This article describes W. H. Smith’s bookselling strategies in the 20th century, and how the firm handled the question of whether it should supply potentially offensive publications to the public, in the 1960s and early 1970s. Its internal debate centred on avoiding adverse publicity and challenging the firm’s moral values. This research-based discussion draws attention to the relationships between booksellers and the buying public in Britain, and the expectations they each had of the other. The research...
indicates the wider implications for how we study print
culture and book history, and the importance of the modern
bookselling archive.

*Keywords*: retail, business, bookselling, print culture, book history

*Introduction*

The research presented here offers a way to rethink
methodologies of book history and print culture stud-
ies by incorporating bookselling more fully within their
parameters. In the British context the formal study of
book history rarely includes the modern bookselling
trade as part of the ‘communications circuit’. Booksell-
ing as a modern industry appears not to have been criti-
cally examined and recorded until the early years of the
21st century, yet it is the essential interface between the
author and publisher and the reader. It is also crucial to
note, and keep noting for successive generations of stu-
dents, that the book trade functioned as a forgotten as-
pect of literary censorship, a critically important field in
publishing history.

From the evidence of the publications record it seems
clear that, in the British context, bookselling has been
hitherto of interest to scholars only when, before the
1850s, retailing books was an adjunct to the primary
trades of printing and publishing. The dominant interest
of publishing history has been the relationships between
authors, their books, and their publishers, and then the
effect of the book on readers. The transmission of the
book from publisher to reader has received too little
attention, given its importance as a key connection in
the circuit. The reason for this may be the ephemeral-
ity of archival materials and sales data: it is a paradox that
20th-century sales data are less plentiful and less accessi-
able today than much older data preserved in fragile phys-
ical ledgers. The ephemeral nature of 20th-century sales
data, and of bookselling practices, has been exacerbated
by wartime destruction and the disposability of the de-
tails of sales, once takings have been recorded. Without
records of how books were sold, where, to whom, in
what manner, and under what conditions, bookselling as
a modern industry remains tangible largely through the
oral histories recorded in projects such as the Book Trade

The bookseller and newsagent W. H. Smith (WHS)
is the exception to this lack of contemporary evidence.
They dominated British bookselling in the 20th century
and had an important influence on British and Irish
bookselling as one of the largest wholesalers of books
and other printed materials. Their archives in the Uni-
versity of Reading Library’s Special Collections are an
extensive collection of daily minutiae of how books
were sold on the British high street in the 20th century.
The firm’s position as the leading supplier to the high
street buyer of the printed word has made it a power-
ful presence in modern British publishing history and
in the history of British retailing. The archives contain
an intricately connected set of records charting the
history of the company’s evolution from a syndicate of
Victorian railway bookstalls to the biggest high street
chain of bookshops and newsagents in England and
Wales.

This article outlines how WHS became dominant in
the industry, presenting a summary of WHS’s activities
drawn from these little-seen archival records. It then ex-
amines how this dominance received a challenge from
the new permissive society of the 1960s and 1970s, which
forced WHS to reassess their responsibilities to authors
and readers alike. By combining the summary with the
specific, synthesizing hitherto unstudied key sources
from the archival resources to supplement the official
WHS histories and the extant scholarly research on the
firm, this article offers original insights to suggest the
scope and potential for future research in booksellers’
archives.

*Expansion*

By the end of the 19th century, WHS dominated the sale
of books and newspapers in British railways stations,
selling cheap fiction and news for travellers. In 1857, they
had been given a permit to open a bookstall in Aldershot Camp, serving the military population there. They made agreements for the purchase of copyrights from notable authors of the day, for example Mayne Reid, Sheridan Le Fanu, and Ouida. H. G. Wells’s 1898 novel *The War of the Worlds*, located in the suburban commuting communities south of London, has the narrator refer to a newspaper boy selling papers as ‘trenching on Smith’s monopoly’, indicating the domination of WHS in the selling of news (Wells, 2005 [1898], p. 36).

In 1905, WHS lost the bookstall contracts with the Great Western Railway and the London and North Western railway lines to other entrepreneurs. They actively rebranded themselves as ‘newsagents’ at this time, thus distancing themselves from being ‘railway bookstalls’. This strategic decision reframed their demotion in trading terms to an evolution in social status and business prestige, since a temporary stall on an open railway platform, though lucrative, was less respectable and less congenial as a workplace than a traditional shop on a high street.

Enormous expansion in WHS businesses took place simultaneously all over England and Wales from the Edwardian period, and continued well into the 1950s. Abundant materials are available throughout the archive, including design correspondence and architects’ plans, legal agreements, employment paperwork, and sales figures for the individual shops that WHS opened and ran in the 20th century. The archive’s vast photograph collection of WHS shops and counters contains images dating from the 1920s to the 1980s.

The planned expansion of public points of sale for reading material is a key point for research, since it relates to (variously) the increasing literacy of the British population; the emergence of commuting as the interface between work and home; the development of a new clerky class, both male and female; and the revolution in bookselling created by the circulating libraries’ rejection of the traditional three-decker novel, leading to the proliferation of new and established publishers offering cheap book series. The ‘Times Book War’ of 1906 also reflected these conditions as a market response to how books were sold in England and Wales. (WHS did not challenge John Menzies’ domination of Scotland’s high street market for many decades.)

Letters in the archive from 1905 indicate much interest from the public in being employed by WHS in its new ‘newsagent’ shops, and from property owners and their representatives in renting their premises to WHS for new shops. WHS was also keen to place the right people in locations where special skills or experience were needed. Staff were routinely transferred across the country (for example, from Plymouth to Twickenham), and the ‘one clerk in the South of England who—as far as we know—speaks Welsh’ was recommended to the regional office in Shrewsbury as a manager for a new shop in Wales. There was concern that rival firms were poaching WHS staff and undercutting their business, indicating that WHS was moving into an already populated market.

A rare survival of the breakdown of total retail sales for the year ending 29 March 1919 indicates that its A and B shops (shops achieving different volumes of sales) both sold mostly books, newspapers, and stationery, but that the balance between newspapers and books differed between the types of shops. The A shops made almost a third of their sales in books alone, the remaining two-thirds of sales coming from newspapers, stationery, fancy goods, and print orders; whereas the B shops garnered nearly 40 per cent of their sales from newspapers and only 27% from books (Tables 1 and 2). The range of goods and services that WHS offered in this early stage as both bookseller and newsagent is indicated in Table 2, with library receipts a small but significant percentage.

From the beginning of their high street presence, WHS were leaders in the provision of reading material for travellers, continuing their origins as a service to Victorian railway commuters. When the Fleet docked at Southend in 1909, WHS rapidly evolved a daily delivery service to the ships by means of local boatmen. During the First World War, WHS were active as booksellers in France and in exporting books and periodicals to France through mail order. This continued in the 1920s through the new Paris and Brussels shops (the Brussels shop is still in business as a branch of Waterstones, now an outlier in a once fashionable street). In the 1920s, WHS developed the travellers’ market—in which travel required the traveller’s active engagement in research and planning, owing to the limited infrastructure for
tourists—into a passengers’ market, in which as much as could be arranged was laid on for the consumer’s convenience without their active involvement in the details of travel. In the 1930s, they opened bookstalls at six English airports (Croydon, West London, Gatwick, Northolt, Ringway, and Speke), and by the late 1940s they were routinely in negotiation with the Ministry for Civil Aviation to expand this business. In the 1950s, WHS library competitions were proposed to Swissair and through travel bureaux, to raise the profile of the WHS circulating library business founded almost a century earlier.

WHS outlets linked directly to travel altered their buying strategies for books, periodicals, tobacco, sweets, fruit, and gifts over time, as more of the population sailed, or flew, for leisure or business. What WHS sold reflected the public’s taste, providing evidence of attitudes to leisure spending and travel necessities. This is supported by the increasing practice among leisure-market periodicals of encouraging travel by air and sea through travel supplements, advertising, and the emergence of a new category of ‘cruise’ and ‘holiday’ clothing, as well as the growing area of air travel as a hobbyist interest manifesting in specialist books, periodicals, and clubs. The WHS photo archive of bookstalls and bookshops is valuable evidence of the changing profiles of these consumer goods, and of the range of WHS entrepreneurial strategies in the travel market.  

Entrepreneurship was key to WHS’s market share. In the interwar years, they provided bookbinding, die-stamping, printing, and advertising to the public and to trade clients through WHS’s own commercial art studio, binding issues of magazines into volume form, the Cheap Book Scheme, and the Cheap Book Company. By the 1960s, WHS shops had diversified further, from merely selling books, periodicals, and stationery, to include perfume, gifts, Ordnance Survey maps, toys, tobacco, clothes, and food—in effect, following the department store route. WHS’s non-retail activities strove to raise their cultural profile through sponsorship of literary excellence, education, and encouragement of the arts. Their activities and products included the W. H. Smith Literary Awards, the W. H. Smith Literary Guild, W. H. Smith Book Club Associates, W. H. Smith Literary Brains Trusts, W. H. Smith Bonds, the W. H. Smith Arts Programme in the 1990s, and the W. H. Smith Young Writers Competition. There is a traceable trajectory from ‘serviceability’ to ‘added literary value’ in these endeavours. This is illustrated by WHS’s acquisition in 1953 of the independent Cambridge publisher and bookseller Bowes & Bowes, which may be seen as an initiative to profit from supplying the university market under an established name of the right social and trade status, rather than through the ‘high street’ WHS brand.

The diversification in products for sale in WHS bookshops and bookstalls increased as the century drew on, and books and periodicals reduced in importance in their shops over time. The firm’s original focus on selling reading material to travellers and passengers was diluted by the end of the 20th century. Books were its prestige

### Table 1. Breakdown of total retail sales in WHS A shops, to year ending 29 March 1919

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of retail turnover</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers and periodicals</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books</td>
<td>32.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stationery</td>
<td>22.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printing</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fancy and leather goods</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christmas cards, postcards, etc.</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library receipts</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2. Breakdown of total retail sales in WHS B shops, to year ending 29 March 1919

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% retail turnover</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Second-hand books</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New remainders</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bound books</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General literature</td>
<td>25.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postcards and Christmas cards</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fancy and leather goods and fountain pens</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stationery and printing</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers</td>
<td>39.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazines</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Binding</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library receipts</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
products, whereas stationery and all manner of sundries were less prominently advertised for sale.

In-house instruction through staff periodicals
Evidence of WHS sales strategies is contained in their in-house periodicals. Examples of the Book Window, Stationery Notes, Weekly Circular, Trade Circular, Trade Notes, The Anvil, Shop Talk, Newsboy and Newsgirl, The Newsbasket, and Talking Shop are held in the Reading archive and are a fascinating resource for bookselling as a 20th-century trade and as a record of literary production from the perspective of the marketplace. To consider these publications as contemporary social history as well as business history presents much potential for future researchers to focus on the firm’s staff and its efficient and imaginative operations evolving and responding over time to national and economic pressures.

The Newsbasket was an in-house magazine, sold originally at a penny, and printed from 1908 to 1977. Unlike the other periodicals, this was a magazine covering staff welfare and personal interests, rather than retail training and instruction. The Newsbasket is entirely concerned with the running of a vast empire of shops and bookstalls and the movements of staff and the development of the business. It is a wonderful business history resource, particularly in its First World War issues, where the sense of WHS being a tightly organized and loyal community becomes strongly apparent.

The Weekly Circular began in 1923 and was a weekly and ‘more intimate connecting link between wholesaler and retailer’, the ‘house organ’ of the firm. This newspaper shows how WHS inserted themselves into a space between publishers and manufacturers, and retail outlets, creating a role as a distributor by the scale and reach of their operations. Its principal features were the discussion of the new issues of periodicals and magazines, changes to the regular schedules, and notes on new books about to arrive on the market. All of this was to encourage the retailers to order early and in good numbers. Extra editorial commentary, small ads for newsagent businesses for sale, helpful news items, and hints about better marketing and buying in of stock proliferated over time. The tone also went slightly upwards—by 1927, The Spectator and Vogue were mentioned—but the Weekly Circular remained a voice for and of the shop buyers, giving advice about what to stock for the public to buy. This newspaper is an unparalleled resource for evidence of what was being published and sold at the time, and what was expected to make a big splash, or not.

The Book Window was published from 1927 and may have ended in 1940, at which date the Reading holdings stop. It was an in-house magazine of advertisements of books for sale through WHS, leavened with an intelligent mixture of articles, book and author gossip and news, and targeted advertising for a range of WHS products.

Stationery Notes also began in 1927, possibly running only for a year, and was an internal circular rather than a formal publication. Its goal was increased sales and more efficiency in stock turnover. It used strategies from modern retail psychology to urge on the staff to greater efforts.

The Anvil was an in-house marketing magazine for stationery, with holdings at Reading published between 1929 and 1934. It was aimed at WHS staff with exordiums as to how to sell more and better. It discusses proprietary brands and gives lessons and examples, and closely focuses on selling techniques rather than advising on what to sell. The readers are expected to take notice and obey; thus this periodical gave in-house instruction rather than the more diffuse persuasion and advice of the titles mentioned above. There is considerable information in The Anvil about how WHS managed their business, and the close attention the stationery department gave to increasing sales, especially during the Depression. The sales instruction examples also give a sense of the most common enquiries to be expected at all shops, and of the goods stocked because they sold well. In addition, The Anvil ran regular features to train staff in the background knowledge and operating instructions, for instance on types of pen or particular forms of stationery.

The Book Lists
As well as through informative reading for WHS staff, direct instruction was offered through the Book Lists. These were instruction lists for WHS buyers, on choosing which books to order from the WHS central warehouse, which was in turn supplied by publishers responding to orders from WHS central buyers. The Basic Book List guided individual regional and shop buyers to decide which books and which editions of books the different WHS branches must stock, depending on their branch category.20

This list was one of several ways that the central Buying Group staff managed the stock of books
across all WHS shops. For example, from 1963 to 1969 they produced a sales promotions magazine for WHS branches, called Scope. This actively promoted the current bestselling books and those books currently in the news, using newspaper articles and book reviews that the public would respond to, as a guide to buyers for what to stock. Thus WHS predicted book sales through the perceived popularity of books in the news, the visible books, the bestsellers, rather than the books that the Buying Group had selected on their own merits.

Each WHS shop was placed in one of twelve selling categories, which determined which of three categories of books they could order from and stock. Thus smaller and less important branches—importance was presumably related to their sales figures—could stock titles of ‘higher’ categories than their ranking required, but this was at their buyers’ discretion and would depend on special local conditions or local interest. In 1968–1969, a more elaborate version of this stock list, for paperbacks only, was issued, arranged by publishers’ series; different publishers’ lists were updated separately at different intervals.

In the later 1960s, the categorization of the shops was simplified to only three, rather than 12. They were required to buy across three categories according to their size or importance, with every House having to select from category A. When an author has five or more titles listed ... A selection of not less than half of these author titles must always be held. This will permit a variation of titles on offer to customers.21

This indicates that if an author whose titles sold well was continually kept in stock they would continue to sell well, since they would have more titles on the shelves than less successful authors. WHS thus privileged the successful author at the expense of the less known and thus less successful author. Success—in WHS bookselling terms—was measured by how many copies were sold, not by critical acclaim or abstract merit.

WHS also publicized its books directly to readers and customers. The Reading archive contains examples of the catalogues distributed to the public in the 1960s, again ordered by the category of book under offer, but also marketed actively to encourage sales. The data they contain tell us what WHS wanted to sell, and omissions will tell us what did not fit the WHS model. From a thorough survey of the marketing catalogues, the Book Lists and Stock Lists, which directed the branch buying strategies and also directed buyers to specific titles, it will be possible to assess which titles were available in the shops, and which were not. What was not offered is a potentially valuable avenue of investigation that could reveal how WHS developed its sales and stocking policy responsively, rather than as a proactive strategic plan.

**Contentious books**

We now turn to examining the archive for a specific case of WHS being forced to examine its stocking policies by the pressure of public opinion, increasingly robust media challenges, and the active intervention of anti-censorship campaigners, against a rapidly changing moral climate relating to the social acceptance of sexuality as a fit and/or desirable subject for the books sold in WHS shops, and to who should be allowed to buy them. This reassessment of the company’s responsibilities needs to be seen against its long history as the nation’s bookseller, the dominant bookselling presence all over England and Wales, and the new permissive society that was demanding books that the bookseller had hitherto been supported by the law in refusing to supply.

The particular set of archival documents in question needs to be understood against the ‘Lady Chatterley’ trial of 1960 and other legal landmarks bringing the discussion of sexuality into the public domain, such as the Wolfenden Report of 1957. The Report recommended that homosexual acts between consenting adults in private should no longer be considered a criminal offence. This led to the Sexual Offences Act of 1967, which decriminalized a range of sexual acts commonly associated with homosexual men. The trial of *R v. Penguin Books* came about as a direct result of the passing of the obscene Publications Act of 1959 and was widely regarded as a test case on whether publishers and booksellers could publish and disseminate certain works in the public interest under the auspices of art, science, and literature. The jury found for Penguin Books, D. H. Lawrence’s publisher, and this enabled *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* to be sold in the UK without publisher or booksellers risking prosecution for obscenity.

The changing legal and moral norms of the 1960s caused WHS to reconsider, several times, how it managed its stocking and retail activities, and the basis for its sales policies for books that were—sometimes suddenly, sometimes gradually—becoming more acceptable for...
public consumption and/or display. In many cases WHS had to reconsider its stocking policies for titles that were being eagerly demanded by the public yet were still regarded by company policy as unacceptable. By 1969, responding to local conditions dominated the stocking decisions for particular kinds of books. Correspondence from the archive between senior WHS staff illustrates their concerns about establishing WHS policy on what they called ‘Difficult titles—books including paperbacks and magazines’.

An October 1969 memo argued for the need for such a policy so that staff could ‘be given guidance as to what we show of difficult titles, what is for customer order only, and what is for wholesale and not for retail’.22 A customer order was an order to the shop from an individual for any book in print. It would be delivered to the shop and collected and paid for by the customer. However, it would not go on the shelves and, crucially, would not be seen by any other customer. Wholesale sales were between the publisher and bookseller (often with a distributor as the publisher’s agent), at a discounted price. Public awareness of which books could be bought came through publishers’ advertising, and their catalogues, usually held by the shop but also by customers. The point at issue here is secrecy, of selling a book to a customer without other customers knowing about it. ‘Difficult titles’ caused such secrecy, and in the 1960s ‘difficult’ titles were becoming more widely known and less legally restricted.

Most of the ‘contentious books’ correspondence in the WHS archive consists of opinions from legal counsel, internal memos between senior staff, and notes on how WHS handled each title. As an example, Henry Miller’s novel *Tropic of Cancer* was first published in 1934 but was banned from publication in the US and the UK. After the publication in 1961 of a US edition, a court trial ensued, but in 1964 the US Supreme Court declared the novel non-obscene. Papers in the WHS archive described it as ‘notorious for its candid sexuality’, and the 1964 edition was ‘not handled’ by WHS. Company policy was clarified in January 1966 with a memo listing those books that could be ordered but could ‘not in any circumstances be displayed in our windows or inside our shops and stalls. Their sale must not be promoted in any way.’

Other titles by Henry Miller and titles by Alexander Trocchi, William Burroughs and Barry Humphries were included on this 1966 memo, as was Hubert Selby, Jr’s *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1964), about which WHS had received a very negative counsel’s opinion: ‘this is a book which they might decide not to sell even only on request and not to stock in branches’. WHS appear to have ignored that advice, since an undated list of sales numbers for the ‘customer orders only’ books on the memo cited above shows that *Last Exit to Brooklyn* was the leading order by a factor of four.25 This implicit sales evidence contradicts most powerfully the legal advice offered, indicating the different constituents that WHS policy needed to accommodate in this period.

Some in-house investigation on ‘contentious’ books had taken place, producing a list of books that WHS decided not to handle from 1963: mostly for reasons of obscenity, a few for libel, and one—*Fanny Hillman: Memoirs of a Jewish madam* by Sherwin Cloth (1965)—for anti-Semitism. 26 Both *The Times* and *Private Eye* carried out a campaign of jeering at WHS while it was cautiously attempting to bring its policies up to date. Throughout the correspondence for this period, the sense of creeping change feels a little desperate, and public. Yet, the evidence we can see in WHS’s internal policies is that the staff were conscientiously addressing which titles could, or could not, be displayed to the public. The staff, too, were ‘the public’ and would have been well aware of the need for modernization in their institution if it was to survive on the high street.

A confidential memo of 1970 reports on the resolution of a problematic customer order, from a Mr C. H. Rolph, for one copy of Michael Nelson’s roman-à-clef of
In 1958, A Room in Chelsea Square, which contains explicitly homosexual content. ‘C. H. Rolph’, a pseudonym of C. R. Hewitt, was a former police chief inspector and an active campaigner against censorship. He was a founder of the Homosexual Law Reform Society and a journalist and legal commentator (Steedman, 1994). His request for A Room in Chelsea Square was probably connected to his investigative work on censorship, since he did not reveal his identity to the WHS staff member concerned. The WHS manager reported, ‘I said I saw no reason to change our decision not to sell “A Room in Chelsea Square”.’ [Rolph] understood the situation completely and will write back to the author.27 ‘To sell’ is the critical verb here, indicating that even now, three years after the Sexual Offences Act of 1967 that legalized some homosexual acts between men, WHS was still extremely cautious about selling, profiting from, or distributing fiction concerning homosexuality. The works of Ovid or Suetonius might also be in the catalogues, but it is likely that, despite their explicit content, they did not count as ‘contentious’, since they were classical and thus ‘literary’, a contentious definition in itself that recurs throughout this correspondence.

A four-page report, from February 1970, sets out WHS’s past and current policy, in which we see that the customers’ orders system was introduced specifically to handle book orders arriving after ‘the sudden torrent of unexpectedly frank literature a few years back. Smith’s first reaction was to keep up certain standards by refusing to handle the most raw of these publications’.28 WHS was well used to being criticized for censorship and was aware that the ‘ultra-permissivists are Smith’s sternest critics. The report goes on to suggest various policy changes, including offering instructions on what not to display in branches that carried problematic stock. Thus WHS advocated carrying under-the-counter material, but was very anxious that this did not become public knowledge, especially not to journalists. A rather spurious moral defence was offered, equating ‘contentious’ books and magazines to multiple copies of a title for which there was simply no space, and the commercial imperative of a balanced magazine stock was offered as a way to avoid displaying Penthouse, a magazine notorious for its semi-pornographic photographs of women.

An undated note from this sequence in the archive lists senior staff’s concerns about an impending publication by Dr Spock. (This was possibly Decent and Indecent or The Teenager’s Guide to Life and Love, both of which were to be published in 1970.) There was also wariness about Gore Vidal’s ‘collection of information which could make us look silly’, concerning WHS’s puritanism over what it sold.29 Vidal’s complaint—a long-running personal campaign against WHS policies that banned his works from display on their shelves—was that ‘literary’ fiction with sexual content was banned, whereas ‘low-grade prurience’ was not (Bugler, 1970). By March 1970, the media had caught on to the ‘customer order only’ policy and pointed out that, though individual shop managers might be broad-minded or advanced in their assessment of what was suitable for ordering, the central book-buying department was not (Bugler, 1970).

In the meantime, WHS Chairman C. H. W. Troughton was consulting the Secretary of the British Board of Film Censors about how to extend WHS policy in line with modern thinking about censorship of the arts.30

In April 1970, by the request of the Chairman, a long list had been produced of the ‘restricted’ books that WHS had refused to order or even handle. (To avoid further excitement, this was compiled without contacting the publishers to check which titles were still in print.)31 This list includes Vidal’s Myra Breckenridge (1968), the cause of his campaign. Organized by publisher rather than by author or title, this list is a fascinating resource for those interested in the publishing history of what Gillian Freeman called in 1967 ‘the undergrowth of literature’. (Interestingly, WHS imposed no restrictions on selling Freeman’s The Undergrowth of Literature, an important study of sociology and periodicals history, even though it is an exhaustive investigation into ‘deviant’ sex and pornographic magazines, advertised by a fashionably airbrushed cover image of a bondage scene.)

Work continued on formulating a definite sales policy for WHS. ‘I think that we could sell more books and help ourselves over the contentious titles aspect if we had a more definite sales promotion policy on books. By this I mean that we could, perhaps, buy a title like Myra Breckenridge for sale in the branches but with definite instruction that it was to be displayed spine only in single copy form.32 The public demand, and the unwelcome and awkward scrutiny of the media, was forcing WHS to consider how to accommodate the public and its own institutional moral stance, and it was giving ground.
Timothy Leary's *The Politics of Ecstasy* (1970)—this time drugs was the problem, rather than unconventional sex—was the next 'contentious' title to cause WHS worries. They consulted a QC for his opinion on their unwillingness to sell it and welcomed his view that, since the book advocated law-breaking and contained a direct appeal to 'the very young,' WHS would be upheld by the law in 'withdrawing it from sale'. One wonders why it was ordered in the first place. Within the layers of WHS management and systems, different opinions appear to have held sway at different points in the book-ordering and bookselling process. WHS as an entity did not hold a single view, no matter how much its senior staff may have wanted this to be the case.

The Chairman's internal memo of June 1970 on 'Book-selling in WHS' grumbles about the problems stemming from current branch managers not being of the same calibre as those of the past, since they clearly did not know the 'Book Trade' properly. He considers that current displays of paperbacks do not reflect his preferred policy of quality and excellence. 'When we read Area Managers' reports it is clear to me that few are concerned with the sale of books.' This relates to the point made above about WHS diversification away from books. He also felt that WHS policy on the choice of books for public display should be 'to be marginally ahead of public taste' and to trust the objective judgement of the critics as to quality. He too advocated 'controlled display. Spine only, face only ... I would much rather sell [Henry] Miller than *Mayfair*.'

**Culpability**

There are two final notes on this introduction to the rich documentary resources for W. H. Smith's bookselling policies. Both involve WHS's stocking policy being involved in legal cases.

In May 1966, WHS solicitors Bircham & Co sent the WHS Chairman a copy of exhibit 124 from the Moors Murders case: the list of the contents of Ian Brady's suitcase. There is no suggestion in the cover letter that the lawyer was concerned about WHS's culpability in supplying any of the books and magazines. Rather, it is clear that, since WHS were at that time straightening out their policy of contentious books, Brady's book collection was unexpectedly and disagreeably relevant to their policy. If the press had made a connection between Brady's reading and what could have been obtained from WHS, especially since Brady had apparently said in his defence that his books and magazines 'could be bought from any bookstall', it could have produced very negative publicity for the firm. An in-house investigation immediately began, and reported within days that six of the titles in Brady's possession were 'probably an American importation distributed by back street wholesaler. Would not have got from us.' The rest were largely in the category of customer order only, and one or two were classified as to be sold without restriction. Thus the WHS senior staff would have been reassured that if the press had enquired, there would have been no case to answer.

The second note dates from July 1969. A Portsmouth bookseller called Mrs Pearl Rosemary Whyte was to be prosecuted for selling obscene material. Her solicitor wrote to a number of printers and publishers, and also WHS, to ask them to confirm Mrs Whyte's defence, that the books she sold were freely available elsewhere. WHS's solicitors disagreed with this legal approach and neatly extricated WHS from any involvement in the case.

**Conclusion**

In the context of WHS's continuing struggle to agree a clear company-wide policy on the books they could and would sell, how they would make them available, and to what degree, these cases indicate the conflicting legal arguments of the period, and their unpredictability. They suggest that WHS was negotiating the shifting Charybdis of prosecution and the ever more demanding Scylla of the public appetite for unfettered, uncensored reading. Such cases were significant in the context of WHS's recent history, in that they exemplified how WHS's status as the nation's bookseller attracted such demands and challenges, and that it was expected to act for the nation, to represent the entire trade in its decisions and judgements, by virtue of its reach and scale. By weathering these minor storms, WHS would become stronger and could act as an example of how to extend boundaries when responding to increasingly permissive social demands.

There is a broader significance also in these cases, and in WHS's continual self-examination and reflection on its practice, for the scholarly study of the book trade as a whole. Methodologies that have hitherto not included selling and advertising as part of the study of
the book must be amended, since—as WHS's extensive advertising in the 1960s demonstrates—the public's reading choices were actively shaped by the people who sold the books to them and who influenced publishers by anticipating whether, and how, a book would sell. As the nation's bookseller, WHS shaped the nation's reading for several generations by making its choice of reading available for purchase. Without WHS and its competitors, the authors, publishers, and printers, and all the secondary contributors to the communications circuit, would be making books to no purpose. Bookselling is an essential element in the business of books and should be studied accordingly.

Notes

1 Earlier versions of parts of this paper appear in the author's internal archives report commissioned by the Department of English Literature at the University of Reading, July 2016; in Macdonald (2017); and in a class on bookselling taught to students at University College London, 30 January 2018.
2 https://www.bookunbound.stir.ac.uk/research/infographic/.
3 For example, Fannin (2002); Lang and Rowl (2005–2006); Colclough (2007); Bradley (2008); McCleery et al. (2008); Colclough (2009); Frost (2015); Wilson (2016). Almost no research on 20th-century British bookselling was published before 2000.
4 WHS Archive, University of Reading Library Special Collections (WHSA UoR), Box 1: Miscellaneous pieces, 1792–1865.
5 WHSA UoR, Box 2: Miscellaneous pieces: Novelists, 1854–1884.
7 See the WHS Archive handlists in WHSA UoR for more detail.
13 See WHSA UoR, Box 63 in particular for evidence of the development of bookselling to air travellers, but evidence of the development of WHS business selling to travellers is present throughout the archive.
14 WHSA UoR, Box 145.
15 WHSA UoR, Box 150.
17 WHSA UoR, Box A.189/1–2.
18 WHSA UoR, Box 209.
19 WHSA UoR, Box PA431–32.
20 WHSA UoR, Box 17: Folder 280/1.
21 WHSA UoR, Books: Paperbacks Basic Stock list.
22 WHS Folder 945/1.
23 WHSA UoR, Box 56/11.
24 WHSA UoR, Box 56/7.
25 WHSA UoR, Box 56/8.
26 WHSA UoR, Box 56/13.
27 WHSA UoR, WHS Folder 945/2.
28 WHSA UoR, WHS Folder 945/4.
29 WHSA UoR, WHS Folder 954/10–11.
30 WHSA UoR, WHS Folder 954/20–21.
31 WHSA UoR, WHS Folder 945/25–42.
32 WHSA UoR, WHS Folder 945/46.
33 WHSA UoR, WHS Folder 945/49, 52–54.
34 WHSA UoR, WHS Folder 945/68–69.
35 The 'Moors Murders' was a notorious case of multiple child murder and sexual assault by Ian Brady and Myra Hindley. The trial took place in April 1966.
36 WHSA UoR, Box 56/16.
References


Frost, S., 2015. ‘Historical Perspectives and Historical Precedence’, Book 2.0, 5, pp. 27–37


