could exploit the potential of a rapidly developing computer technology to achieve the time-honored goal of timely, comprehensive, balanced, and systematic collection development."⁷

It is important to note in this brief historical review that there were other players who followed soon after the founding of **Richard Abel and Company** and reacted quickly to the opportunity and threat posed by Abel's ideas. By 1970, in addition to Blackwell's, such international firms as **Otto Harrassowitz**, under the leadership of **Richard Dorn** and his son **Knut, Aux Amateurs de Livres** and **Swets & Zeitlinger** all offered some form of approval or gathering plans. In the United States the major players were **Baker & Taylor** and **Bro-Dart**, but

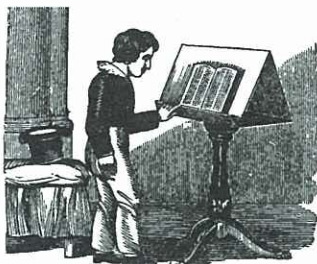
"When mergers reach the hundred mark - and push on beyond - it becomes difficult to remember just who has merged with whom."

even smaller firms such as **Midwest Library Service** offered blanket order plans.⁸ The speed and efficiency of the approval plan process had been firmly established as an essential collection-building tool for modern academic libraries.

While still in an historical frame of mind, it is also interesting to look back to see just what the publishing world was like, in these pre-approval plans days of the late 1950's, when both **Richard Abel** and **Richard Blackwell** were just beginning to understand the opportunities academic libraries presented to their individual firms. In the standard textbook, and one used and perhaps remembered by all library school graduates in the 1960's, **Carter and Bonk's Building Library Collections**, we find this interesting observation: "One of the striking features of the book trade in the late 1950's was the beginning of a series of mergers, which is altering the former structure of the trade somewhat....It is becoming increasingly difficult to make very definite statements about individual firms, because firms are merging, being bought out, and buying out other firms in turn, and generally swirling around at a giddy pace which leaves the onlooker somewhat confused. **When mergers reach the hundred mark - and push on beyond - it becomes difficult to remember just who has merged with whom.**"⁹ The emphasis in the last sentence is mine. Given that these words were written in 1963, it would be interesting to hear Carter and Bonk's observations today.

It is also interesting to note that Carter and Bonk don't use the term "approval plans," "gathering plans" or "blanket orders," but do say: "There is another type of buying which aroused some heated discussion in library periodicals in the early 1960's. It has been called 'block buying.' In the controversy referred to, the term was used to describe the placing of standing orders for all the products of a given publisher, as for example, a university press. Some librarians felt strongly that this abdicated the librarian's central responsibility: selecting each book to fit the library's needs."¹⁰

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I, User — First Encounters with the RCA eBook

by **Rick Lugg** and **Ruth Fischer** (R2 Consulting Services, 63 Woodwell's Garrison, Contoocook, NH 03229; Ph: (603) 746-5991; Fax: (603) 746-6052) <rick@r2consulting.org>

In this issue, *ATG* inaugurates a new column, edited by **Rick Lugg** and **Ruth Fischer** of **R2 Consulting**. *I, User* gives voice to a central, if often overlooked, experience of the information age—namely, what happens when we first encounter a new product, service, interface, search engine, Web site, database, or concept? Specifically, what is the user's experience? Not the developer's; not the marketer's; not the venture capitalist's — the *user's!* Think of these articles as small documentaries, with room for humor, outrage, criticism, and enthusiasm.

We begin by describing our experience with the **RCA REB 1100 eBook** reader. In coming months, we'll look closely at alerting services, other eBook readers, audio book software, "bots" of various stripes, and anything else that piques our interest. However, the focus remains the user experience, minutely observed, which of course extends beyond encounters with technology. For instance, we know several kids starting college this fall. We'll ask one or more of them to recount his or her first experience at their academic library—the catalog, the reference desk, their first taste of bibliographic instruction. Maybe we'll get a new faculty member to do the same. Librarians might describe their first experience of a vendor. We invite contributions.

We'll also offer opportunities for response from the subjects of our scrutiny — correcting misperceptions, updating documentation, promising improvements — because the premise here is

simple: we place the user at the center of the experience; why else do these products and services matter? Any dialogue that can improve that experience is worth having.

"Please Wait": First Encounters with the RCA eBook

eBooks are on everyone's mind these days, if not in their hands. As budding consultants, we at **R2 Consulting** have license to pay attention to, well, pretty much whatever we want to as long as we don't expect to get paid. Because so much ink and so many bytes have been sacrificed to extol the virtues of eBooks, we've spent a good deal of the last six months transforming ourselves from eBook neophytes to eBook phytes. In fact, we even decided to become consumers, as well as mere experts. Here's what happened:

Summer 2000: **R2** spends its summer vacation studying the eBook market. We become, in retrospect, irrationally exuberant.

October 2000: **Gemstar** announces new eBook readers, made by **RCA**, to go on sale the day after Thanksgiving. Publicity kit includes groovy photos, and names **Best Buy**, **Circuit City**, and **Office Max** as purveyors. We are *there!*

11/24/00: Drive to **Best Buy**. Look near Palm devices. Negative. Look in PC section. No dice. Near the **GameBoys**? Nope. When all else fails, ask. Ask again. And again. In fact, ask 7 people, including a manager. Weird looks, no reader.

11/24/00: No **Office Max** or **Circuit City** within 30 miles. Let's *continued on page 34*

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pany in the late 1960's was meteoric: "We finally had 900 or 1000 people in the company with offices in 16 cities scattered around the world"¹¹ and his offer of an **ELAP** program (**English Language Approval Plan**) providing worldwide coverage of English language publications caught the attention of **Richard Blackwell**. As a direct result of the Abel threat, **Richard Blackwell** expanded his sales efforts into the United States. With the establishment of Blackwell's blanket order service in the late 1960's, **Richard Blackwell** could write in 1971: "At the moment we operate 22 of these plans for North American libraries, and they vary in size from comprehensive coverage of all the main areas (as for example for the **University of Wisconsin**—Milwaukee, amounting to some \$30,000 a year) to **Fordham University Library** (which requires only the publications of the Clarendon Press, amounting to some \$1,200 a year)..."¹² Oh, for the days when a comprehensive U.K. approval plan cost \$30,000!

Meanwhile, the reign of **Richard Abel**, which was to last some fifteen years (1960-1974) was about to come to an end. What exactly caused the final closure of **Abel** is open to much debate. **Richard Abel** himself says that the firm "was always undercapitalized. In 1974 inflation was starting up, the economy has just fallen apart, the stock market lost about half its value in a matter of days. And suddenly, the libraries we were dealing with had cash flow problems. So they slowed their payments to vendors."¹³

A slightly different slant was given by **Don Chvatal** in his 1999 interview where he said: "...one of the causes for the demise of the Abel company: failure to maintain good inventory management. Excess inventory was being carried on the books at an ever-escalating value."¹⁴ In the same interview **Chvatal** also discusses the leveling off of sales growth in the early 1970's, saying: "We introduced cost-plus, and that was a marketing mistake; it quickly turned into a financial mistake because we lost sales and sales revenue...."¹⁵

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