

The book publishing firm of Weidenfeld and Nicolson sprang from the ashes of an ambitious, intellectually lavish periodical chrysalis – Contact magazine, which, backed by a generous printer, was ready at the end of the war to project the cultural, political and business rebuilding of Europe. Staff was on site, several numbers commissioned and planned in detail when the British government announced the continuation of paper control and ban on new periodicals. Reluctantly we produced the magazine in stiff covers, giving each issue a separate title and calling the end product Contact Books. Although greatly praised by the press a hybrid magazine in stiff covers was a commercial impossibility, so Nigel Nicolson and I decided we would henceforth be book publishers, and W & N was born. Incorporated in 1948 its first book appeared in the autumn of 1949 – sixty years ago. The first list was praised for its literary quality but held to be too highbrow for the firm's survival. Fellow publishers, such as Hamish Hamilton, Fred Warburg, Victor Gollancz, Walter Hutchinson, predicted early demise; Dwyer Evans of Heinemann gave the firm two years. However industry giants such as Allen Lane, Billy Collins, Stanley Unwin and Jonathan Cape, and agents Curtis Brown, were betting on its survival and indeed longevity.

By the third year the list took shape and distinguished British authors joined it, mostly when being animated to write on a topic they liked. Rose Macaulay, Cyril Connolly, Isaiah Berlin, Cecil Beaton, Edward Sackville-West, published books under our imprint. With Sonia Orwell and Barley Allison as readers we acquired such fiction giants as Saul Bellow, Mary McCarthy, Dan Jacobson, Nigel Dennis.

The great breakthrough for the firm were the seasons 1957 to 1960. Then we extended our general list into two fields and did so with a huge appetite and outreach into the most diverse spheres in the world of academe and the visual arts. One of our specialities was the concept of international series on, for

instance, history, religion, natural history on the one hand and richly illustrated works of biography and a wide range of subjects on the other, in the form of multi-language co-editions.

A world history planned in 40 volumes, of which 34 have so far been published, brought us instant reputation as academic publishers straddling the general market because of the high level of international range of the authors. Maurice Bowra's *Greek Experience*, Michael Grant's *The World of Rome*, Eric Hobsbawm's trilogy on the 19<sup>th</sup> century, reflected the very high standard and universal appeal of this series; a history of nature edited by Richard Carrington, a 12-volume set of history of religions, all proved successful in each of the participating countries. An ambitious 80-volume illustrated paperback series known as the World University Library and edited by Colin Haycraft appeared simultaneously in 12 languages and boasted a range of widely known and outstanding young academics

Weidenfeld & Nicolson has often been mentioned as pioneers of international co-editions; to the extent that the notion of printing colour illustrations accompanying a different language text, the two real pioneers were Phaidon Books in Vienna and later Thames & Hudson in London, but theirs were almost exclusively illustrated books on art. We introduced the concept of biographies and other literary genres, printing colour sections together and the black text pages in different languages separately. We had many imitators, such as George Rainbird and other 'packaging firms', who produced finished copies for other publishers, but viewed historically Harold Nicolson's book on Monarchy was the first of the non art co-editions on the market. The era of the illustrated coffee table book might have outlasted many fashions and crises, but was greatly influenced by the steep rise of printing costs as a result of the escalation of oil prices due to the wars in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Weidenfeld & Nicolson also developed a good fiction list, acquiring Vladimir Nabokov, Margaret Drabble, Irwin Shaw, Olivia Manning, Edna O'Brien, Jim Farrell and John Berger, the two last having won early Booker prizes, but its

reputation as publisher of contemporary history and biography remained unchanged throughout the six decades of its existence: memoirs of General de Gaulle, Konrad Adenauer, President LBJ, Harold Wilson, Mendes France, as well as some of their spouses such as Mrs. Johnson and Mrs. Reagan; such great 20<sup>th</sup> century biographies as Joachim Fest's *Hitler*, the range of Antonia Fraser's magnificent lives of Mary Queen of Scots, Oliver Cromwell, Elizabeth Longford's Queen Victoria and Wellington, Richard Holmes' *Shelley: The Pursuit*, and many others. Antonia Fraser edited her highly successful illustrated series on short biographies of Kings and Queens of England, which remains an evergreen.

After selling control of the firm to a group around Anthony Cheetham and Peter Roche in 1992 the company maintained its tradition and its distinct personality within the newly formed Orion group, a tradition which the firm retained when Orion in 1998 became part of the great international French based Hachette group. Books such as the Klemperer Diaries, Pope John Paul II's Testament, the memoirs of Katharine Graham, Michael Palin's magnificent travel books, The Rolling Stones' group autobiography, the sensationally successful novels of Carlos Ruiz Zafón and Bernhard Schlink and a crop of books on ancient and modern history continue a tradition which I hope might last for many years to come. At a turning point of history in every field, from one political era to another, but also from one ground-breaking technological invention to another the future of the book is much discussed. Undoubtedly, in say 15 years, we will see whether and to what extent Kindle will have revolutionised the book trade, to what extent whole genres of entertaining and learning matter will no longer be seen on the printed page, but I believe a large portion of what we today call book publishing will still be served up in the traditional form. Undoubtedly there will be a division of labour; some ranges, such as encyclopaedias, may shrink into pocket-sized computers, but there will still be enough to publish and grounds for continued pride under the imprint of Weidenfeld & Nicolson on its 75<sup>th</sup> birthday or indeed its centenary.