



# Children's Book Publishing in Britain Since 1945

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Children's books are, for the most part, a function of the publishing industry. 'Twas ever thus, from the day when Benjamin Collins and Thomas Boreman more or less invented the things, and no history can be adequately written without studying the publishers. This is especially true of the cataclysmic period since the second World War, when many established verities have been transformed. Discerning them, and tracing their change, is a complex, but fascinating, task, and the failure of this volume to confront it engenders dismay --- not least because its editors hold posts of some distinction as university lectures in children's literature. For much of the post-war period what went on inside publishing houses was fairly uniform and constant, whether the firm was a giant like Collins, publishing children's books from offices in both Glasgow and London, or an optimistic venture set up by hopeful amateurs employing one secretary and a traveller. Many of the operations involved (editing, printing, marketing, selling books, selling rights, paying authors etc) were in the direct control of individual publishers. (For more detail about this process, **BfK** readers might care to look at Liz Attenborough's admirable series of 'Publishing Profiles' which began in the January issue of 1997.) But beyond all this were Events, just as important but largely outside publishers' control: acquiring stuff to publish (negotiated commissions, submissions from agents, deals with packagers, happy accidents found in slush-piles), and the effect on markets of a shifting pattern of economic and social pressures. What all this amounts to is an interlocking group of influences that will govern the nature of the children's books in the market at any one time but will themselves change qualitatively as time, cash, and government fiat flow past. It is the historian's job to clarify these relationships that subsist within and around the publishing industry and to point to the effects as, generation by generations, they feed through to the children. No such clarity or systematic assessment occurs in this history. Hardly any factor noted above is given systematic consideration by the book's editors and when a mention does occur it is so garbled that it makes no contribution to a coherent account of post-war events. *Exempli gratia*: Both editors are obsessed by social change within the second half of the period. They bang on, sometimes repetitively, about changing values, 'the female presence' etc. but they make no effort to trace, or question, the way these issues obtruded themselves upon the publishing industry. There is no mention of the heady events of the seventies with the foundation of the Children's Rights Workshop and the Writers and Readers Publishing Co-operative, the publishing venture at Centerprise, the arrival of the infamous 'McGraw-Hill Guidelines', or a move by the Educational Publishers Council to allow itself to be ruled by the Equal Opportunities Commission. In their own chapters on 'Setting the Scene' and 'Publishing Practices', both editors appear woefully ignorant of the totality of books within their period (Nicholas

Tucker gives a preposterous account of the situation in 1945) and they do not seem to have worked through the files of the **Bookseller** or the records of Book Trust which would have supplied them with more information than they apparently care to have. (Among the most amazing omissions are accounts of the early collaborative work of publishers, libraries and teachers through the YLG and other agencies, of the development of 'Children's Books of the Year', the Puffin Club and of the trade significance of the Bologna fair. The editors may argue that their neglect of conventional sources is made up for by their use of a 'living archive': recorded interviews with editors etc. (apparently undertaken without knowledge of a similar project being mounted by the Book Trade History Group). Good though the idea be, it has gone off at half-cock. One looks in vain for evidence from such witnesses (men, alas!) as John Bell, David Gadsby, Dick Hough, Robin Hyman, Rayner Unwin, Ron Whiting, and --- above all --- Antony Kamm. The chapters from other contributors are presumably intended to fill what the editors perceive as gaps (many of which remain --- there is no attempt, for example, to analyse out the vast array of genres into which 'children's books' may be divided). The first of these chapters --- inexplicably --- is about book prizes. Keith Barker plods a route that he has covered before, but omits all discussion of the effect of book awards on publishers --- and, indeed, awards made *by* publishers. You will learn nothing from him of the Macmillan Prize or the Kathleen Fidler Award, nor that Jan Mark first emerged as an author through the Penguin/Guardian Competition. A similar refusal to place publishing at the centre of an historical account occurs in the next chapter which is a sort of annotated list of famous picture-book artists by Judith Graham. She utters barely comprehensible remarks about printing processes, but has nothing to say on popular movements. Ladybird Books, incidentally, do not seem to be mentioned anywhere at all. The decline in control evident here is redeemed, in part, in the rest of the book, where Geoff Fox supplies a model account of 'Movable Books', Philip Pullman a small, but barely relevant, monograph on 'Picture Stories and Graphic Novels', and Susanne Greenhalgh a broad chronological survey of 'Children's Books and the Media'. Reading these essays intently one can wrench them into a personal awareness of the events of the period although within the structure of the book they are little more than dangling appendages. (Incidentally, why is Philip Pullman allowed illustrations and nobody else?)

Running Order:

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