XVI. Educational Books

Robert Fraser

In 1970, the Waldock Committee reported with confidence on the place of educational works in OUP’s publishing program, and with good reason. In that year, schoolbooks accounted for 25 per cent of the firm’s turnover, and 30 per cent of its profits, and this was without taking into account college textbooks or a growing involvement in English-language teaching. Here was a very lucrative trade, a substitute, in its way, for Bibles and prayer books as a commercial staple. Since, in the same year, academic titles represented only slightly more of the turnover -- 31 per cent -- but produced a mere 5 per cent of the profits, the discrepancy in solvency becomes clear: educational titles were six times more profitable than monographs or learned editions. As generators of income, only reference books surpassed them.

The officials at the Press who had seen Queen Victoria laid to rest in 1901 would have found this state of affairs surprising, even alarming. The seventy-year period between them and Waldock saw a steady increase in sales of educational titles, which since 1938 had enjoyed their own separate catalogue, constituting what other publishers would have referred to as a ‘list’. Across this lively period, certain dynamics are visible as, generation after generation, fresh waves of educational change swept in at home and abroad. Principal catalysts in this respect were successive Educational Acts for England and Wales that challenged the elite style of instruction the Press was used to providing for, and threw open school doors to young people of every class and background. The first of these, passed by Arthur Balfour’s Conservative government in 1902, abolished the 2,568 school boards set up by the Forster Act of 1870, replacing them with 328 local educational authorities with the power to open and run secondary schools, and brought voluntary -- including religious -- schools under the state umbrella. One consequence was the consolidation and standardization of the examination system, as the Matriculation Exam (‘Matric’ to generations of anguished candidates) became a benchmark of intermediate attainment and progress towards the Higher Certificate, which came to be accepted as the portal to the universities.

In breasting these waves, the Press both broadened and narrowed its conception of itself as an educational force. It broadened by reaching out from the upper forms of the British public schools, which it had perceived as its distinctive province, to take in general secondary and then primary school activity in almost every academic subject, both at home and abroad. It narrowed by focusing more of this provision on standardized syllabi, exams, and tests. On one matter, everybody -- both in Walton Street and before 1980 in the London Business -- seemed agreed: the Press’s imprint served as a guarantee of ultimate standards. But what these standards were, who defined them, for whom, and to what effect were constant topics of debate.

1 Humphrey Waldock, Report of the Committee on the University Press, supplement no. 7 to the University Gazette 100 (Oxford: OUP, 1970), 56; hereafter cited as Waldock Report.
2 After 1937, the General Catalogue no longer covered educational titles, although they were still listed in the alphabetical index at the end.
In this the Press was far from alone. A second constant factor was competition from rival companies, some of whom -- notably Macmillan, Longmans, and Nelson -- had possessed by 1900 many more years of experience in the wider academic arena. Seldom in at the start, but seldom lagging much behind, Oxford often relied on its image to help it forge ahead. To be taught to read by Oxford seemed to some a vicarious substitute for reading something at Oxford, as other publishers without this cachet soon became uncomfortably aware. People bought dark blue; it was the colour of success. [Simon Eliot: was it mostly dark blue? Many OUP series had other colours – red and maroon, for instance] The advantage instilled was especially obvious overseas, where the Oxford image helped sales. Nonetheless, whether in the home market or overseas, the Press’s success was uneven. Too often it followed suit where it might have called the shots.


By 1900, the Press had started to view itself and its multifarious activities in a new light. In 1931, the acerbic John Johnson, then Printer of the Press, wrote an internal memorandum comparing the firm of his own day with that of Bartholomew Price (Secretary to the Delegates, 1868–84). Price had been open to the idea of publishing for schools, even going so far as to write a series of mathematical textbooks himself. Caution, however, had then sounded the keynote:

In ‘Bat’ Price’s time the educational book, being directed to the public schools, was much more akin to the University text-book. [Simon Eliot: By the way, Johnson was wrong about this – there were many CPS books that were clearly aimed at less advanced markets than these.] On the other hand our books, ever since the great expansion of secondary schools in 1902, have been increasingly directed to a much younger market and a market much less akin to any University text-book market... Between the actual needs of his [Price’s] time and the actual needs of our time and the whole surrounding circumstances there is a very big difference indeed... The Secretary’s Office... will always have the critical faculty very highly developed; but the modern schoolbook (perhaps unlike its 19th century ancestors) needs the critical faculty in rather less degree and other faculties in rather larger degree.3

There are implications here concerning the balance of decision making between Oxford and London. Johnson’s characteristically mordant comments emanate from Oxford; he had little time for Humphrey Milford, the Publisher in London, or for what he regarded as Milford’s empire. Despite the animus, his remarks indicate something about changing conceptions of the Press’s scope in the early part of the century. One can see what Johnson means by scrutinizing some nineteenth-century pedagogical titles carried over into the 1900s: George Saintsbury’s Primer of French Literature (1896), W. G. Woollcombe’s Practical Work in Physics for Use in Colleges and Schools (1896), the Clarendon Press’s Anglo-Saxon

3 John Johnson, ‘Some Suggestions’, memorandum of 1931 to R. W. Chapman, forwarded by C. H. Roberts to Dan Davin on 31 January 1955 to with covering note running: ‘You may be interested in reading this typical Johnsonian memorandum on the Education Department. It shows that some of our difficulties have a very ancient history.’ From Secretary’s Office File ‘Misc. Papers for GBR to see’. [Q: supply formal archival notation?]
Reading Primers, and more than a dozen annotated editions of Shakespeare’s plays by the indefatigable Aldis Wright, who in his seventies was still earning a fair income for labours undertaken decades before. All possess a slightly hand-me-down feel: either bridging the gap between university and the upper forms of the great boarding schools or, at the very least, benefiting from the theory of overflow from the higher echelons of academe to the lower, which seems to have been Oxford’s guiding principle at the time. Chosen by dons for reputable academic reasons, they were sent forth into the educational world at large with limited consideration for differences of aspiration, or indeed of style. [Simon Eliot: I wonder how an instructional handbook on Book-keeping – a very successful CPS title – fits into this rather rash generalisation? I really think that this paragraph needs toning down in the light of what Volume II has to say about the CPS.]

Until the 1870s, the choice of educational texts was the responsibility of a School Books Committee located in Oxford. As early as 1896, the Delegates considered appointing a senior member of the London staff specifically to deal with this market, only to postpone the idea for a decade. [Simon Eliot: But check discussions in OD 1896-7 lead by Gerrans – they identify acutely where the CPS was going wrong by that time: not focussed on exam board syllabi, not cheap enough, not effectively competing with the Pitt Press and Macmillan.] In 1906, however, partly in response to the 1902 Act, Milford -- who had been assistant secretary to Charles Cannan in Oxford since joining the Press in 1900 -- moved to London, where he assumed day-to-day responsibility for education. The appointment carried an unwritten assumption that he would take over from Henry Frowde as Publisher, and therefore as manager of the London Business, on the latter’s retirement. The level of the appointment, furthermore, signalled the new seriousness with which the Press viewed the expanding school market. By 1908, Frowde was referring to Milford somewhat grandly as ‘The Head of the Education Department’, though by this he seems to have implied an area of professional responsibility rather than an organizationally distinct grouping. In any case, the new emphasis entailed a division of responsibility within the London Business. While Frowde’s letter books of the period largely concern the Bible trade and negotiations with the high command in Oxford, Milford’s deal with routine demands from head teachers for textbooks. Even at this period, there were several educational bestsellers. A particular favourite, benefitting from the Press’s longstanding reputation as a producer of maps and atlases, was the Oxford Elementary Geography by Andrew John Herbertson published in several volumes in 1911 [Q: This seems confused. A. J. Herbertson wrote a Preliminary Geography (1906), Junior Geography (1905), and Senior Geography (1907), but no Elementary Geography. But Fanny Dorothea Herbertson wrote The Elementary Geography (7 vols.) for the Clarendon Press. Is this what you’re referring to? The series was published across a span of years -- perhaps 1909–11, but the dates need to be verified.] In the same year, the Press also issued A History of England, jointly written by C. R. L. Fletcher and Rudyard Kipling for the school market, price 1 s. 8 d. (for details, see chapter 000 by Alan Bell). The London Business was so inundated with demands for this title that, as Milford wrote discouragingly in July of that year, ‘our binders have been unable to keep pace with it and are unable to send out specimen copies’. With the help of the Press’s versatile, and largely female-staffed, bindery at Oxford, 7,500 were rushed out to meet requirements. Still the orders flooded in. [Q: Bell states that the initial print run was 25,000...]

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4 Delegates Order Book, Friday, 17 June 1896, 198.
5 Henry Frowde, memorandum, 13 April 1908, Milford Letter Book 11, 331.
6 Humphrey Milford, memorandum, 29 July 1911, Letter Book 39M.
As this aspect of the Press’s work grew in importance, taking on an air of specialism, some refinement of organizational units became necessary. By 1909, in preparation for taking over as Publisher, Milford had acquired an assistant to deal with the day-to-day correspondence with schools. As Milford assumed the helm, further restructuring ensued. The segment of the London operation responsible for the burgeoning textbook market moved northwards to Falcon Square off Paternoster Row. Here, for the time being, the Press was warehousing its stock, and here education assumed a semi-independent identity as one-half of an operation devoted to vocational books: the Medical and Educational Department. Within it, control of educational sales was vested in Milford’s promoted deputy, Vere Henry Gratz Collins (1872–1966).

Collins, an interesting man almost unmentioned in existing accounts of the Press’s history, came to the Press by a slightly unusual route, and at an age when he had acquired diverse experience elsewhere. He had spent several years as a schoolmaster, teaching the lower forms in the Mercers’ School (then located in nearby Barnard’s Inn) for eight years, and had practical experience in running book clubs. Nonetheless, his was an unusual, even a risky, appointment. An agnostic and a contributor to the radical press, he had quit Charterhouse under a cloud in the Lower Fifth and had gone on to take a Double Third in Literae Humaniores at Balliol under Benjamin Jowett. At Mercers’, he had contributed articles on sex education to the Westminster Review and on divorce to the Fortnightly Review, and he had been forced to resign from the secretariaship of the National Home-Reading Union for ‘sexual degeneracy’ after a messy and much-publicized divorce; his correspondence with the sexologist Havelock Ellis had been cited in his decree nisi. He was a close associate of Edward Thomas, Robert Bridges, and, later, Thomas Hardy, whose Jude the Obscure he had read with excitement and approval during his last year at Oxford. Collins’s candid memoirs were not published until his seventy-eighth year, and then under the nom de plume ‘Mark Tellar’. They reveal a concern with childhood reading and its influence on later life, and strong dissatisfaction with the literature provision he had received at Charterhouse, where the few English texts on offer had been treated in an ‘arid philological style’. They also disclose a catalogue of what in Edwardian society passed for moral indiscretions: a Gissing-like liaison with a prostitute, and an affair with his wife’s ‘house parlour-maid’. Throughout, he inveighs repeatedly against the ‘inhibitions’ of convention while emphasizing the need for emotional candour. It is little surprise that in middle life he befriended, and published, D. H. Lawrence.

This discreet chameleon was given responsibility in the London Business for a growing area that covered every level of the school system, from public and grammar schools to local elementary schools, and every subject area, from mathematics and the sciences to history. Collins’s remit was one aspect of a broader drive in which, it was hoped, schoolbooks would create a reading public for the general list, for childrens’ books, and, in time, for learned works and the World’s Classics series, which Oxford had taken over in 1906 from Grant Richards.

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7 Mark Tellar [Vere Henry Gratz Collins], A Young Man’s Passage (London: Home and Van Thal, 1952).
From fairly early on in the century, the Press seems to have recognized that a special cultural cachet, and the possibility of diffused influence within society at large, lay in its provisions for language teaching, both at home and abroad. In 1906, the English Association had been founded by a group that included the incumbent Professor of Poetry at Oxford, A. C. Bradley, out of concern for the quality of literature teaching across the curriculum. Frowde had immediately become its publisher, and the effect can be detected in his catalogues: first in the association’s own annual bulletins, which bear titles like *Types of English Curricula in Boy’s Secondary Schools* (1907, with an equivalent report on girls a year later), and second in commissions from the Clarendon Press to Henry Watson Fowler, one of two distinguished lexicographer and grammarian brothers, for a spate of language books aimed at the population at large, though principally, one suspects, at the school population.

The career of the Fowler brothers is discussed in [chapter 000](#) by Alan Bell. Its importance for the educational market is that their works came to typify the elitist pole of a debate between those at the Press’s London operation, who were obliged to cater to the school market, with its varied audiences and their colloquial usages at home and abroad, and the mandarins of Great Clarendon Street. Together with James Murray’s emerging *Oxford English Dictionary*, the Fowlers’ volumes came to be viewed as exemplars of a well-bred variety of native speech that seemed to insinuate, in the mocking phrase of the loud-mouthed parvenu Mr Toad in A. A. Milne’s stage adaptation of Kenneth Grahame’s *Wind In The Willows* (1908), that ‘the clever men at Oxford / Know all that there is to be knowed.’ For the Fowlers’ first Oxford title, they settled on the title *The King’s English* (1906), their purpose being to help the middle classes write and speak a decent, plain vernacular (better and plainer, one suspects, than the monarch’s). It therefore possessed an undeniable educational function. In 1912, Milford still described it to a correspondent as a book ‘designed for teachers of very advanced forms’.

In 1913, the Fowler brothers joined Poet Laureate Bridges, Henry Bradley (of the *OED* staff), A. C. Bradley, Professor Walter Raleigh (a trusted Delegate), and Raleigh’s friend Thomas Hardy to found in Oxford the Society for Pure English. After a break caused by the Great War, this too, like the English Association before it, took to issuing with the Clarendon Press a series of tracts: Bridges covered homophones (1919); Logan Pearsall Smith, the assimilation of foreign words (1920). Unlike the association, with its pedagogical remit, the society was an inner circle of writers and linguists, and its tone was more discursive than prescriptive. By 1920, its pronouncements were already giving rise to misunderstanding. The *New York Times*, for one, was not quite sure what was meant by ‘pure’ in its name. While commending the society for its apparent openness to neologisms, the paper issued a health warning against the Fowlers, whom it accused of being ‘insular in attitude’, if not ‘insolently parochial’.

So the great debate was joined: exactly what was English? Judging from its bulletins, the association was less interested in adapting to the varieties of usage and dialect developing everywhere than in influencing the school system at home. Again, this seems to have been part of a broader strategy, since as Collins was able to report to Hardy on 9 April 1920:

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8 From Milne’s *Toad of Toad Hall*, first performed at the Lyric Theatre in December 1929.

There has been a considerable increase in the number of copies of ‘The World’s Classics’ sold over the last few years, though the sale of the more expensive series of Standard Authors and Oxford Poets has gone down. There is bound to be an increase of an intelligent reading public as long as there is an increased expenditure on education every year, and a larger proportion of the population undergoing secondary education.\(^\text{10}\)

As with more general titles, success with schoolbooks depended on getting the level and the price right. While Aldis Wright’s editions of Shakespeare remained in the list at the comparatively high price of 1 s. 6 d., ‘plain Oxford text’ versions of the same plays -- that is, editions without notes, for which there seems to have been a considerable demand in schools where teachers were confident of supplying their own glosses and explanations -- were now offered at a third of that price, as were editions of other canonical authors of English literature. [Simon Eliot: This is not new, the canon was clearly defined by the end of the 1880s by the emerging examination boards] There was, even more vitally, economy of scale. Monographs, college textbooks, and even anthologies sold in single copies: school texts sold in sets. The titles in the catalogue in every subject area advertise this collectivity of appeal. A typical title is H. W. Fowler’s *Sentence Analysis for the Lower Forms of Public Schools* (1906). The pivotal preposition here is ‘for’: from the century’s second decade, it appears in increasing numbers of titles as, theory and practice coming together, textbooks are aimed at particular kinds and levels of students, from the most advanced to the very youngest.

Increasingly, the authors of these practical little books were, like the Fowlers, who had both been schoolmasters, people with experience in the classroom at every level, from elementary classes to the Sixth Form. It was Collins, for example, who, in the last year of the Great War, commissioned a history of Europe from a novelist and one-time educator who had trained at University College Nottingham. D. H. Lawrence been a pupil master at Davison Road Elementary School in Croydon for several months in 1908, and when, a little more than a decade later, he handed over the typescript of *Movements in European History*, Lawrence H. Davison was the byline on the title page. In 1921, he had not long before passed through the nightmare of wartime exclusion and suspicion recounted in *Kangaroo*, and the submission found him at his preachiest. Like *Aaron’s Rod*, published the following year, it extolled the cult of the hero, in a sense less akin to Carlyle’s than that of 1930s poets who cherished the ‘Truly Strong Man’, or even of the fascist leaders they would attack. The text passed Collins’s and Milford’s scrutiny, was duly blessed by the Delegates, and sold 4,000 copies. Only when Johnson called for a revised edition and Lawrence added to it a more than usually pontificatory appendix were eyebrows raised. Fowler read it for the Press and reported that the prose was ‘epileptic’, despite which it was issued with only minor deletions.\(^\text{11}\)

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**Fresh Fields: The London Business and Overseas Educational Publishing, 1926–55** [Q: It’s not clear why the closing year for this section is 1955. The account seems to end in the mid 1940s, which is where the next section dealing with the London Business (‘The Milch Cow’) picks up.]

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\(^{11}\) Editorial file, OUP/PB/ED/006371/OP859.
There was another dimension to the language debate: the imperial nexus. Frowde had tended to regard the Press’s branches as export agents for OUP and Clarendon books. His successor, Milford, held a more complicated view. Not only was he an enthusiast for the branches, but he was also much concerned with what happened between the branches, and with parts of the world in which so far there were none. In 1915, the London office had employed in a clerical capacity a former pupil from the school where Collins once taught. At sixteen, Eric Cecil Parnwell was an alert young man with gimlet eyes who had just left Mercers’ with nothing more to his name than a matriculation certificate. Though he was initially put to small cataloguing tasks, his background suggests that his appointment may have resulted from a broadening of the Press’s social vision. Parnwell would perhaps ‘do’ for the London end. He had determination and undoubted organizational ability. Although Parnwell had never left his native England, Milford gave him an office in Falcon Square in 1926 and a world map on the wall instead of the standard Oxford Almanack, and then asked him to ‘become an expert in education overseas’, by which he seems to have meant overall responsibility for sales representatives worldwide, for areas not covered by the network of branches, and for interstitial regions that the branches could conveniently supply direct. With this end in view, Milford dispatched him on a familiarization tour, the first of many such promotional trips that he was to make overseas, accompanied by his wife, trunkfuls of books, and eventually their young son.
Quick on the uptake, Parnwell soon identified one such area of convenient expansion. In 1927, on the eve of departing with his wife on an extended tour, he received a long memorandum from Vaughan Jones, a Bombay-based representative covering the Indian Ocean area. On visits to East Africa, Jones had noted the vast untapped potential represented by the migrant Asian populations there. Here was a market that could conveniently be supplied from India, since both areas were under British control, and the Asians of Kenya and Uganda lived in self-sufficient communities nostalgic for home. Macmillan was already enjoying some success there with Swahili textbooks printed at its own branch in India. So Parnwell, who was about to set out for South Africa, re-routed his itinerary via Mombasa and, once he reached South Africa, made sure to visit Natal. Soon he was able to fix up with Raymond Goffin, who was in his first year as manager of the Indian branch [Q: in
Bombay?, for the Asian school population of both East and South Africa to receive textbooks printed at Oxford House, Bombay.

Parnwell’s global brief was not entirely the product of originality or far-sightedness on Milford’s part: as ever, Milford was nervous about competitors. [Simon Eliot: I think not, the Delegates had already committed themselves to textbook production before Macmillan’s influence could have been felt] Longman had made Oxford aware of new markets for English-language-teaching books in the empire beyond the traditional constituencies in the Dominions. For a decade, Longman, or ‘the Ship’, as the Press liked to refer to its rival, with reference to its logo, had been selling such textbooks by Michael West, an educator with long experience in Bengal, who had been pioneering an entirely new approach over the last few years. Controversial then and now, it relies on the questionable assumption that second-language English users who use the language professionally -- say, in the course of working for the Bengal Civil Service -- probably do not need to learn to speak it fluently, let alone read demanding English texts. Precious time and expense could be saved by not acquainting them with colloquial idioms or quality literature, of which they had little need, and by concentrating instead on broadening their vocabularies and improving their grasp of syntax. Over the course of a number of ‘experiments’ in Calcutta schools among a broad swathe of pupils, West did just that, with a noticeably faster transition to basic literacy than that achieved by previous teaching methods. Having tested his approach, he attempted to sell it to OUP’s Indian branch [Q: in which city?], still under the management of Geoffrey Cumberlege (eventually Publisher, 1945–56). The Press rejected it.12

So West took his idea back to his original publisher, Longman, which accepted it with enthusiasm.13 In 1926, the year of Parnwell’s promotion, Longman brought out the first of West’s ‘New Method’ readers, which featured an incremental vocabulary suited to intermediate students; this was quickly followed by a dictionary in which a basic vocabulary of 1,490 words was used to define 24,000 items. Their success was remarkable, especially in India, and Oxford reacted instantly, though a little clumsily. For many years, Walton Street had grown used to losing out commercially to Longman, which even had a large share of the classics market with Kennedy’s Shorter Latin Primer. This time, however, Oxford fought back, on two fronts. First, it commissioned a language course from Lawrence Faucett, a teacher with several years experience in China, whose ideas had fortuitously just been turned down by Longman. Seeing an opportunity, Parnwell snapped Faucett up in 1930 after sharing with him certain ideas of his own. Travelling through Africa and Europe for OUP, Parnwell had been struck by the lack of suitable teaching materials, and particularly by the disastrous effects of using West’s method to teach the shape and meaning of words without any true concern for their sound. An anecdote, slightly tall, that Parnwell was later fond of recounting illustrates his approach. One day while on tour in Malta, he had inspected an elementary class in which, with very limited success, a newly trained master was attempting to persuade his charges to recite a sentence that included the English noun man, with its flat vowel. The reason for his failure was evident: a second-language user raised on West’s New Method, the

12 See also Rimi Chatterjee, Empires of the Mind: A History of the Oxford University Press in India under the Raj (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 318, which, however, has Milford scrutinizing West’s New Method Readers for guidance in 1910. They did not exist until 1926.

instructor was himself pronouncing the noun as ‘mahn’. At that point, a herd of bleating goats
grew into the yard outside. Unable to stand the travesty of instruction a moment longer,
Parnwell stopped pacing around the room and instructed the class to disregard their teacher
and listen instead to the goats. Within a few seconds, they were all triumphanty shouting
‘man, man, man’. [Q: need a citation for the anecdote]

Faucett and Parnwell were of one mind. The aural quality of English was paramount,
and with that priority in mind, Faucett brought out the first instalment of his Oxford English
Course in 1931 [Q: date s/b 1933?]; drawing on his experience, Parnwell collaborated on the
Melita English Course with Frederick George French for use locally in Malta [Q: Faucett
and Parnwell brought out the primer for Melita in 1934; didn’t French write the course
books by himself?]. Whereas the New Method, functionalist in emphasis, concentrated on
the incremental acquisition of vocabulary from 500 to 1,000 and then to 3,000 words, the
Oxford books applied to this new sphere an overseas equivalent of the integrated educational
philosophy already espoused by the Press at home. ‘The natural way to master language
construction’, it explained, ‘is to learn to speak it first; in that way a firm connection is made
between the word-token and the object’. [Q: citation] Semantics were therefore enhanced
with a graceful concern for sound and contemporary idiom, often exemplified in dialogue
form:

Young Boy: What makes the engine go, father?
Father: Steam, my boy. 14

There was an explicit ambition to introduce students to worthwhile literature as soon as
possible. So [Q: Reading?] Book III contains simple poems by Wordsworth and Blake, and
even some lines from Endymion, while a set of supplementary readers takes pupils from
Robin Hood to a much abridged Tale of Two Cities via stories of Greece and Rome, The
Tempest as recounted by Charles and Mary Lamb (again, much stripped down), and glimpses
of The Arabian Nights.

Long-term costs were minimized by employing stereotype plates for production, and
the books should have been a runaway success, yet Longman retained its commercial lead.
The reason for this seems to have been partly a matter of promotion and partly of distribution.
Longman was far more experienced in selling textbooks abroad, with a more extensive team
of travellers and reps. And when a decisive boost was needed, a director on the board -- often
a member of the Longman family -- went into the field and delivered it at the highest level of
official contact. Parnwell, a mere lieutenant in the hierarchy at Amen House, was no match
for such men.

Instead, Faucett tried another ploy. He suggested to West that they co-author an
updated course drawing on their respective strengths, and that the Ship and the Press market
it jointly, sharing the profits. Milford tentatively put this plan to Kenneth B. Potter at
Longman, his tone verging on the disingenuous. Collaboration along these lines would, he
wrote, ‘remove the spirit of competition’ and leave each of them free to operate ‘under
whatever division of areas we might make’. [Q: citation for the letter] Soon, the thinking
behind this scheme became obvious. Like the conquistadors of old, or like the Great Powers

14 Lawrence Faucett, Oxford English Course: Language Book III (London: Oxford University
Press, 1933), 12.
slicing up Africa, the Ship and the Press were going to partition the world between them into two non-interfering zones. After listening for while, Longman, which had everything to lose, stopped listening. In 1934, the scheme was abruptly dropped.

Parnwell’s approach was subtler. Lacking an aura of supreme authority, he took to weaving in and out, seeking areas where provision had been overlooked, such as Turkey and Iraq, neither of which were then subject to direct British influence. He had also for several years been encouraging the Press to adapt the Oxford English Course to different national systems, marketing the results where possible through the branches. Another untried region was Persia, which Hawkins [Q: identify—first mention], not yet manager of the branch, investigated in March 1933 on his way back home on leave from India. The following year, Persia unexpectedly changed the language of school instruction from French to English. Seeing an opportunity, Parnwell wrote to Professor Robert Young at the American College of Tehran, suggesting that 4,000–5,000 copies of the Oxford English Course as adapted to India be supplied through Bombay. Not for the first time, politics intervened. ‘Persia’, Young replied, was now ‘intensely nationalistic and violently anti-Indian’. [Q: citation] As a result, the director of education had been commanded not to order from the subcontinent under any circumstances. So the entire course had to be recast for the Persian school system, substituting Persian settings for Indian ones, and the book sets shipped out from London.

The underlying Press policy, which was increasingly accepted by the Education Department, was one in which a basic course in any subject would be adapted to varying social and educational conditions, both in Britain and overseas. In this respect, Oxford had again taken its cue from its competitors, partly from Longman, with its worldwide system of local representatives, but also from Nelson, which, from its base in Edinburgh, had been feeding the international appetite for locally sensitized pedagogic fare for some time. Treated this way, mathematics proved as successful and adaptable as English. The Nelson maths course for schools had been successfully domesticated for use in India, Malaya, the Gold Coast, and other parts of Africa with a growing school population. In much the same way, the Oxford mathematics courses, initially devised to suit the needs of an expanding secondary school system in Britain, were exported via the branches to locations from Ceylon to Barbados, changing as they went and breeding new titles and series in the process.

Maths, Geography, and French: Joint Efforts at Home and Abroad, 1944–70

Both in Britain and overseas, the decades following the Second World War found the Press working in an increasingly regulated educational environment. An early symptom at home was the bill that R. A. Butler as President of the Board of Education (later Minister of Education) had steered through the Commons in wartime. Passed into law in 1944 and implemented in 1947, the Education Act established a three-tier system of state secondary schools; students would be assigned places via a new examination at eleven-plus, devised in accordance with the emerging science of educational psychology. Hence, grammar schools became a feature of every English town, creaming off pupils who scored well on the test and banishing the rest to technical or secondary modern schools (only the second of these took off in practice). For seven years following the Act, the old-style School Certificate and Higher School Certificate remained in force, though they gave way in 1951 to a General Certificate of Education, with ordinary, advanced, and scholarship levels, for abler students. The remainder of the school population, initially deemed beyond -- or possibly beneath -- formal examination, was rescued from this limbo only with the gradual introduction after the mid-
1960s of comprehensive schools and a Certificate of Secondary Education as a lower-order ordinary level with no advanced stage. Expanded in their scope, proliferating in their social impact and pedagogical approaches, schools were henceforth to be an increasingly specialized and professionalized concern, for publishers as much as for teachers.

The response by Press was to split its educational provision. In 1945, as Cumberlege succeeded Milford as Publisher, the freshly styled Education Department of the Clarendon Press, entrusted with textbooks for British schools, remained in Oxford, while the Overseas Editorial Department returned with Cumberlege to Amen House in London. If a portfolio fell between these two stools, or if a publication for the home market needed to be adapted for overseas use, both departments were to be consulted. At the Oxford end, responsibility for various curriculum subjects was vested in a small cadre of dedicated desk editors, presided over by the assistant secretary, a position occupied for much of this period by Peter Spicer, a baronet’s son, Christ Church man, and Congregationalist who had served below decks in the Royal Navy during the war and would pointedly ignore his baronetcy once he succeeded to it in 1968.15 Spicer was ably supported by his formidable assistant Laura Salt, a former school inspector who had previously worked on reference books and maps. At the outset, existing titles were kept in print to serve the expanded classes in grammar schools; the challenge was develop material for other constituencies of pupils by stressing the practical applications of many subjects. Thus, in March 1947, Cumberlege advised Dora Bellington, an art teacher from Surrey, that her Art of the Potter [Q: Was this book used in the UK and abroad, i.e., it would have been of concern to Cumberlege only if it were an OE title?] would need to be reassessed for the needs of non-grammar-school students: ‘My impression is that the book is rather biased on the historical side and that it would probably need more space devoted to the practical side.’16 As levels of instruction proliferated, and new, more pragmatic teaching methods came into vogue, an equivalent shift in focus could be observed right across the curriculum. It can briefly be illustrated by sampling three key areas: maths, geography, and French.

Maths was integral to the syllabus. It was thus a subject that needed to be carefully rethought when textbooks were commissioned for different categories of students, and the need to produce books emphasizing its application outside the classroom was soon apparent. Telltale signs occur in titles: Modern School Mathematics, for example, implied maths as conveyed in secondary moderns. In the early 1950s, the Press’s senior maths editor, A. M. Wood, commissioned four volumes under this title from E. J. James of Redland Training College in Bristol. Published from 1955, they represented a graded course leading from first principles towards the needs of young people who might go on to a commercial apprenticeship or to a lifetime in a factory. It proved hard to get the level right. When book two was delivered, a professional reader commented: ‘On some very elementary subjects it goes into a great deal of detail, e.g. counting. Some of the detail in the section on stars would tax even a normally competent maths teacher. Who is the book written for? The novice or the consummate experimentor; for the teacher of the very slow, or for the man dealing with near misses from the grammar school.’17 Once such sections had been redrafted, the balance of

15 Obituary in the Independent, 12 November 1993; Richard Russell to Robert Fraser, 11 November 2010.
16 Geoffrey Cumberlege to Dora Bellington, 31 March 1947, OUP/DUP/PUB/5/1.
17 Anonymous reader’s report enclosed in A. M. Wood to E. J. James, 15 October 1956, OUP/PB/ED005736/OP793.
treatment proved more satisfying: the real-life context determined the pace of instructional delivery and the complexity of exposition. Book one, for example, aimed to induce a fascination with number theory. It included magic triangles and series, but it also teased the pupil’s curiosity by demonstrating the diverting consequences of multiplying the number 37 by multiples of 3. The result was a series rising from 111 to 222 and onwards. It further explored the world of mundane applications by demonstrating the usefulness of such calculations when endeavouring to find one’s way on a map, place items of furniture around a house, or estimate the slant of the sun’s rays at particular times of day.

The series was reprinted annually, and by 1966, when new developments were already in the pipeline, the demand was for 20,000 copies of each book. Success spawned spin-offs: teacher’s manuals, question-and-answer books, wall charts. No sooner had he completed all of these auxiliary tasks than James set about compiling a complementary series called *Topics in Mathematics*, applying the acquired skills to vocations such as nursing. The manuals were especially admired. By 1958, the Indian branch was beginning to cast acquisitive glances, anxious to propagate a version adapted to Indian schools. As Hawkins told James, ‘We have for many years sought without success to add a book on the Teaching of Mathematics to our Teaching in India Series. It looks as if the book will be fairly easy to adapt to the purpose, but before exploring the question fully, perhaps you would let us know if you have any objection to the publication of an abridged and adapted version.’ Once the Indian proposal had received the blessing of the Secretary and the author, the nominated adapter was R. Narasimachari, who had already written for the Indian branch an *Oxford Modern Mathematics* course that followed the curricula set in the state of Madras, and was issued in English, Kannada, Malayalam, and Tamil. Prospects seemed set fair, at least overseas.

Just as James’s series was finding new audiences abroad, however, its presence was challenged at home. In 1965, the arrival of the Certificate of Secondary Education meant that until the arrival of the General Certificate of Secondary Education in 1986, there were to be three constituencies of British secondary students: those sitting for the General Certificate of Education, those in secondary modern schools who were thought to be up to the new exam, and those who, as before, would leave without a certificate to their name. While James’s books remained useful for the last of these groups, for the middle band an entirely fresh series needed to be developed quite rapidly. The upshot was *Oxford Secondary Mathematics*, a more demanding four-book series from James that covered the subject historically, theoretically, and practically. At the same time, preparations were made to replace James’s original books with a parallel series for non-GCSE students from Douglas Paling. No sooner were these in production, however, than the entire program was compromised by a national reform of quite a different kind: the United Kingdom was to introduce metric currency in a phased operation from 1971: the question, still hanging at the end of this period, was whether the Press’s schoolbooks should reflect this gradualism or, as Wood, the maths editor, believed, be metricated forthwith.

20 [Q: identify the document] OUP/PB/ED/005752.
Geography was just as much a prey to changing regimes of instruction as maths. The Press enjoyed a long history of pre-eminence in this area, not least because of the professionalism of David Bickmore’s Cartography Department in serving several contiguous departments and being capable of producing reference atlases of the distinction and beauty. The *Oxford Atlas* (1951), edited by two ex-officials of the Land Survey of India and drawing on the full resources of the Royal Geographical Society, the British Museum, and the Bodleian, was the pinnacle of cartography; school atlases, and courses in geography, were the foothills. The air was less rarefied down there; nonetheless, that was where most people lived, and increasingly over this period, the provision of material for schools -- notably the *Oxford School Atlas* (1955) and *Shorter School Atlas* (1956) -- was the bread and butter of the department.

In the immediate post-war period, the doyen of Oxford school geography was Professor Jasper Stembridge, whose *New World Wide Geographies* had been steady earners for thirty years. Stembridge, however, was coming up for retirement, and the world around him was fast changing. Although physical geography had a tendency to stay put, human and political geography were always in flux. Place names -- including, at this period of hectic decolonization, the names of countries -- shifted constantly, as did regimes, religious affiliations, and cultural attitudes. Stembridge had difficulty keeping up with these trends. In 1949, from his rural retreat near Taunton, he produced a second series of his books, but his sense of historical priorities was no longer that of his worldwide readers. As Laura Salt incisively told him, his first draft gave ‘too much detail of the happenings in the Second War, which seems right to us now, whose experience of it is so fresh, but I fear may seem a little dated in a few year’s time to children who have no first-hand experience of it.’

An entirely new series, Oxford Progressive Geographies, was deemed necessary, and Stembridge, despite his age, was once more given the task. The new series was aimed squarely at the branches, especially the newer offices in Africa and Asia, and responsibility for its distribution was therefore handed to Amen House, where Judith Lovelock occupied the relevant desk. Avoiding appearances of old-style imperial Eurocentrism, its four books progressed from *Regions and Peoples of the World* to *Asia and Australia*. Europe and the British Isles did not feature until book three, and the final book was devoted to Africa, with especial attention to emerging sub-Saharan territories. This, as far as the Overseas Editorial Department was concerned, was where the future lay; but such optimism proved short-lived. After Stembridge died in 1969, responsibility for updating the series was handed to his friend John Myers. But the enthusiasm of the branches, even for the updated material, soon wilted, especially in Africa, where editors on the spot wanted to produce teaching material from a local perspective. If the Stembridge-Myers course had a future, it would be in British schools. In March 1973, Lovelock wrote to Myers to tell him that responsibility for it was being returned to Spicer’s people in Oxford.

Like geography, modern languages had international application, and like maths, they were prone to shifts in method. In 1951, the Press commissioned from Leila Tomlinson a three-part series for grammar schools called *Nos Voisins Français*, which proved so successful that it was widely adopted by prep schools for Common Entrance; when adapted for Australia, it sold a quarter million copies there in the first nine months of 1953 alone.

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22 Laura Salt to Jasper Stembridge, 28 November 1949, OUP/PB/ED/015414.  
24 Cumberlege to Eyre, 29 February 1954, OUP/DUP/PUB/5/35.
By the end of that decade, the Nuffield Foundation was fomenting enthusiasm for the direct method, initially concentrating, as John Brown (Publisher, 1956–80) reported to Spicer, on its application to French. In 1960, anxious to cash in on the method’s introduction into the secondary modern system, Spicer commissioned a fresh series from Pamela Symonds, a forty-eight-year-old teacher from Berkhamsted with experience of its use. Something of a workaholic, Symonds soon resigned from her teaching job to concentrate on the project. Working with a team of photographers and illustrators led by Norman Meredith, she spent several months in France building up a picture of an imaginary country town called Fleurville, and of a Monsieur Garnier and his family, who lived and worked there. Let’s Speak French (1962) was designed to ‘teach the French language principally through speech’, and it benefited from trial runs at the pioneering London comprehensive Holland Park. Its author had taken pains over the least detail, forestalling any embarrassments accruing from currency reform by consulting L’Administration des Monnaies in Paris about images of the promised new franc coins. To placate the French was simple; Symonds had reckoned without the Irish [Q: Northern Irish?]. From the Royal Grammar School Armagh, a fourteen-year-old berated Spicer: ‘Please inform either Miss Pamela Symonds or Norman Meredith that . . . he or she has got their facts wrong. Because, if you look closely at Monsieur Garnier’s car it has the registration number 113 FT 75. According to earlier text, the Garniers live in Fleurville . . . 75 is a Paris number.’ It was a matter of honour within the Education Department that courteous replies were sent to every pupil who wrote in. Spicer placated Armagh as best he could.

Symonds’s series did well: by March 1968, book one alone had sold 238,840 copies, and there had been spin-offs: tapes, question-and-answer books. With this success, she had moved to Highgate, where her sense of entitlement rose along with her expenses. She now complained that she needed to share her royalty payments with French colleagues, many of whom she had visited, or received in London, at her own expense. Spicer strove to calm her, and then renegotiated terms for a new series on which they were working together. French Through Action took the direct method a step further [Q: What was the extra step?], and it was to enjoy considerable success into the 1970s and 1980s.

Symonds’s textbooks attracted a lot of international attention. By 1965, Let’s Speak French had provoked a demand in Nassau [Q: in the Bahamas?] for a Spanish course along similar lines: Let’s Speak Spanish was produced within a few months. In April of the same year, Spicer received a request from the Board of Education in Etobicoke, Ontario, for a version of Let’s Speak French adapted to Canadian requirements. There was no time to produce a separate course, since the schools needed it the following academic year, so Symonds agreed to a royalty of 10 per cent to tinker with books one and two, negotiated through the Canadian branch. By July, she was conferring with Quebec House in London with a view to adding some French-Canadian flavouring. Since Fleurville was out of the question, the action moved to Montreal, but Monsieur Garnier was indispensable. After talking to Quebecois officials, Symonds found a solution. Garnier’s interests should now be located more securely than his number plates: they should concern automobile exports to Canada. [Q: According to Symonds?] Quebec was delighted with the flattering light this

26 John Tyler to Spicer, 9 May 1972, OUP/ED/ED/000713.
27 Pamela Symonds to Spicer, 20 December 1968, OUP/ED/ED/000713.
28 R. E. Bain to Spicer, 16 May 1964; Spicer to Bain, 22 May 1964, OUP/ED/ED/000713.
shed on the ‘industrial renaissance in Quebec and Montreal’, adding that ‘there is no reason why some reference to this should not be included and be of interest to children’. It was, Symonds further thought, ‘important to try to present French-speaking Canada to English [Q: hyphen here? ‘English-speaking’?] speaking Canada in a light which is acceptable to the former’.  

The Milch Cow: English-Language Teaching and the London Business, 1944–70

The constant interplay between Oxford and London over educational titles had the effect of placing Amen House in general, and successive Publishers in particular, in a strategically interesting position. Education was now a matter of hot public debate, and textbooks were big business, attracting the attention of governments at home and abroad and of a variety of non-governmental agencies with ideological axes to grind. Hard-pressed Publishers from Milford to Brown were increasingly obliged to defend the trade from outside interference, or else negotiate a truce. As a result, the role of the Publisher, both within the world of publishing and in the larger public sphere, became a quasi-political one.

In general, the OUP senior staff was confident of the Press’s language-instruction methods. As Milford stated in 1944, their end purpose was to induce all English-language learners by manageable stages towards ‘the hope and the ideal to speak English as the English do, and of reading the same literature -- even Shakespeare and the Authorised Version’.  

But as in the days of the English Association and the Society for Pure English, there was an ongoing argument over the integrity of the language itself, a question on which even Overseas Editorial and the Clarendon Press did not see eye to eye. In April [Q: March, as in the footnote?] 1949, Cumberlege felt moved to write to A. L. P. Norrington (Secretary, 1948–54), defending Parnwell’s textbooks for Africa against the purism of the OED. ‘There may,’ he admitted, ‘be a head-on conflict between your Oxford lexicographers and what our experts in the Colonial field feel necessary for immature minds’.  

Cumberlege considered his department’s approach to be applicable, with slight modifications, anywhere. As he wrote in August of the same year to the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company: ‘We specialized in producing books for the teaching of English to foreigners and . . . these books are adaptable to almost any situation. It is the method that is important.’  

To bolster this claim, Cumberlege’s regime witnessed the fulfilment of one long-deferred success. There had long been a chink in the armour of Oxford’s English courses: unlike West’s New Method, they did not possess a uniform dictionary. The pre-war Indian branch had peddled the Concise Oxford around to shops and schools, but the Concise had been derived by Fowler in 1911 from the two-thirds-complete OED, and successive editions had done nothing to address the needs of overseas users. The disadvantage, as the Publisher John Brown recognized from his years in India, was that the Concise depended on prior knowledge. Second-language readers

29 Symonds to Spicer, 18 July 1965, OUP/ED/ED/000713.  
30 Milford, letter to the editor, Times Literary Supplement, 23 October 1944.  
31 Cumberlege to A. L. P. Norrington, 28 March 1949, OUP/DUP/PUB/6b.  
32 Cumberlege to Neville A. Gass, 10 August 1949, OUP/DUP/PUB/5/8.
looked up a word, and they couldn’t understand the definition. So they looked up another word in the definition, and then they came back to the original word that they looked up. It was, of course, circular.  

It was Brown who had noticed [Q: when? in India?] an advertisement in a Japanese newspaper for an advanced dictionary of current English that was being compiled by three teachers of English: A. S. Hornby, E. V. Gatenby, and H. Wakefield. Their book was the result of a decade of research at the Institute for Language Research [Q: Institute for Research in English Teaching?] in Tokyo, and it adopted a graded approach to definition. There ensued a three-way negotiation between the institute, the Press, and the British Council. In 1942, Hornby smuggled printed sheets to Ifor Evans at the council, who passed them on to Milford. Kenneth Sisam (Secretary, 1942–8) reported enthusiastically, but no sooner had a plan for the Press to publish been hatched than it ran into a double barrier: a wartime lack of paper and the internal politics of the Press -- the Clarendon cartographers [Q: lexicographers?] insisted the work was by rights theirs, while Parnwell wanted it for the London end. In November 1947, Cumberlege wrote to Sisam: ‘Parnwell says that the need abroad for this book is so urgent and our commitment to H[ornby] of such long standing that he is willing and indeed anxious to take it over as a Colonial Schoolbook. . . . It ought to be a very useful seller for very many years.’ In 1948, the necessary ten tons of paper were released. Parnwell had his way, and the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English proved an instant and lasting success, its first edition going into twelve impressions, its second (1962) into nineteen, and its third (1974) into thirteen [Q: Several sources report 28 impressions of the 3rd ed.]. Eventually, it would sell more than a quarter million copies.

It is not hard to see why. The dictionary eschewed etymology and accumulating usages in favour of an incremental elucidation of current practice, building securely on elementary semantic foundations. Its advantages can be illustrated through a couple of entries under C. The Concise defined cow as ‘a female of any bovine animal, specially of the domestic species’, and curmudgeon as ‘a churlish and miserly fellow’. In the Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, these became respectively ‘a large animal kept on farms to produce milk or beef’, and ‘a bad-tempered person’, adding, in deference to the readers’ assumed youth, ‘often an old one.’ But though the definitions were no longer circular, the financial arrangements underpinning the new dictionary fortunately were. Hornby had forsworn any personal profit from his enterprise, preferring to benefit the project of language teaching by paying his ever-burgeoning royalties into a trust for this purpose administered by the council, which then used the funds to purchase language-teaching textbooks, many of which were issued by the Press. The dictionary promoted sales of these textbooks and supplementary readers, which in turn encouraged sales of the dictionary.

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34 Cumberlege to Kenneth Sisam, 10 November 1947, OUP/DUP/PUB/5/2b.
In 1956, Brown was made Publisher. Parnwell was promoted to deputy publisher, in charge of liaising with the branches. Parnwell’s former duties were taken over by David Neale, who pursued imperial thrust where his predecessor had left off, overseeing the expansion of overseas textbook distribution with more pragmatism, some felt, than flair.

The business over which Brown presided was ten times the size of the one that Milford had overseen, and employed 357 persons in a building that had long since grown too small for it. From this unsatisfactory base, the Oxford English courses proceeded from strength to strength: between 1944 and 1955, turnover increased tenfold, from £40,000 to £400,000. Following Faucett’s retirement in 1937 (for reasons of ill health) from active scholarship,[Q: can’t really say ‘following Faucett’s demise’ here, since he died in 1978] the Press’s generic language scheme was adapted to the needs of country after country by Frederick George French, who had collaborated on Parnwell’s course for Malta in the thirties. A

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PLATE 11.2: A.S HORNBY (1898-1978)

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curmudgeon by anybody’s definition, French had been the headmaster of Rangoon High School before the war, then a school inspector, and he carried around with him the atmosphere of colonial Burma. He had been appointed a judge on the Channel Island (and tax haven) of Alderney, where Brown was wont to visit him. The post allowed him ample time to write when the fit was on him, and his adaptations were inexorable in their geographic advance. Making his mark with the illustrated three-volume classroom manual *The Teaching of English Abroad* (1948–50, with volumes subtitled *Aims and Methods*, *The Junior Course*, and *The Three Senior Years*), he masterminded as well the adaptation of Faucett’s course to Africa by Isabelle Fremont in 1947 and then adapted it himself to Malaya (1947), Mauritius (1950), Southern Africa (1952), Ghana (1955), Nigeria (1955), East Africa (1956), and Hong Kong (1956).

Unlike Hornby, French was in no mind to forgo the proceeds from his labor. In the autumn of 1959, the London office acquired a sprightly graduate recruit in the shape of twenty-four-year-old Jon Stallworthy, who had recently come down with a second in English from Magdalen, where he had won the Newdigate Prize. He was allocated to Overseas Editorial, where Carol Robson oversaw the day-to-day production of language textbooks. On his first day, he found himself alone at lunchtime in the office next to Neale’s. The telephone rang, and he picked it up. An abrupt voice shouted, ‘French here!’ Stallworthy had not heard of him, but inquired what the caller wanted. ‘Ten thousand pounds’ was answer. Stallworthy asked for what purpose this considerable sum was required. ‘Income tax’, boomed the voice. On Robson’s return from her break, Stallworthy -- whose salary as a trainee was all of £600 per annum -- shyly asked her whether the caller had been an impostor. ‘Oh no’, she said, ‘that’s Brigadier French. He does all our language books.’ ‘But he said he wanted ten thousand pounds to pay his tax,’ Stallworthy shakily persisted. ‘Well then,’ Robson replied quietly, ‘he probably does’.37

If French was doing well from English-language teaching, the Press was doing still better. Although Oxford had not closed the commercial gap with its long-time rival Longman, its profits were surging, and by 1960, on an expanding turnover, the annual gross profit margin was expected to be around 33 per cent. In January 1963, Brown sent David Neale, Parnwell’s successor at Overseas Editorial, a brisk reprimand attached to a summary of business during the previous two years, when the cost of sales (that is, the cost of raw materials and manufacturing) had been respectively £398,739 and £357,608. He commented ‘Your gross profit of 28.8% on the year is very low and seems to indicate that some price increases are necessary.’ Under pressure, the profits were set to soar even higher. By 1973–4, on sales of £1,074,000, the profit would be 45 per cent; in 1974–5, on sales of £1,241,000, it would reach 51 per cent.39

**Case Study: Wole Soyinka**

36 Ibid, 11.
37 Jon Stallworthy, interview by the author, 15 February 2010. The income tax, it might be added, was set at the minimal Channel Islands rate.
The Press initiated a graduate training scheme, recruiting young editors on the understanding that they would spend two periods of six months attached to one of the branches abroad. (This program was available only to men; women, even those with outstanding educational backgrounds, were assigned lowly desk jobs in London or Oxford.) Between these ebullient juniors and their elders there was a perceptible generation gap. One such junior Oxford editor was James Currey, a Wadham history graduate and son of the Mafeking-born poet Ralph Nixon Currey (1907–2001). In September 1958, he was recruited into Overseas Editorial, and in July 1959 he was sent out to Cape Town on a two-and-a-half-year attachment. While there, he met the similarly minded, similar left-leaning David Philip, whom in March of that year Brown had dispatched to Salisbury, Rhodesia, during the most volatile months of the Central African Federation. After further periods of in-service training in London and the Cape, Currey returned to an Amen House seemingly dominated by middle-aged India hands, for whom OUP was ‘the centre of the worldwide empire on which the sun never set.’

His unease was shared by a coterie of junior editors of a similar age and outlook. Among them was Stallworthy, who had recently returned from the Karachi office, and Rex Collings, a non-graduate who had come to the Press after a period in the army and a contract with Penguin, and who had since worked for a period in OUP’s East Africa office in Nairobi.

‘We were all enthusiastic about decolonisation,’ Currey recalls of his contemporaries, ‘and publishing local books for local needs.’

So far as these Young Turks were concerned, Overseas Editorial was trapped in bumbling paternalism, and Brown’s preference for high-level diplomacy over bread-and-butter editorial management appeared frankly cavalier. In 1962, this energetic group of younger editors launched an initiative that took its name from the coronets on the Press’s coat of arms. The Three Crowns series was intended as a holdall for general-interest books across branches. Its first titles were blandly developmental, and featured short monographs on agriculture and the administration of newly independent territories, but also included *Seven African Writers*, a discussion of writing from the sub-Saharan continent by Gerald Moore, a literary academic who had taught in Hong Kong, Nigeria, and Uganda. It was Collings who first perceived the potential of this vaguely defined ragbag for reversing the department’s customary direction of cultural exchange. Collings, who had run the branch in Nairobi for eighteen months, was an elusive individual whom few of his colleagues could claim to know well. Acutely aware of his lack of a degree, he apparently came in for a certain amount of condescension in the office. In photographs, he possesses the slightly haunted look of a sad man trying -- with imperfect success -- to look happy.
Over the New Year of 1962, Collings had made a familiarization tour of the Press’s African branches, during which he heard in Ibadan that Joan Littlewood, the outgoing and experimental director of the Theatre Royal Stratford East, had preceded him to Nigeria and had since spoken warmly of a work she had seen by a up-and-coming, and extraordinarily gifted, local playwright. On his return, Collings wrote to Littlewood:

Unfortunately no one I spoke to remembered either the name of the dramatist or the name of the play . . . As you may know we do a great deal of publishing for the Nigerian market and are about to start printing and publishing in Nigeria itself. . . . We are anxious to publish the works of local authors wherever possible and it did appear to me that if the play was suitable for acting then it would probably be suitable for us to publish. If it is possible, and if you had not made other arrangements for it I should be most grateful if you could let me know whether there is a possibility of our getting a copy of the script to look at.40

The dramatist was Wole Soyinka, and the play, *The Lion and the Jewel*, was his high-spirited three-act comedy depicting the unsuccessful attempt of Lakunle, a logorrheic rural schoolmaster, to woo Sidi, the village belle, in the face of competition from Baroka, the wily but elderly chief. On its arrival, the typescript was assessed by Moore, Neale, and John Bell (manager of general books in London) and received enthusiastic praise from all three. Nobody doubted its value as verbal or dramatic craft, but Bell and Neale both questioned whether Overseas Editorial was the best vehicle for the distribution of original, high-quality literature. The forte at Amen House, after all, had always been textbooks, and it would be risky to publish without orders from the usual network of educational contacts. But the manuscript was accepted, and the series went on to publish four more Soyinka scripts, including his Shelleyan *Dance of the Forests*, first performed for the national independence celebrations in 1960. Over the next ten years, the series acquired works by Soyinka’s countrymen John Pepper Clark and Ola Rotimi, the Sierra Leonian Sarif Easmon, and the Ghanaian Joe de Graft. Perhaps its greatest catch was Athol Fugard, whose workshop productions in Port Elizabeth were gaining him in the mid sixties a considerable reputation both in the world of international theatre and on the political left.

None of this resolved the department’s problem of how to treat such texts. Soyinka’s works, which won him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1986, were packaged in ways that did not please him, the educational establishment, or potential stage companies: they were issued cheaply on mediocre paper, and wrapped in jackets whose designs, by the Sudanese artist Taj Ahmed, confirmed patronizing presuppositions about tropical society and life. Within a few years, they were set as school texts in both West and East Africa, but problems remained. The Nairobi office of OUP, for one, opined that for the assistance of teacher and pupil, the texts should be reissued with explanatory glosses, but exam boards generally resisted the idea, on the grounds that such aids would predetermine interpretation and understanding. OUP was used to turning out plain-text Shakespeare; now it had plain-text Soyinka, and neither he nor his growing circle of admirers appreciated this fact, concluding that the Press had little conception of the quality of the work.\[Q: This makes it sound as though Soyinka and OUP (at least in Nairobi) were on the same side, and the problem was with the exam boards. Is that accurate?]\ In 1965, frustrated by such seeming limitations, Collings quit the Press for Methuen, taking Soyinka along with him. The Press retained rights to the Soyinka texts already published, and the two-volume Oxford *Collected Plays* of 1973 was issued between plain blue and purple covers as part of the Oxford Paperbacks series. After Collings’s departure, part-time responsibility for Three Crowns was assumed by Currey, followed by Stallworthy, and then, on his return from secondment in Karachi, by Ron Heapy. In 1976, with little wailing or gnashing of teeth, Three Crowns ignominiously folded.

There were some in the junior ranks at Ely House, the London Business’s smart new Mayfair headquarters, who felt that this ill-omened series had let its authors down. Since then, the publishing historian Caroline Davis has argued robustly that Three Crowns exposed a fault line between the Press’s proclaimed cultural mission and the economic drives that supported it, especially in a period when Oxford was making a great deal of money out of Africa. The most damning verdict of all, however, emerged midway through the life of the

\[41\] Davis, ‘Postcolonial Literary Publishing’, 227–8, drawing on reports in file 911083, ref 012161, box OP1619.
\[42\] Ibid, 222–54.
series, and from the very top. All along, Brown had been taking a closer interest in the project than some of his subordinates suspected. In November 1969, he shared with a group of colleagues his impressions of why Heinemann’s African Writers Series had made such an impact on the international literary scene, whereas Three Crowns had briefly flourished but was staggering. Heinemann, he declared,

produce books that look like books and not supplementary readers . . . Compare our policy: we got hold of Soyinka and just added as and when someone submitted something . . . We produced them to look like supplementary readers and not paperbacks.\(^4\)

Few statements could illustrate more trenchantly the tensions involved in maintaining a high-profile educational list over seven decades while striving for both intellectual excellence and commercial viability within a keenly contested market. Over the first three-quarters of the twentieth century, the educational sides of Press frequently performed this balancing act with commendable aplomb, but they did not invariably do so.