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# 'The girl from Ghana goes into publishing' - Margaret Busby: a vanguard publisher

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## Abstract

Margaret Busby co-founded Allison & Busby in 1967 creating the label of 'The UK's youngest and first black woman publisher'. This paper will assess how Busby challenged cultural norms and represented greater diversity in the publishing industry during a period of great societal change in Britain in the 1960s. It will examine the formation of the company, the backdrop of society in Britain at that time, and explore three key aspects: the position of Busby as a female Editor, the representation of people in publishing with African origin, and the types of books which A&B set out to bring into the mainstream. Considering Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital throughout, this paper will analyse the impact of these three aspects on the creation of capital which served to popularize the publishing house.

## Key Words

Margaret Busby; Allison & Busby; diversity; 1960s; Britain; publishing

## Introduction

'[W]hen we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise' - Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009)

In 1967, Margaret Busby co-founded the publishing company, Allison & Busby (also known as A&B), and by doing so received the label of 'The UK's youngest and first black woman publisher' (Busby, 2016). This paper serves to provide an account of A&B within the backdrop of the publishing industry in the 1960s and it will argue that Busby was a

trailblazer for diversity in publishing culture during a period of internationalisation of English literature and diversification of society. This paper will first explore the educational background of Busby and the beginnings of A&B as a publishing house. By situating the background and behavioural traits of the editors themselves, one can begin to understand why they chose the types of books they published in their first few years of trading. Part two of this paper serves to explore the social, political and cultural landscape of Britain in the 1960s and the lack of internationalization in English literature sold globally, how only a 'single story' was present. Part three will analyse how A&B challenged the *status quo* in publishing in the 1960s and explore the idea that they were a precursor to change in the publishing culture. This will be analysed by exploring three aspects: the position of Busby as a female editor, the representation of people with African origins in publishing, and the types of books which A&B set out to bring into the mainstream.

By reflecting throughout upon Bourdieu's notion of the 'field', which focuses on the accumulation of capital in its various forms to succeed in a market (Bourdieu, 1993), this paper will serve to analyse Busby's position within 1960s British trade publishing. Where A&B were lacking the economic, human and social capital possessed by other commercial publishers, this paper will highlight the development of Busby's intellectual, cultural, and symbolic capital in her push for diversity. This paper will conclude that it was these forms of capital which served to popularize the publishing house and their titles.

As the 1960s was known as a period which brought 'cultural' change, this paper must first situate its adopted definition of 'culture' against theoretical arguments across academia. This paper does not serve to extensively address the conflicting theories of what culture is, who produces it, or who in society deserves to appreciate it. Briefly, and solely in the context of this paper, the term 'culture' will be used interchangeably in relation to the production culture in literature when discussing 'book/publishing culture' and to 'the ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society' when analysing sociological aspects of Britain (Lexico).

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## **1. Busby and the creation of A&B**

### **1.1. Education**

Margaret Busby was born in 1944 in Accra, Ghana to family with ancestry in Barbados, Trinidad and Dominica (Stevenson, 2019). Both her mother and father had been educated in the UK and held an 'appreciation of the British way of life' (Busby, 2018). Margaret was sent to attend secondary school in England at the age of 10 where, together with her sister, they were the first Africans at an international boarding school in Sussex (Busby, 2018). Whilst completing her undergraduate degree in English at London University, Busby began to question the representation of her African origin in literature, realising that her entire curriculum lacked a single work 'by an African, or by anyone who was not an acknowledged representative of European civilization' something which she saw as 'an absence too far, amounting to an erasure of my identity' (Busby, 2018). Determined to introduce her fellow students to writers of African origin and to open their eyes to the world, Busby found a small number of published writers such as Chinua Achebe and Flora Nwapa and began to build a library of works for the 'enlightenment' of her peers and for affirmation of her identity (Busby, 2018).

### **1.2. Founding A&B**

Busby first began to build connections in the literary scene whilst at university; in fact, the party at which Busby and Allison first met was held in the house where J. M. Barrie wrote Peter Pan and attending were her good friend Rachel Anderson, a writer, along with literature students from Oxford University and Trinity College, Dublin (Poetry Book Society, 2011). Brought together by their mutual love of poetry, Busby and Allison found a shared desire to start a publishing company different from other commercial companies of the time where they could make poetry 'accessible and affordable' (Busby, 2016). Ultimately, their enthusiasm and principled nature was moved onward with the goal to 'produce poetry, not in the expensive elitist hardback volumes in which it traditionally appeared, but as cheap paperbacks that even people like us could afford' (Poetry Book Society, 2011).

### **1.3. Vanguard publishers**

The word 'vanguard' is not used exclusively to highlight the nature of A&B as a new publishing company entering the established field of trade publishing in Britain, but to also describe the personalities of the co-founders of the company. The Oxford dictionary defines 'vanguard' as 'A group of people leading the way in new developments or ideas.' (Lexico) Busby brought two identifiable 'labels' to the fore as a book editor, the fact that she was a woman and that she was of African origin, both of which were rarely seen in editors at the time. Clive Allison served to challenge commercial publishers at the time who were focused on stability and commercial gain by using his publicity background to contribute an idealistic, whimsical enthusiasm, or 'seat-of-the-pants style' as previously described by Busby (Kingshill, 2011). Together, they 'had long given up on settling for the *status quo* when it came to an industry then dominated by elderly white gentlemen' (Busby, 2018), and were often described as brave, imaginative, swinging, remarkable, offbeat, and lively, across headlines and columns at the time (Poetry Book Society, 2011). The list of titles owned by A&B was not exclusive to poetry but instead they published an international list of many genres and by authors with a variety of backgrounds, all through the flexibility which independent publishing provided (Busby, 2018). Busby remarks that the biggest compliment they received was that 'you never knew what they were going to publish next but you knew it was going to be interesting' (Poetry Book Society, 2011). By utilising her background and intellect Busby created cultural capital in the high praise and critical acclaim they received.

## **2. 1960s British culture and internationalization**

Toni Morrison, a senior editor at Random House in America and one of the only role models to Busby at the time, was quoted as saying: 'cultural identities are formed and informed by a nation's literature' (Busby, 2018). Therefore, to further determine Busby's success and legacy in the literary field, this paper must situate her education and the formation of A&B against the social backdrop of 1960s publishing in Britain and the change in English literature during the period.

### **2.1. 1960s society in Britain**

The 1960s is often described as 'technicolour' as it was a period of great change in politics, society and popular culture. In popular culture, the 'famous sixties' Cultural Revolution began to take hold in 1963' (Feeney) and brought with it rapid changes in British music, cinema, radio and fashion. Post-WWII, political views shifted to encourage peace and affluence after times of austerity. British goods and services were in great demand which kept unemployment low, improved living standards, and gave the population greater disposable income for consumer goods (Feeney). A societal revolution encompassing greater liberalisation also informed political decisions at the time, including social laws to support women to obtain equal pay and greater employment rights against discrimination (British Council). Feeney describes this period as having 'a greater sense of optimism and adventure, especially among the younger generation who were keen to embrace any new ideas'.

British society in the 1960s also changed most notably through migration into England and Wales from the West Indies, India and Pakistan. Post-WWII there was an unprecedented rise in the foreign-born population as migration to Britain was encouraged to help with the labour shortages the country was facing. The *British Nationality Act 1948* granted Commonwealth citizens the right to live and work in the UK with no immigration control until 1962, when new laws to restrict immigration were passed (British Council). Now known as the 'Windrush Generation', the migration specifically from Britain's former colonies accounted for an estimated 472,000 people between January 1955 to June 1962 (Migration Watch UK). To many migrants at the time, nations across Europe offered labour, welfare systems, better pay, better education for their children and, for some, security from their home nations who were experiencing political and ethnic tensions, civil war and the like.

## **2.2 The Internationalization of English literature**

As Toni Morrison indicates, cultures can be formed and informed by a nation's literature and the high levels of migration and social change also brought a cultural change in the realm of literature. In the 1960s, a period of literary revolution was reflective of the new international population and societal reform of the decade. The formation of publishing

houses such as A&B, who were *avant-garde* and liberal in nature, was pushing the norms of literary production in subject matter and sensitivities in response to a British society that was looking for literature which represented their thoughts and values at the time. One of the seminal works to investigate the change in literature publishing out of Britain in the years following the Second World War is Bruce King's *The Internationalization of English Literature* which focuses on the years between 1948 and 2000 (2004). Throughout this work, King determines that the main influence upon the change in literature and publishing during this period was the internationalization of British society and the contribution to the liberalisation of publishing that these foreign-born nationals brought with them; that it was both cause and effect.

### 3. A&B challenging the *status quo* in publishing

Lewis Coser perceived the cultural impact of publishing as an industry by arguing that publishers are 'gatekeepers', selectors and guardian of a universal literary heritage, who hold control over societal culture through literature (1982, 362). By founding A&B, Busby challenged and led a revolt against three cultural aspects of the publishing 'establishment' or, as Murray describes, the publishing 'industry schema' (2004, 91) at the time: she was a woman, she was of African heritage, and she was publishing books which were accessible in content and cost, very different from other commercial publishers of the era. In this era of internationalization, as King defines of the 1960s, Busby and A&B's stance in the publishing industry, along with their attitude of challenge, strengthened the position of independent publishers. As Busby reminisces in her obituary to Clive Allison:

Clive maintained that the founders of imprints such as Quartet and Wildwood House and Virago and all the others that set up after we did, with far more money and experience, must have taken one look at us and thought, 'Well, if those two young twits can do it, so can we!' (Poetry Book Society, 2011).

#### 3.1 Women in publishing

Referred to as 'twice as many, half as powerful', women were confronted with a publishing industry where they were in lower level positions in a business dominated by men and 'old boy networks' (*Women in Publishing*). Lynne Spender, a vocal critic of the industry in the 1980s, takes a similar stance to Coser and advocates that because publishers hold the position of gatekeepers to culture, a lack of women editors and writers resulted in a severe lack of female heritage within the written word (1983, 7) and therefore further evidence of dominance by the Caucasian, educated male. In the 1960s Busby was one of the few editors in senior positions at the time globally who were women, amongst the likes of Diana Athill, Ursula Nordstrom, and Toni Morrison. In her 2016 article for *The Bookseller*, Busby expressed 'I wish I could say that as a co-founder of the imprint, my race and gender were not an issue', but instead she was often mistaken as an employee of Allison or as his wife (Busby, 2016). This only further pressed her desire for diversity in an industry yet to experience the wave of public agitation for women's rights in the late 1960s (Murray, 2004, 4). This movement consequently led to the establishment of female-led and feminist-focused publishing houses in the 1980s such as Virago, Pandora Press and OnlyWomen Press who, like Busby had in the 1960s, challenged the traditionally defined publishing culture.

### **3.2 African-origin representation in publishing culture**

In a 1984 *New Statesman* article, Busby wrote 'The reality is that the appearance and circulation of books supposedly produced with [ethnic minority] communities in mind is usually dependant on what the dominant white (male) community, which controls schools, libraries, bookshops, and publishing houses, will permit' (as quoted in Busby, 2016). Before WWII, British publishers held trade across the British Empire, where India and countries across Africa were considered as major export markets. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, a critic of publishing in colonial times, argues that the lack of African culture in published literature was a form of censorship by colonial European publishing and that government licencing laws were a system of repressive control (1986, 69).

By the 1960s, textual scholarship which advanced the traditionally recognised 'canon' of writers was considered outdated and was criticised for having the sole purpose of

justifying imperialism (Said, 1998) by replicating colonial views and by undermining all other ethnicities and religions (Hutchinson & Young, 2013). This 'canon' included writers such as Shakespeare, Chaucer, Dickens, Milton, and many others who have been published since who hold the same western, Caucasian, Christian, male influence. With a lack of statistics available on this matter, anecdotally it can be determined that the impact of western culture upon culture in colonial countries, through literature and schoolbooks by companies such as Longmans, Green & Co. and Oxford University Press, was great (Davis, 2013). Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a successful novelist who grew up in Eastern Nigeria, highlights this experience in her 2009 TED Talk:

when I began to write at about the age of seven... I wrote exactly the kinds of stories I was reading. All my characters were white and blue-eyed, they played in the snow, they ate apples, and they talked a lot about the weather, how lovely it was that the sun had come out. Now, this despite the fact that I lived in Nigeria, I had never been outside Nigeria. We didn't have snow, we ate mangoes, and we never talked about the weather, because there was no need to.' (Adichie, 2009, 00:27)

Some book series by commercial publishers were successful in introducing writers of African origin in the 1960s such as Heinemann's *African Writers Series*, books which Busby accounts as life-changing and which opened her eyes to literature which connected her history and identity to the written word (Busby, 2018). Prior to this time, writers and students of African origin found a lack of literature which represented their culture—their language, race, gender, environment and education—and as Adichie states 'only a single story was available' (2009). With a similar background, it is this effect on Busby which pushed her forward as a pioneer for diversity in publishing and which provided her with authenticity to build her symbolic capital in the field.

King suggests that the shift in publishing culture was due to the popularity of the counter-culture of the 1960s, through which 'society became more liberal and sympathetic towards difference, and postcolonialism became fashionable in the academy... The term postcolonial also changed its significance from a historical period to resistance against what was perceived as dominant western culture.' (2004, 5) A&B once again situated themselves



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within the societal change of the late 1960s, and the resulting change in reading trends, to successfully publish writers of African origin. Publication of these works, during a time of societal change and 'fashionable' postcolonialism only grew the symbolic capital of A&B further. As Bourdieu analysed:

the objective probabilities (of economic or symbolic profit, for example) inscribed in the field at a given moment only become operative and active through 'vocations', 'aspirations' and 'expectations', i.e. in so far as they are perceived and appreciated through the schemes of perception and appreciation which constitute a habitus (1993, 64)

Although they did not publish only writers of African origin, A&B were perceived as a 'major catalyst for bringing the work of several writers from the African Diaspora to critical public attention' (Stevenson, 2019). In 1969 A&B published their first novel, which defined how they would challenge the commercial trade market from then on. African-American author Sam Greenlee's book *The Spook Who Sat By The Door* was previously rejected by numerous publishers, including Panther Books where Allison had previously worked. This was a story of 'a tough black man who trains a guerrilla army and triggers an American revolution' (Johnson Publishing Company, 1971) and through persistence and conviction, A&B achieved high unit sales, media coverage, and translation, film, and international rights sales (Publishers' Weekly, 1970, 22). This book, 'alongside the eponymous founder's interests, reflected an era of hope and political consciousness in which it was conceived' (Kingshill, 2011). Busby herself describes it as having a 'powerful political message, in an era when Black Power was more than a slogan, deserved to be heard' (2018). By publishing such a title at a time of such political change, Busby was seen to be a 'cultural precursor' (Murray, 2004, 4) and furthermore A&B gained symbolic profit at the critical turning-point when social value and appreciation would have been applied (Bourdieu, 1993, 65). During the 1960s and around the same time as the underpinning of A&B, a wave of 'Black British Publishing' emerged, just as feminist publishing did during a period of women's rights activism in the 1980s. New Beacon Books was founded in 1966 and primarily published Caribbean history,

politics and literature, and Bogle L'Ouverture Press was founded in 1968; both were motivated to disseminate black literary material (Ireland, 2013).

Regrettably, the demographic of writers in the UK has not changed to reflect society as these publishers may have once intended. A recent report by the Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society found that '94 per cent of authors in the UK are white. Just 1 per cent are black' (Kretschmer, 2019, 12) although, as Busby declares, 'The decades since I first became a publisher have seen radical changes. The entire canon of English literature has been favourably influenced by many exciting writers whose identities could not be more diverse.' (Busby, 2018) One must therefore acknowledge that some diversity is better than none. Even after the sale of A&B in 1987 to W.H. Allen, Busby has continued to campaign for diversity in publishing by encouraging women writers of African descent to put their heads above the parapet and by founding initiatives such as GAP (Greater Access to Publishing) (George Padmore Institute).

### 3.3 Challenging the culture of literature

In *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993), Pierre Bourdieu continued a thirty-year-old theory of a relationship between cultural tastes and class position by analysing the production, circulation and consumption of cultural goods, specifically literary production. Bourdieu placed literature and the role of the publisher in high regard for their cultural production through creation of 'mass' ('low art') and 'restricted' ('high art') print culture. In their start-up years, A&B stood out as a publishing house which challenged this historically defined 'culture' of the literary canon in other ways aside from the publication of Sam Greenlee's bestseller.

The first three poetry titles published by A&B (*Selected Poems* by James Reeves, *A Stained-Glass Raree Show* by Libby Houston, and *The Saipan Elegy* by James Grady) challenged market norms in three ways: they were targeted to young people, published in a paperback format with a 5,000-unit print run, and affordable as they were priced at five 'bob' or shillings (approximately £4.50 in today's currency) which was a third of the cost of other poetry on the market at the time. Theoretically, the publication of these three titles also defied the categorisation of poetry by publishers as 'high art', a genre which Bourdieu

saw as culturally only available to the few to understand and not the masses (Bourdieu, 1993, 51).

In addition to poetry, A&B also published culturally sensitive works of historical and political non-fiction which were otherwise out-of-print. This included republishing titles such as Trinidadian Marxist historian CLR James' *The Black Jacobins* in 1980, originally published in 1938 (Bartholomew, 2017), which further placed the press on the map for their challenging cultural standpoint. The development of the list in the founding years of A&B represented not only the creation of A&B's intellectual capital as a company, but also their symbolic capital. As Thompson states in his reflection on Bourdieu's work, 'Publishers seek to accumulate symbolic capital... it is important to their image, to the way they see themselves and want to be seen by others' (2013). By publishing titles of this type at low price points, A&B situated themselves in the field as a publisher who would make literature accessible to all for purposes of disseminating quality content, rather than with commercial profit in mind.

## Conclusion

Looking back to theories of book history and culture, one must again turn to Bourdieu's *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993). As he determines, one enters the game by 'investing one's (academic, cultural, symbolic) capital in such a way as to derive maximum benefit or "profit" from participation' (Johnson, 1993, 8). As the examples provided throughout this paper show, Busby invested her own intellectual and symbolic capital as an agent into A&B in order to disseminate minority writers in the field and to challenge preconceptions of publishing and the control of cultural capital. Visible in actions throughout her career, Busby held an end goal of opening the eyes of the British public to a culture they were not previously exposed to, as she had done at university and continues to do today with her recent publication of an anthology titled *New Daughters of Africa* (2019).

As this paper has outlined, A&B challenged the *status quo* of publishing culture in the late 1960s during a period of great societal change in Britain. Unlike feminist publishers or presses focused upon writers of African origin, Busby rejected the label of a 'black publisher'

and her position was not wholly of a 'woman in publishing', nor a 'publisher of colour', but instead that of a publisher who would push existing boundaries and remain at the forefront of change among independent publishers, further building on her symbolic capital in the field. Whilst building her career within this changing dynamic of publishing culture, Margaret Busby did not use her editorial position to sit herself with the feminist publishers of the time by only publishing women writers, as her authors were of all genders and races: instead she sat alongside men in a male dominated establishment, challenging for diversity.

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