In Praise of Bookshops / The Town of Books, Hay-on-Wye, England

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In Praise of Bookshops

The Town of Books (Hay-on-Wye, England)
by Jack Walsdorf (Blackwell North America, Inc.)

(Note: This is the third of what will be a continuing series co-authored by Tom Leonhardt of the University of Oklahoma and Jack Walsdorf of Blackwell's, detailing their experiences visiting little-known and well-known used, rare, and sometimes antiquarian bookshops throughout the world.)

A recent ten-day business trip to Oxford, England left me with one weekend free — what better time and place to be a bookhunter with free time on my hands. But it was not in Oxford that I chose to spend my time — my sights were set on a small border town some two and a half hours due west of Oxford. There, settled in the gently rolling hills and lush green valley along the river Wye, is what can be called the “Town of Books.”

Imagine, if you will, a little country town in decline. Paul Minet, himself a bookseller, in his work Late Booking (Frantic Press, 1989) describes it thus: “In the late fifties Hay-on-Wye, like many similar country towns, was in slow decline. Being geographically isolated, it had been quite prosperous in Victorian times, serving a wide farming area with a range of shops… Many of these shops had gone out of business after the war… The railway closed and buses became infrequent.”

The town itself, with its mostly Victorian buildings, sits on a hill above the river, with the small winding streets leading down to the bridge and across the river into Wales. The center of town is made up of very few streets, Oxford Road, High Street, Broad Street, Lion Street and Castle Street. Castle Street leads to the town Castle, which according to Minet, is “a semi-ruined building of mixed Norman and medieval origins… inserted into these ruins continued on page 6

If Rumors Were Horses

As we go to press, we have learned (October 7) that it’s official! Dawson Holdings PLC has acquired The Faxon Company, Inc. Dawson had previously acquired two Faxon subsidiary companies, the Turner Subscription Agency and Faxon Canada. This acquisition has been approved by the Federal Trade Commission and completes Dawson’s purchase of Faxon. “The Faxon Company will be a wholly-owned subsidiary and will continue to operate from its Westwood, MA location, under the Faxon name,” said Bryan Ingleby, Group Chief Executive of Dawson continued on page 5
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was a most pleasant house of mixed Georgian and Victorian origins...” And it was to this Castle and this house that in the early 1960’s came one of the most famous (some might say unusual) booksellers of all time — Richard Booth. It was Booth who started the tide which eventually would result in some thirty plus bookshops moving into town. And it is Booth who now runs various bookshops, warehouses and even the Hay Castle Bookshop, who is truly “King of the Hill.” Estimates vary but it is safe to say that his stock is in excess of one million volumes.

The main shop, and the one I had the most luck at, is located at 44 Lion Street, called Richard Booth’s Bookshop. Here one can find 400,000 books, along with a slightly messy organization. “Let’s not bother with trying to keep it tidy,” one can imagine the staff saying to themselves, “after all, those customers will just mess it up again.” Books on the floor, books on tables, books piled high, dusty books, books falling off the shelves — all are to be found here. But, given the time, one can find long wanted items. I came to

Booth’s with more than 1,000 titles already in my collection of books by Julian Symons. I had just finished reading a Symons bibliography (to be published in 1995 by Oak Knoll) but there were twenty titles that are still missing from the collection. Two hours at Booth’s resulted in four finds. Normally a success rate of 20% wouldn’t seem that great, but I had been looking for these particular books for more than ten years.

The various Booth shops will give the book hunter finds in almost any subject area, but most surprising is that a goodly percentage of the books in stock are of U.S. origin. For a number of years Richard Booth made a practice of acquiring truck loads of books from various American sources and the stock still shows that activity.

Less than two blocks away sits my second favorite Hay-On-Wye bookshop, with only 200,000 titles in stock, the Hay Cinema Bookshop. Not to be outdone by Booth’s looming presence from his Castle on the Hill, this shop proclaims itself “the World’s most A-MAZE-ING Bookshop.” And it certainly is one of the few bookshops to be housed in a former movie theater.

A-MAZE-ING it may be, for again the organization is only slightly more structured than that found at Booth’s. Once, when I was an exchange librarian at the Oxford City Library, I asked a staff member to help me “alphabetize” some files. She looked at me and responded: “What’s that?” Clearly the word still is not put to use in bookshops in the west of England. Fiction is arranged in no order after the capital letter — thus fifteen shelves of “S’s” are intermingled, with Symons being here, there and everywhere. Slow going, this!

I made a good haul and the carrying bag I was given when I finally finished my hour of looking at the Cinema Bookshop carries the words — “Magical Moments in Mid Wales” and that is exactly what can be found here in this town of bookshops.

SHOP FACTS:

Richard Booth’s Bookshop, 44 Lion Street, Hay-On-Wye, Hereford, HR3 5AA, Phone (0497) 820322, Fax (0497) 821314. Open every day 9:00 - 5:30.

Hay Cinema Bookshop, The Old Cinema, Castle Street, Hay-On-Wye, via Hereford HR3 5DF, Telephone (0497) 820071, Fax (0497) 821004. Open every day 9:00 - 7:00. Catalogues in all subjects issued regularly.

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excited about our future together. Faxon now has the financial strength to resume normal business operations. Dawson Holdings PLC has retired all of Faxon’s 1994 obligations to publishers, provided a return to normal business terms with publishers for 95 subscriptions, established a working capital line of credit for the 1995 subscription year, and guaranteed that the office, operations (and people) will remain in Westwood. I think I speak for all Faxon employees in saying we happily anticipate continuing and strengthening our business relationships with the library community as part of the Dawson organization.”

More as we go to press. We have learned that Reed Elsevier has bought Mead Corp.’s Lexis/Nexis for $1.5 billion (see WSJ, 10/5/94, p. A3) outbidding companies like Times Mirror and the Thomson Corporation. This certainly shows the power of Reed/Elsevier and makes us all the more pleased that we were able to visit with Jan Willem Dijkstra of Elsevier Science Publishing recently. See this issue, page 40.

The awesome Marian Reijnen of Martinus Nijhoff International recently gave birth to a 7 lb. 13 oz. baby boy, Julian Joffrey was born on the 17th of August at 3:35 a.m. Congratulations, Marian! Marian tells us she will be returning to work full time in December and will be attending the ALA Midwinter conference in 1995. Marian and her husband would like to express their gratitude for all the cards and messages!

Many of us have called Martinus Nijhoff recently and have been greeted by a new voice. The new voice is that of Ineke Middeldorp, who has been appointed to the position of Sales Manager for Martinus Nijhoff, North America. Her email address is 75027.500@compuserve.com. Ineke will be attending the Charleston Conference in November, and ALA Midwinter in February. She is looking forward to meeting us at these upcoming conferences and so are we! Welcome, Ineke!

The incredibly energetic Judy Luther (once of Faxon) has accepted the position of Senior Manager, North American Sales with ISI. All North American academic and corporate sales staff will report directly to her. Judy will be moving to Philadelphia from Atlanta. She asks us all to send grits! Judy has not abandoned ATG in all this movement! See innovations, which she edits with Norm Desmarais, this issue, page 70.

ISI has also announced the appointment of Keith R. MacGregor to the position of Vice President, New Product and Editorial Development. Keith will not only manage the team that creates new products and enhances existing products, but he is also responsible for the groups managing the editorial integrity and quality of all of ISI’s products and services.

More from ISI. Two new CD-ROM products have been released — the Index to