

Printing for the British Publishing Industry: The Rise and Fall of Aberdeen University Press

IAIN BEAVAN

The very name, 'Aberdeen University Press' occasionally still causes a number of misconceptions. Aberdeen University Press (hereafter AUP) has never been a division of Aberdeen University itself, though throughout its existence it maintained a particularly close relationship with the institution.¹ Its first chairman was (Sir) William Ramsay, Professor of Humanity at Aberdeen, and a scholar of considerable reputation. James Trail, Professor of Botany joined the board in 1907, as did (rather fittingly), the University Librarian, P. J. Anderson, in 1921.²

For the greater part of its existence, AUP was predominately a printing company, not a publishing firm. That is not to say that it did not publish at all, but until the 1980s its publication list consisted mainly of the occasional commissioned title. It simply was not in the business as a speculative publisher. AUP came into existence in 1900, fully formed, fully functional, and capitalised to the tune of £54,000. Its previous business and commercial existence was not as AUP, but as Arthur King & Co., (latterly as A. King & Co.) though as early as 1880, the company occasionally expanded their imprint to read, 'A. King & Co., Printers to the University', which was substantially true as the firm printed the *University Calendar* and many other official reports. From 1887, the proprietor of Arthur King & Co. was John Thomson, who had been apprenticed to William Bennett, printer, Aberdeen. Thence Thomson went to the *Aberdeen Journal* Office as compositor and later as foreman in the case-room.

In 1872 John Thomson became joint owner of Arthur King & Co. with Alexander Troup, a wholesale bookseller and stationer, and a Mr Mackenzie, each proprietor paying £200 as their individual share. Within 15 years Thomson had bought out both his partners, and found himself sole owner of both equipment and premises that were inadequate to cope with the level of business then being attained.

The printing office about 1870 was situated at the end of a long passage (Clark's Court, Broad Street), and

consisted of a basement and two floors above it. The basement (a dark, ugly place...) was reached by a short stair and contained furnace and engine, and, further on, [the] machine-room. A stone stair led from entrance to first floor, on the landing of which the office stood facing down the stair [...]. On each side of the office were two rooms housing the caserooms [...] the bookwork

*room was very congested; had frames against the walls [...] and imposing surface in the centre. The top floor contained the stereo foundry; also a small paper store. The warehouse was in a building nearer the street, part of which was another paper store.*³

In 1872 there were 21 employees of the firm: 7 men on wages over £1; and 14 boys on weekly pay of less than £1. By July 1887, there were 66 staff: 21 men; 37 boys; 8 women; and by 1900 there were over 174 names on the payroll. And, in 1904, four years after the legal creation of the Aberdeen University Press Ltd, there were about 200 employees drawing wages. The number of women employed by the firm started to increase from 1887, and by 1894, 38 were employed (at that same date there were 30 men and 44 boys also on the payroll.)

Arthur King & Co. was already a well-established printing house by the time that Thomson (with others) bought the company: it did much jobbing work, and for many years had printed the *Aberdeen Free Press* and produced a great many papers, announcements and notices relating to the expansion of the railway system into the North and North-East of Scotland. Late in 1863 steam power was introduced into the factory, and the printing of the *Free Press* became less arduous.⁴

In spite of Aberdeen's distance from Glasgow, Edinburgh and London the company was sufficiently competitive to undertake work for metropolitan publishers. Wages in the printing trade in provincial Scotland (that is, beyond Glasgow and Edinburgh) were not high: £1 for a 60 hour week was a printer's standard wage in the 1860s (and this was the rate adopted at the time in King & Co.). From the 1860s, the firm, reported an employee, 'went in pretty largely for the execution of reprints for William Tegg & Coy., London'.⁵ This specialisation – of having been a book printer for major publishing houses – was very effectively developed by John Thomson, under whose proprietorship, the firm took on considerable printing work for Longman, Hodder, Burns & Oates, Murray, Macmillan, amongst others.

Statements concerning the machinery held by King & Co. in the 1860s and later are somewhat inconsistent, but it appears that from the middle of that decade, it owned a large, double-quad platen, and two (later, three) Wharfedale machines (cylinder presses) of varying sizes. The platen press was roundly disliked, as it 'proved a terror to us all, for most of us were called upon to have a shot at feeding her, which we essayed to do at the imminent risk of having our hands nipped off by the sharp and sudden fall of the heavy iron-framed tympan as it was drawn under the great platen'.⁶ In order to cope with the volume of reprint work, the stereo foundry was kept particularly busy, and four stereotypers had to be taken onto the payroll (all came up from Edinburgh).

1899 AND 1905 REVIEWS

By the turn of the twentieth century, the company had grown significantly, in terms of employees, machinery and stock, and its premises had undergone a series of alterations and expansions. Adjacent property had been bought up,

and new works built. On occupying these new premises in 1899, both the *Aberdeen Journal* and the *Aberdeen Evening Express* effused over King & Co.⁷ Their articles claimed that over 1,000 tons of paper were consumed by the establishment yearly. The machine-room included 10 American-built Miehle 2-revolution presses, 6 Wharfedale, and 2 jobbing machines. By 1905, such had been the expansion rate, the *British Printer* reported that AUP (as it had then become) owned 15 Miehle machines, and it was often repeated at the time that John Thomson was the first to introduce such machinery into a printing works in Scotland.⁸

On imposition, King & Co. had 1,300 iron chases (dimensions, 2' x 3'), and in composing, could provide 4,000 galleys each 2' long. Next to the machine-room in the new premises were the separate stereotype and electroplate foundries.⁹ But there are other interesting features of the 1899 descriptions: they note that 'Mr Thomson [...] sets up miles of type [...] but also casts the type to the tune of about 2 tons per month, three type-casting machines being constantly in operation. There are over 600 tons of type in the establishment; and includes Russian, Bengali, German, Hebrew Greek, etc'. The 1905 article in the *British Printer* discussed with Thomson the reasons for AUP's maintaining its own type foundry. He commented, 'We can cast nearly all the type we want, and at much less than the typefounders can sell to us. Why, we gain close on 50% on the type account. Isn't that good enough?'

Thomson did not think that the output from composing machines then available was appropriate for the kind of work AUP was trying to undertake, 'What book printers are now waiting for is a machine to cast and set up type – *by one operation*. I am sanguine that such a machine will be available before very long. The various machines presently in the market are not suitable for good bookwork. We have tried and discarded some, and have seen all of them'.¹⁰

At first the type cast in its own foundry by AUP proved to be of good quality, and the resultant printed sheets to the required standard, but some years later, one effect of World War I was felt in that the price of required metals increased to the point that AUP could not afford to buy the needed lead and antimony, with the result that the quality of their type metal dropped: it lost both hardness and sharpness, and, according to one employee, this situation lasted some years, though exasperated by niggardliness as much as by real shortage.¹¹

John Thomson may have been dissatisfied with the quality of work produced by using linotype machines, but the reality of increasing mechanisation within the trade was to have its influence. In 1917 the directors were informed that John Long Ltd could not place any printing orders with AUP, as the Aberdeen company's prices were too high. 'Messrs Long publish the cheaper class of books which is set by machinery, and this is the difficulty which the U.P. has to contend with'.¹² The options open to the board of directors were limited. A year later they returned to the issue, and finally in 1920, Monotype machinery was introduced.

The 1899 newspaper reports also noted that, 'There is a small array of workmen and workwomen in the establishment. Following the example of

their competitors in the south [i.e. Edinburgh] the firm recently added a female composing department. They occupy a separate part of the building, and appear to be smart and intelligent at their work as compositors'. In fact, the presence of female workers in the firm can be traced back to the late 1860s, though their employment as compositors dated from 1893. In 1905, the separate female composing room (most of the workers there were teenage) was given over to a full range of duties: some female staff were 'on reprint, others on ordinary author's copy, whilst the largest number were employed on dis[tribution]'. And overall, the decision to employ female compositors proved highly successful for the firm, and increasing numbers were taken on the payroll. Indeed, for many years, composition absorbed the largest percentage of staff: in 1904, AUP had 211 employees, 99 (47%) of whom were female. And of this workforce, 122 (ca.58%) worked in one or other case rooms, or acted as readers. The machine-room (printers and apprentices) absorbed 23 workers.¹³

AUP was initially capitalised by the issue of 54,000 shares at £1 each. John Thomson was actually paid £36,000 (essentially the valuation of Arthur King & Co.) and, additionally received 18,000 shares. But the company was soon in for a nasty surprise. Much as the company had earlier expanded and invested in new machinery, though arguably not always in a timely manner, a 1916 valuation of the company's type and machinery reported that they had previously been badly overstated. The machinery was worth nothing like what the firm thought it was: much needed to be replaced with more modern equipment. The company was in an embarrassing position: it potentially could not meet its ultimate obligation to its shareholders. The recourse adopted was to obtain agreement to revalue (downwards) the shares. The drop in valuation of the machinery, type, furniture and fittings was over 30%: from £33,400 to £22,000.¹⁴

The economic and commercial environment in the months before and during the First World War had its inevitable effect on the British printing industry. In August 1914, AUP's board of directors acknowledged the general depression in the trade, brought about by worries attendant on the outbreak of war, and felt obliged to reduce working hours from 50 to 33 per week. By 1915, business had picked up, to the extent that there was 'plenty of work in the case room but great difficulty was experienced in overtaking the printing due to want of machine-men, a considerable number having enlisted'.¹⁵ The staffing level in 1915 should have been 80 men and 82 women. In fact it was 54 men and 82 women.¹⁶ This is a drop of over one third of the male workforce: a statistic that was bound to hit the machine-room particularly hard. Wage bills and labour costs increased. Although a non-union firm – the directors in fact noted that 'it was essential to maintain the non-union conditions in our works owing to the employment of women'¹⁷ – AUP had got itself into an ultimately unsustainable and unsympathetic position, in that every time there was a wage increase – either a general increase, or a War Bonus – agreed between union shops, the unions themselves, and employers' federations, the firm was obliged to match it, for fear of losing valuable and skilled staff to other printers.

In May 1916, the directors noted the loss of business (in the form of an unidentified title hitherto produced by AUP) to an Edinburgh printer whose prices were lower, and that the stereo plates then held in Aberdeen were to be transferred to Edinburgh. It was clearly accepted that the stereo plates did not belong to AUP, and that their transference was in the gift of the publisher. Whether the publisher paid for the storage of the plates by AUP is not known, but a trade agreement some 26 years later placed the responsibility for keeping type standing with publishers, not printers. In 1942, AUP's directors' minutes record that an agreement had been reached between the Publishers Association and the British Federation of Master Printers on the charges payable by publishers to printers for type kept standing, and the insurance on the same. It is equally clear, though, that such an arrangement had been enforced by printers for many years previously.¹⁸

Like other printers, AUP had been approached to dispose of surplus type metal as part of the war effort. To that end, they disposed of 90 tons of old type in between 1914 and 1918, and cumulatively over 100 tons during World War II. That the company was able to come up with 90 tons in World War I is remarkable, as in 1914, it had suffered what was described as a 'disastrous fire' which seems to have been particularly damaging in the case rooms.¹⁹ The extent of the damage was estimated at £15,000, and the level of stress and worry on the then managing director, George Thomson whose health at the time was poor, is said to have contributed to his untimely death in May 1915.²⁰

UNION MATTERS

Ironically, the directors and managers of AUP took to collective bargaining and protectionist measures on behalf of the company itself, before they allowed the same basic rights to their workforce. In 1915 AUP signed up to the Aberdeen Printing [...] Employers' Association (which itself joined the Scottish Alliance of Master Printers and became linked to the British Federation of Master Printers) as the firm realised that membership of such organisations offered the (attractive) prospect of mutual co-operation, and the furtherance of common concerns and, if necessary, the protection of their own interests against legitimate industrial action by employees.²¹

John Thomson, the original owner, died in 1911. There is a real sense that he died unloved and unlamented by many who met or had dealings with him. Biographical notices of Thomson show respect, but little warmth; and he does indeed come across as a hard, determined and intemperate businessman, who, because of his 'fiery outbreaks' drove out his works overseer, and also his own son, Joseph, who had previously been encouraged to join the business, to Edinburgh where he went to run the Mercat Press.²² The trade unions loathed him, for stepping outside the conventions and agreements that they struggled for with other firms: his employment of a large female workforce, mostly in the composing rooms did not betray an enlightened attitude, and had nothing to do with issues of equality, but, rather, everything to do with being able to pay women less for essentially the same work as men; and he employed

apprentices at a higher ratio to journeymen than was recommended, for a comparable reason. And, according to one source, it was this latter reason, more than any other, that the firm was blacked by the union (the Scottish Typographical Association). One effect of this blacklisting was, of course, that all union members were forbidden to take employment at AUP at the risk of expulsion. The company was not put back onto the 'fair' register of recognised firms (the list was maintained by the trades union) until 1918.²³ However, one consequence of coming to an agreement with the local branch of the Scottish Typographical Association that year (1918) was that the firm effectively agreed to take on no new female staff in the composing room,²⁴ and by 1931 the number of female compositors in AUP had dwindled to 12.²⁵

BUSINESS CONTACTS

But how extensive were AUP's contacts? We can build up a reasonable picture of the publishers for whom they worked, but only infrequently the titles that they actually printed. The firm's minutes sometimes recorded the outcome of journeys made south to elicit new business. By 1917, a reliable list suggests that AUP had undertaken printing work for over 15 publishers, including Allen & Unwin, Batsford, SPCK, and Mills & Boon.²⁶ Business, was however slack: at periods in the year earlier only 7 out of 21 machines were running.²⁷ However, that year (1916), AUP had made contact with Henry Guppy, Librarian of the John Rylands Library in Manchester, and initiated one of the firm's longest business relationships.²⁸

The immediate post-war period (1919-20) seems to have encouraged some short-term feelings of optimism. The Managing Director was able to report on Constable & Co., the Faith Press and the Royal Historical Society as new or recent customers. It should be said, though, that such reports were regularly tempered with costing worries, and the creeping realisation that machine-set text represented the only secure future. But by the early 1920s, AUP was starting to slow down. Indeed, that decade was characterised by reports that one or other department in AUP was fully occupied being regularly followed by notices of short-term working being introduced in other areas of the factory. Business was proving erratic, and there was no period of steady productivity. Moreover, the list of publishers then served by the company remained fairly static – perhaps disconcertingly so. Batsford had become a customer, and Chapman & Hall remained pleased with AUP's work, but attempts to get Faber to send them material for quotation met with little encouragement; Gollancz offered no prospect; Hamish Hamilton (just started business) did not look promising; and Constable had moved its printing contracts elsewhere.

That said, we find frequent references to work for the John Rylands Library, and for Manchester University Press itself. In 1928, the firm was able to record Dr Guppy's satisfaction over the quality of AUP's printing of the *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, and that arrangements had been made to order Arabic and Syriac type to undertake the printing of several major catalogues compiled by Alphonse Mingana (linguist and a curator of oriental manuscripts at John Rylands), and which required the hand setting of

non-Roman scripts.²⁹ Work on Mingana's translations and catalogues continued to 1939. AUP was given due recognition by the compiler himself for the skilful work which the firm displayed, and the manner in which they performed a 'difficult task'.³⁰

AMALGAMATION

Theodore Watt joined Aberdeen University Press as joint managing director in 1932. Hitherto he had been proprietor of the Rosemount Press in Aberdeen, which itself had evolved from the *Aberdeen Free Press* organisation. Negotiations with the Rosemount Press ended with an agreement that the two firms should amalgamate as from the beginning of 1932. Both companies were experiencing difficult trading conditions, though they were not in total direct competition with each other: AUP was predominately a book and journal printer, whilst the Rosemount Press carried out considerably more jobbing and general commercial work. Complementarity, therefore, was seen as the best way to business survival. The Rosemount Press was able, also, to offer considerably more suitable premises (with all activities on one floor) than AUP. This provided an opportunity to undertake a rationalisation and modernisation of machinery, though in order to accommodate machinery from AUP, the Rosemount Press disposed of – not with any sense of reluctance – its lithographic facilities, as they were proving unprofitable. The joint managing directors wanted to move as much as possible to the Rosemount Press's factory. Important amongst the reasons for the move were the better lighting conditions at the Rosemount Press: 'good natural lighting is essential for economical production, and particularly for the printing of colour work' and 'a Case Room and Machine Room laid out on the ground level is the invariable rule in all modern printing premises – for instance, the Glasgow and the Edinburgh University Presses [...]. The A.U.P. is greatly handicapped by the present lay-out of its plant'. The recommendations included some changes on AUP's part also: 'We think that the typesetting department of the A.U.P. should now be closed down. The coming of the Monotype has made separate typesetting obsolete'.³¹

A subsequent consultancy report concurred with the view that all machinery and plant should be moved from A.U.P.'s premises. It also recommended that between them, Rosemount Press and AUP should dispose of 150 tons of type – but only when the metal market improved. The sizes of new type should be in accordance with the point system, and that 'the whole of the new type for hand composition be cast either on the Monotype [...] Casters or on the two Sorts Casters. You would then be able to do away entirely with the distribution of type, and there would be a tremendous saving of time in "make-ready" upon your machines [...] it would be advisable to retain at least a couple of old U.P. type-casting machines, one for Arabic, etc., and the other for "quads"'.³² The consultant, accepting Theodore Watt's expectation that AUP would shortly receive considerable long-run orders from Nisbet, recommended the purchase of two Miehle machines, which would prove useful for both colour and ordinary work.

Clearly, the amalgamation of the two firms acted as a catalyst to planning and modernisation, and opened up real possibilities of better accommodation and internal factory design, but equally it must be said that some of the recommendations (e.g. on replacement of machinery) were matters that had dogged AUP for decades. Nevertheless the now enlarged firm continued to occupy two premises, some distance apart, with all the attendant efficiency problems that were thus created, for a further 30 years.

1939–1945

World War II also brought its inevitable worries and exigencies on the home front. The company received instructions from the Ministry of Home Security making compulsory the provision of fire watchers in premises in which more than 30 persons worked; and the firm agonised over whether it was legally bound to provide an air raid shelter for its employees. (The official answer was that it was not so bound). The Ministry of Supply had suggested that every printer should part with not less than 20% of the metal held, as tin was in desperately short supply.³³ By 1944 AUP had disposed of upwards of 76 tons of type metal; though there was a windfall bonus of a subsidy on this of over £5 a ton.³⁴ By June 1942, employees were beginning to be called up, with the inevitable loss of skills and expertise at the workplace.³⁵ The wages of those in the printing trades, nationally, were subject to a number of increases, particularly in the earlier years of the war.³⁶ And then an unexploded bomb landed ‘in close proximity’ to the Rosemount Press premises, requiring work to be suspended for 36 hours.

In January 1940, the heating failed in AUP’s original premises with work carried on in temperatures as low as 44 deg. Fahr. (not that the directors were unaware that this was breaching the stipulations of the Factories Act). Finally, to cap it all, it became clear that the sanitary conditions in factory were unsatisfactory, a fact picked up by the Chief Sanitary Inspector for Aberdeen in his adverse report.³⁷

Profits dipped at the beginning of the war, but, after this initial drop in the volume of work and profitability, it picked up, and reprint work remained buoyant through the war. Severe paper rationing meant that publishers and printers would only commit themselves to work known to be saleable. There was little room for risky speculations in the publishing market. AUP also benefited from damage and destruction elsewhere. The company recorded in 1941 that ‘The condition of trade was showing an improvement in machining – a considerable number of reprint orders having come in as a result of the destruction of printed stocks by recent enemy action in London’.³⁸ A year later (1942) the firm recorded that because of rationing, publishers were not speculating on any new titles but ploughing their limited resources into reprints of assured good sellers (See Appendix I).

MERGERS

Although, in 1946, the firm minuted the return of 12 of its employees from war service (and, sadly noted the death of 5 others), it was soon also to record

the first of many remarks on the scarcity of labour. It was a problem that faced the whole industry. Skilled men had tragically died, apprentices had simply not returned to complete their time; and there was the lure of work and better pay elsewhere. But overall business was showing some signs of improvement and expansion. The annual report for 1947/48 was fundamentally very optimistic: the company had taken on the maximum number of apprentices that the trade regulations permitted, work was plentiful, indeed there was more than the company could absorb, the limiting factors being restrictions on paper supply, and too few skilled compositors. Then, in 1949, the company suffered the second of the two significant fires in its history. It started in the case-room (there is an implication that the 1914 fire started in the same department). Damage was described as considerable, but fire did not spread to other floors and departments, though the machines in the press-room (on the floor below) did not escape the consequences, 'owing to molten metal dripping through the floor boards, and water'. But this accident did not affect plans that were then well advanced: in 1948, the opportunity arose for AUP to acquire William Jackson Ltd., with the retirement of its manager. Negotiations, then started, were completed in 1950, and AUP pumped in money to modernise machinery to undertake 'the mechanical binding of books'.³⁹

In general, throughout the 1950s and 1960s the firm was comfortably profitable, and continued its pattern of small-scale local absorption, by taking over John Avery & Co. (the Greyfriars Press), a firm of general printers in 1953; and Edmond & Spark, stationers and bookbinders, in 1966. Both these companies, like AUP itself, had nineteenth-century origins. In that same year (1953) AUP opened an office (apparently for the second time in its history) in London, the better to compete against increasing competition; and maintained a presence in the capital for 14 years.

It is also very noticeable that the managing directors of the firm, Theodore Watt and then his son, Harold, were determined to maintain high professional profiles. Theodore, who died in 1946, had been President of the British Federation of, and Scottish Alliance of, Master Printers; Harold studied at the London School of Printing after the war, and in 1948 returned to AUP as joint managing director, then carried through the post alone from 1958. Harold Watt also became an officer of the British Federation, President of the Society of Master Printers of Scotland; and served on the committee of the Young Master Printers' Association. And, because of their roles in these professional organisations, but also for severely practical reasons, both Theodore and Harold maintained a close interest in the wellbeing of the Aberdeen School of Printing, supported by the local authority to provide apprentices with the necessary training.⁴⁰ (Harold Watt, as Managing Director, had the uncomfortable responsibility of negotiating AUP through the mergers and company acquisitions of the 1970s and 1980s).

Post-war growth and prosperity there may have been, but there were persistent nagging anxieties. Reports of lack of skilled workers continued: in 1956, these shortages were attributed to the company's 'northerly location' and by 1961, AUP was turning away work because of the 'severe shortage of

skilled labour', though again the company was financially sufficiently sound to embark finally on a large-scale rationalisation and extension of its premises in one location.⁴¹

The annual reports of the late 60s and into the 70s are laced with ritualised complaints over the effects of government economic action, and pay and price freezes to slow down inflation though for some of this period Aberdeen was classed as a development area and since AUP was (by definition) a manufacturer, it could benefit from various tax breaks and employment premiums (investment incentives to promote industry in less prosperous areas): both these features enabled the firm to maintain its price levels to customers.

The size of the workforce in AUP had, in fact, remained remarkably static: in 1915 it should have been (if it had not been for the war) about 160; in 1967 it was 150. And, although more modern models of machinery had been introduced, the plant and machinery were still based largely round Monotype and letterpress work: there was no radical move to supplant these machines by large-scale film setting (photocomposition) facilities, and high quality lithographic machinery until the early 1980s.

END GAME: PRINTING

It is well known that AUP was taken over by Robert Maxwell and the Pergamon Press Group in 1978, but the entire share capital of AUP had in fact passed into corporate hands some eight years earlier, when, in 1970, the directors of AUP recommended that shareholders accept the offer made by the British Bank of Commerce, which (in spite of its name) was a Glasgow-based merchant bank. The recommendation by the directors was accepted. Between 1970 and 1972 that merchant bank made further acquisitions of printers in Aberdeen (Central Press Ltd and George Cornwall & Sons) and physically integrated these firms into yet further extended and modified AUP premises. By 1973 it was agreed that these firms should trade in name only, and that all staff should go onto AUP's payroll. So AUP started to trade under a number of different imprints: AUP itself for book and journal printing; as George Cornwall for lithographic and commercial work, and as the Central Press for general (jobbing) printing. Diversification was the order of the day.⁴² As part of the documentation prepared for the transference of ownership in 1970, the company summarised its book printing activities 'by the letterpress process, involving relatively complex typesetting and relatively short runs (average 3,000; exceptional – up to 50,000)'. It included the names of 34 leading (mostly British) publishers, some of whom (e.g. Academic Press, Longman Group) also had substantial orders for journal printing.⁴³

Then in 1975, the company's Annual Report noted breezily that it is 'now a wholly-owned subsidiary of Brandts Ltd and has as its ultimate parent, Grindlays Holdings Ltd'. It could fairly be said that AUP lost immediate and direct control of its broader financial security and wellbeing by its recommendation to accept the approaches of the British Bank of Commerce. Between 1965 and 1969 National & Grindlay acquired the shares of William Brand, well-established merchant bankers, then, in 1974, took over the financially troubled Glasgow-based firm, the British Bank of Commerce.⁴⁴ By 1976,

however, it appears that Brandts was in some trouble, which might explain why, although the 'ultimate parent remains Grindlays [...] the whole equity capital of the company is now owned by Spey Investments Ltd'.⁴⁵ All the conditions were in place for further purchases over which the AUP board could do little or nothing.

What were the commercial prospects of AUP? By the mid-1970s, about 50% of the work of AUP (in its totality) was given over to book and journal publishing; 50% to commercial and other jobbing work. In catching occasional comments in the directors' minutes (late 60s and 70s), they have some similarity with 50 years earlier. One begins to sense real unease: there were concerns about the severity of competition, and the undercutting effects of changing technology; on commercial printing being difficult to obtain; on slackness of work on the 'book side'; on lack of work in the letterpress machine-room, the withdrawal of regional employment incentives, and on the corrosive effects of inflation; though there were hopes that the increasing prosperity of Aberdeen (i.e. predominately the oil industry) would help the commercial and jobbing arm of the company. Book and journal work continued to suffer, however: references to slackness of work occurred in late 1975 and through 1976 and such reports continued intermittently through to the 1980s.

Then, silently almost, in January 1978, Spey Investments received a bid (which was accepted) from Pergamon Press Ltd to buy AUP.⁴⁶ Harold Watt, as Managing Director of AUP is reliably reported to have admitted that, against a background of adverse trading conditions and rapid technological advances, AUP would not have survived had it not have been for the support of Pergamon Press and Robert Maxwell.⁴⁷

Suddenly, the pace quickened. AUP was now part of a different commercial conglomerate, but at least it was one that had as its primary business printing and publishing. Against a background of fierce market competition, and what were seen as AUP's fundamental problems of high cost rates (due to low production) and the high running costs of the building that the company occupied, a consolidation scheme, entailing a reduction and redistribution of functions, was entered upon. There was to have been a 'transition from hot metal setting and letterpress printing to largely photo-composition and litho printing for Books and Journals, whilst continuing the expansionist programme for Commercial Printing'.⁴⁸ There was undeniably one major positive side to this: AUP was actively encouraged to enter book publishing – not just the occasional commissioned title, but to take on commercial risk titles, also. And, as other writers have already noted, one major reason why Robert Maxwell bought AUP was to develop it as a Scottish educational and academic imprint.⁴⁹

Between 1978 and 1980 there was a series of intensive discussions and plans on exactly what shape the company's reorganisation should take. But they coalesced into five main directions: the move of AUP into scholarly publishing was affirmed; the letterpress business (which had been the primary mode of production) was to be reduced as rapidly as practicable, and the activity taken up by litho printing; commercial printing (local material and jobbing work) should also be developed; typesetting facilities to be sharply

reduced, and obsolete equipment removed. And on this last point, AUP Type-setters was established (aided by a grant from the Scottish Economic Planning Department) in Queenslie, east Glasgow in 1981, specifically to provide 'film setting facilities for journals and books printed by AUP Aberdeen following the closure of AUP's hot metal [i.e. Monotype] and letterpress printing departments'.⁵⁰

Against a background of big wage increases, a continuing fiercely competitive market, and a forecast loss of up to £100,000 unless something radical was done, the trade unions were presented with the mixed prospect of retraining (onto offset litho) for some, but, inevitably, redundancy for others.⁵¹ In a draft announcement prepared in early 1980, AUP announced that it was seeking 23 redundancies, though it claimed still to have over 100 staff on the payroll.⁵² On the issue of running down the letterpress business, there was a reluctant acceptance that it had to happen, and debate was largely limited to the speed of the closure, and the phasing-in of large-scale litho printing, though an incentive was held out in the form of the possibility of more book and journal work within the Pergamon Group going to Aberdeen, subject to satisfactory internal pricing by AUP itself. Recommendations for an initial round of disposal of material included: most of the Company's Monotype equipment (8 sets of Monotype keyboards and casters), the majority of the Miehle letterpress machines; and 2 out of 3 of the Heidelberg cylinder presses.⁵³ It was essentially one more manifestation of the end of letterpress printing, yet equally one that reflected economic imperatives.

In the background, as it were, Maxwell had in 1980, bought the ailing British Printing Corporation (to become the British Printing and Communication Corporation), and by 1982 had created the Pergamon-BPCC Group. This was directly to determine the path by which one element of AUP was to disappear. Having been part of the Pergamon Group (then Pergamon-BPCC Group) arguably had some broader potential advantages for AUP, in the forms of greatly increased sources of investment, defensible rationalisation and modernisation plans as part of a larger group, and access to internal markets. But Pergamon-BPCC were less than comfortable with AUP's projected trading loss for 1981 of over £229,000.⁵⁴ There were 96 staff at AUP at the time, and the strategy initially adopted was to reduce the company to 'two-thirds its present size'.⁵⁵ Rumours that year (1982) of the company's viability were making customers nervous about confirming orders – understandably as the local press had descended on the news that employees had on one occasion not received their wages in timely fashion.⁵⁶

A survey of AUP's then current and potential printing activities was prepared seven months after AUP itself had been acquired by Pergamon. It emphasised that AUP was seen by some as becoming less competitive in price; and made the point (not that it needed repetition) that AUP should not rely on the absolute loyalty of its customers, and that the firm's prices should remain close to what a customer might have expected to pay for the work to be done by photocomposition and lithographic printing. But there were other reservations, mostly from publishers with significant journal publishing commitments (e.g. Academic Press). AUP's purchase by Pergamon had forced a reassess-

ment of the Aberdeen firm by its own customers. They were perceived differently. AUP was no longer seen as independent and neutral. It was now owned by a very real competitor to many for whom the Aberdeen firm had provided printing services. And the concerns of those publishers not in the Pergamon Group raised questions on conflict of interest. A major publisher encapsulated it all, with concerns that its journals would be seen in direct market and readership competition with Pergamon; or else, printing priority would inevitably be given (or have to be given) to the parent company, with the same effect in both cases – a lower quality of service than hitherto enjoyed.

Indeed, one major publisher, whose business ‘represents a very considerable portion of turnover’ provisionally stated that no further work would be forthcoming. It is not clear how this was resolved, but it is certainly the case that the printing of over 20 journal titles was potentially under threat. There were other problems for AUP as part of the Pergamon Group. AUP’s ability to act entirely competitively was regarded as to an extent in doubt. In its survey of its existing and potentially new customers in London and Oxford (a total of 51 firms were approached) it discovered that several firms had their printing undertaken by Wheatons of Exeter – a firm that had merged with Pergamon Press a year earlier, in 1986.⁵⁷

The years following constitute a chronicle of contorted and complex ownership. Between 1978 and 1986 AUP existed within the Pergamon-BPCC group, as a single unit, albeit with two divisions: one devoted to journal and book printing (this had been ruthlessly modernised); the other division devoted to publishing (under Colin McLean, first as Publishing Director from 1979, then as Managing Director (Publishing) from 1982 to 1990).

In 1986 AUP was warned of forthcoming big changes in the Pergamon-BPCC group of companies, and in September that year awoke to find itself acquired by Hollis plc (itself, a wholly owned Maxwell company). One year later Hollis plc had put in place plans to sell its printing and publishing interests (including AUP and Oyez Press) to BPCC.⁵⁸

AUP may have been carried round in a circular commercial manoeuvre, but it was not to stay under the control of BPCC for very long. In order to help fund other massive acquisitions, BPCC was sold off (in fact a management buyout) in December 1988.⁵⁹ The printing side of AUP was therefore removed from the control of the Maxwell group of companies; and became known as BPCC-AUP Aberdeen. This was merely to delay the end. BPCC’s own subsequent mergers ten years later helped create the Polestar Group in 1998, which in 2003 decided to close its Aberdeen operation with outstanding business transferred to Polestar Wheatons in Exeter.⁶⁰ However, even then there was some indication that Polestar AUP had not entirely abandoned the printing of specialist texts. *Dotprint* recorded the closure and added that, ‘AUP is part of the same Special Products Division as Polestar Wheatons in Exeter. [...] The two plants share a single managing director [...] customers include Reed Elsevier, Blackwell Science, Harcourt Publishers and Taylor & Francis, although AUP also prints some commercial colour work’. The reason given for the closure, according to *Dotprint*, was ‘very difficult market conditions and constant erosion of prices’.⁶¹

END GAME: PUBLISHING

But what of the publishing division of AUP – and of its sole existence as a publishing firm from 1988? As Colin McLean has recorded, Robert Maxwell had ‘planned to add AUP Printing to the cluster of printing firms which serviced his book and journal empire’⁶² and that ‘he was prepared to sink half a million pounds in making AUP Publishing an imprint of repute’.⁶³

The annual output of titles published by AUP grew rapidly. In 1979, the company recorded only 3 works; a year later, 9; but in 1988, 38 titles.⁶⁴ But the increase in the number of titles produced annually brought with it, its own stresses. There is an irony in that its very success as a publisher rapidly caused friction with the printers, BPCC-AUP. A board minute of January 1989 (just one month after the formal separation of the printing and publishing divisions into different companies) expressed concerns that AUP Publishing might have to look elsewhere to get its printing done, as there were delays at AUP-BPCC, who were having difficulties in absorbing over 30 titles (from AUP Publishing) in one year. Quite how this problem was resolved by the publishers is not immediately clear.⁶⁵

From the time of its acquisition by the Pergamon Group, much work was produced by AUP as publishers that was directly beneficial to university and higher education, on a wide range of subjects, including economics and economic history, social and political history, social policy, politics and terrorism, Scottish literature, folksong, and some titles in the biological sciences.⁶⁶ AUP appreciated the advantages to be gained by narrowing the overall focus of their publishing activities, and had decided to concentrate on three areas: works of lasting value concerning aspects of Scotland; academic works emanating from Scottish universities (but only if they had a worldwide marketing potential) and ‘works of reference essential to scholars’.⁶⁷ AUP was prepared to contemplate such works either as ‘risk’ titles, or on commission (i.e. with a subvention from a scholarly or industrial body).⁶⁸

AUP derived much justifiable professional satisfaction for its commitment to publishing the *Concise Scots Dictionary* (which, as McLean notes) had previously been rejected by Collins, O.U.P and Chambers. It proved the best seller at the Edinburgh Book Festival. And indeed we can quantify this via company minutes: ‘Mr MacLean was congratulated on the immediate success of his promotion of the Concise Scots Dictionary, the first printing of 11,000 copies having sold out within 2 weeks of publication’.⁶⁹ And the firm also published some of the more recent fascicles of the *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* (which is now with O.U.P.).

AUP’s plans to merge with, or take over other Scottish publishers did not materialise, and its fate was effectively sealed in 1991 by Robert Maxwell’s sale of the Pergamon Group to Elsevier. It might have been better if AUP had been included in the sale; but it was not, and remained tied to Maxwell Communications Corporation, the debts of which were discovered, in 1992 to have been breathtaking. Shortly thereafter it transpired that AUP owed £1.1M to its holding company.⁷⁰ That was an insuperable problem: AUP was put into administration that year, soon ceased trading, then brought to formal liquidation, and formally wound up in 1996, but not without having made a notable,

yet often very elusive, contribution as printer and latterly as publisher in Britain over a century.⁷¹ The history of Aberdeen University Press over the twentieth century is dominated by two closely interrelated themes: the need and ability to invest at the right time; and the need to know what to invest in. There can be no doubt that AUP maintained a reputation, both amongst its customers and its trade competitors as a firm of letterpress printers of very high quality, but the market for such provision was always relatively small, specialised, and heavily under threat from other forms of printing production. This was seen with absolute clarity by the advisors to the Pergamon Group that took over AUP. But, to its ultimate misfortune, AUP had become a minor, dispensable element in wider commercial enterprises.

Appendix I

NEW ORDERS AND REPRINTS

Figures taken from the relevant Directors' Minute Books.

Year	New orders / titles	Reprints
1933	82	89
1934	92	148
1935	99	137
1936	113	134
1937	96	132
1938	106	109
1939	75	68
1940	51	66
1941	46	185
1942	53	89
1943	45	80
1944	77	139
1945	42	106
1946	45	119
1947	26	47
1948	23	93
1949	57	78
1950	30	87
1951	42	72

Appendix II

AUP'S LIST OF PUBLISHING CUSTOMERS, 1970

A. & C. Black
 Academic P.
 Allen & Unwin
 American Elsevier
 Bailliere, Tindall & Cassell
 Baker (Publishers)
 Batsford
 Bell & Sons
 British Museum
 Butterworth & Co.
 Cambridge U.P.
 Clarendon P.
 Crosby Lockwood & Sons
 Dent & Sons
 Edinburgh U.P.
 Edward Arnold
 Faber & Faber
 Fountain P.
 Ginn & Co.
 H.M.S.O.
 Heinemann Educational
 International Textbook Co.
 Livingstone
 Longman Group
 Maclaren & Sons
 Macmillan & Co.
 Nisbet & Co.
 Oliver & Boyd
 Oxford U. P.
 Phaidon Press
 Pitman & Sons
 Royal Society
 Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
 Wiley

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author is grateful for the considerable guidance and advice freely given by
 Dr Harold Watt, in the years before his death in 2003. Similarly, considerable thanks
 are also due to Bob Thomson, first chairman of the Scottish Printing Archival Trust.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The business records of Aberdeen University Press and associated companies, including personal and professional papers of Dr. Theodore Watt and Dr. Harold Watt (1869-1990s), held in Historic Collections, University of Aberdeen, are cited as MS 3233 throughout.
- Much useful information is available in Alexander Keith, *Aberdeen University Press: An Account [...] Until [...] 1963* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1963); H.M.R. Watt, *AUP: The Aberdeen University Press Printed Archive, 1840-1978: A Check List* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Library, [1994]) and the record of the presentation of an honorary LLD award to Harold Watt in 'The Honorary Graduands', *Aberdeen University Review*, 51 (1985-86), pp.148-50.
2. MS 3233/2/1 and MS 3233/2/2. Directors' minute books, 1900-15; 1915-22.
3. Charles Pirie, 'Random Notes on the Early Days of What is Now The Aberdeen University Press Limited', pp. [1-2]. MS 3233/14/7.
4. William Skea, *Memories of a Seven Years' Apprenticeship of Half a Century Ago* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen Master Printers' Guild, 1920), p.15.
5. Skea, p.15.
6. Ibid., p.15.
7. *Aberdeen Journal*, 12 April 1899; *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 18 April 1899. Cuttings in MS 3233/14/2. This article relies on the piece in the *Evening Express*.
8. 'Mr. John Thomson and the Aberdeen University Press', *British Printer*, (October 1905), pp. 251-55. Offprint in MS 3233/14/7.
9. The *British Printer* differentiated the stereotyping and electrotyping departments from the type foundry itself.
10. 'Mr John Thomson', p.254.
11. Pirie, p.[6].
12. MS 3233/2/1/2. Internal report, August 1917.
13. Analysed from Wages Books, 1900-1975. MS 3233/2/21/1-11.
14. MS 3233/2/1/2. Minutes through 1916.
15. MS 3233/2/1/2. Minute, 7 June 1915.
16. MS 3233/2/1/2. Minute, 12 May 1915.
17. MS 3233/2/1/2. Minute, 10 October 1916.
18. 'Minimum Scale of Charges for Book-Printing', (July 1920), MS 3233/9/3.
19. Pirie, p. [6]; MS 3233/2/1/2. Entries for 11 January and 14 March 1916.
20. Pirie, p. [4]; Keith, p. 33.
21. Mary Sessions, *The Federation of Master Printers* (London: Sessions, 1950), pp. 67-70.
22. Pirie, p.[4].
23. Iain Beavan, 'Aberdeen University Press and the Scottish Typographical Association: an Uneasy Early Relationship', in *Images and Texts: Their Production and Distribution in the 18th and 19th Centuries*, ed. by Peter Isaac and Barry McKay (Winchester: St Paul's Bibliographies, 1997), pp. 143-62.
24. Siân Reynolds, *Britannica's Typesetters: Women Compositors in Edwardian Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989), p.2; Sarah Gillespie, *A Hundred Years of Progress: The Record of the Scottish Typographical Association, 1853 to 1952*

(Glasgow: Macle hose for the S.T.A., 1953), pp. 204-05.

25. Wages Book, 1929-44. MS 3233/2/21/5.

26. MS 3233/2/1/2. Internal report, 6 August 1917. This assertion is supported by reference to Charles Collins, *The Natural Law* (Mills & Boon, 1919), several of Stanley Weyman's novels, *A Gentleman of France* (1894), 'printed from American plates at the Aberdeen University Press', *The Long Night* (1903), *Shrewsbury: a Romance* (1898), *Sophia* (1900) all published by Longman; Mrs W. M. Ramsay's *Romance of Elisavet* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1899), and, rather differently, J. C. Smith, *The Manufacture of Paint*, 2nd edn. (Greenwood, 1915).

27. MS 3233/2/1/2. Minute, 17 July 1916.

28. AUP printed the *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library/John Rylands University Library* for many years. The last issues printed were those for volume 64, 1981-82. See Watt, p.vii.

29. MS 3233/2/1/3. Directors' minute book, 1922-31. Minute, 12 November 1928.

30. Watt. See entries under Mingana.

31. Internal report of Joint Managing Directors, 22 April 1932. Inserted in Directors' minute book, 1931-44. MS 3233/2/1/4.

32. Internal report [by H. W. McKenzie] to Board of Directors, Aberdeen University Press. Inserted in MS 3233/2/1/4.

33. Ellic Howe, *The British Federation of Master Printers, 1900-1950* (London: British Federation of Master Printers, 1950), p. 168.

34. MS 3233/2/1/4. Minute, 21 January 1944.

35. The regulations governing liability for National Service were complicated and changed over time. Howe, *The British Federation*, ch. 8.

36. *Ibid.*, ch. 8.

37. Problems with heating and sanitation occurred in 1940. The bombing raid was on the night of 21 April 1943. MS 3233/2/1/4.

38. MS 3233/2/1/4. Minute, 27 January 1941.

39. MS 3233/2/1/5. Directors' minute book, 1944-57. Minute of 6 July 1948.

40. Aberdeen Technical College School of Printing closed in 1970. MS 3233/15/3.

41. AUP's printed *Annual Report and Accounts*, 1956, 1961. Bound in MSS 3233/2/1/5; 3233/2/1/7.

42. Information derived from AUP's *Annual Accounts*, MS 3233/2/1/7.

43. MS 3233/2/1/6. Directors' minute book, 1957-76. Minute of 1 April 1970. See Appendix II for list.

44. Adrian Tschoegl, *Internationalisation as a Rearrangement of Ownership of Firms [...]. Grindlays Bank, 1828-2000* (Philadelphia: Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, 2003) Available via <<http://fic.wharton.upenn.edu/fic/papers/03/p0324html>>.

45. Aberdeen University Press, 'Annual Report', 1976. MS 3233/2/1/6.

46. MS 3233/2/1/6. Directors' minute book, 1957-78. Minute, 9 January 1978.

47. Ian A. Olson and Colin MacLean, 'Harold Watt: [An Obituary]', *Aberdeen University Review*, 60 (2003-04), p. 247.

48. 'AUP: Aberdeen University Press – Detailed Consolidation Proposals for the Printing Business: A Consultative Document', (November 1979), p. i. Inserted in MS 3233/2/30/1.

49. Olson and MacLean, p. 247.
50. Internal memo on 'Proposed Investment in Up-To-Date Computer Typesetting', undated MS 3233/2/31.
51. Minutes of a Meeting 20th March 1980 to discuss the Company Development Plan and Trading Position. MS 3233/18/9. Also several draft agreements with local branches of unions regarding redundancies. MS 3233/2/30/1.
52. 'Draft of Brief Announcement That Could Be Used in Answer to Any Press Enquiry', undated but early 1980. Annotated by H. M. R. Watt. MS 3233/2/30.
53. 'AUP: Aberdeen University Press – Detailed Consolidation Proposals', p.5 and appendices 2 and 3. Inserted in MS 3233/2/30/1.
54. Internal memo of meeting with Ian Maxwell, 30 January 1982. MS 3233/2/18. The situation scarcely improved: the forecast loss for 1982 was £150,000. Untitled internal memorandum of 28 April 1982. MS 3233/2/30/2.
55. Summary of Meeting held at AUP, 23 June 1982. MS 3233/2/30/2.
56. Revised draft memorial (by H.M.R.Watt) and Letter to Robert Maxwell, 1 October 1982. Also "‘No wage’ Shock for City Print Men", *Aberdeen Evening Express*, (28 May 1982). MS 3233/2/30.
57. Internal report of [...] Visit to London and Oxford, (August 1978). MS 3233/18/9.
58. MS 3233/2/1/8. Directors' minute book, 1980-88. Minute, (25 September 1986). Also, David Goodhart, 'Pergamon Sells £30m Businesses to Hollis', *Financial Times*, (2 August 1986).
59. R. L. J. Thomas and R. T. Turner, *Mirror Group Newspapers plc: Investigations under [...] the Companies Act, 1985*. <<http://www.dti.gov.uk/cld/mirrorgroup>>.
60. Laura Grant and Leah Williamson, 'End of Era as Aberdeen Print Firm Bows Out', *Press and Journal* (12 June 2003).
61. <http://www.dotprint.com/newspast/03_05_05.shtml> [accessed 12 January 2005]. *Aberdeen University Review* is currently printed by Polestar Wheatons of Exeter.
62. Olson and MacLean, p. 247.
63. Colin MacLean, 'Aberdeen University Press: The Maxwell Years, 1979–1991', *Aberdeen University Review*, 60 (2003-04), p.1.
64. Summary output of AUP Publishing. Enclosed in MS 3233/10/10/2/3.
65. MS 3233/10/10/2/7.
66. Some of the larger undertakings included: the 4-volume *Atlas of Late Medieval English*, the multi-volume *History of Scottish Literature*; the *Dictionary of Scottish Business Biography* (1986-90), volumes of Bower's *Scotichronicon*; Iain Brown's 1987 edition of and commentary to *Scott's Interleaved Waverley Novels* (the imprint including Pergamon Press and the National Library of Scotland); Leslie Macfarlane's magisterial *William Elphinstone and the Kingdom of Scotland*; several of the University of Aberdeen's Quincentennial Studies series and four of the volumes of the *Greig-Duncan Folksong Collection*. There is an irony in that subsequent volumes of *Greig-Duncan* were published by the Mercat Press, Edinburgh; and that volumes 5–7 were printed by BPC Wheatons, Exeter. AUP also acted as distributor for the Scottish Text Society. See MacLean, 'Aberdeen University Press' for further detail.
67. AUP Publishing figures for 1982. MS 3233/10/10/2/3.

68. For example, Peter Payne's *The Hydro* (1988) was published with financial assistance from the North of Scotland Hydro-Electric Board.

69. MS 3233/2/1/8. Minute of 21 August 1985.

70. The liability was created largely by group inter-company loans. Memorandum, 'Aberdeen University Press Limited (in Administration), List of

Creditors at 18 February 1992'. Over £1M was owed to Maxwell Communication Corporation. MS 3233/10/10/2/9.

71. Papers relating to the administration, liquidation and winding-up are in MS 3233/10/10/2/9. The name itself, Aberdeen University Press, did not disappear, as the right to use it was sold to Aberdeen University in 1993. See Price Waterhouse letter of 23 April 1993.