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ATG Interview/ Richard Abel

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Against the Grain Interview

RICHARD ABEL

The Origin and Development of the Approval Plan

Interviewed by **Dora Biblarz** (Arizona State University)

Following last year's two-part interview with Fred Gullette, one of the first people that Richard Abel hired, I was invited to bring my tape recorder to the 1991 Charleston Conference, where Richard Abel agreed to reminisce on the 25-year history of the company that launched so many of the services and practices which we take for granted today. Regretfully, the entire transcript could not be reproduced, but what follows here (and in the next two issues) is the perspective of the founder of one of the most influential companies in the history of academic library bookselling, acquisitions and collection development in North America.

Introduction

ATG: To begin, tell me about your education, your experiences that might have brought you an interest in books.

RA: Well, that all started when I was a kid in Montana. I'm really a refugee cowpoke. I read my way through the Carnegie Free Public Library in Great Falls, Montana. When I was about 15 or 16, the director of the library, Miss Trigg, permitted me to start using the adult room because I'd burned up the juvenile room. I was around 16 years old out on the ranch and I had a bunkhouse all to myself. I started to read philosophy in the bunkhouse every night at the end of a day's work.

I went to Reed College, originally to go into Physics, because I was very interested in sciences. When I got to Reed, they had a required humanities course, and I became absolutely fascinated with History. All my work at Reed was done in History, with a major focus in my thesis on Medieval and Renaissance Constitutional and Legal History.

Libraries obviously have always been important to me because I soon discovered that I could get a hell of a lot more knowledge, faster, more efficiently by skipping classes and going to the Reed College Library and reading. I

ransacked the Reed College Library because reading is the most effective way of learning for me - and I believe it to be true for most people. The hard psychological fact about all of us is that none of us remember more than about 5% today of what we heard or saw yesterday. We've got this very strange kind of a mind, a strange kind of mental apparatus that only permits us to take in and store effectively a very small amount of the dis coherent, transient kind of

stuff that happens daily. And how does a book differ from this? A book is highly focused, it is a coherent, logical laying out of some body of some branch of knowledge. It is, in effect, a highly effective, highly efficient means of transferring knowledge that person A possesses and that person B needs. Although often person B doesn't know they need it - students are a classic example of this.

In summary, here is - for me, at any rate - the enormous importance of the book, the enormous importance of libraries, where a whole lot of books on a whole lot of branches of knowledge are all gathered together and one can sift around through all that stuff and get to it. And the fact that for me, and I believe this to be true of virtually everyone, the book is the most highly efficient, effective means of transferring information.

So, since I'm a night person, I wouldn't get up until Noon or one o'clock, I would go to the library, I ransacked the Reed College Library. Heh! I graduated! I went on to

Berkeley, to do graduate work in the same field, with the expectation that I would become a professor of History. I got a stack permit, since I was a graduate student. I had a little desk up on the History floor of the stacks where I would go and read books.

While there, I did what every graduate student does, and became a TA. It was perfectly clear to me, after about two months of being a TA that I did not have the patience to be a teacher.

So here I was, at Berkeley, with my career shot, and what was I going to do now with my life? I was married, had a child by this time.

While I was at Reed College, I had converted what had been a student-owned textbook and supply shop to what was, in fact, principally a bookstore. It had been open an hour a day and by the time I graduated from Reed, it was open about seven hours a day. About this time, Reed College Co-op was at the point that it had outgrown a student manager and they needed a part time manager. The school also had an acting President and he needed a part-time, what was called an assistant, but was really a go-fer. I was hired at Reed College to run the bookstore and be the go-fer for the acting President. That was in 1950.

College Bookstore Sells to Libraries

I'd only been back there a couple of years when the Portland Public Library - no it was the University of Oregon, called me and said "You carry a lot of books we're having a lot of trouble getting; would you be willing to sell to us?"

Now remember that we were a not-for-profit bookstore on a college campus. I went to the Trustees and the Trustees said "If it was another not-for-profit in the state, so no interstate commerce was involved, go ahead and sell to them if they want to buy." So I started selling books to the University of Oregon Library. Very shortly thereafter, the Portland Public Library talked to some-

one at the University of Oregon. Then, the Portland Public Library called me. I went to the Trustees again, and they said, "Yes, go ahead."

Then, within about — it must have been about 1953, and I believe it followed an ALA Midwinter meeting, because this happened about late January, early February — I received a phone call from UCLA, one from Cal Tech, and one from the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, all within two days, saying: "We understand you sell scholarly books to academic libraries." I said, "Yes," but I didn't know if I could sell to them, I'd have to check with the Trustees, which I did. Remember the Trustees were deriving no income from this thing, it was a student co-op. That had been the original legal form of this textbook supply shop and it kept that legal form. Well, the Trustees put together a committee, with a couple of attorneys on it. They concluded, "Well, we can do this. But let's set up a for-profit corporation that will, in fact, pay taxes." And so Reed College Bookstore, Inc., which is what it came to be named, came into being. All the shares were owned by Reed College Co-op, which is the student co-op that I'd run, so that all the profits then (assuming there were profits) would flow back to the student co-op.

So, we formed Reed College Bookstore, Inc. I called these libraries back and said yes, we could sell books to them. And that's the way Reed College Bookstore, Inc. came into being - that's how I got into library book supplying.

ATG: And at this time, you were operating a "traditional" bookstore?

RA: A traditional, well, an atypical college bookstore because the National Association of College Bookstores would ask me to come to their meeting every year to tell them how to put trade book departments into college stores. If the Reed Co-op had to depend on textbooks and school supplies, it would have been open an hour a day. As it was, we were open about 45 hours a week because the Reed student body, in those days, was a reading student body. We sold an average of about \$120 to \$130 of books per student per year that weren't textbooks, (Reed used very few textbooks.) I could take the student body that was going to be admitted for the

next year and could virtually predict what our sales were going to be. This was the Reed student body back in the 1950s and you must remember that \$120 in those days would be worth \$250 or \$300 today. So, what I'm trying to say is that I had as a customer base, in the retail end of things, a really committed bunch of learners. And the Reed College faculty worked with me because they agreed with me that one of the things a Reed College student should graduate with is a strong personal working library. At that point there was a terribly enlightened view among the faculty that all the College was doing was showing these kids how one learns and how it is one finds out about things, and the way to find out about things is with books. And the way to be able to find out about things efficiently is to have books of your own, so that you just

The case went through to the Supreme Court, which said: "Hey, this macaroni factory does, in fact, have to pay taxes."

go to your own shelves and you get the fundamental books, the books that are critical, off your own shelf. So, there was all this encouragement from the faculty all the time.

ATG: So, here we are, in the very early '50s with 5 or 6 libraries, U of Oregon, Portland Public, UCLA, Cal Tech, British Columbia. Are they personally selecting books in your bookstore?

RA: To some degree, they're doing that. But they're starting to send me purchase orders. They used to be typed lists. Now another thing most people don't understand is how relatively recent is the development of the institution of academic and research library bookseller. In those days, in the early '50s, libraries - let's look just at the West Coast - you, in Arizona would have bought your medical books and your scientific books from an outfit called J.W. Stacey in San Francisco. That was a leftover from the days when scientific, STM publishers had wholesalers. Stacey had, I think, the 11 Western states, and there was somebody in Chicago and there was somebody in St. Louis, and so on. They ran an absolute monopoly.

ATG: So we couldn't get these titles in a bookstore? Academic libraries today don't usually buy directly from publishers, but in the early '50s was that the same?

RA: Some materials were bought from publishers directly. Now there was another source, called the American News Company, and as the name implies, they distributed newspapers and magazines.

ATG: Scholarly journals also?

RA: No, because most of the journals were subscribed to at that point by libraries directly with the association that was the publisher. This whole business of private, for-profit publishers, publishing journals was something that happened in the '50s and the '60s. Before that, the big journals were those from the American Institute of Physics, the American Chemical Society, the American Institute of Biological Sciences and the same

in England.

ATG: So, we have here a scenario where the poor acquisitions librarian is typing up lists.

RA: Yes, and sending them off, and not getting reports, and some of the books would be so old they were out of print. Then there was Baker and Taylor - they were really a public library operation.

ATG: Were they a jobber at the time?

RA: What they were really trying to be was wholesalers to the book trade. What they kept going after though, just as Ingram now, was the library market because they could see a steady base of sales.

Well, things that we started to do in those days, like encouraging librarians to order on single title forms, one title to one 3 by 5 form, and reporting where we would send a report back to the library and say, "We're not going to send this book right away because it's out of stock," or something. What we called oneshot orders, meaning orders generated by the library for a single copy of a single title, was still the crudest sort of thing in these early days, just the crudest

sort of thing. The library acquisitions game was still very much kind of a hit and miss affair. It wasn't the kind of routine that it became in the '50s.

ATG: How did the libraries identify the books they wanted to order - through lists, or publishers' ads?

RA: Mostly it was faculty buying, to which the library played a clerical role.

ATG: So, here we are, at a critical turning point in the development of the acquisition functions in libraries, which were still operating in a very 19th century mode, and you enter the picture.

RA: Working with a whole bunch of libraries, we started to try to regularize these routines, so that there was a new kind of two-way communication going on. Faculty were recommending the books, the library was simply ordering the books and the acquisitions department was, in those days, just damn near a clerical operation.

ATG: They had to find the medical

and scientific books from Stacey's and go to somebody else for other things, this was very decentralized. Then you came along, for at least these 5 libraries, and they found that they could order more books from you.

RA: Well, it started with the stuff that nobody else wanted to handle, Baker and Taylor, the American News Company, Stacey's: University Presses, societies, small publishers; you know they still preferred to work with Simon and Schuster books rather than the "itsy bitsy" publisher.

ATG: Now, did you have problems dealing with the University Presses and the societies?

RA: Oh, yes. Terrible, terrible problems. Before the American Association of University Presses was formed, they used to call themselves the "Pure Tobacco Growers Association." There were about a dozen of them, who would get together to talk over mutual problems. They called themselves the Pure Tobacco Growers Association, trying to set them-

selves aside from the "impure" commercial publishers! But as a result, their operations were very hit and miss — it was often hard to get books from them.

ATG: This is very interesting. So you found that there was a market there, a niche, really, an area of service that could be extended to libraries, and you started to fill it with just those five libraries.

RA: Yes, but other libraries quickly started to come aboard. Then, I adopted a very active marketing program, so I was going out and talking to libraries. By the late '50s, I can't quite remember when this was, probably 1957 or 1958, we had enough business in the Los Angeles area and that included Arizona, by the way, to justify serving those libraries out of a new Los Angeles office that was run by a fellow by the name of Tom Martin. It was the first office we established. Now, the Trustees of Reed College were afraid of setting up an out-of-state corporation, so they let me set that up as a thing called Richard Abel Bookseller. So, in Los

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A Look at Issues

From Your Editor

The Charleston Conference will be held **November 5-7, 1992**. You should get a flyer for the Conference at approximately the same time that you receive **ATG** for June. The theme of this year's conference is **The Medium is the Message** and is based on the Marshall McLuhan and Robert Fiore book of the sixties. I can't tell you how old I felt, when NONE of the people who work for me knew OF the book or the author. Speakers include: Miriam Drake (Georgia Tech), Clifford Lynch (University of California), Connie Kelley (University of Virginia), Allan Wittman (Wittman Associates) and others. If any of you are interested in sending in a paper proposal, it's never too late.

Responses to the **Aqueduct Action Agenda** are everywhere over Internet and Bitnet. Apparently a hardcopy version will be distributed at ALA San Francisco. Besides positive response to

the Action Agenda, there is much concern about vendor service charges for serials and how they can be verified.

The economics of journals. As document delivery becomes more and more prevalent, pricing involves charging for the article rather than for the entire journal. In the print journal publishing environment, use of individual articles is not as much of a factor as it is in the document delivery environment. If articles are made available and an article doesn't get used, what happens? If authors are to be paid royalties for used royalties should they be charged if their articles are not used? As the economics of journals publishing changes these are just some of the issues that must be dealt with.

Use of resources. Libraries are frustrated by the lack of funds and are purchasing a progressively lesser piece of published information. This is caus-

ing some to talk about the use criterion as the basis for stocking the library book shelves. What does this model mean for libraries? Doesn't it change our entire collection development basis? What are the circulation statistics on the books in **Books for College Libraries-3**, for example? Was use a factor in selecting those materials? Should it have been?

Gille and Flumiani lists. And for those of you who are still buying books, the Gilles may be still around. According to informed sources, the ALCTS office has available at no charge, with a SASE, the Gille List. Requests can be sent to: Gille List, ALCTS Office, 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611. And, don't forget, if you have a questionable order, your friendly book jobber can probably help. For example, Bob Schatz reported on Acqnet about the Academic Book Center's use of the term "RISK" for such types of titles. ☛

ATG Interview

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Angeles, we opened under that name. The second office was opened in San Francisco by Fred Gullette, again as Richard Abel Bookseller, Inc.

Columbia University Macaroni Factory Case

Then a major change was forced on us by the Columbia University Macaroni Factory Case. A guy in the mid-'50s, who owned a macaroni factory, had, on his death, given this macaroni factory — as a going business — to Columbia University. Columbia University continued to run it, but they contended that they didn't have to pay any taxes, because it was owned by a not-for-profit. The IRS took it to court. The case went through to the Supreme Court, which said: "Hey, this macaroni factory does, in fact, have to pay taxes." The IRS, then, in typical fashion, published a whole series of regs that were just tough as hell on not-for-profits. Not-for-profits could hardly have made change if these regs had been followed. Of course,

everybody in the not-for-profit sector was just terrified by all of this.

Well, the Trustees came to me and said: "We're shutting down Reed College Bookstore, Inc. The Federal regs on taxes will not permit us to have this thing on this campus, so we're shutting her down." Well, I argued with them about this decision and finally said, "OK, look, I'll buy the thing from you. We won't kill it. I will agree to move off this campus. I will change the name. And then, give me a year, and I'll move it off the campus too, so there will be no connection with the school in any way, shape or form. And I will leave Reed College Co-op behind. We will separate the two operations in the course of this year. We will separate out what the co-op is and what Reed College Bookstore is."

ATG: Like a divorce - and they would get another manager.

RA: That's right. I found another manager to run the Reed College Co-op and I moved the library selling operation off the campus and it became Richard Abel and Company, Inc. Rich-

ard Abel Bookseller in Los Angeles and San Francisco were rolled back into this new corporation. And that's the way that all happened.

Coming in the Next Issue — The Approval Plan is Born