The British Book Trade: An Oral History [Review]

By: William M. Nelson


This is a pre-copyedited, author-produced version of an article accepted for publication in Oral History Review following peer review. The version of record Nelson, William M. (2012). The British Book Trade: An Oral History. Oral History Review, 39 (1), Spring 2012, 151-153 is available online at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/ohr/ohs005

***© Oxford University Press. Reprinted with permission. No further reproduction is authorized without written permission from Oxford University Press. This version of the document is not the version of record. Figures and/or pictures may be missing from this format of the document. ***

Abstract:

The British Book Trade: An Oral History is a collection of interviews drawn from the oral history project Book Trade Lives, which is part of the British Library Sound Archive’s more comprehensive project National Life Stories. Expertly edited by project interviewer Sue Bradley, the book is organized thematically, with each of its nineteen chapters focusing on a particular aspect of the book business between the 1920s and 2006. Topical extracts from the oral histories of more than eighty book trade insiders provide a detailed and finely nuanced account of nearly a century of British bookselling and publishing. Of obvious interest to students of book history, The British Book Trade is such a pleasure to read that its appeal should extend well beyond an audience of specialists.

Keywords: book review | British book trade | oral history

Article:


The British Book Trade: An Oral History is a collection of interviews drawn from the oral history project Book Trade Lives, which is part of the British Library Sound Archive’s more comprehensive project National Life Stories. Expertly edited by project interviewer Sue Bradley, the book is organized thematically, with each of its nineteen chapters focusing on a particular aspect of the book business between the 1920s and 2006. Topical extracts from the oral histories of more than eighty book trade insiders provide a detailed and finely nuanced account of nearly a century of British bookselling and publishing. Of obvious interest to students of book history, The British Book Trade is such a pleasure to read that its appeal should extend well beyond an audience of specialists.
One reason this is such an engaging volume is that it features a diverse cast of characters, many of them gifted storytellers whose distinctive voices combine to create a rich historical context. Included here are the recollections of editors, secretaries, publisher’s readers, and sales agents alongside interviews with such major figures as Andre Deutsch and Max Reinhardt of Bodley Head. Throughout the book, descriptions of everyday business in a wide variety of bookshops are intermingled with accounts of larger scale developments in the book industry, both in Britain and around the world. In this way, the editor provides readers with a comprehensive guide to the requisite skills of the book trade as well as insight into the strong bonds of friendship and professionalism that have usually existed among its members. Told from such a range of perspectives, the life stories that comprise *The British Book Trade* are vivid, moving, often very funny, and almost kaleidoscopic in their cumulative effect. This is an image Bradley herself employs in the book’s introduction, stating that her editorial work with these stories “felt like handling a kaleidoscope” (xvii) as she assembled this 300-page book from 1,600 h of interviews archived in Book Trade Lives.

Bradley admits that the process of weaving together snippets of interviews to create the content of the book felt at times “like severing life-connecting threads” (xvii). However, she notes that the primary reason for turning portions of the interviews into a book was to develop a wider audience for the Book Trade Lives recordings, and she emphasizes that readers may locate these interviews intact at the British Library (see [http://www.bl.uk/reshelp/findhelppretype/sound/ohist/ohnls/nlsbook/book.html](http://www.bl.uk/reshelp/findhelppretype/sound/ohist/ohnls/nlsbook/book.html)). In her informative introductory discussion of possible approaches to editing such a large body of oral history recordings, Bradley explains that chief among her reasons for choosing a thematic arrangement was to demonstrate what oral testimony might bring to a written history of the book trade. She certainly succeeds in this, though some readers will no doubt wish to know more about her methodology, especially the details of her collaboration with interviewees. In this regard, there are valuable insights to be gained, not only from Bradley’s introduction but also from her italicized interview questions inserted at various points in the text and from commentary on the interview process included in the final chapter. It remains, however, that the purpose of *The British Book Trade* is clearly more to tell stories than to provide methodological information.

Bradley organizes the testimonies to chart important developments in British bookselling and publishing, and she introduces these developments in a subtle and very effective way by the chapter titles, which are quotations taken from the interviews. For example, one interviewee’s question “Has anyone mentioned Elizabeth Weiler?” becomes the title of a chapter on the role of women booksellers—the fiercely intellectual Weiler herself as well as distinguished women such as Christina Foyle, longtime chair of her family’s prestigious book firm, and Gerti Kvergic, proprietor of The Economist Bookshop. Another interviewee’s expression, “the opening of the sluice,” provides the title for a chapter on the proliferation of sexually explicit literature following the controversial court decision to allow publication of Lady Chatterley’s Lover. Each of the interviews included in the book offers something of the speaker’s vital human story, and frequently, this includes substantial recollections about book trade figures such as T. S. Eliot at Faber & Faber and Leonard Woolf at Chatto & Windus. Together the interviews offer fresh historical perspective on the rapid pace of change over a century that saw the old world of family
publishers such as James Thin of Edinburgh and Maureen Condon of Kings Lynn give way, from the 1980s onward, to the conglomerates and new technologies that have now transformed the industry.

The British Book Trade is a volume to be read alongside another publication on book history in England, The Human Face of the Book Trade: Print Culture and Its Creators, edited by Peter Isaac and Barry McKay (New Castle, DE: St. Paul’s Bibliographies, 1999). Also enlightening is comparison with Martyn Lyons’ Reading Culture and Writing Practices in Nineteenth-Century France (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), which includes substantive commentary on oral culture, oral history, bookshops, and reading. It in no way diminishes the merit of these two books to note in conclusion that The British Book Trade is by far the most readable of the three.

William M. Nelson
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

doi: 10.1093/ohr/ohs005
Advance Access publication 21 February 2012