Publishers pulp non-fiction

If the publishing of non-fiction books in Australia is to survive and prosper in the future, some fundamental problems need to be addressed. Even defining what non-fiction publishing is would be a start

Peter Sculthorpe, easily Australia's most important composer of serious music and, not as yet the subject of a biography. A respected music writer recently proposed such a biography (the timing set to coincide with Sculthorpe's 70th birthday) but could not find a publisher willing to take it on. Eventually, he was told by a publisher that it would be willing to publish if the author could obtain $12,000 in funding. The author has obtained neither a grant nor other assistance.

"There seems to be a consensus in Australian publishing that there is a real problem in the area of quality non-fiction: that books which are good and important are not being published."

Stories like this one are common in publishing. Of course, they always have been: as a wag observed in *The New Yorker* in October 1997, "Since Gutenberg, publishing has been in crisis". Even so, there seems to be a consensus in Australian publishing that there is a real problem in the area of quality non-fiction: that books which are good and important are not being published, that the eternal tension in publishing between culture and commerce has swung too far towards short-sighted and narrow-minded commercialism.

Part of the problem is the very name. Calling a book "non-fiction" is a little like calling poetry "non-prose", defining itself merely in terms of what it is not. Perhaps it should try to find a better label, something more glamorous. It's not that bookshops should have a shelf for "belles lettres" but at least that is an attempt to honour an art form. For the relevant sectors, "Biography" is good, so is "History", but the word "Essay" has been hopelessly debased. The "Australiana" tag is a real loser: it reduces everything to coffee table book status. So what do we mean by "quality non-fiction"?

Peter Spearritt, the director of the National Centre for Australian Studies, offers a useful starting point in the introduction to *Australia: A Reader's Guide*, an annotated bibliography of books about Australia.

Spearritt notes: "This book is an intriguing commentary in why some books last and others do not. Of the 10,000-plus books published in Australia per annum, less than 100 make it to the best seller lists or to the 'must read' surveys ... and probably less than 500 survive long enough to make it onto the reading lists of educational institutions or community book-clubs."

He says of the "survivors" that they tend to be "grandly conceived reference works" such as Cayley's *What Bird is That?*, or authoritative (*Australian Dictionary of Biography*), or comprehensive or useful. Such books tend to be large-scale collaborations.

"Many of the sole-author books selected for inclusion have earned their place because they are opinionated and argumentative, as well as being broad in scope," he writes, citing the *Lucky Country* and *The Tyranny of Distance.*

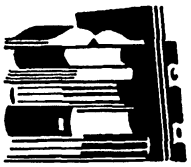
Another point Spearritt makes is that there are marked gaps in the library: "It is notable that a number of important books on Australian life and culture that survive and deserve to be reprinted are listed in this guide not only because they were classics of their time, but because no one since has tackled their topics as well or on such a grand scale. Robin Boyd's *Australia's Home*, first published in 1952, and Roger Covell's *Australian Music*, published in 1967 and yet to be reprinted, are notable examples." Non-fiction publishers face major problems, some of which may be endemic to book publishing generally and are probably insoluble.

Book publishing is a unique media industry. It is characterised by a low entry cost which allows many small publishers to operate (there are something like 1,000 in Australia alone). This leads to chronic oversupply, a state which has existed for a long time and shows no signs of diminishing. Without creating artificial barriers to entering the market, such as some sort of licensing system (surely unthinkable), nothing can be done about this.

Of the 10,000-plus books published in Australia per annum, less than 100 make it to the best seller lists or to the 'must read' surveys ... and probably less than 500 survive long enough to make it onto the reading lists of educational institutions or community book-clubs."

Added to this universal problem is the small size of Australia's market for books, its wide geographic spread and distance from other markets.

Then there is the issue of sale or



return, the basis on which almost all books are sold in Australia. Although it has some benefits – for example it allows bookshops to be more adventurous in the stock they take – it is costly and wasteful. Some publishers argue that the costs of a high return on a large release (figures of 60 per cent are not unheard of) are so great that many other marginal projects have to be forgone because of it. That might be an extreme figure but regardless, the process is costly and that cost must be borne, eventually, by every participant in the industry. Interestingly, sale or return only became common in Australia in the late 1970s. Perhaps it would be possible to wind back the clock?

In effect, the major publishers have no real grounds for complaining about the small fry flooding the market, as they do it themselves. The philosophy is that of a reproducing catfish: pump out hundreds of little catfish, and hopefully one or two of them will thrive. There is an awareness that this is not in the long-term interests of the industry but those with long memories say that there has always been this awareness but nothing is ever done about it.

Australia's lack of a strong non-fiction culture has also hindered the industry's development. Most attention (and funding) goes to literary fiction. Non-fiction books do not have the status and recognition accorded them in the U.S. and continental Europe. Such writing is not widely considered an art in Australia.

Why not? Perhaps because as one publisher observed, Australians are seen as practical people, interested in how-to books rather than books of ideas. This "practicality" is believed to be on the rise – people are interested in getting a job, earning more money, getting healthier and thinner, and not interested in politics, society or world affairs.

Australia also lacks the strong magazine culture of the U.S. which has encouraged long factual articles and helped factual writing become recognised as an art form. Australian magazines which publish articles of longer than roughly 3,000 words are rare. This has another effect: many journalists never get to write longer pieces and so don't know quite what to do when they get the opportunity. Many non-fiction books written here tend consequently to read like a collection of articles.

And because of the economic difficulties facing factual writing in Australia, many important histories and biographies have tended to be institutionally supported, and written by "approved" authors. This is a recipe for terminal dullness, and probably helps foster the notion that Australians are not interested in such things.

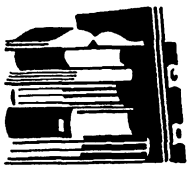
Perhaps as a consequence of all these things, the media does not take non-fiction publishing as seriously as it should. Andrew Wilkins of Hyland House is especially critical of this trait. He says that the mainstream media rely on the publicity machines of major publishers, and treat new book releases as celebrity events, rather than as serious journalistic undertakings.

So what will happen to non-fiction publishing in the future? There is

Revised 1995-96 Book Publishing Statistics

Data items	Unit	1994	1995-96
Number of organisations	no.	186	214
Number of books sold	million	124.8	130.6
Sales of all books	$m	841.7	950.0
Sales of other products	$m	260.0	217.2
Total turnover	$m	1156.7	1256.8
Average turnover per business	$m	6.2	5.9
Wages and salaries paid	$m	212.8	201.1
Royalties and fees paid	$m	63.4	69.3
Total costs	$m	1001.2	1132.5
Average costs per business	$m	5.4	5.3
Opening stocks	$m	238.8	257.7
Closing stocks	$m	245.3	270.3
Stocks to book sales ratio	%	29.1	28.5
Sales of Australian titles	$m	487.7	561.1
Sales of imported titles	$m	354.0	388.9
Royalties and fees paid per Australian book sales	%	13.0	12.4
Export sales of books	$m	81.1	80.3
Employment – males	no.	2165	2140
Employment – females	no.	3376	3443
Persons working per business	no.	29.8	26.1
Salaries per person employed	$'000	38.4	36.0
Operating profit before tax	$m	162.1	136.8
Profit margin	%	14.0	10.9

Source: ABS



widespread acceptance of the idea that electronic publishing forms will in time come to dominate certain areas of non-fiction publishing. Michael Webster, and a past editor of *Bookseller and Publisher,* says that all sorts of "static" reference material, such as dictionaries and encyclopedias and many educational texts are being presented either in CD-ROM or online form, and that this will only increase.

"Australians are seen as practical people, interested in how-to books rather than books of ideas. This "practicality" is believed to be on the rise - people are interested in getting a job, earning more money, getting healthier and thinner, and not interested in politics, society or world affairs."

"Traditional publishers, when they have a product in mind, tend to think of books first, and then think of what else they might do with it. But a software company like Microsoft will think first of the electronic form, and then perhaps consider a book. Microsoft deserves to be considered as a major publisher now."

He said that this shift to online content has major cultural implications. "Where is the Australian content going to come from? With online services, there is no need for all the local apparatus of printing and distribution. The *OED* can be sourced from the U.K., for example. Lots of online services are being bundled together for libraries and the like.

"This has big implications. It means the death of territorial copyright. This poses a big danger to local content. At present you have something like the *Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary* which is 95 percent a global product. The few per cent which is Australian content is partly paid for from the profits from the territorial sales of all the dictionaries.

"Concentration of power is a big worry. The electronic providers are looking to tie up the content: that is the essence of the dealings between Microsoft and Jamie Packer.They are grabbing that non-fiction content that people want."

Webster said he thought that Australian traditional publishers intellectually know they face a challenge but don't know how to go about meeting it. There have been some heavy investments in CD products which have flopped, which make people wary.

Traditionally, much quality non-fiction publishing has been the province of the university presses. Unfortunately, the UPs have come under the same pressures being applied to the higher education sector generally. They have to make things pay and their publishing programs have either been greatly curtailed or significantly altered to operate along more commercial lines.

This is in contrast to the U.S., where a quality publishing program is seen as an integral part of a university's activities, and the U.K. where UPs are registered charities.

Another problem which involves universities is also related to bottom-line driven thinking. The photocopier has become the scourge of academic publishers. Since a High Court case a few years ago, universities have been free to photocopy chapters from books, staple them together into "course books" and sell them to students. Royalties are minimal.

This has devastated academic publishing, particularly of books which might have been expected to sell 500 or 600 copies. Photocopying might knock out half of those sales, and make the project unviable.

What can be done? Most publishers agree that the production of quality non-fiction in Australia probably depends on some form of public subsidy.

There was criticism of the Australia Council for largely ignoring non-fiction publishing, given that a quality book of the sort which Spearritt refers to can have a far more important effect on the culture than a fiction work. There was also the possibility floated of direct subsidies to commercial publishers. Or the creation of a new section of the Australia Council with a brief to both fund important factual works and to promote their importance in the wider community.

Other possibilities might be to examine the sale or return structure, investigate whether its effect is detrimental to the industry, and if so whether it can be changed.

"The most important books, however, are not the ones that sell the most. It is one of the great paradoxes".

Perhaps examining the role of the University Presses and trying to encourage a (disciplined and non-self indulgent) return to cultural values in these publishers might help. Even preventing the destructive use of the photocopier in tertiary institutions would be a start. If some sort of university publishing cooperative was formed in which all institutions had a stake in academic publishing generally, then a non-aggression pact on the use of photocopied course books might be negotiated.

The importance of somehow fostering cultural values in book publishing is hard to overstate. As Frank Moorhouse recently told *The Australian's Review of Books*: "The book is still the bedrock of intellectual and cultural life. The most important books, however, are not the ones that sell the most. It is one of the great paradoxes".

Richard Evans