
The recent conference in Perth, organised by the SPA for member publishers, provided a useful forum for booksellers, library suppliers and librarians to discuss developments in the book world. Trading since the demise of the Net Book Agreement was the opening discussion topic. Library book buying, training provision for publishing with help from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, future plans for the Edinburgh Book Festival and the current programme of Book Trust Scotland were all on the agenda. Useful discussion also followed Jenny Brown’s presentation on the proposed changes in the SAC’s support for publishing. There were sessions on Internet marketing, Copyright harmonisation in Europe and working with the Scottish press - a session in which the deputy editor of The Scotsman took the opportunity to denigrate the entire output of the Scottish publishing industry.

Feedback from this conference and recent talks with Scottish Arts Council committee members has brought into sharp focus a worrying tendency towards disparagement of Scottish publishing which is harmful and negative. Constructive criticism and debate are welcome but much of the SAC’s support for literature will be undermined if current attitudes are permitted to prevail.

To support literature as an art form, the Scottish Arts Council’s policy of working on three key aspects - writing, publishing and reading - carries the consensus of virtually all those who work with books; it is a sound principle. Writers as artists need a public, an audience, and readers need easy access to the written word. Increasingly they also need to be aware of its value; a situation which is not, of course, confined to literature.

Careful thought has been given by the Scottish Arts Council as to how a writer is defined as working in or about Scotland. Readership is supported in Scotland and outside the country in order to widen the writer’s audience. Publishing is supported if it is based in Scotland.

It is scarcely a coincidence that the current trend to belittle the efforts of Scottish publishers has arisen at a time when a talented and active Scots editor has gained prominence in a large international publishing conglomerate in London, when
Scottish writers are enjoying a popularity, well-deserved, but not always accorded in the past, in the rather fickle London literary scene, and when a prominent Scots literary agent has returned to live in Scotland to seek talent for his business, which is to trade in writers with London publishers.

It is not in the interests of any of these that Scottish publishers should be successful. All command media attention and considerable spending power; the independent Scottish publisher does not. Note that the deputy editor of what is regarded as a Scottish national newspaper stated clearly that he despises the ‘local’ output. Sadly, what happens in London always seems to be more important to sections of the Scottish press than what happens here.

But let us be clear on the question of publishing. Alasdair Gray was first published by Canongate, as was Charles Palliser, whose Canongate-published novel was a huge success in the USA as well as in the UK. Liz Lochhead, Janice Galloway, James Kelman, and A. L. Kennedy were all published first by Polygon. Such was the regard in which Polygon was held that the design and format of its books were copied by the London house who sought its authors most avidly. The reputation of many writers was made through the publication of their work by a Scottish publisher.

It is said, on both sides of the argument, that the small Scottish publisher has lacked cash for adequate advances to authors and marketing muscle to promote the books. What was and remains probably the greatest disadvantage is not simply either of these, but the fact that Scottish-published books are hard to sell in the narrow world of London bookselling which dominates Britain, through chains like Waterstones/W.H. Smith and Dillons. Scottish-published books are also hard to sell to libraries whose suppliers do not even display them. They view Scottish publishing output as a minority, special interest - unlike those Scottish-interest books which the Big Six London publishers produce. Even in Scotland, a Borders librarian was unaware of Canongate’s edition of Sunset Song, not because Canongate had not made the information available (that fact was confirmed) but because the library authority’s usual supplier - based in England - only made the Penguin edition available in his displays.
At this moment the writer is enjoying a support bordering on reverence, the reader needs to be wooed. So it is all too easy, when problems arise, to blame the publisher. An easy target, especially if the publisher is in Scotland, handy, small.

Thus negative comment may well become self-fulfilling. Authors, hearing from all around that Scottish publishing is to be despised, will turn to London for publication. Scotland will be merely a working environment for writers who use their country as an inspiration, a studio, a landscape. Agents may choose to live in the pleasanter confines of Scotland as a better “lifestyle” while earning from the authors sent to the Metropolis, Newspapers may concentrate on reporting to the local folk what emerges from the culturally and enconomically more important centre in London. Scotland as playground or country estate, in fact. with an ever-dwindling economy, an economy which in the end may not be able to support an interest in literature. It is a political as well as a cultural argument.

Why do we continue to support the notion that a reputation is only validated when it is made in London? Why does London welcome Scottish authors as current celebrities, but only if they have made them there? And, most important, why do we salivate over praise and attention in England and undermine what can be achieved at home?

If Kelman or Galloway falls out of favour in London, will London be blamed and tears shed over the poor treatment meted out to Scots? If young writers are no longer welcomed in London with open arms because the US -based publishing director has decreed a change of focus, how will they find a public when in Scotland the publishing industry has been tramped into a mish-mash of local guide books and exhibition catalogues.

Publishing is a commercial activity. Money is invested by the publisher to turn writing into books and the publisher needs to earn a living as well as the writer. And to earn that money to invest or to repay borrowings. There are few fats cats in the Scottish publishing industry. If there were, of course they would be pilloried for it. But it should be remembered that it is only by publishing Danielle Steele or Jeffrey Archer that vast sums are regularly made. An occasional Literary prize winner does not, unfortunately, earn enough to fund
major marketing campaigns. The reader’s taste is the issue. Mass market appeal is not the same as literary merit. But there is no praise given for reaching out to a mass market.

It is time to stop the destructive carping and consorious knuckle-rapping and to look together at what can be done to ensure that Scotland retains some control over its literary identity. It is unacceptable for a newspaper editor to denigrate the publishing output of his country; it is unacceptable to welcome back a literary agent whose avowed intent is to strip his native publishing industry of its nourishment; it is unacceptable to ask the industry to conform to principles and ideals set out by committees of academics, poets or librarians without taking account of the industry’s opinion, and to criticise if the economies of the process go sadly awry in consequence.

It is also unproductive for the SAC to decide to support publishing on a narrow front without very adequate consultation with experts from the industry. Otherwise we are in a State-Publishing situation, which the British Government is currently funding consultants to eradicate in former communist countries. It is a very delicate line to tread.

Publishers are the experts in their own business; they know how to produce books, they know the problems and pitfalls and financial panics. They have that experience. They must work in a supportive infrastructure which recognises their need to be economically successful, not to be treated like fraudsters if they are. Close examination of the support and services they need may show up many small projects, not the broad sweeps so beloved political or financial powers, who want to see large, quantifiable results.