

1 Introduction: ‘The Penguins are coming!’¹

The story of Penguin Books is practically the stuff of legend. A flash of inspiration reportedly hit its founder, Allen Lane, at Exeter train station in 1932. Upon scouring the shelves of the station stall for something, anything, to read on his journey home to London, he realised that there was simply nothing of substance available. What if, he mused, quality literature were available for the price of a packet of cigarettes? And so ‘Penguins’, as they came affectionately to be known, were born (Penguin Books, 1985, pp. 13–15; Lewis, 2006, pp. 71–3; Rylance, 2005, p. 48). Of course, the full story is far more complicated than that, but the principle of the establishment of Penguin Books was simple: to make quality texts available at an affordable price, or ‘GOOD BOOKS CHEAP’, to borrow the phrase that Lane (1938a, p. 969) would later coin as his slogan. It would be a mistake, though, to view Allen Lane’s ‘eureka!’ moment as one born purely out of an ideological desire to educate the masses, to make reading an affordable pastime for a wider demographic. Undoubtedly, as Lane’s legacy would show, this may have formed some part of his thinking, but he was also a businessman, a seasoned publisher who understood from first-hand experience the changing book-market trends of the 1930s, which had led to a significant downturn in the fortunes of his existing company, The Bodley Head (De Bellaigue, 2001a, p. 70). The problem was that reading itself was not what needed encouragement, rather the actual purchasing of books.

After the First World War, thanks in large part to the institution of compulsory primary schooling from the 1880s onwards, more sophisticated levels of literacy were becoming increasingly widespread, and so a demand for evermore reading materials inevitably followed. However, the sheer price of new books meant that access was still problematic. Consequently, the reading public often shunned the bookshop, instead using public libraries, second-hand books and books borrowed from friends. Added to this, books tend not to ‘wear out’ and require replacement, as do other

¹ This was the shout line appended to the advertisement for a set of ten new Penguins that Allen Lane placed in the 1935 issue of The Bodley Head’s journal, *Bodleian*. This advertisement is reproduced in Penguin Books (1985, p. 17).

commodities,² and so the publisher was, and is, faced with a significant challenge (Rylance, 2005, pp. 48–50). This challenge was less to engage the public with reading for pleasure than to compel them to acquire books as personal property. In some ways, and with the glorious benefit of hindsight, the answer should have been obvious, but many publishers of considerable standing nonetheless found themselves on their uppers. Twenty-one major firms, including Lane's own Bodley Head, went out of business in the 1930s (Rylance, 2005, p. 49). Even when confronted with Lane's idea to harness the paperback form,³ the notion induced a deep suspicion amongst publishers, critics and authors – a fear that overproduction would drive down standards and that short-term gain would lead to long-term cultural detriment (Lewis, 2006, pp. 70–1). George Orwell, for instance, was outspoken in his belief that people's book-buying habits were finite due to how much reading time a single person had. He predicted the publishing trade's imminent collapse in the face of the Penguins' market infiltration: 'the cheaper books become, the less money is spent on books. This is an advantage from the reader's point of view and doesn't hurt trade as a whole, but for the publisher, the compositor, the author and the bookseller it is a disaster' (Orwell, 1936, p. 165). How wrong Orwell would be. And he was far from alone. Other notable publishers of the time pleaded with Lane to see sense,

² Simon Eliot (2013, p. 2) actually cites the 'reassuring flimsiness' of the Penguin paperback as one of its key selling points, but even these more-fragile-than-usual books remain amongst the most durable items of personal property, as evidenced by their still adorning bookshelves the world over: thumbled, broken spined and falling apart, they are still – more or less – readable.

³ The 'invention' of the paperback is popularly attributed, incorrectly, to Lane; in fact, the paperback existed at least as early as the nineteenth century, and some even date it to the Aldus Manutius's sixteenth-century Aldine Press (Lewis, 2006, p. 75; Lamb, 1952, p. 39), but it was usually the format employed for low-brow, popular novels and thus associated with works of inferior quality, often called 'yellowbacks' after their mustard-coloured paper covers (Raven, 2014, pp. 151–2). Alastair McCleery (2002, pp. 164–9) provides a particularly pragmatic account of Lane's inspiration and its subsequent effect on the trade, which is helpfully devoid of sentiment.

such as the managing director of Chatto and Windus, Harold Raymond, who in a letter to Lane wrote the following:

The steady cheapening of books is in my opinion a great danger in the trade at present, and I sometimes think book-sellers have to be saved from themselves in this respect. . . . [I]t is this lowering of prices which is one of the chief reasons why our trade is finding it so hard to recover from the slump.
(Raymond to Lane, 1 November 1934, quoted in Penguin Books, 1985, p. 15)

Even after Penguins had started paying dividends, Lane's contemporaries continued to ascribe the trade's various woes to them: 'You're the b . . . that has ruined this trade with your ruddy Penguins', was the insult reportedly levied at Lane by Jonathan Cape, who was undoubtedly frustrated at his own lack of vision. Cape had, after all, been the first publisher to lease the rights to several key titles that would launch Penguin, mistakenly assuming that the initiative would not go anywhere and that he might as well make a profit out of Lane before it all went wrong (Howard, 1971, p. 164). In the end, these and other publishers' long-held perceptions of what constituted the restrictions on intelligent reading, which were also those that underpinned the core assumptions governing the publishing trade's commercial practice, would turn out to be misplaced (Rylance, 2005, p. 53). Lane's decidedly contrary view, arguably more a product of luck than judgement, was that the only restriction on intelligent reading was personal purchasing power. This transpired to be the luckiest of hunches.

The aim of this Element, however, is not to trace a potted history of the founding of Penguin Books – a task undertaken many times already (see, for example, Eliot, 2018; Penguin Books, 1960, 1985; Williams, 1956). This said, the gap in the market that Lane astutely identified, and thus the basis upon which the resulting 'paperback revolution' was instigated, claims an importance for the enquiry that follows. Even if Lane's motivations were fundamentally economic, the trigger for finding the answer to the trade's issue was his realisation that good quality literature needed to be more

widely available. His solution would involve, in short, not only targeting but also cornering a wider demographic than the trade had hitherto attempted. Lane would need to bring good books to the masses (Hare, 1995, p. xii). The upshot of this scheme was a manifest fixation of Lane's business on creating products that would appeal to a somewhat mysterious character, one who is, however, referred to with remarkable frequency in both the myriad correspondence in the Penguin Archive⁴ and the published scholarship on Penguin's business that together underpin this Element. This elusive character goes by the moniker of 'the general reader'.

Nowhere do we hear more of our general reader than in relation to the book series that perhaps most keenly embodies the Penguin brand: Penguin Classics. Foreshadowed to some degree by Penguin's issue of six Shakespeare plays in 1937 (Morpurgo, 1979, p. 113), the founding of the Classics in 1944 (first publication 1946) under the leadership of E. V. Rieu (who served both as the series' editor and as the translator of its inaugural publication, Homer's *The Odyssey*) was not dissimilar from the initial establishment of Penguin Books. Despite widespread commercial advice that the idea of bringing 'classic' texts to the masses would have no traction in the marketplace, Lane nonetheless backed it. He may have been driven in this endeavour by prevalent contemporary domestic concerns in respect of the conditions to which British people would return from the Second World War, as adumbrated in the liberal economist William Beveridge's report published in November 1942,⁵ which outlined plans for tackling the 'Five Giant Evils' of Society (Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness), and which may have become the blueprint for Labour's welfare state in 1945 (Whiteside, 2014, p. 24).⁶ Probably not unrelated was the fundamental belief that the new

⁴ The Penguin Archive is housed today in Special Collections in the University of Bristol's Arts and Social Sciences Library.

⁵ The report was officially titled: 'Social Insurance and Allied Services (Cmd. 6404)' (Beveridge, 1942).

⁶ The Beveridge Report, in turn, was a product of discussions that came as a result of the poor conditions to which soldiers returned (poor housing provision and healthcare) after the First World War, and the desire to avoid the same happening a second time. For more on this topic, see Harris (1997, chs. 16–18).

‘citizen soldier’ of the Second World War needed to be educated (in contrast to his more accepting forefathers in the First World War), so that he could understand the reasons for fighting in the war. Significant investments of time and money were thus made into the Army Bureau of Current Affairs (ABCA), which conducted weekly reading groups for the millions working in the armed forces on issues relating to citizenship but also history, geography and religion (Huxford, 2018, pp. 16–17, 77–8; Grant, 2016).⁷ Such factors surely influenced Lane’s strategy, and he was richly rewarded for his investment of faith. Lane’s ambition to distance ‘classic’ texts from their traditionally academic associations (‘to break away from the academic idiom’ as Penguin Editor Bill Williams (1956, p. 19) would later describe Rieu’s mantra for the Classics) and make them accessible to larger audiences was a runaway success. *The Odyssey*, which sold more than three million copies, became the bestselling Penguin of all (Yates, 2006, p. 35; Shorley and McCann, 1985, p. 9).

It is in this very context of ‘unlikely candidates for publishing success’ that I situate the Element that follows. If Homer was considered to have had dubious potential as a bestselling author, even in spite of the likelihood that a reading public would have at least heard tell of his works (and those of other celebrated authors writing in Greek and Latin, upon whose corpus of writings Penguin Classics had initially been founded (Lewis, 2006, p. 252)), at what point – and why – did Penguin Classics believe the time was ripe to mine the works of other, more obscure authors? And was the process of bringing them to market really as distanced from the academy as Penguin’s ‘self-understanding’, to use William John Lyons’s (2013, p. 69) term, would have us think?

To explore these questions, the subject of my interest here is the move from c. 1956 until the turn of the millennium towards medieval literary authors. Of course, it takes little imagination to understand why a narrative such as Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*, and indeed

⁷ ABCA would stop in the 1950s, but the notion of needing well-read citizens continued, even becoming more important, throughout the Cold War, with the notion of being well informed constituting a defining principle of democracy over communism (Huxford, 2018, pp. 77–8).

other medieval works in the English vernacular, came quickly to be added to the Penguin Classics list – though even these ‘safe bet’ endeavours were not without their own complications.⁸ But what of the translation of medieval literary works from other European vernaculars, whose authors were largely unknown to an anglophone reading public? On what basis would they be saleable? In a trade which is notoriously risk averse, the various hunches of Lane notwithstanding, why would this risk be worth it? This concise Element will trace the route to market of Penguin’s medieval French literary works, asking whether our friend, the general reader, really can have been the intended target market. I have elected to focus on Penguin’s medieval French titles, first, for pragmatic reasons – the extent of the corpus, composed of eleven titles, is ideal for a study of this length and remit. Second, and more important, from my perspective as an academic working in medieval French, the texts selected for Penguin’s medieval French Classics have come to form the core of undergraduate curricula in medieval French (and often English) in both the United Kingdom and the United States, which raises important questions in respect of Penguin’s influence and ‘canonisation’ (a term to which I will return). Third, I believe that the French list highlights some core differences in the way Penguin approached translations from languages other than Old/Middle English, Latin and Greek. The Element is thus split into two sections. The first of these takes a macro view of the identity of the general reader, and Penguin’s attempts to reach them, as well as of how ‘classics’ (and indeed Penguin Classics) may have come to be inextricably linked with the academy. This provides the context for the second section, which homes in on the archival evidence surrounding Penguin’s publication of medieval French literary titles, where I conduct an enquiry into whether the realities adumbrated by the Penguin Archive’s primary evidence actually fit with the broader horizon in which Penguin was, and purported to be, operating. There is, of course, still much work to be done on the sociocultural conditions governing the publishing trade in post-war Britain; whilst this

⁸ See the forthcoming Element in Publishing and Book Culture by Samantha J. Rayner on this subject. Rayner (2018) has also discussed the subject in a recent article on what she calls ‘The Ship-Wrecked Malory’.

Element does not aim to give a full overview of these conditions, its case study-based approach nonetheless offers an insight into how Penguin chose (and was forced) to operate during that period, particularly in respect of translating foreign-language works. Therefore, in addition to furnishing information as to Penguin's internal commercial concerns in respect of Classics, it also provides some initial redress to the gap in our understanding of the sociology of knowledge, influenced by the rise of intellectual culture and changing class relations, in post-war Britain.

2 The General Reader, the Academy and Penguin Classics

2.1 Who Is the 'General Reader'?

I referred to the general reader in my introduction as an elusive character, and yet the concept has become such a commonplace, a kind of stock phrase, that I think most would probably have an initial sense of to what/whom this refers. Such an individual might just as easily be referred to as an 'average joe/jane' or 'the (wo)man in the street', but does this really tell us anything about her or him? Indeed, for a term that is used so frequently and with such abandon, actually defining what is meant by 'the general reader' turns out to be a more complex affair than it at first seems. Taking the perspective of the publisher: how can these readers be attracted to book products if the publisher knows nothing other than that she or he is average? What does that really mean, in specifics? After all, it is upon specifics that the principles of marketing are founded. The successful strategic creation of a book product rests upon the identification of a circumscribed target market, and the sketching of a figure for whom the product is meticulously tailored and at whom associated campaigns are aimed (Squires, 2007, p. 51). Indeed, in her brief blog reflection on leading an MA Publishing class on book proposals at Oxford Brookes University, Alison Jones (2016) argues strongly that designating books as intended for general readers is 'lazy', not only because it is impossible to reach such an ill-defined market but also because it implies that a publisher has not thought deeply enough about that market. This in turn risks alienating rather than attracting readers, precisely because readers do not think of

themselves as general, but rather as individuals with their own unique experiences and preferences.

Even if we imagined for a moment that parameters could be agreed for what constitutes ‘general’ or ‘average’, given the fairly vast spectrum that would have to be acknowledged, how can Lane, and Penguin by association, possibly have hoped to appeal to this wide a demographic? Lane’s was by no means a ‘lazy’ enterprise, to return to Jones’s term, but it was one founded more upon instincts than proven stratagem. We might legitimately ask, then, did Penguin and Lane even know what they meant by ‘the general reader’? Did they mean it to refer to something or someone specific, understood internally if not externally, or was it merely a useful placeholder term, designed simply to give the impression that Penguin knew what it was doing? If the former, then what, exactly? And, if the latter, did the books find their way accidentally to a target market that was rather more specific than the general reader designator would have us believe? As Jones (2016) puts it so succinctly, to say a book is for the general reader is no better than saying “[t]his book is for humans”. Well, yes, but that’s not very helpful, is it? Indeed not, so I will now explore this more deeply.

What we can be assured of is that the general reader was by no means Lane’s invention, nor was it peculiar to Penguin Books. The term was already in wide use amongst book professionals well before the time of Lane’s epiphany on Exeter station, as is evidenced, in just one of several examples, by the 1931 appearance of a scholarly article in a librarianship journal (Waples, 1931). In it, the author Douglas Waples grapples with the librarian’s age-old problem of choosing which books to buy for his library because, he says, ‘almost everybody reads different amounts of everything for all sorts of reasons’, a statement he describes as ‘hopelessly vague’ (Waples, 1931, p. 190). Waples thus undertakes a quantitative analysis of the relative popularity of given genres of books to see if he can apply a general rule to the proportion of books in particular genres that it would be sensible to purchase. Following this through to its logical conclusion, therefore, whilst Waples’ general reader sounds like she or he is a single person who embodies everything in an average way, in fact Waples is talking about ‘readers plural’, and what constitutes the perfectly literal average of their reading habits. In short, there is no general reader in

Waples' model: there are lots of readers, and his attempt is to find a way to cater to them all, not with one single item but with a range of items that ensures that there is something for everyone.

This conception of the general reader as, in fact, 'readers plural' is somewhat easier to grasp than the notion that one item could please all, and it makes a good deal of sense, but it leaves open the fundamental problem that Penguin's usage of it appears to speak to something rather different. Indeed, Penguin's mode of operating was not, in the manner of Waples' library purchases, to build a list, the sum total of which would mean that everyone could find something they liked, but rather that each individual item on the list had been chosen for its potential to appeal to the still undefined general reader – what we now recognise as Jones's 'lazy' route to market. So the question remains as to whether Penguin really had a sense of to whom it was marketing its books. Lane may have been an occasional risk-taker, but it would be too much of a stretch, surely, to paint him as someone who really thought it was possible to please everyone with every single product.

What *would* make sense is less the idea that Lane wanted to create products for *everyone*, but rather products that at least held the potential to be used by *anyone*, as is suggested by Morpurgo's (1979, p. 215) slightly insensitive albeit accurate description of Lane's business strategy as being akin to 'blanket-bombing'. Still, though, it remains to be seen whether we can discover who 'anyone' actually was or is. Anecdotally, of course, very few readers, at least in anglophone countries, could claim never to have encountered a Penguin Book. But, as Eliot (2013, p. 1) advocates in his prehistory of Penguin, 'all book history should begin and end with a reader. Not a generalised reader, not a convenient reader devised by a literary critic, but with a real reader at a precise time.' Fortunately for us, there are various 'real' Penguin readers who have taken the trouble to record their experiences and engagements with Penguins, and their insights may help us to grasp better who actually ended up reading Penguins, and why.

Richard Hoggart (1960), writing on the occasion of Penguin's Silver Jubilee, offers his thoughts in a short piece in *Penguins Progress* entitled 'The Reader'. When Penguins first came to market, Hoggart recalls that he was sixteen and a 'working class youth at a grammar-school'. Despite

acknowledging that he does not believe that anyone can claim to be a typical reader, he somewhat contradicts himself by saying he believed himself to have been ‘roughly typical of one large group of Penguin’s early customers’ (p. 27). Hoggart states, perhaps unsurprisingly, that cheapness was a factor in his generation’s enthusiasm towards Penguins; he interestingly adds that success may have had more to do with a timeliness that was predicated upon the post-war rise in intellectual activity amongst a larger social demographic than ever before.⁹ This meant that Hoggart and his friends felt a need ‘to keep up with the Joneses, culturally and intellectually’. For Hoggart, what Penguin got so right was finding a balance: the books were accessible without being dumbed down; they were aspirational, but not beyond reach (pp. 28–9). Hoggart also acknowledges that as he matured, so did his relationship with Penguins, coming as he did to view them not just through a reader’s eyes but additionally through those of a teacher and later of a parent (p. 29). In all of these interactions, though, what is clear is that Hoggart is not thinking as just ‘anyone’. He is unambiguous in proclaiming Penguins as holding an appeal specifically for intellectually and culturally engaged readers: Hoggart himself went into the academic profession, rising to be a professor of English, and Warden of Goldsmiths, University of London, and he even ends his short reflection by noting that his own Penguin Book had prompted letters from ‘readers who are clearly laymen and young, but whose seriousness and critical intelligence is [*sic*] certainly no less than we [Hoggart and his peers] could claim’. In Hoggart’s depiction, then, the general reader turns out to be a long way from ‘general’, instead finding a rather more precise definition bounded by intellectual culture.

Twenty-five years later, Penguin Books (1985) published a further celebratory volume to mark its fiftieth anniversary. Another self-professed Penguin reader and English professor would provide the foreword: Sir Malcolm Bradbury. Bradbury (1985, p. 8) reflects on his experience of Penguins as follows:

⁹ Particularly useful studies of the radically changing sociocultural conditions that affected the publishing trade in the post-war period are provided by Rose (2001, esp. ch. 4) and Collini (2012; 2008, esp. ch. 21).