

Chapter 12

Trade Publishing

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<Image 19.01> Trade publishing covers those books published through the book trade aimed at a broad general audience. Whilst OUP has built its brand and reputation on academic, reference and educational publishing, there were also many notable trade books and authors published between 1970 and 2004. This chapter covers a range of individual titles and series, including non-fiction, the illustrated histories, Oxford Books of, the World's Classics, and children's books. In broad terms, trade publishing can be characterized by a higher level of risk compared to scholarly publishing, as it involves higher discounts to intermediaries in the book trade, the payment of advances to authors, and the possibility of large quantities of unsold stock when sales are disappointing. In turn successful trade editors are required to have strong commercial instincts, and their books need significant investment in marketing and sales. These matters were very important to publishers in placing books in one category as opposed to another. Readers, if they bothered themselves at all, might not know how to distinguish.

At the beginning of this period trade books were produced within the General Division based in London at Ely House under the London Publisher, Sir John Brown. 'Trade' and 'Academic' therefore had different locations and different identities. 'Trade' continued in Oxford when the London Business moved there.¹ However, the identity which a separate location had formerly given it was eroded over time as the Press steadily stressed its academic purposes. 'Trade' shrank considerably over the ensuing decades and ceased to exist as separate department in 1999 (with some unhappiness and loss of jobs). Looking back over this period, Ivon Asquith, commented that a university press, grounded in scholarship and education, could not compete with a pure trade publisher. However, 'publishing with OUP could be an attractive option for a scholar who wanted to reach a wider than usual audience, but who might have worries about the standards or attitudes of a more commercial publisher. On the other hand, OUP could be found wanting by authors who valued the higher advances and large sales forces of a major trade publisher.'² This chapter does not concentrate on the internal structures and politics of the Press but aims, rather, to highlight significant publications. Such treatment is necessary, especially since

¹ See Bullock, chapter 5.1

² Email correspondence with the author, 14 October 2011.

trade books appeared from many different parts of the Press, not just from its dedicated trade arm.

Several themes emerge. The first is the attempt to catch up with the paperback revolution. Penguin was dominant in many areas of interest to the Press, such as literary classics publishing and reference, and a strategy had to be created to expand in this area. At the beginning of the period, hardbacks and paperbacks were published by separate houses. Although hardback publishers would acquire a full set of rights from the author, they would not usually have their own paperback operation and would sublicense paperback rights to another publisher. By the 1980s this set of arrangements became less common as publishers were keen to exploit all rights including the opportunities from paperback publication as sales in soft cover had become increasingly important.³ There were also benefits for authors as they were to receive a full royalty on the paperback edition rather than share the proceeds with the hardback publisher. Vertical publishing became the norm and the Press gradually moved away from selling paperback rights to London trade houses. In turn it became harder to buy in paperback rights from London or New York houses, as was done in the 1970s and early 1980s. The logical step was to expand the Press's own paperback operation and, beginning in the early 1970s, the new list Oxford Paperbacks was created to publish trade books in paperback. There were considerations beyond simply those from the editorial side, and David Attwooll, head of the department from 1976, created an integrated strategy which included a dedicated paperbacks warehouse in Park Royal (to avoid the distribution problems at Neasden), a batch printing deal with Hazell Watson & Viney in Aylesbury, and unprecedented discounts (for OUP) with retailers. A dedicated sales rep for paperbacks was appointed and David Attwooll himself toured the branches to spread the word. <Image 19.03>

The period of this chapter also saw the growing importance of literary agents, who negotiated contracts on behalf of authors. Authors who started their writing career with the Press would often, for subsequent books, take on an agent. Agents looking for the best deal would encourage them to sign up with another trade house, in return for a significant advance payment. At times, for example in the mid-1990s, the Press discouraged its editors from working with agents, but this proved impossible in a world where even some academic authors could see the benefit of representation. Practices concerning the payment of royalties became controversial as the Press changed its calculation method away from payment of a percentage against the published price (then standard practice in trade publishing) towards a payment mechanism based on net receipts – the revenue actually received by the Press from the retailer or other sales channel. This change took place for

³ See Giles Clark and Angus Phillips, *Inside Book Publishing* (Abingdon, Routledge, 4th ed., 2008), 17-18.

academic books in the early 1980s and was then adopted for most trade books by the early 1990s. In order to get books into bookshops the discounts given to retailers rose significantly over the period of this chapter, up to 60 per cent, and could reach 75 per cent on book-of-the-month deals to the chains or on book club sales. Switching to royalties on net receipts could encourage such deals, but would also increase the overall profitability of the books for the Press. The returns for authors, however, were likely to be lower and such a royalty arrangement was unpopular with agents.

The frothy book market of the 1990s was a time of high advances to authors and large marketing budgets. The retail market changed significantly with the end of fixed book prices (the Net Book Agreement collapsed in 1995) and the consequent deep discounting of bestselling titles by the book chains. The superstore concept for bookshops - huge stores with extras such as armchairs and coffee shops, in which browsers could relax - arrived from the USA with the opening of Borders in Oxford Street in 1998 - Waterstones created its own large Piccadilly shop in 1999. Meanwhile Amazon had been founded in 1995. The ability to discount books attracted greater attention from the supermarkets and it was the growth of internet and supermarket sales which contributed to the decline of book clubs, previously the only way to buy cheaper books other than through the remainder shops. The slow decline in library funding contributed to falling hardback sales for the midlist authors – those who had not yet broken through into the ranks of the bestsellers. Whilst trade publishing carries a higher level of risk than academic publishing, with the possibility that many thousands of copies remain unsold in the warehouse, it also can reap substantial rewards. As is often the way in trade publishing, the Press, as will subsequently be seen, had surprise hits on its hands.

By the late 1980s the Press had clearly decided to minimize its risk from Trade publishing and there was less enthusiasm for the entrepreneurial instincts of individual editors. Indeed the Andrew Malcolm case⁴ had made the Press twitchy about editors having a free hand. Whereas previously Trade books could simply be reported to the Delegates, it was decided that they should follow the same procedure as for academic titles. Accompanying reports should be commissioned from outside advisers. This did not fit with the customary processes of Trade publishing. The agony aunt, Claire Rayner, for example, refused to submit to such a process and was not published by the Press. In any case, confronted by requests from agents for a quick decision – sometimes within a few days - such a procedure was unwieldy. The Press decided to publish fewer one-off titles, to group books together as

⁴ In 1986, the Press was sued by Andrew Malcolm for breach of contract for failure to publish his work *Making Names*. Mr Malcolm won on appeal and in 1992 the parties entered into a consent order to settle their outstanding claims.

series – thereby making efficiencies in marketing – and to highlight the Oxford name (as was the case in the area of reference). The relaunch of the World's Classics as Oxford World Classics in 1998 is an example. The aim of this chapter is to select some highlights from the varied Trade publishing carried out by the Press. Overall OUP can be viewed as a strong presence in the Trade market through its publications in a variety of areas. There were a number of success stories, some planned, some less so. That continues to be the story of Trade publishing, whether in Oxford or in London or New York.

Anthologies of poetry published by the Press dated back to the early twentieth century, and the 1970s saw the publication of *The New Oxford Book of English Verse* (1972) edited by Dame Helen Gardner and *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* (1973), edited by Philip Larkin. Over the next two decades the idea of an Oxford Book was developed more fully through publishing a range of new titles. An early example, and the title which showed the way in terms of commercial success, was the *Oxford Book of Literary Anecdotes* (1975), edited by James Sutherland, the Lord Northcliffe Professor of Modern English Literature at University College London from 1951 to 1967. The book had been commissioned by Dan Davin in 1953 but the manuscript did not appear until 1973. It was sent out by Jon Stallworthy to Simon Nowell-Smith and Robert Gittings for review. Nowell-Smith responded: 'Back from a holiday in Jersey I thank you for (a) a letter addressing me by my first name ... (d) misplaced confidence in my ability to appreciate the merits of Sutherland's choice of literary anecdotes. You must learn that I am not a serious scholar, or serious critic – or indeed a serious person.'⁵ Robert Gittings was puzzled by the terms of reference: was the book about stories by authors, about authors, or about their work? Evidently the book was intended to be about authors, and having exhausted a supply of distinguished readers including Nevill Coghill, who all declined to comment, the book was promptly sent off to press. It appeared in 1975 with a healthy print run of 20,000 hardbacks, and proved that anthologies could reach a popular market.

A consistent seller was *The Oxford Book of English Verse* and just as the Quiller-Couch version from the early twentieth century remained in print with the arrival of the Gardner edition, the latter in turn carried on alongside the new book edited by Christopher Ricks (1999). The 'Oxford Books of' series expanded across a range of subjects, from *Exploration to The Sea*, from *Dreams to English Ghost Stories*, and with the right editor the books became classic anthologies. They continued to attract highly distinguished editors: to select a few examples, *The Oxford Book of Aphorisms*, edited by John Gross (1983); *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English*, edited by Margaret Atwood (1985); and *The Oxford Book of Irish Short Stories*, edited by William Trevor (1989). <Image 19.04>

⁵ Postcard Simon Nowell-Smith to Jon Stallworthy (April 1973), undated, OUP/PB/ED/018094/OP2492.

A supreme anthologist, Gross edited the *Times Literary Supplement* from 1974 to 1981, and it was in July 1978 that he offered Jeremy Lewis at the Press the idea of a book of aphorisms. He had previously reviewed *The Faber Book of Aphorisms*, edited by W. H. Auden and Louis Kronenberger (1964), and reckoned that there was room for a new volume: 'while it bears the mark of Auden's genius, [it] also has plenty of Audenesque idiosyncrasies'.⁶ In an age long before Twitter, Gross's volume of memorable short statements was hailed as both entertaining and adventurous. Anthony Burgess in *The Observer* said that: 'along with Christmas crackers and fortune cookies, it is a profound witness to our need to be comforted less with apples than with bite-size confirmations of the damnableness of life and the need to put up with it'.⁷ Gross received an advance of £2,000 and a full royalty of 10 per cent of the published price on the hardback, which sold 20,000 copies.

However, by the beginning of the 1990s the commissioning programme was reined in. The permissions bill was getting rather high but there was a feeling that the concept was being over-published - *Private Eye* had fun with the *Oxford Book of Cake*. In 1989 the Canadian branch published the *Canadian Book of Military Anecdotes*, edited by Victor Suthren, which was thought to be a step too far. This followed on from the publication in 1985 of *The Oxford Book of Military Anecdotes*, edited by Max Hastings. He was signed up in 1982 by the in-house editor Judith Luna, and there was much discussion with Hastings's agent about the size of the advance – agreed at £3,000 against a hardback royalty of 10 per cent on the price.⁸ In his proposal, Hastings regarded the anthology as 'one of those pleasures which comes only once a lifetime. With such a wonderfully open field of fire it should be possible to create a very entertaining, whimsical commentary on the soldier's lot through the ages'.⁹ The collection began with the biblical account of the fall of Jericho and ended with Hastings's own account of the taking of Port Stanley in the Falklands War of 1982. With a first printing of 25,000 hardbacks the book sold over 30,000 copies at £9.50 in its first Christmas. Perhaps the Canadian volume of anecdotes was a response to Hastings's British focus. A US reader commented that the book should have the subtitle, 'Mainly British' or 'All but all of them British'.¹⁰

⁶ John Gross to Jeremy Lewis, 24 July 1978, OUP/PB/ED/017776/OP2427.

⁷ Review in *The Observer*, 27 March 1983.

⁸ Judith Luna to Michael Sissons, 16 February 1982, OUP/PB/ED/008188/OP17.

⁹ Max Hastings, synopsis for *The Oxford Book of Military Anecdotes*, OUP/PB/ED/008188/OP17.

¹⁰ Shelby Foote to Jeffrey Seroy at OUP, 15 July 1985, OUP/PB/ED/008188/OP17.

Published in 1990, *The Oxford Book of Humorous Prose* was compiled by Frank Muir. Covering five centuries from Caxton to Wodehouse, and 200 authors, the collection was promoted heavily by the Press in the year of Muir's 70th birthday and reached the top of the hardback bestsellers. As with *Literary Anecdotes*, the book was a long time in gestation, with a contract signed many years before the typescript was delivered (in 1974). The Press was faced with, firstly, the book's great length, which was non-negotiable in Muir's eyes. He did not expect to be edited and the text finished up as 1,200 typeset pages; even when priced at £17.50 the profit margin was low. Further, Muir's agent believed that the contract should now be renegotiated in the light of the time that had elapsed since signature. A new advance was agreed along with payment of substantial copyright fees.

The book attracted mixed reviews – one with the headline 'More girth than mirth'. Comments were made about the standard of editing, with one internal memo suggesting that the book was riddled with typos and that Muir had mistranscribed most of Wodehouse. Kingsley Amis took the opportunity of his review of the book, entitled 'The sound of dying laughter', to comment more broadly on the nature of an Oxford Book. He complained about the inclusion of contributions from 'innumerable Americans and quite enough Canadians, Australians...' which simply reflected the publisher's desire to sell more books overseas, and said that the old OUP was not daunted by the lack of overseas contributors in *The Oxford Book of Medieval Verse*. For Amis an Oxford Book 'used to carry its authenticity and authority in its title... If they have not yet brought out the Oxford Book of Bluebottles or of Handbags, it can only be that they are biding their time.'¹¹ Philip Larkin told Amis that he thought that with their numerous 'Oxford books of...' – 'these pissy trendy compilations' OUP was debasing the coinage.¹²

The Oxford Illustrated History of Britain in 1984, edited by Kenneth O. Morgan, was a landmark trade publication. It was commissioned by Asquith, then the history editor, at the request of Denniston, the Academic Publisher. With 500 pages, over 250 illustrations (both colour and black and white), and a team of distinguished scholars to write the text, this proved a highly successful title in its own right also inspired several illustrated histories published by the Press. Sales of other titles could be given a push by pointing to Morgan, and authors could be persuaded to contribute in the hope that their volumes would be half as successful. The illustrated history brand came to represent authoritative scholarship written for the general reader. Morgan proved a reliable editor, delivering the text of 200,000 words more or less on time, and recruiting as contributors such leading historians as Peter Salway, John Blair, John Gillingham, Ralph Griffiths, John Guy, John Morrill, Paul

¹¹ Kingsley Amis, 'The Sound of Dying Laughter', *The Amis Collection* (London, Hutchinson, 1990), 174.

¹² A. Thwaite, (ed.), *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin, 1940-1985* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 691.

Langford, Christopher Harvie, and Colin Matthew. Encompassing two thousand years of history, it covered political, social, economic and cultural developments. According to the reviewer in the *Sunday Times* the book 'provided the best collaborative history of Britain since *1066 and All That*'.¹³ The first print run was over 100,000 copies, supported by a book club order from BCA of 85,000 copies. The trade magazine, *The Bookseller*, wondered why OUP had not done this kind of book before: 'it all seems so obvious now'.¹⁴ Other editions followed, including an illustrated paperback and a mass paperback edition (rights were sold to Sphere), and by 1997 sales of the OUP editions alone had topped 500,000 copies. There was some resistance to the sale of paperback rights to Sphere on the grounds that it did not help to build up OUP's image as a paperback publisher, and that over the longer term it would be the OUP editions that became regular backlist sellers. Further volumes designed to appeal to a general market followed and in all around thirty illustrated histories were published. These included *The Oxford Illustrated History of English Literature*, edited by Pat Rogers (1987), and *The Oxford Illustrated History of the British Monarchy*, edited by John Cannon and Ralph A. Griffiths (1988). Other subjects covered were *Theatre*, the *British Army*, *Vikings*, *Roman Britain* and *Modern Europe*. <Image 19.05>

Often cited as the work that started a boom in popular science publishing was Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* published by Bantam in 1988. Selling many millions of copies, it led to a wave of titles attempting popular explanations of the big ideas from science. The Press had in fact been publishing in this area long before, with authors such as Richard Dawkins and James Lovelock. Dawkins was a Fellow of New College, Oxford in 1976. However, he first sent the typescript of his book on evolution to Tom Maschler at the London trade house Jonathan Cape. Michael Rodgers, the science editor at the Press, also heard about the book, from Roger Elliott at New College, a Delegate of the Press, who wrote: 'I have no idea whether he or it is any good but it might be worth looking into.'¹⁵ 'This postcard that arrived on my desk ... changed my life and I think the Press's science publishing ... I knew from the first sentence [of the typescript] it was special', Michael Rodgers recalled.¹⁶ Recognizing the importance of the book, he wrote to colleagues of his excitement: 'It is extremely readable and I am convinced the book will create a real stir and do very well indeed. ... Dawkins's fear about Cape is that they might over-sensationalize the book. One appeal of the OUP is that its imprint would confer a stamp of respectability.'¹⁷ Desmond Morris had suggested an alternative title of *The Gene Machine* but with an accelerated publication schedule, the book appeared from Oxford that autumn as *The*

¹³ David Cannadine, 'History for Unheroic Times', *Sunday Times*, 27 May 1984.

¹⁴ *The Bookseller*, 12 May 1984, 2020.

¹⁵ Roger Elliott to Michael Rodgers, 20 February 1976, OUP/PB/ED/003643/OP510.

¹⁶ Michael Rodgers, Interview, 20 March 2009.

¹⁷ Memo from Michael Rodgers to D. M. Davin, J. H. Stallworthy, and A. J. Hart-Davis, 11 March 1976, OUP/PB/ED/003643/OP510.

Selfish Gene priced at £2.95. Dawkins received a modest advance on publication. The internal report at the publisher Granada - offered the book for paperback publication - suggested that although it was their job to translate interest in Dawkins's writings into paperback sales, the task would be difficult. The anonymous reviewer commented: 'although these books are talked about in hushed tones in certain circles I have the awful feeling that that is all that happens and that people don't read them that widely in this country, although the intellectual French and the vast college-educated audience in the US do make these books best sellers in their own way.'¹⁸

Reviews were slow to come to start with but there was a BBC Horizon programme about the topic, called 'The Selfish Gene', broadcast in December 1976 and watched by 1.5 m people. Dawkins wrote to the producer about the behaviour of reviewers, both of TV and books: 'I am sure you must have been bitterly disappointed at the way the critics from supposedly serious newspapers preferred to review the Royal Variety Show, even if they did pan it. I was flabbergasted to hear that my own uncle and aunt had a dispute over which programme to watch. If you can't even count on people with a coefficient of relatedness of 0.25, where are you? ... I get the feeling that the main dailies (and the BBC) have Arts graduates for reviews editors who will give mass coverage to the Letters of Wagner's younger brother (etc.) but who imagine that anything scientific is automatically of no interest to their readers.'¹⁹ Dawkins need not have worried. Roger Lewin in the *New Scientist* had already reviewed the book favourably and suggested that it had the 'unmistakable sniff of a bestseller'.²⁰ The editor of *Vogue* wrote suggesting that the author should write a new piece on the selfishness of genes for their magazine. Paperback rights were sold to Granada (and a licence period of 8 years) before the Press took over the long-term publication of the book. By the time of the publication of a 30th anniversary edition, it had sold over a million copies and had been translated into over 25 languages. But OUP did not hang on to Dawkins and for his subsequent books he moved publishers and acquired an agent keen to negotiate the best deal on his behalf.

James Lovelock, now famous as the originator of the Gaia hypothesis (in collaboration with Lynn Margulis) - later to become a theory - was working as a freelance scientist when he published an article 'The Quest for Gaia' in *New Scientist* in February 1975. Lovelock suggested that the surface of the Earth behaves as a highly integrated organism capable of controlling its own composition and environment. The article attracted the attention of

¹⁸ Report commissioned by Peter Sommer at Granada; sent with a memo from Carol Buckroyd to Michael Rodgers, 4 August 1976, OUP/PB/ED/003603/OP502.

¹⁹ Richard Dawkins to Peter Jones at the BBC, 16 December 1976, OUP/PB/ED/003603/OP502.

²⁰ 'The Gene Machine', *New Scientist*, 28 October 1976, 199.

several publishers including Peter Janson-Smith and Adam Hart-Davis at OUP. The Press secured the world rights to *Gaia: A new look at life on Earth* (1979). An internal memo anticipated that the book would be controversial but could see that the general public would respond with enthusiasm.²¹ This indeed proved the case and a follow-up book, *The Ages of Gaia*, was published in 1988. Lovelock's autobiography, *Homage to Gaia: The life of an independent scientist*, appeared from the Press in 2000. Roger Penrose, Rouse Ball Professor of Mathematics at Oxford, submitted a proposal in 1984 with the tentative title, 'The Emperor's New Mind' – the title was described in the note to the Delegates as 'enthraling, if possibly confusing'.²² Penrose's central argument was that we will always have great difficulty in describing the human mind using our current ideas of the laws of physics (the new clothes). Martin Gardner, in his foreword to the book, published in 1989, said that it would become a classic. It turned out to be a key title in the area of popular science and was highly successful publishing, especially given that no advance was paid to the author. Predicting this, Arrow bought the paperback rights, though they subsequently reverted to the Press. Peter Atkins, author of the bestselling OUP textbook *Physical Chemistry*, proposed a trade book on the central ideas of contemporary science – published as *Galileo's Finger: The ten great ideas of science* (2003). The title drew on the fact that Galileo, one of whose fingers is preserved on display in Florence, provided much of the impetus for modern science by helping to point the way out of medieval ignorance. Atkins received a substantial advance for the book, but considerably less than might have been paid by a trade house in London. The book featured in *The Sunday Times* bestseller list and had excellent reviews, with Dawkins saying: 'the Nobel Prize for Literature has never been won by a scientist. It is high time it happened, and Peter Atkins would be my candidate. ... Atkins's literate prose leaves us inspired, fulfilled, enriched, and properly alive.' <Image 19.06>

A scientific book about gardening, *Know and Grow Vegetables*, by J.K.A. Bleasdale, P.J. Salter and others, appeared in 1979. Written by experts at the National Vegetable Research Station, Wellesbourne, Warwickshire, the book offered simple instructions and helpful advice on how to produce good vegetable crops, based on the latest scientific research. One tip offered was to germinate seeds indoors before being sown outdoors in a jelly to protect them from damage. The suggested carrier jelly was wallpaper paste prepared at half its normal strength. The first volume sold 25,000 copies in its first year, and was followed by a second volume (1982) and a combined edition (1991). Some titles sold in highly respectable numbers, but the Press could not always realize their full sales potential. In 1998 the eponymously titled book was published based upon the *New Scientist* column, *The Last Word*, which invites readers to write in with enquiries about everyday scientific phenomena.

²¹ Memo from Peter Janson-Smith, 2 June 1975, OUP/PB/ED/009923/1347.

²² Delegates' Note, 23 May 1984, OUP/PB/ED/017090/OP2276.

Answers were given to such questions as: Why is the sky blue? Does it really get warmer when it snows? Why doesn't superglue stick to the inside of the tube? How is it possible to uncork a bottle by hitting the bottom? Can you drive through a rainbow? Should you walk or run in the rain? The book sold tens of thousands of copies but subsequent titles based on the column, published by Profile Books, sold hundreds of thousands.

On popular health, the Press published such titles as John Guillebaud's *The Pill*, which went through six editions by 2004, and the *National Childbirth Trust Book of Pregnancy, Birth and Parenthood* (1992 and 1996). A bestseller which came as a surprise to the Press was *The Diary of a Teenage Health Freak* (1987) by Aidan Macfarlane and Ann McPherson. By a paediatrician and a GP, both from Oxford, the book aimed to meet the need for cringe-free health information specific to teenagers. The fictional diary of the teenager Pete Payne, it gave readers advice on health, sex and other issues. The character of Pete was inspired by Adrian Mole, the creation of Sue Townsend, who wrote the foreword to the book. It was based on a study of over 600 teenagers aged 14 and 15, who filled in a questionnaire about their health and were then asked to write about some specific problem relating to themselves. On receipt of a finished copy, the Medicine Delegate, David Weatherall, wrote: 'I remember with amusement the effect this had on the Delegates when the title came through. I hope that the sales and reviews make them look foolish as I think it is a splendid idea.'²³ The book reprinted before publication and went on to sell over half a million copies in the UK. A sequel, *I'm a Health Freak Too!*, appeared in 1989 (featuring Pete's sister Susie), and the books were turned into a Channel 4 television series as well as being translated into over 25 languages. A Healthfreak website followed, attracting over 1.75 million visitors.

The World's Classics series dated back to the early twentieth century. It was started by Grant Richards in 1901 and 66 volumes had appeared by the time he went bankrupt. Henry Frowde bought the series for OUP at the end of 1905 and by the 1960s it had grown to over 600 titles, all in small-format hardback. With the growth in competition from paperback editions, which took over the market, a decision had to be taken about how to secure the long-term future of the series. By 1974 around 200 were still in print and by 1977 the total had diminished to 170; sales shrank from a total of 140,000 copies in 1973 to just over 90,000 in 1977. By that year the conclusion of an internal memo was that the 'series in its present form has no long-term future'.²⁴ Alongside Penguin Classics the hardbacks came across as 'an attractive but inconsistent rag-bag of titles'.²⁵ The question was how to take

²³ David Weatherall to Nicola Bion, 6 April 1987, OUP/PB/ED/017879/OP2447.

²⁴ Memo, Jeremy Lewis to Editorial Committee, 2 November 1977, OUP/021863/OP3247.

²⁵ Memo, Jeremy Lewis to Editorial Committee, 23 August 1977, OUP/021864/OP3248.

the series into paperback: in which format and with which authors? This would involve competing with Penguin Classics and should the Press aim to go in head-on or start with more peripheral titles not available elsewhere? In the end the decision was to go into the market with keenly priced editions of the main authors, and to secure academic adoptions which would underpin the sales figures. The trick would be to meet the requirements of students without intimidating the general reader. It was also hoped to translate good will for the old hardbacks into concrete sales of the paperback editions, as well as carry on the publication of curiosities alongside mainstream titles.

The paperback series was launched in 1980 with 24 titles including novels by Austen, Henry James, Mary Shelley and Tolstoy. Prices ranged from 75p for *Pride and Prejudice* to £1.95 for *Anna Karenina*. There were four-colour covers in a series design, full explanatory notes for students, and introductions by such renowned writers and critics as John Fowles and John Bayley. *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë was one of the first texts issued (it had been the very first World's Classic that Grant Richards published in 1901). There was little reliance on the old hardbacks as sources for these editions, and some texts were drawn from the Oxford English Novels and other scholarly editions.²⁶ 'There was a feeling at the beginning', Judith Luna has observed, 'that we had to get a lot of titles into the series very quickly to build critical mass, and we didn't do any resetting in those days to save costs. We just used to find out-of-copyright books and photographed them.'²⁷ This statement from someone who worked on the project is frank, but does not suggest a commitment to the highest editorial standard from a university press.

The arrival of Will Sulkin at OUP from Penguin as a paperbacks editor in 1980 offered knowledge of that company's success in this area, and confirmed that the thrust of the strategy was correct – to concentrate on building the coverage of the central authors. Sales figures from Penguin showed, for example that 'Brontës and Austen are tops. Dickens is a very good second, but popularity of individual novels varies considerably. Hardy looks like being runner-up to Dickens. George Eliot is patchy. ... Foreigners are French and Russian ... The Koran is a must.'²⁸ It was concluded that although Penguin was pre-eminent in the market, it had no built-in editorial advantages except access to some modern classics still in copyright, such as *Animal Farm* by George Orwell. A policy pursued by Penguin was to publish TV or film tie-in editions with covers using stills from the productions. Given that the sums asked by the TV company were too high for the Press to consider, an innovative approach was adopted in the early days of the paperback series. Members of staff who

²⁶ David Attwooll, '2,000,001', *New Statesman*, 4 April 1980.

²⁷ Interview, Judith Luna, 17 June 2011.

²⁸ Memo Robin Denniston to Will Sulkin, 4 November 1980, OUP/021862/OP3247.

looked similar to the actors were recruited to dress up in period costume and a relevant scene was mocked up for the cover picture. This strategy was not pursued in the long term and in any case films or TV productions usually boosted sales for editions which were not specifically tied-in. Even the appearance of the film *Troy* (2004), starring Brad Pitt, led to an increase in sales of the World's Classic edition of *The Iliad*. New series designs appeared on a regular basis, first in 1990 and then in 1998, at which point the books were also rebranded as Oxford World's Classics. By then there were over 700 titles available against 1,500 from Penguin. Alongside Penguin, a new competitor had emerged in 1991 with the launch of Wordsworth Classics. With print-runs of 50,000 copies, and minimal overheads for the company, the books were sold for £1.00 each. Both Oxford and Penguin took the view that this would be a temporary phenomenon in the market, but they were proved wrong and there were serious worries about the future of World's Classics in the face of this competition. The success of the Wordsworth editions prompted Penguin to issue its own Popular Classics at £1.00 each in 1994; and OUP was forced to respond by slashing prices on 250 titles to £2.50, a move which halted a sharp decline in sales. <Image 19.07>

The financial success of classics editions largely rests on the fact that most editions are of works out of copyright. When authors come out of copyright this provides an opportunity for a series to include them for the first time. Such a case is Thomas Hardy, who came out of copyright on 31 December 1978, and editions followed in World's Classics. Following an EU directive, the standard term of copyright for all authors was extended in 1995 to 70 years from date of death - the previous period was 50 years. Hardy in fact came back into copyright until the end of 1998, and publishers of new editions of his works had to pay royalties to his estate during this period. The Press encountered a problem in 1998 when its new branding was challenged in the courts in the USA. Penguin Books USA argued that the new cover look infringed Penguin's 'trade dress' rights in its classics series through similarities in the cover design and colour. OUP rejected the claim. After a good deal of argument, a compromise was agreed with Penguin which allowed the books printed in the new covers to sell out before a revised design was implemented, with the 'bold but effective change from Oxford dark blue to a dark red'.²⁹ A boost for the series was provided by the 'Big Read' in 2003, a search for the nation's best-loved novel. Viewers of the BBC programmes were asked to declare their preferences and the results were broadcast in a final countdown in December. The top book was *The Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien but with many classic novels in the top 100 (*Pride and Prejudice* came in at number two; *Jane Eyre* at number 10) there was a long-term boost to the reading of the authors represented in the Oxford series. Although Oxford World's Classics have not achieved the market share of Penguin, over time they have gained a firm foothold with a reputation for the standard of the edition (their notes) and their attractive appearance. Fresh titles, translations of foreign

²⁹ Press release, undated, April 1998, OUP/SOPA/000072/PA13.

authors, and new editions continued to be commissioned. By 2004 there were around 800 titles in the series. With editions of, for example, John Cleland's *Fanny Hill: Memoirs of a woman of pleasure* (1985), Mrs Beeton's *Book of Household Management* (2000), and the *Kamasutra* (2003), the series continued to attract interest in individual titles and editions as well as in the series as a whole. An edition of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, attracted much attention and there was a launch party in Dublin – the book was published on Bloomsday (16 June) in 1998. The original edition was photographed in a special operation at the Bodleian Library, and broken characters were repaired on the film. The book attracted high-profile reviewers, including Anthony Burgess, and is still widely regarded as the best critical edition. Associated titles were also published in the series such as *Is Heathcliff a Murderer?* (1996) by John Sutherland, in which he examined a series of seeming anomalies, enigmas, and mysteries in Victorian fiction. For example, does Becky kill Jos at the end of *Vanity Fair*? Why does no one notice that Hetty is pregnant in *Adam Bede*? How, exactly, does Victor Frankenstein make his monster? Why does Sherlock Holmes get wrong the name of one of his clients? Subsequent volumes were *Can Jane Eyre be Happy?* (1997) and *Who Betrays Elizabeth Bennet?* (1999). In 2001, to mark the centenary of the series, a selection of small-format hardbacks appeared with introductions by well-known names including Christopher Hope, Alan Sillitoe, and Jeanette Winterson.

Other success stories have included the list of *Very Short Introductions*, which now covers over 250 subject areas. Beginning in 1995 the books have sold over 3 million copies and their brevity – most being between 120 and 180 pages - makes them highly suitable for translation. When the list of books first started there was a competition within the trade department to come up with a better title, but in the end the name stuck, as did the abbreviation VSI. A range of distinguished authors have written for the series, including Barry Cunliffe (*The Celts*), Timothy Gowers (*Mathematics*) and John Sutherland (*Bestsellers*). The series hit both a trade and student market. This approach had been tried before with the OPUS series of paperbacks in the 1980s – an attempt to copy the publishing success of Pelicans – but it was the VSIs which found the right formula. The cover of each volume featured an original painting by the freelance, formerly in-house, cover designer Philip Atkins. The series initially took over titles from the 1980s *Past Masters* series of short introductions to great thinkers in which books such as R.M. Hare on *Plato* (1982), Henry Chadwick on *Augustine* (1986), G.M. Ross on *Leibniz* (1984), and Germaine Greer on *Shakespeare* (1986) had appeared. There were many admirable volumes by distinguished authors but the series as a whole did not quite meet expectations. VSI titles thereafter, however, were normally specially commissioned, and at an accelerating rate as it became obvious that a successful formula had been found. Books provided introductions to historical topics, to particular disciplines, to particular texts, to particular literatures – and the scope in these and other fields looked almost endless. Titles published in 2001 - Peter Coles, *Cosmology*, Leslie Iversen, *Drugs*, Catriona Kelly, *Russian Literature*, William Doyle,

The French Revolution - give a flavour of the range. It was clearly vital to commission authors who not only had academic standing but were capable of succinct summary. <Image 19.10>

Several one-off titles have been successful trade publications. The Press took a risk by publishing a memoir by Winifred Beechey, a first-time author in her 70s, which appeared in 1984 with a Foreword by Ronald Blythe. Set in the Vale of Aylesbury between 1914 and 1965, it told the story of her parents' lives and her own growing up. Amongst books written by leading academics for a mixed audience of general readers and students was Simon Blackburn's *Think: A compelling introduction to philosophy* (1999), which sold 60,000 copies in its first year and launched a trend of pocket-sized trade titles. Similarly, popular works of history included *Codebreakers* (1993) by F. H. Hinsley and Alan Stripp, the inside story of the work at Bletchley Park during the Second World War. The original 1908 edition of *Scouting for Boys: A handbook for instruction in good citizenship*, by Robert Baden-Powell, was reissued in hardback in 2004 and proved to be a great success. The Oxford Paperback Reference series, which covered every subject area from music and dance through to folklore and the weather, was to expand significantly and featured prominently as titles in the subscription service Oxford Reference Online.

A prominent area of trade publishing was children's books, which provided both commercial and critical success for the Press. OUP is the only university press to carry a significant list in this area. Moved from the General Division to be within the Education Division, the list discovered and developed a range of talented authors and illustrators. There was a long history of publishing classic authors such as Rosemary Sutcliff and Philippa Pearce, and for most of the period of this chapter the children's editor was Ron Heapy (from 1979 until he retired in 2000). He worked with authors who had 'temperament and very strong egos' and he loved every minute of it. He took over, after a brief interlude, from Mabel George, who was a hard act to follow – her authors and illustrators won seven Carnegie, and three Kate Greenaway, medals (she had retired in 1974). His initial, cautious brief was to aim for the library market and to avoid teenage novels, but experiments with fiction could not be avoided. Whilst a lot of such books did not do as well as he had hoped, there were a number of spectacular successes. 'Certainly in fiction, most of what you do fails...but it's the ones that win that pay the electric light bill.'³⁰ <Image 19.08>

In July 1983 a typescript arrived at the Press from Valerie Thomas with the opening lines:

³⁰ Interview, Ron Heapy, 12 May 2009.

Winnie the Witch lived in a black house

In the forest.

The house was black on the outside, and

it was black on the inside.

Ron Heapy replied to say 'We thought the story had something. The colour idea is very good, though probably we would have to tidy it up a little and find an artist.'³¹ By 1987 proofs were ready and the artist, Korky Paul, had been signed up to illustrate the book. Heapy wrote with the proofs: 'we're all delighted with them. Even our Production Manager, who is a burnt out case and has seen it all before, leapt off his chair and came screaming down the corridor.'³² Published in 1987, the book won the Children's Book Award in 1988 and became a runaway success, selling over half a million copies by the end of the century. More books were to follow as well as a CD-ROM version which came out in 1997. Winnie became the most successful character in Oxford children's publishing apart from Biff, Chip, Kipper and the others in the Oxford Reading Tree. An earlier success was the Demon Headmaster titles by Gillian Cross. The first was published in 1982, attracting an advance of £400. Three children pit their wits against a fiendish headmaster who has a hypnotic hold over his school. A number of titles followed; also a TV show which ran for three series in the late 1990s. Paperback rights were sold to Puffin and later reverted to OUP, as was to happen with a later novel by Gillian Cross, *Wolf*, published in 1990. The first Harry Potter book appeared in 1997 and is credited with having created the notion of a crossover title, which would be read by both children and adults. Of course such books existed before then and the reviewer of *Wolf* in the *Times Educational Supplement* said 'Here is a teenage novel capable of entertaining adults', and the book went on to win the Carnegie Medal in 1991.³³

The development of a new book by the illustrator Brian Wildsmith shows how in trade publishing authors and editor scan work very closely together. He had first been published by the Press in the 1960s, and Mabel George had commissioned his *ABC* which won the Kate Greenaway Medal in 1963. In 1988, on the plane and whilst driving to visit a publisher in Italy, Heapy and Wildsmith talked over how to take a new angle for an illustrated title about the Nativity. The publisher they were visiting, Otakar Bozejovsky from Zurich-based Bohem Press (who was staying in Italy), said he thought that a straight Christmas story would be very boring and that all straight Christmas stories are interchangeable. Wildsmith had

³¹ Ron Heapy to Valerie Thomas, 22 September 1983, OUP/PB/ED/011402/OP1525.

³² Ron Heapy to Korky Paul, 30 January 1987, OUP/PB/ED/011402/OP1525.

³³ Brian Slough, 'Nightmare Rides', *TES*, 14 December 1990.

initially wanted to see the story from the donkey's point of view, and after much discussion in the final version the main events were to happen off stage, without words to describe them, as seen by a little girl and a baby donkey. The book appeared in 1989 with a print run of nearly 50,000 copies including orders for the USA and Germany. A follow-up volume was *The Easter Story* (1993), told through the eyes of the donkey which carries Jesus into Jerusalem. Another winner of the Kate Greenaway Medal for outstanding illustration in a children's book was *The Highwayman* in 1982. Charles Keeping gave a distinctive black-and-white treatment to the poem by Alfred Noyes about a highwayman and his love for Bess, the landlord's daughter at the inn. When commissioning the book Heapy worried that the character Bess might come out too 'chocolate box', adding: 'I am sure there are parts of the world and periods in history where girls went around with white blouses falling off the shoulder. Alas, I never meet any girls like that.' Keeping replied, 'Even if I tried to do a "chocolate box" Bess it wouldn't come off, don't fear.'³⁴ Other black-and-white titles followed from Keeping, including Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott* (1986).

A highly successful author of fiction for teenagers is Geraldine McCaughrean, who during the period covered by this chapter won the Carnegie Medal, the Whitbread Children's Book Award (three times), and *The Guardian* Children's Fiction Prize. *Little Lower than Angels* (1987), featured Gabriel, who ran away from working as apprentice to a stonemason in order to play the part of an angel in a travelling play. This, her first novel, sold a respectable 2,000 copies in the first year but she wrote to the Press to complain about the book's availability: 'I ought to vent my spleen on someone at OUP. But at virtually every school and library I've expended my annual leave on visiting, I've been told without fail that my book isn't in the shops. Is it out of print? Do I know anybody who stocks it? The most humiliating day of all (in every respect) – opening the school fete – was crowned by being told that the headmaster, infant-school headmistress, fete organizer, children and PTA had all tried for months to get hold of a copy but had not been able to do so; that's why nobody had read it and didn't know what it was about or who I was.'³⁵ It is not clear how this particular failure occurred but it graphically illustrates what customers really experienced when managers in Oxford complained of 'distribution difficulties' whether in Neasden at one period or in Corby at another. McCaughrean didn't in fact need to worry as her reputation grew with every book, and her second novel *A Pack of Lies* (1988) won the Carnegie and *The Guardian* awards. The book was sold to Puffin but OUP later regained the rights and took over the long-term publication. <Image 19.09>

³⁴ Correspondence between Ron Heapy and Charles Keeping, 9 January 1980 and 22 January 1980. OUP/PB/ED/11337/1519.

³⁵ Geraldine McCaughrean to Ron Heapy, 10 August 1988, OUP/ED/ED004636/ED606.

There is no better person than Heapy to reflect on a hundred years of children's publishing at OUP, which had begun in 1906, and had taken in *Biggles* and *Winnie the Witch* along the way. Moved from London, it now sat alongside august companions, but did so with pride: 'We're all in a quad now', he wrote, 'with a fountain and cloisters. Every spring, two ducks fly in, and shortly after, eight little ducklings waddle across the lawn, looking nervously up at the large university-type buildings looming down on them. I like to think the mother duck looks back on them and says, "It's OK, fellas, relax. This is where they do Children's Books."' ³⁶

³⁶ Ron Heapy, 'A Hundred Years of Oxford Children's Books', *Books for Keeps*, 167, November 2007.