
The Forming of a Legend: Stanley Unwin's Publishing Success

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Abstract

'Unwin, Sir Stanley (1884-1968), publisher'. The first line of his entry in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* by Robin Denniston (2008) is too humble a description for such an extraordinary person. Sir Stanley Unwin was *the* publisher in the British book trade. He was the 'Unwin' in George Allen and Unwin Ltd, the president of the Publishers' Association, the passionate upholder of co-operation between publishers and booksellers, and the author of *The Truth About Publishing* – the classic textbook of the industry. The man who led the fight against America's discriminatory tariffs and regulations, who defined and promoted the Great British Book Trade to the rest of the world.

This article aims to explore how this great character was formed by exploring his early life, before assessing how he founded and operated his own publishing firm, and finally the decline and fall of the firm after his death.

Key Words

Sir Stanley Unwin; Publisher; Allen & Unwin; Publishing History; Book Trade

Introduction

Sir Stanley Unwin was a truly remarkable figure in the British book trade in the twentieth century. He went through a slightly unusual route on his journey of becoming a publisher. He worked as a City office boy for several years before took on a dreadfully long apprenticeship at his uncle's publishing firm. When he finally established his own publishing house, Allen and Unwin Ltd, he adopted a very simple but brilliant publishing strategy, which, as the article will argue, had its origins tracing back to his nonconformist upbringing, his days as a City office boy and his world trips. On the other hand, his poor management skills had led to the eventual decline and fall of his firm after his death.

Early Life: 'NOT an Intellectual'

As mentioned by his son Rayner Unwin on several occasions, Sir Stanley Unwin was not an intellectual. He left school before he could finish his education and never completed any formal qualifications, but he was a tradesman who knew his trade well. Indeed, there are

reasons, tracing back to his early life, why he became a more skilled publisher than many of his contemporaries.

19 December 1884, South-east London, Stanley Unwin was born to the printer Edward Unwin, of the printing firm Unwin Brothers, and his wife Elizabeth, the daughter of the paper producer James Spicer. Unwin was brought up in a devoutly nonconformist atmosphere, a point on which the article will come back later since it has profoundly influenced his character as a publisher. Although with printing and paper in his blood, Stanley Unwin did not start his working life in publishing. After attending the School for Sons of Missionaries at Blackheath and a further two years of education at Abbotsholme School, Derbyshire, the 15-year-old young man left school to work in a ship and insurance firm in the City of London. This was due to financial difficulties forced upon the Unwin family by the burning down of his father's printing work at Chilworth in Surrey. During his three years working as an office boy in the City, he acquired the basic knowledge of financial management, which turned out to be absolutely essential for his successful publishing career.

The Beginning of a Publishing Career

As stated by himself in his autobiography, his career as a publisher began on a Sunday night, probably in early 1903, after a weekend spent with his step-uncle T. Fisher Unwin (then the owner of the well-known publishing house of the same name) and family. However, the real purpose of the visit was to have him 'sent for to be inspected', mockingly described by himself in book trade language, as being 'on sale or return'. 'After a thorough examination', he accepted T. Fisher Unwin's offer of a publishing job on the condition that he 'should have nine months in Germany forthwith and three months in France at some future indeterminate date'. (S. Unwin, 1960)

In practice, he began working for his uncle during his stay in Germany. According to itineraries arranged by T. Fisher Unwin, he visited booksellers and attended meetings and events in exchange for the old man's barely adequate sponsorship. The planned nine-month trip had been cut short two months early due to T. Fisher Unwin's urge for Stanley to go back and start working in his London office. It was not as pleasant a trip as one would think but nevertheless, the 19-year-old Stanley Unwin had obtained his precious first experience of the book trade in the well-organised German way. (S. Unwin, 1960)

Despite the curtailed trip, Stanley Unwin did not start working in T. Fisher Unwin's office until three months after he returned from Germany, as the publisher was 'not ready' for his commencement. However, the three months was very well spent at the family's printing works where he learned about the printing process. He learned exactly how long it takes to

make corrections in standing type and much else that proved invaluable to him as a publisher. (S. Unwin, 1960)

Three months later, Stanley Unwin started his first and only job as a publishing house employee at 11 Paternoster Buildings, the City, London. During his nine years working for T. Fisher Unwin, he learned the craft of publishing, rapidly and thoroughly. He worked as reception boy, office boy, traveling sales representative, in-house editing, contract negotiating, marketing, foreign rights selling – in the end, he had practically mastered the whole business. Despite the excellent job done by the young Unwin, the pair of Unwins did not get along. Much like the future Sir Stanley Unwin himself, T. Fisher Unwin liked an employee that does what he told without much creative input in terms of how to run the business. Stanley Unwin was precisely such a young man, with bright ideas for running a publishing house based on knowledge and confidence accumulated from his days as a City office boy, his trip in Germany, his valuable three months spent at his father's printing works and his time in Paternoster Buildings. After a confrontation between the two Unwins, it was clear that Stanley had to start his own publishing firm to achieve his professional ambitions. (S. Unwin, 1960; Potter, 1997; Denniston, 2008)

Final Preparation: A World Trip

The twenty-eight years old young Unwin, with £1,300 capital in hand (as he proudly presented in a letter to Marry before their engagement) (D. Unwin, 1982), left the old Unwin's gloomy City office, thinking of setting up his own publishing house. There was only one thing left on his mind before he could fully satisfy himself as ready to venture his own publishing business: to see the world. (S. Unwin, 1960)

Growing up surrounded by missionaries' children, Stanley Unwin learned early in life the extent of the great outside world, not just across the channel to Europe but also China, Africa and other continents. The recognition of the size and diversity of the world gave him an advantage over many in the British publishing industry, and became particularly useful when he decided to become a publisher himself. Before he invested in acquiring George Allen and Sons, he travelled with his then to-be brother-in-law to see the world himself, and to explore possible potential market for his future business. With a £300 budget (as an investment on himself), his year-long world trip covered Africa, Australia, New Zealand, the South Sea Islands, Japan and a port city of China, then under German control (Unwin and Storr, 1934). Many of these territories later became vital markets for his trade. Even today, a hundred and two years after Stanley Unwin humbly put his name at the end of his newly acquired publishing firm, Allen & Unwin is still trading as an independent publisher in

Australia, as a result of a successful management buyout at the year 1990. Through that world trip,

'he became much more aware of the fact that the world was a big place, full of different views and it required tolerance to live in it. So, he was very tolerant of other people's views. He hated the imposition of other people's views by any means, censorship or National Socialism.' (Potter, 1997)

It never ceased shaping his character as a publisher and indeed later on in his role as the president of the Publishers' Association.

Running a Publishing House

11 p.m. 4 August 1914, Great Britain declared war on Germany. Earlier that day, Stanley Unwin bought the recently bankrupted George Allen and Sons. after he carefully examined the publisher's accounts and backlist. On acquiring the bankrupted firm., Stanley Unwin had effectively acquired the recently merged Swan Sonnenschein's staggering backlist, including Marx, Shaw, George Moore, Freud George and many other great thinkers of the age. He made sure what he acquired was well worth the money he spent and the risk he took on. Allen and Unwin Ltd started trading on the first day of the First World War. In Stanley Unwin's hands, it survived the labour and paper shortage of the two World Wars and went on to thrive for more than half a century.

A Remarkable Publishing Strategy

The publishing strategy of Allen & Unwin was fairly simple: to publish well-reasoned good views, without rewriting, no matter what the subject or level of popularity (Potter, 1997). There were two key issues in such a strategy: firstly, how could the publisher know whether a view is well-argued or not, good or bad; secondly, could the firm afford to disregard public demand?

To address the first issue, to make sure his firm published quality content, Stanley Unwin relied heavily on outside readers and his own authors. Bernard Miall, whom Stanley had known from his time at T. Fisher Unwin, was probably the first one taken on board in the early days of Allen & Unwin. As 'one of these marvellous people who would give you a very reasoned opinion on almost any subject', Bernard Miall quickly become valuable and was employed almost immediately in 1914. Stanley often went to intellectuals for advice and he fully respected their opinions in making publishing decisions. Though a non-intellectual himself, he got along well with his, on the whole, intellectual authors and readers, certainly professionally, if perhaps not personally, even when his authors did not get along with each

other. These people liked him because he would publish unpopular opinions and respected him as a tradesman who knows his trade well. (Potter, 1997)

During the First World War, he famously took the risk in publishing Bertrand Russell's *The Principles of Social Reconstruction*. It was certainly not in favour of public opinion and also, at least one of his own authors: his very own Lord Cromer 'described one of Russell's early works as, literally, "a pernicious book"'. He then put it on the cover as a quote from Lord Cromer: 'This is a pernicious book'. (Potter, 1997)

Stanley Unwin not only published controversial opinions, and views that contradicted one another, but also views that contradicted his own judgement. As 'an absolute, complete teetotaler', he published a book on the Biochemistry of Malting and Brewing, on the basis that 'he had been told it was the best book on the subject'. (Potter, 1997)

What made him so wonderfully bold and non-judgmental? This traces back to his vision of the world formed from his world trip and further back to his nonconformist family background. As explained by Rayner Unwin in an interview, people with then unpopular opinions were often

'pacifists and had liberal views with a rather small "I", but, on the whole, were intellectuals who were out in the cold during the war. They weren't all prisoners but they were at odds with the Establishment. That's where he [Stanley Unwin] made his friends. He was used to people who were at odds with the Establishment as a Nonconformist. These people were not Nonconformists themselves but they had almost the same attitude, that he had grown up being used to, in that they were a bit holier-than-thou against the State whereas he was holier-than-thou against the established religion. But it becomes much the same in the end. He wasn't afraid of being right, though a minority. Therefore, he didn't necessarily follow the crowd'. (Potter, 1997)

His nonconformist upbringing, vision of a big world and government's enforcement of The Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) during the First World War made him dislike censorship in any shape or form, a firm view he held throughout his life. 'He always decried the censorship of the written word wherever he found it.' In his last years, he agreed to be a witness for the defence during the prosecution of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* possibly without even having read the book. (Potter, 1997)

Financial viability

Concerning the financial viability of his strategy of prioritising editorial 'quality', there is no clear evidence that Stanley Unwin knew that doing so would pay off financially. No money

matters had been mentioned in relation to a particular publishing decision, apart from his permission of losing one thousand pounds to his son Rayner on publishing Tolkien's *The Lord of The Rings* Trilogy (R. Unwin, 1999). And according to Rayner Unwin, there was not a single book qualified for publication in the house ended up unpublished (Potter, 1997). It just somehow worked.

Stanley Unwin certainly had a fairly accurate sense of the whole business and was very clear and strict about numbers. On which point his office boy experience in the City had come in handy. Addressing the book tradesmen in a lecture given in the Stationers' Hall at Friday 9th October 1931, Stanley Unwin was very precise in terms of the financial details, cost and different streams of revenue, and the publishing and printing schedule of a typical book (S. Unwin, 1931). In his book *The Truth About Publishing* (1926), he covered every single aspect of the British book trade, from manuscripts to printing plates, from fulfil orders received in the office to overseas translation rights. Rather oddly, he even took the trouble to make sure in his firm no money would be spent on things that he thought did not matter, such as a water boiler in the lavatory room. Envelopes and boxes were to be reused in the office, in the warehouse and even at home for his personal affairs. He knew the firm so well that, during the Second World War, after a bomb dropped on the warehouse one night, according to his son David Unwin (1982) who was working at the Museum Street office at the time, he never tired of repeating the numbers: 'In that one night we lost one million four hundred thousand books affecting two thousand one hundred titles on our list', which was a fairly accurate number. He somehow knew, or at least believed, that if he spent every penny carefully and wisely, did his very best to promote and sell his titles, he would be able to make do. And indeed he did.

Decline and Fall of Allen & Unwin

George Allen & Unwin Ltd was a very successful publishing business during Sir Stanley Unwin's life time and continued to be so for a couple of decades after his death, before it merged with Bell & Hyman became Unwin Hyman Limited at the end of 1985, and the newly formed firm was acquired by HarperCollins in the year 1990. The once flourishing publishing house ceased its existence not long after its founder's death.

What caused the rapid decline of George Allen & Unwin? The overall economic environment was the main reason but the way of which the house was operating contributed as well. Sir Stanley Unwin managed his firm as if it was an extended version of a one-man band, an enlarged edition of himself. He reckoned the reason why he was running the firm rather than anyone else is because he knows the business well enough, he could do everyone's job and he could do it better. He expected all his employees just simply do as they were told,

most of the time by him. (Potter, 1997) At the office he opened the post himself every day, even on bank holidays (Denniston, 2008). He largely organised the firm personally by himself. Such a management style worked perfectly for a relatively small firm as Allen & Unwin and with the more than capable Sir Stanley Unwin as the director. However, as the firm grew larger and after Sir Stanley passed away, problems started to emerge. By the time of his death, most of his 'bright young men' were at the age of retirement. The only person under forty qualified as a management role was Rayner Unwin. (Potter, 1997) In addition, too wide a range of titles and the disadvantages of being middle-sized were the crucial problems according to Anthony Smith (2000):

'There were some 2,500 titles extant on its lists when Rayner took over as chairman after his father's death in 1968. That profligacy, plus a wide-ranging interest, was largely to blame for Allen & Unwin's later troubles [...] Allen & Unwin's major problem, acute in the mid-1980s, was being middle-sized, neither large enough to absorb overheads easily nor small enough to be quirky and buoyant.' (Smith, 2000)

It seems that the success of Allen & Unwin should be fully attributed to Sir Stanley Unwin, as should its decline and fall.

Conclusion

As demonstrated in the article, the forming of the great character of Sir Stanley Unwin as a publisher could largely be traced back to his early life, even before he actively prepared himself to be a publisher. As a non-intellectual, his uniqueness in the British book trade could be, at least partly, attributed to a mixture of his family background and incidences happened in his life. His nonconformist upbringing, vision of the world had continuously shaped his mind and made him great as a publisher. Although his remarkable character defined his own publishing house, Allen and Unwin Ltd, his lack of management skills eventually led to its decline and fall after his death.

'When Stanley Unwin died in London on 13 October 1968, at University College Hospital, he was widely recognised as one of the architects of the British, and indeed the international, book trade; as a publisher of the highest standards of probity in business matters as well as in the quality of the books he published; and as a personality, not without weaknesses, reasonably self-righteous, but one who had contributed importantly to the life and well-being of his country over half a century.' (Denniston, 2008)

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