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Papa Abel Remembers — The Tale of A Band of Booksellers, Fasicle 5: Unconventional Travel

by **Richard Abel** (Aged Independent Learner) <rael@easystreet.net>

Shortly after the first sales trips to the **University of British Columbia** and the **University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)**, trial orders began to trickle in from both universities. These orders were clearly trial orders, for they encompassed trade, short discount, large trade, small niche houses, university presses, and society or other peripheral, sometime-publishing organizations. None of this was surprising, because I had neither asked for any quarter in the species of books with which we would deal, nor specified any classes of publications or publishers that we would not supply. On the contrary, we offered to supply *any* title available through the bookseller distribution channel, a then uncommon practice among library booksellers. These trial book orders were priced at the prevailing discount structure: 30% on trade books, 10% on short discount books, and no discount, or list price plus postage, on books the publisher offered to booksellers at no discount.

Now the **Reed College Co-op** had always sold books to students and faculty at a quite generous discount, so we were comfortably familiar operating on narrow profit margins. However, the academic and research library discounts were deeper than the **Co-op's**. This disparity was a direct consequence of the competitive library discount structure that had been established by wholesalers (e.g., **Baker & Taylor**, **American Book Co.**, regional sci-tech distributors, etc.), based upon their wholesale discount status. **Reed College Bookstore (RCB)** was a retail bookseller serving libraries rather than a wholesaler whose academic library customers represented a fraction of their entire market. Thus, we were not eligible for such preferential publisher discounts. Well, that is the way it was, and the **RCB** had to fall into step. Eventually, this discount structure would be corrected by publishers' discounts based on quantities ordered and number of titles stocked, but the reigning 10-30% discount was cast in concrete. As a result, **RCB** was left with declining profit margins that had to carry costly investments in computer-based systems that were necessary to better serve libraries that lay just over the hill. With these narrower profit margins, we realized we had to operate on a leaner and more carefully controlled body of cost structures than had previously existed.

Among other things I learned from these visits to the backrooms of academic and research libraries, standing orders for books-in-series were a library desideratum, a supply function poorly executed. The existing library book suppliers were simply not prepared to establish such a demanding recordkeeping and ordering system to do this job effectively. The same was true of most book publishers. On the other hand, the journal jobbers, which some libraries used for books-in-series standing orders, were accustomed to tracking sequential publishing numbers. But in those days book publishers published few if any journals, and consequently, journal jobbers did a mediocre job as well, for want of a good publisher liaison. I had blithely promised to accept and carefully monitor standing orders. In due time, as individual libraries came to trust our service, standing orders began to pour in. I dealt with them myself for several years, but as **RCB** grew, a position was created solely to handle the standing orders. Even so, **RCB** experienced several bouts of less-than-satisfactory service before we finally got standing orders up on the computer as a key element in the approval system. Soon, the two recently visited libraries were satisfied with **RCB's** service, and the volume of orders approached and then reached or exceeded the quantities of our first two library accounts.

As volume increased, **Fred Gullette** came aboard, followed shortly by **Tom Martin**. Both started as part-timers, as they were **Reed** students whose time was focused on their studies. **Fred** had pursued a couple of majors but became disenchanted with a college career and soon became a full-time employee. He was a devotee of **Mark Twain** in both language and intellectual perspective and would often recite long passages from **Twain's** more pungent and cynical short writings, emulating the tone and pronunciation of **Twain's** original recordings. He was also a dedicated outdoorsman — hiking, camping, skiing, etc. — and his **VW** perpetually bore a tent, sleeping bag, Primus stove, ax, etc., so that he could camp on the spur of the moment. **Fred** possessed a quite interesting and charming character, and was a great favorite of librarians. **Tom** was an economics major with a penchant for mathematical economics. Indeed, so intriguing did he find the mathematics that in later years, while he managed the **RCB** offices, he routinely enrolled in various graduate mathematics courses in colleges and universities nearby. **Tom** possessed, as might be expected, a highly analytical mind and was a notable contributor to the development and modification of the various and quite elaborate systems that **RCB** put in place to serve libraries.

In the meantime, I had concluded that I must embark on a traveling sales program

to call on other academic libraries. This conclusion was forced by the financial exigencies of supporting a higher valued inventory and a growing breadth of stocked titles, both of which were necessary to respond adequately to our present library demands. **RCB** possessed limited investment funds to support this expanding inventory, so this shortcoming had to be compensated by increasing turnover. The only solution to this inventory/financial tradeoff was to learn if additional libraries might be induced to use our services. And the only way to determine the likelihood of broadening our customer base was to call on other academic libraries. So after phoning ahead for appointments, I set off. I was a complete neophyte at “cold calling.” All I could think to do was to recount, as honestly as I could, our recent venture into academic library book supply. Academic libraries were troubled by wholesalers, who were more focused on other markets and other species of titles rather than academic ones. As I was dealing in the scholarly side of the book world, I generally received an interested, although always probing, response. Many acquisitions librarians seemed to find it something of an anomaly that here sat a wet-behind-the-ears college bookstore dealer interested in selling only scholarly books and asking for some of their orders. Whatever the varied immediate responses, most academic libraries sent a series of trial orders to prove to themselves that what this young man was saying was true.

At about this time another policy-altering phone call came from the then acquisitions librarian at the **Los Alamos Radiation Laboratory**, **Charlotte Owens**, who asked if we would be interested in supplying the **Lab** with books. Now here was a wholly new class of library. Her call came at a most opportune time because the sci-tech publishers had recently and almost as a group moved away from their traditional, regional wholesaler distribution system to soliciting sci-tech book purchases directly from booksellers or individual direct buyers. Hence, **RCB** was suddenly able to operate as freely with the purchase and selling of sci-tech books as we did with other publishers. Knowing that we were no longer shackled by the policies of regional wholesalers, I could sell to a library that acquired mainly sci-tech material. I immediately told **Charlotte** we would indeed be interested. In addition, I sought an appointment to travel to the **Lab**, as face-to-face meetings were necessary not only for reasons of establishing a personal presence, but for us to fully understand the needs and preferences of the library with respect to the parameters of collecting, invoicing, reporting, shipping, and other practices. Getting to **Los Alamos Radiation Lab**, a remote, secure research organization, proved a somewhat

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daunting undertaking. First, the visitor had to have an official document authorizing a visit. Second, the flight aboard a five-place, chartered **Beechcraft Queen Air** from Albuquerque to Los Alamos had to be scheduled by the **Lab's** travel office. Third, upon arrival, I would be met by an armed officer who would accompany me during the entirety of my visit.

Nevertheless, I arranged for a flight to Albuquerque aboard the small charter **Beechcraft Queen Air** that would take employees first, and secondarily, ordinary paying passengers, depending upon available seats to the **Lab**. The Los Alamos runway was a paved tongue of land protruding from the Rio Grande Valley wall that rose quite markedly back to the plateau on which the **Lab** was located. As a consequence of this rise and the shortness of the runway, takeoffs were negotiated by taxiing the plane to the plateau end of the runway, revving up the engines to takeoff speed, releasing the brakes, and rolling down the runway to near liftoff speeds. The balance of the liftoff was negotiated by dipping down into the canyon for some distance and then off down the canyon back to Albuquerque. Upon landing at the **Lab**, the visitor was met by a security officer, who was a constant companion, even into the restroom, until takeoff for the return trip. **Charlotte Owens** proved a charming and knowledgeable acquisitions librarian, well con-

versant with the world of sci-tech books. She had learned of **RCB** on a visit to **UCLA**. The interview went well, and I was escorted back to the airstrip and back to more conventional ways of travel and working.

During the course of the return trip, my thoughts turned to the meaning of that visit upon the future conduct of **RCB**. We had provided a few sci-tech books to our current library customers but had not made much of our inventory or capacities with this species of book available to them. Now it was clear that as a first step we had to stock sci-tech books at once, and in breadth and depth. Therefore, we had to go back to these current library customers and solicit orders for sci-tech books to generate the turnover we needed to support this sudden increase in inventory. Furthermore, we had to broaden our horizons to include "special libraries" or "research libraries" as a desirable and closely related class of libraries to cultivate. We had been defining scholarly books far too narrowly — after all, serious sci-tech books were as much additions to scholarly literature as serious, new books in the humanities or social sciences. Our definitions of the species of books to carry in inventory and the libraries we wished to serve with such books had to be broadened. Inventory and marketing efforts had to be adjusted immediately to reflect these insights about expanding **RCB's** defining role and its future customer base.

Both initiatives were undertaken at once, the latter by arranging trips to the **Atomic**

Energy Agency's Pacific Northwest National Laboratory at Richmond, Washington, and the **Idaho National Laboratory** at Idaho Falls, Idaho. At the Richmond facility, I was met by **Don Stave**, the acquisitions librarian, about whom more will be written later. After the routine grilling, I set off for the **Washington State University Library** in eastern Washington, where I made my presentation to **Anne Connette**, the acquisitions librarian. She was a very pleasant but firm acquisitions librarian, who clearly knew her way around the realm of scientific and humanities/social science books. At about that time, the university, formerly a land-grant agriculture-engineering school, was massively upgrading its humanities/social science curriculum with which the library was fully attuned, hence **Anne's** commanding knowledge of these species of books. She introduced me to the new librarian, **Don Smith**, also about whom more will be written. (It was on this call that I developed the practice of picking up a course catalog from the registrar's office to use as a guide for the selection of the species of titles each library would likely acquire.)

Next, I travelled to the **National Test Reactor Facility** outside Idaho Falls. The acquisitions librarian, **Hillis Griffin**, was an extraordinarily knowledgeable fellow, thoroughly immersed in the science with which he was involved. He was also an early library proponent of computers in libraries. He was

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so routinely involved in the new technology of computers that he put himself to sleep at night producing wiring board models of possible computer circuits. In addition, he was a passionate organ player. Much of our conversation was devoted to these matters, making this perhaps the easiest “cold call” I had made.

These were my first, self-initiated passes at selling sci-tech books, and I concluded this trip once again gravely uncertain about the outcome. In all three cases the usual trial orders began to appear, and we worked very diligently to make sure these trial orders presented **RCB** in the best light possible. Within several months, incoming orders came from established accounts. These new accounts confirmed that **RCB** had been accepted as a reliable dealer in scientific books as well as the accustomed scholarly humanities and social science books.

The volume of business was outstripping the capacities of the three of us and our part-time student help. Therefore, the first assay into hiring employees outside the confines of the **Reed College** student body was undertaken. This assay proved more rewarding than anticipated, for we located **Lorene Dortch**, who became a backroom pillar of **RCB** for years. **Lorene** was a former jazz singer mar-

ried to a jazz drummer whose mounting health problems forced her to seek steadier employment. She was first brought aboard to assist with billing and order processing. She then went on to hire and organize a staff to conduct the ordering and receiving operations, a staff which consisted of mothers reentering the job market after their children had grown. In the early days **Lorene** was also soon overwhelmed, so she brought aboard **Eunice Andrews**, who ultimately married **Tom Martin**.

It appeared that everything had fallen comfortably into place, and **RCB** had a “calm sea and pleasant voyage” ahead. We had discovered a book-supply niche, which all the competing booksellers treated as more or less peripheral to their most profitable and readily serviced book customers and demands. There seemed to be little difficult competition, as **American News** had fallen on hard times, a victim of burgeoning growth following the founding of a growing number of independent news dealers. (**American News** eventually went bankrupt.) I encountered no **Baker & Taylor** representatives in the academic libraries — the few on the road seemed to focus on the public libraries and large school districts. We had ample space for inventory and staff. We had the fundamental nucleus of a first-class staff, to which further supplemental staff could be readily added.

We had finally drawn the attention and cooperation of the scholarly and scientific publishers across North America simply by

virtue of our rapidly increasing purchases and our salesmen’s reports. I had not yet gone to publishing centers, but a number of publishers came out to size up this maverick operation. **Mildred Smith**, editor of *Publisher’s Weekly (PW)*, which was the sole U.S. book trade publication of that era, came out to have a look. **Mildred** was a redoubtable eminence in the book trade, another no-nonsense but acute individual. From that visit forward, we enjoyed a cordial relationship with *PW* and eventually with **Daniel (Dan) Melcher**, the President of **Bowker**.

Thus, we possessed substantial relationships with not only publishers’ representatives but the heads of a number of firms and the media. I was asked to speak at an early **American Association of University Presses (AAUP)** meeting. As a result, I received job offers from three of the major university presses, but I turned them all down. I was firmly and irrevocably committed to running a small, maverick scholarly and scientific bookselling operation, oriented to scholarly and research libraries from a college campus. We had a growing base of academic and research libraries that seemed to value our single-minded devotion to serving them, and we eschewed all options to enter into other species of books and libraries or other classes of library furniture and goods. It all seemed a clear and pleasant voyage in association with people whose vocation and company we respected and enjoyed. 🌊

As I See It! — Emerging Trends in Textbooks — Libraries Will Feel the Effect

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Some remarks made to a **Publishers Association** conference in the UK by **Tom Davy**, CEO of **Cengage Learning Europe, Middle-East & Africa**, about textbooks made me sit up. He is an experienced and thoughtful publisher who does not hesitate to look beyond the smoke of today’s battle to the unexplored territory beyond.

Davy told his fellow publishers that the textbook market is in decline, and that textbook publishers have to look beyond the printed book (*The Bookseller*, 15 February 2008), and use technology not merely to deliver content but to provide learning solutions that extend well beyond the remit of the traditional textbook. This writer’s publishing career started in college textbook publishing, so his remarks stimulated some thought about the changes that are going on right now.

Traditionally, print-based textbook publishing is characterised by the adoption of the textbook that is purchased by each student for the course. The textbook has generally been accompanied by the provision, free of charge,

of material to assist teachers in the effective use of the textbook to drive learning results: the instructor’s manual. It was this way for many years until the Internet disrupted the way we did things.

Turbulent times have hit textbook publishing. The top five major English-language textbook publishers in the world are **Pearson Education, Cengage Learning, McGraw-Hill, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt and Macmillan** (including **Bedford Freeman Worth**). Incidentally, the top five textbook publishers in the USA are the same five companies. But **Reed Elsevier, Thomson and Wolters Kluwer** have all sold off their textbook businesses. Why? What **Tom**

Davy described as a market of diminishing returns is the reason:

- The textbook market is very competitive. Success is difficult to achieve. Each of these companies has other, more profitable activities in professional and financial information services. Indeed, in late February **Reed Elsevier** announced that

it was selling its magazine publishing business, **Reed Business Information**; **Reed** not only wants to get out of textbooks, it is getting out of all print-based or advertising-driven publishing.

- In the past ten years, second-hand copy sales and the increasing use of Web-based information have had a devastating effect on college textbook sales.
- Internet delivery of lecture notes and presentations, and **Google** searches for answers, threaten to destroy adopted textbook multiple copy sales as the engine of the business. It is very difficult to see how textbook adoptions can be maintained in the online environment.
- The investment in technology to support a new generation of textbook-based products, with critically enhanced functionality to manage workflows and provide a complete learning environment, is so large that only the largest companies can assume the investment and manage the risk inherent in product innovation and re-engineering.

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