

How far did Allen Lane, co-founder of Penguin Books, contribute to changing the reading culture in Britain from the 1930s-1940s?

Hope Garnett

Abstract

Allen Lane established Penguin Books in 1935 and helped change Britain's reading culture by improving the reading public's access to middlebrow literature through his business minded savvy by producing cheap paperback reprints and helping turn book borrowers into book buyers. This article will assess how far Lane contributed to Penguin Books and how new this 'revolutionary' idea was for Britain. It will examine how the consequences of WWII were managed in order to maintain success during this challenging time whilst also acknowledging how other influential figures like Bill Williams and Eunice Frost, the originality of Lane's cheap paperbacks and previously existing access to literature can also dispute the extent to how far Lane actually had contributed to Britain's changing reading culture.

Key Words

Penguin; Lane; culture; paperback; war; access;

Introduction

Allen Lane, co-founder of Penguin Books along with his two brothers, Richard and John, played a fundamental part in the introduction of the modern paperback into the book market. Lane, originally Williams, was introduced to the industry after his distant relative, John Lane, approached the family and offered him a position in his publishing house, the Bodley Head, due to his lack of heirs and wanting to keep the company under the Lane family name. After his uncle died in 1925, Lane became part of the Bodley Head publisher's board but came to the realisation that his innovative and progressive ideas did not align

with the ideals of the other conservative Bodley Head members. At one point, Lane wanted to publish a volume of cartoons by the American cartoonist, Peter Arno, which was met with overt criticism from the Bodley Head board. Consequently Lane announced that he would personally take on the financial risk and *Peter Arno's Parade* was consequently published and appeared in 1931 (Mackenzie, 1991).

After several years working at the Bodley Head, in 1934 Allen Lane founded the idea of 'Penguin Books' after seeing that only slick magazines and tenth-rate fiction books were all that were available at railway stations whilst supposedly taking a train journey with Agatha Christie and her husband. His idea was to gain the rights to reprint quality fiction and non-fiction on tasteful paperback covers and sell each copy at six-pence apiece. It had become a trend for the mass reading public to be able to have access to such literature like flamboyant romances, westerns and thrillers through innovations like twopenny libraries. As opposed to older commercial libraries like Mudie's, twopenny libraries, which first appeared in North London in 1930, quickly spread throughout the towns, cities and boroughs of Britain serving a working class clientele (Hilliard, 2014). Therefore, it was Lane's argument that middlebrow fiction and biographies would be more informative and appeal to a wider range of educated readers whilst also maintaining respectable yet appealing authors. Consequently, Lane wanted to show the reading public that it was possible to have good taste in cheap books (Kells, 2015) and thus help turn the increasing reading public of Britain from book borrowers into book buyers.

The purpose of this article is to determine how far Allen Lane's endeavour contributed to changing Britain's reading culture. Firstly, this article will apprehend what the pre-existing reading culture was in Britain by understanding what access the public had to certain reading material and the subsequent social divide this varied access had. It is necessary to understand whether cheap paperbacks were completely Allen Lane's original idea in order to comprehend how new of an effect this 'phenomenon' was upon the reading public of Great Britain. By also determining how Lane handled the difficulties that WWII presented

during this time period will also help prove how far Allen Lane managed the shocking global situation at the time and still help improve access to more middlebrow literature, contributing to the social and economic state of Britain's changing reading culture.

The Reading Culture

A vast improvement in Britain's educational system came after the passing of the 1870 Education Act which meant that there was an unprecedented increase in the size of the reading public that subsequently created a gap in the market to be exploited by publishers. Due to this substantial social change, where before British book readers were mainly middle class and well educated (Mann, 1979), now there was a 'diffusion of knowledge' to be accessed and traded by all (Feather, 2006, p.107). However, there remained the issue of British book buyers in that even though the lower classes had the capability to read, their main source of reading material predominately came from organizations like the twopenny libraries rather than bookshops which meant that they could only access literature on loan. Such establishments served a working-class clientele but have believed to strengthen the reading public's need for book-ownership (Morpurgo, 1979). Moreover, from the 19th century, with egalitarian values becoming more renowned, circulating libraries were becoming a powerful force in the distribution of the latest general literature and subsequently beginning to shorten the distance between what different people from different social classes could have access to (Kingsford, 1970). Nonetheless, some argue that established publishers did not see such establishments as a threat due to their clientele being so dissimilar from those of established booksellers. Twopenny libraries still made an impact in blurring the distinction between the middlebrow bestsellers of the 1930s in middle-class hardcover novels and the working-class cheap paperbacks (Hilliard, 2014).

Yet, due to the high prices of books, most notably hardbacks and biographies, a lot of reading material remained highly inaccessible. Even though cheaper hardbacks were

produced, Lane believed that a successful cheap hardback book would not even reach the outer suburbs for another 10 years after publication (Joicey, 1993). Therefore, as opposed to hardbacks usually being produced at a number between 1000 and 5000, Lane had intended to produce his cheap paperbacks in editions of 20,000. Such paperbacks would be sold to establishments like Woolworths and twopenny libraries where the everyday man would feel more comfortable. It was Penguin who had the ability in making knowledge easily understandable but not in that they may pervert the truth behind the knowledge as Lane's cheap paperbacks needed to achieve the trust of its audience to create substantial sales, which as a result further highlights Penguin's achievement (Grant, 1960).

Despite the cheapness of their books, it was their impeccable print and design that played a part in Penguin's increasing success (Norrie, 1982). Such innovations had allowed further book runs to be created. In 1937 the non-fiction, educational Pelican series was launched and in 1946 the Penguin Classics notoriously offered a prose translation of '*The Odyssey*' by Oxford University scholar, E.V. Rieu, where he planned to put Homer into an idiom accessible by the contemporary reader (Mackenzie, 1991). Such controversial innovations by Penguin meant that the growing access to middlebrow literature grew and it came to light that the previously clear distinction between the upper and lower classes in terms of their access to knowledge was becoming increasingly blurred and subsequently changing Britain's reading culture.

Did Allen Lane deserve all the credit?

At the beginning of Lane's career where he had been granted a position at his uncle's publishing house, the Bodley Head, it came to the point where new innovations needed to be taken to save the publishing house from closure. The idea of a paperback was nothing new and publishers like the Bodley Head had toyed with the idea of re-printing out-of-copyright fiction from their backlists at cheap prices before (Hare, 1995). Although Lane had

taken this idea of cheap re-prints and went one step further by adopting a new physical format and trying to find new unconventional sales channels (Feather, 2006). However, it is believed with little doubt that Lane's innovations were derived from numerous previous paperback series. One example is the Albatross series, issued in Germany from 1932 where an Englishman named John Holroyd-Reece had set out to compete with the publisher Tauchnitz, who were becoming anachronistic. He had designed a slightly taller and thinner format than that used by Tauchnitz, but a format very similar to the style of paperback known today. Similarly, Holroyd-Reece used bold colours to distinguish the different topics and genres, as famously used by Penguin (Kells, 2015). Other examples of cheap reprints include that of the publisher Boni & Liveright based in America in the 1920s and the improved use of the 'three decker' design that continued until the 1890s, that involved the publication of new novels in three volumes at a guinea and a half for the set (Kingsford, 1970). Therefore, there really was no originality in Lane's idea, however, he was distinguished from the rest in his belief that regardless of price, good books will sell no matter what. Therefore, even though the idea of cheap paperbacks was not entirely Lane's original idea, it was his entrepreneurial initiative and passion that allowed Penguin to lay claim over their paperback books to have as much of an impact as they did. Finally, this phenomenon of the Penguin impact also meant that relatively little money was needed to spend on promotion as well as 'demonstrating that a large market can be won by a product that depends on its own excellence and on the judgement of a sufficient sector of the public to make it profitable' (Williams, 1973, p.11).

In fact, the success that Lane had achieved proves that credit is due is in his initial decisions that made Penguin into what is known as today. Such decisions included the iconic black and white penguin logo, came from Lane knowing that such a logo needed not to be formidable like *'World Classics'* or patronising like *'Everyman'* (Morpurgo, 1979). Secondly, his understanding of how crucial it was that this endeavour would breakeven so that what was sold equalled how much had been spent also contributed to Penguin's success hugely as it was an unprecedented amount for publishing at the time. In fact, it was calculated that

the breakeven point at the initial stage was between 17,000 and 18,000 copies per title, with such titles including Ernest Hemingway's *'A Farewell to Arms'* and Mary Webb's *'Gone to Earth'*. It was the perseverance of the Lane brothers that ensured Penguin's success and impact through their continuous failed travels to established booksellers that eventually led to their unconventional visit to Woolworths. It was the Woolworth's senior buyer who believed that even though the price was right, the titles chosen were not suitable for the clientele of their company. However, it was the senior buyer's wife who found the covers of Lane's prototypes delightful and even though she had not read any of the titles before, at six pence apiece, she would buy the whole lot (Morpurgo, 1979). With that, Penguin was rescued and was able to carry on and such events has led Lane to having credit in furthering Penguin Books innovations, like the *'Penguinincubator'*, a slot-machine book dispenser, to develop and continue to have the lasting impact it would upon Britain's reading public.

However, as time went on and Penguin Books' success was continued increasing, it was not just simply Lane alone who was the mastermind behind helping change the reading culture of Britain. Throughout the entire process of creating Penguin Books, Allen Lane continuously had the backing and support from his two brothers. Even in the beginning stages where book orders and financial backing were a necessity, all the Lane brothers had put effort into securing these components with, for example, Richard concentrating on securing orders in London due to his ties and trusting relationships with existing booksellers there (Kells, 2015). John's contribution to Penguin was cut short by his death during the war but personal accounts from individuals within Penguin relay the passion that Richard Lane had put into the company through his role as 'Penguin's first editor and chief custodian of its cheerful ethic of well-designed books that offered high-quality literature at a low price' (Kells, 2015, p.2).

Notable figures like William Emrys Williams, also known as Bill Williams, Editor-in-Chief of Penguin Books from 1936 to 1965 and Eunice Frost, initially a secretary to Allen Lane, turned Director in 1958, also had huge parts to play in the administration of Penguin.

‘Without William’s consistently wise and dependable advice, and his acute literacy judgement over thirty years, Lane would not have enjoyed his brilliant critical and commercial success with Penguin Books’ (Meredeen, 2008, p.77). Furthermore, Williams has been credited as being the sole progenitor of the Pelican series (Meredeen, 2008), its non-fiction educational series that allowed Britain’s reading public to access a whole range of topics covering modern thinking in the arts and sciences that subsequently allowed a larger reading public to have a further understanding of the world (Lewis, 2005). Eunice Frost was another such figure that had major influence in the impact that Penguin had upon Britain’s reading public. She is regarded as a revolutionary figure for being one of the first women employed by Penguin Books initially as a secretary to Allen Lane in 1936 and eventually becoming a key member of the Editorial Committee with responsibility over Penguin, Modern Painters and Puffin. It was Eunice Frost’s influence and tenacity that led her to becoming a Director in the company, which further led her to having a pivotal influence in the shaping of its strategies. Figures like Williams and Frost show that Lane was not the sole influence upon the decisions that Penguin had made. It can be easy to assume that such ideas made by Penguin came from a single actor, however it must be understood that Lane, was not a publisher but a very effective businessman who had to rely on other individuals who understood good literature in order to ensure the success of Penguin and have further effect upon the reading culture of Great Britain.

World War II

Three weeks after the start of WWII, Lane had commissioned Harold Nicolson, a diplomat, author, diarist and politician to write a 50,000 word Penguin Special on ‘*Why Britain is at War*’. It was published on 5th November 1939 and sold over 100,000 copies with a substantial quantity exported to the US (Lewis, 2005). This was a decisive move on Lane’s part as it was a clear and insightful account on why Britain went to war with Germany and why it was so important to defeat Nazism that was read by thousands including many

soldiers during the war. It would have a major effect upon Britain's reading public as it was a polemic account on behalf of the British government that would ensure it was understood the important reasons behind Britain's decision on going to war with Germany which subsequently would effect the British public substantially in the following war-filled years to come.

The war was a global catastrophe that had a pivotal effect on the publishing industry. As a result of the war, a huge number of male workers in the industry were being sent off to fight with only a small amount of men actually returning home, including Lane's two brothers (Phillimore, 2017). Moreover, necessary materials for production, especially paper were rationed, made worse when Germany invaded Denmark and Norway in 1940, cutting Britain off from Sweden and Finland, its traditional suppliers (Lewis, 2005) hence hindering a higher volume of publications from being produced. However, as opposed to so many other publishers, the war was good to Penguin Books.

Paper rationing was assessed based on sales during the year prior to the outbreak of the war where Penguin had had a huge growth in sales, therefore it remained that Penguin, near the beginning of the war, was in a more prosperous position than many other publishers (Hare, 1995). Moreover, Allen Lane himself was approaching his late thirties during the outbreak of the war, which meant that he was part of the limited amount of those eligible for the Forces (Lewis, 2005). Moreover, as the head of Penguin Books, he was considered to be in a position that was more valuable for its non-military contribution to the war effort, therefore Penguin still retained their commander-in-chief to carry on and helm the ship.

The government subsequently saw the key role that literature could play in the war effort so as a result, paper allocations, which proved problematic for other publishers, were never a problem for Penguin. In return Lane published titles suggested by the government, one of the most popular being a book on recognising types of aircraft (Mackenzie, 1991). It

was also due to the book's format, size and content that made them ideal for British soldiers to carry in Europe and for mailing abroad as gifts (Mackenzie, 1991). Other endeavours included Lane winning a huge order from the Canadian government to produce books for its troops. Following this, Lane and Williams approached the British government with an idea for the Armed Forces Book Club, which was met with enthusiasm and was launched in July 1942 (Mackenzie, 1991).

It was major events during the war, namely the evacuation of Dunkirk, that caused huge realisation for military authorities that they needed something to ensure that morale was kept high and that its soldiers were kept active and alert (Hare, 1995). By no means was Penguin financially prosperous during the war what with major paper rationing and subsequent hardship in supplying books to the troops. In fact, supplying books fell to voluntary organisations, like the Red Cross, that relied heavily on second hand books through donations and repairing and rebinding Penguin books and as a result, several million second hand books were in constant circulation amongst troops at home and abroad (Hare, 1995). This allowed distraction for the reading public of Britain during the war and consequently helped boost morale during these trying years. It can be argued that such innovations helped change the reading culture of Great Britain as the war had tremendous effects on what the public could have access to, but the troops and Britain's general reading public from all social classes were able to gain access to all types of literature and thus helped Penguin gain public recognition even after the war.

How far did Allen Lane contribute to changing the reading culture in Great Britain?

It cannot be disputed that Allen Lane certainly had contributed to the changing reading culture of Great Britain during the 1930s and 1940s. His drive and enthusiasm towards creating cheap paperbacks through Penguin Books, albeit from a business perspective rather than a literary one, meant that people from the working classes enjoyed growing

access to more middlebrow literature. As a result of Lane's endeavour, the barrier between the lower and higher classes was beginning to break down in terms of access to knowledge. However, Lane was not the sole contributor to this 'paperback revolution' with the effects of WWII, previous twopenny libraries and other contributing figures, like Bill Williams and Eunice Frost, Penguin Books subsequently helped change Britain's reading culture and their access to the vast knowledge available.

References

- Feather, J. 2006. *A History of British Publishing*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
- Flower, D. 1960. *Penguins Progress, 1935-1960*. Harmondsworth: Penguins Books.
- Flower, D. 1959. *The Paperback: It's Past, Present and Future*. 1st ed. London: Arborfield. Products Lts.
- Grant, M. 1960. The Teacher. In: D. Flower, ed. *Penguins Progress, 1935-1960*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Hare, S. 1995 ed. 'Myths of Creation', in *Penguin Portrait: Allen Lane and the Penguin Editors, 1935-1970*. London: Penguin pp.3-12.
- Hilliard, C. 2014. The Twopenny Library: The Book Trade, Working-Class Readers, and 'Middlebrow' Novels in Britain, 1930-42. *Twentieth Century British History*. 2(1): 199-220.
- Joicey, N. 1993. A Paperback Guide to Progress Penguin Books 1935-1951. *Twentieth Century British History*, 4: 25-56.
- Kells, S. 2015. *Penguin and the Lane brothers: the untold story of a publishing revolution*. Victoria: Collingwood.
- Kingsford, R.J.L. 1970. *The Publishers Association, 1896-1946*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Leavis, Q.D. *Fiction and the Reading Public*. 1965. 2nd ed. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Lewis, J. 2005. *The Life and Times of Allen Lane*. 1st ed. London: Viking.
- Mackenzie, R.N. 1991. 'Penguin Books' in *British Literary Publishing Houses, 1881-1965*. Detroit: Gale Research.

Mann, P. 1979. *Book Publishing, Book Selling and Book Reading*. London: Book Marketing Council.

McAleer, J. 1992. *Popular Reading and Publishing in Britain 1914-1950*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Meredeen, S. 2008. *The man who made Penguins*. Stroud, Gloucestershire, U.K.: Darien-Jones Pub.

Morpurgo, J.E. 1979. *Allen Lane, King of Penguin*. 1st ed. London: Hutchinson & Co.

Norrie, I. 1982. *Mumby's Publishing and Bookselling in the Twentieth Century*. London: Bell & Hyman.

Phillimore, S. 2017. OUP at War: The Impact of WW1 upon a University Press. *Journal of Publishing Culture*. 7(1): 2-10.

The Independent. 10 October 2015. Penguin Books at 80: A 'paperback revolution' that helped keep Britain's radical conscience in order.

Williams, W.E. 1973. *Allen Lane: A Personal Portrait*. 1st ed. London: The Bodley Head.