

Posted Abroad

Steve Hare

Abstract

During World War Two, draconian paper rationing, and the increased difficulties in exporting books to readers abroad presented particular challenges to Penguin Books. They had always enjoyed an international audience, but now had many of their eager UK readers in uniform and posted abroad. The challenge – to keep a regular flow of books to that remote and scattered audience – appealed to Penguin’s founder, Allen Lane, who contrived to supply books through several ingenious and unconventional methods.

Keywords

Publishing; distribution; typography; design; education; paperback; Penguin books



These are the first ten Penguins, published on 30 July 1935, nearly eighty years ago. Here is an instantly recognisable, iconic design, so familiar it is almost etched into our DNA. Say “Penguin Book” to anyone, of almost any age, and they would not be able to help themselves thinking of three horizontal bands, type, and a penguin, with the bands colour coded according to the content: orange for fiction, green for crime, dark blue for biography. Simple, bold, modern (even now), and impossible not to love a little. And all this despite the fact that Penguin effectively abandoned plain typographic covers at least fifty years ago.

This design was not commissioned from the Pentagram or Wolff Olins of the day, but was entirely the work of a junior member of staff at The Bodley Head, the publishing house that [Allen Lane](#), Penguin’s founder, had effectively inherited from his distant relation, John Lane. The 22-year-old [Edward Young](#), in an unguarded moment, had probably mentioned that he had some modest talents as an artist. Once Penguin had been decided on as the name for the new series (legend has it by Lane’s secretary), Young was immediately dispatched to the Penguin Pool at London Zoo to sketch them waddling down [Berthold Lubetkin](#)’s inspired and still brand-new spiralling concrete ramps.

Young’s simple solution owes some small debts, notably to the continental [Albatross Books](#) and [Harry Beck’s Underground map](#). Both used colour coding; and Albatross, of course,

sported a rather less approachable seabird as its emblem (McCleery, 2006, 297–316). But Penguin also defined a new idea; the book as brand; the book as mass medium. It is impossible today to imagine the impact of hundreds of these bright, colourful objects filling window displays in the high street, and held aloft by commuters instead of today's ubiquitous *Metro*. Simple, uniform and like nothing else, let alone other books – they announced reading as a fun, modern activity, with a unique element of community; the books were almost badges of membership of an essentially universal club. But the simplicity of early Penguin covers is deceptive. Over time and in straitened and special circumstances they came to tell a complex story, against a background of the Blitz, the Battle of the Atlantic, rationing – with an almost Churchillian response to adversity.

World War II was not easy for the majority of the British publishing industry. Poor gentleman publishers had struggled through the Twenties and Thirties – through recession, depression, bankruptcies – and then, to cap it all, new media threatened to lure readers away: to the cinema, radio and the first flickerings of television. War, however, brought full employment, albeit of a mostly regimented nature. People suddenly had money to spend and enforced leisure time. For most, the war imposed brief periods of intense activity, interspersed with endless sitting around and waiting, often in barracks or gun emplacements, usually in remote coastal outposts, miles from civilisation. So people could – and did – buy books. And just as trade was picking up, and publishers could finally sell all they could produce, the government introduced increasingly stringent paper rationing. All publishers had their allocation cut to 60 percent of the paper they had used during a benchmark period, set between 1 September 1938 and 31 August 1939. This was followed by a further draconian cut in December 1941 to 37.5 percent (Pearson, 1996). For the first time in years there was a huge and willing audience – and publishers were unable to satisfy the demand. A final insult was added to injury with one particularly devastating bombing raid at the end of 1940, which destroyed much of Paternoster Row and the area surrounding St Paul's – the very place where most publishers warehoused their precious stock. This resulted in the loss of some five million books. (Eliot and Rose, 2009, 351)

One man probably had a wry smile. His rival publishers had thought him mad to desert the City and invest in a cabbage field in a small village outside London to build his headquarters and warehouse, but Harmondsworth escaped the worst of the bombs. He was Allen Lane, founder of a publishing, social and cultural revolution.

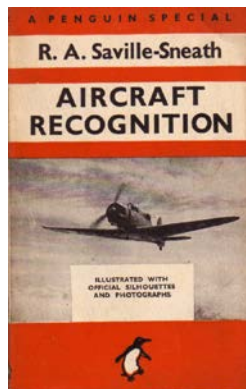
Penguin was not like any other imprint, and Lane was not like any other publisher. He was no gentleman – though he would certainly end up one in later life, with honorary degrees, a knighthood and appointed Companion of Honour. In the Thirties and Forties he was still something of a maverick, the most unconventional of publishers, and an undoubted genius. His paper ration benefited substantially from Penguin's huge sales in the predetermined period, leading up to the outbreak of war. While every other publisher was contracting, retrenching and still struggling in the early war years, Lane was expanding right, left and centre (though still predominantly left in those days). While other publishers struggled to survive – and Lane, indeed, had tried in vain to keep the Bodley Head solvent – the new imprint appeared and was an immediate and huge success. Penguin had been launched not on detailed market research or in-depth interrogation of focus groups, but on simple instinct: Lane's certainty that the world was full of people who had been denied a proper education and were eager for decent books at the right price. That price was 6d – then the cost of a packet of ten cigarettes. Penguins, in their bright, clean and simple covers contained the works of contemporary authors of repute and influence. And Penguins were everywhere. The instant success with fiction reprints doubled as Lane expanded into non-fiction, and commissioned original works; Pelican textbooks on literature, history, science, archaeology – and then, and most significantly, Penguin Specials. These were political titles commissioned and written at journalistic speed during those frantic pre-war years when the press and most publishers appeared to be ignoring the obvious: the unstoppable rise of fascism and the dangers posed by Hitler. Penguin Specials were topical, urgent and compelling, and they were consumed in huge numbers, helping Penguin consolidate, and providing the basis of that far superior paper quota.

Despite the declaration of war, Penguin continued to expand in every direction: with children's lithographed picture books and a companion junior fiction series; short stories and regular magazine publications; Hansard (briefly); illustrated hardbound books with colour plates designed to be collectable; even a brand-new series on Modern Painters, designed to bring the best of modern art to a similarly eclectic and universal audience. These ambitious new series added substantially to the reach of Penguin, which already included Shakespeare, Guidebooks and Illustrated Classics – along with the main series encompassing fiction, crime, biography, travel and miscellaneous titles, the political Specials, and the continually expanding Pelican series.

Penguins, too, were international from the start, reaching audiences in every continent. But paper rationing caused obvious problems, especially exporting books in bulk to the USA. Transatlantic convoys were always vulnerable to U-boats. A single ship torpedoed on its way to the States to bring back much needed armaments and machinery to Britain might go down not only with all hands but also several thousand Penguins loaded as ballast – a terrible waste of precious resources. And those books that did make it to the American newsstands and bookstalls suffered by comparison. American books were bright and shiny with illustrated covers whereas Penguins were now printed on crudely recycled paper with the contents stripped of leading and margins to get as many words as possible on every page. Even brand new they looked tired by comparison, and with the penguin on the cover often looking uncomfortable, even in pain.

There was a solution – simple in principle, but extraordinarily difficult for Lane, who hated to lose his direct influence – to hand over complete control to the US office and let them print and publish Penguins in the States, which would free up paper for further home sales. Ian Ballantine, the ambitious young man in charge in New York, jumped at the chance, and took a leaf out of Penguin's own book by recreating an American version of the biggest selling book in the UK.

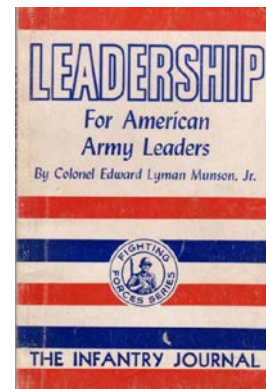
This was R.A. Saville-Sneath's *Aircraft Recognition*. Every schoolboy and Home Guard carried a copy; it was essential to know if the plane flying overhead was friend or foe.



Penguin Special, S83, 1941



US Penguin Special, S201, 1942

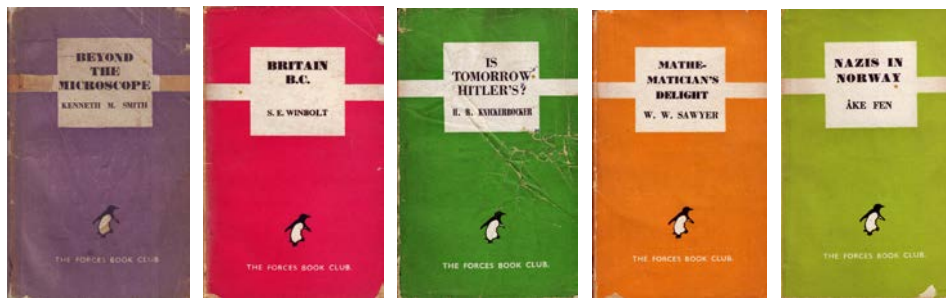


The Infantry Journal, 1942

Ballantine and his team produced their version, cutting and pasting it together on their kitchen table. *What's That Plane?* went on sale soon after the United States entered the war. It, too, sold in huge numbers, but it was to have wider impact. American soldiers were issued with books under the imprint of *The Infantry Journal*, a series of rather uninspired and uninspiring booklets that primarily consisted of training manuals. Army educators soon realised that soldiers would respond more positively to these publications if they looked more like the books on general sale. Following the success of *What's That Plane?*, Penguin Books Inc was appointed to publish them: military titles mixed with more general, but still relevant, reading. It was an arrangement that thrived throughout the war, and put Penguin in touch with a huge audience, supported by official backing. (Ballantine and Patrick, 1995, 16–19)

Allen Lane saw the immense value of this arrangement and negotiated a similar arrangement with the British Army to produce books especially for troops at home and abroad. Potentially endless red tape was casually by-passed. Penguin's chief editor, W.E. Williams had recently been appointed to run Army Education, the very body that would commission them. It was soon all agreed, with Penguin as the exclusive supplier.

It was yet another blow for the rest of the British publishing industry. Penguin had just arranged a new source of paper along with a new audience, and had obtained the chance to cover all their costs with a first run exclusively for the Army, with copies for general sale as run-ons. The Forces Book Club should have been a huge success; it was hard to see how it might fail. But it only lasted a year, and soon petered out. Williams, the driving force behind the Pelican imprint was, at heart, an educator. And while countless poor conscripts in their remote outposts probably wanted nothing more than some undemanding crime fiction or westerns – they were largely offered titles such as *Social Life in the Insect World* and *Ur of the Chaldees*. (Pearson, 1996, 17–38)

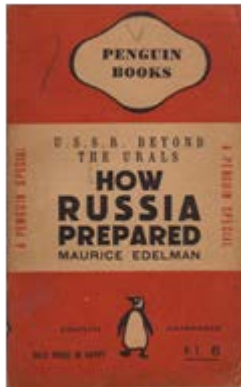


Penguin Forces Book Club titles, 1943

The many unsold copies were eventually recalled and rebound as Prisoners of War Book Service editions which were sent abroad to German camps where a truly captive audience was to be found. Today these books are understandably rare: after reading them, prisoners often found a perfect use for these Penguins either as fuel for the stove to brew some tea – or toilet paper. (Hare, 1995, 116)

As the war progressed, British troops in large numbers came to be stationed in the Middle and Far East, with little chance of receiving books from home. Places like Australia and New Zealand which had provided a large export market for Penguin from the start could no longer receive new stock from the UK. So more deals were negotiated. There was no editorial or production staff in Australia. Instead, a local publisher, Lothian was engaged to reprint popular Penguins for the Australian market. A similar arrangement was negotiated with an odd character based in Cairo, W. Jeffery Eady, to reprint Penguins primarily for the

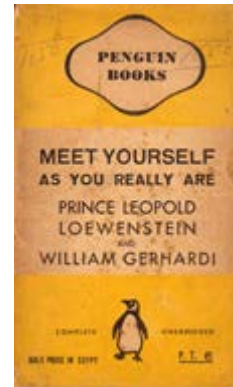
British forces stationed in and around Egypt. Among other things, Eady was the Shanks Sanitary and Bath Company representative in the Middle East; it is unlikely that he was a publisher through and through. (Pearson, 1996, 71–3).



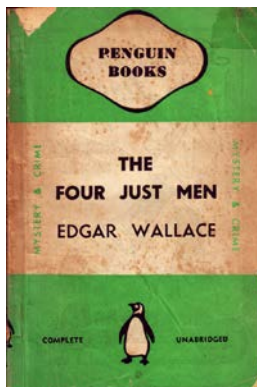
Egyptian Penguin
Special, S110,
January 1945



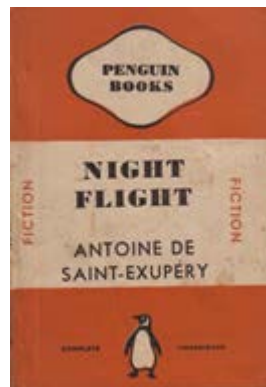
Egyptian Edition Pingouin,
unnumbered, c.1943



Egyptian Penguin
main series 383, 1943



Australian edition,
Penguin main series 64,
January 1943



Australian edition,
Penguin main series 182,
November 1943



Australian edition, Penguin
Special S54, August 1940

To the casual observer, both the Australian Lothian, and Egyptian editions look initially like ordinary Penguins. Closer inspection reveals a complete inconsistency in the use of font and type, a lack of uniformity in size and centring, and the addition of local adverts of a charming or occasionally bizarre nature. Understandably these books seldom turn up in the UK, and are now rare in their home market. They feature rough and ready, slightly amateur versions of Young's classic design, but tell a compelling story of wartime exigency: in Australia, just as

in the UK, production and design staff would be called up for active service, leaving a depleted staff to carry out tasks for which they might be either inexperienced or unqualified.



Advertisements in Australian Wartime Penguins

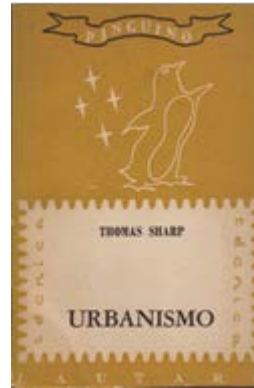
Penguin Special S127,
November 1942

Needless to say Penguin was also publishing for the home market around this time with books like the *Wartime 'Good Housekeeping' Cookery Book*, which features such recipes as “Sea Pie” made without fish, “Wartime Steamed Pudding”, “Mock Lemon Curd”, “Eggless Fruit Cake”, and the particularly tempting “Dig for Victory Dish”.

Allen Lane ensured that Penguin survived and grew. Penguin continued to distribute books to readers in any way they could and wherever their readers happened to be. A wartime Penguin fitted perfectly in an Army battledress pocket, and they were to be found in most of them. These fragile books, printed on paper so crudely recycled that you can occasionally read whole words of previous printings, were also passed round air-raid shelters and eventually posted free of charge to troops abroad. Penguin’s Harmondsworth warehouse and offices had long been requisitioned for the repair of fighter aircraft, and the depleted office staff moved into Lane’s living room for the duration. Many of his employees had already been called up, and a skeleton staff oversaw the production of ever-increasing numbers of books despite the fantastic obstacles and difficulties.



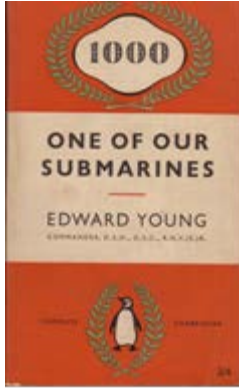
L'Italia di Domani, Edizioni del Pinguino, Q1, 1942



Lautaro Pingüino, Buenos Aires, 1947

By 1945, Penguins were universally known, and were even reaching audiences other than the Anglophone. Negotiations were already well advanced to translate selected titles into Spanish for Argentinian editions. In 1944 a further series was produced for the Free French, under the editorial supervision of Arthur Koestler. There was even a single Italian 'Edizioni del Pinguino', published in July 1942. Back home, and amongst the British armed forces, Penguins were an essential, universal part of wartime life and were held in special regard by a massive audience. It is widely believed that they were a significant factor in the postwar Labour landslide election victory, helped in no small part by a further series of books specifically dealing with postwar reconstruction, and the design and architectural implications.

With the war over, it took considerable time for the British infrastructure to recover. Paper rationing continued, and for some years the average production period for books was between 18–24 months. The topical and urgent Penguin Specials quietly dwindled. And outside competition increased, with publishers like Pan riding a wave of popular success with war yarns such as *The Wooden Horse* and *The Colditz Story*, and later with the James Bond franchise. Penguin avoided these topics; possibly because Allen Lane still felt the loss of his youngest brother, John, who was killed in action in 1942 when his ship was torpedoed. (Lewis, 2005, 151–2)



Penguin did produce one war story of note however: *One of Our Submarines*, the memoir of an RNVR officer. That officer was Edward Young, designer of the original Penguin cover, who had left Penguin and volunteered at the start of the war. It was Allen Lane's way of thanking him for the design that helped make Penguin one of the best known brands worldwide. It became the 1,000th Penguin in the main series, published with a celebratory laurel wreath around the number, which was prominently positioned on the front cover. The book appeared in an edition of 250,000, which sold out and was soon reprinted. Young would later write to enquire, politely, if any subsequent reprint might use the blue colour coding to signify "biography", rather than the inappropriate orange "fiction" colour.

At the start of the war, Penguin had already established itself as a leading publisher in the UK, supplying books to the home market with substantial international sales in addition. By 1945, however, Allen Lane's and Penguin's aims and ambitions had grown exponentially. He did not simply want to sell books, but to make a real difference to ordinary people's lives and their access to educational material. With this in mind, Lane soon set about recruiting editors, and commissioning new series that would ultimately become a 'home university', providing books on every subject and in every discipline. Many of these would ultimately become both set books in the growing university sector, and standard texts. He also determined to rebuild the brand image and the design and presentation of the books, seeking out [Jan Tschichold](#) to carry out a fundamental overhaul of Penguin design and typography. After six years of deprivation, hardship and separation faced by the majority of the population, there was a natural surge of optimism with the return of peace, and an urge to rebuild lives, homes and whole towns. It was a feeling that Penguin shared, and reflected in their growing list, with E.V. Rieu's translation of *The Odyssey* – a story, of course, about one man's return from an endless war to face further challenges at home – a telling metaphor for Britain in 1945.

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