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Book events, book environments

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Since the Second World War, a common conception has been that the literary festival has become one of the key sites for the promotion of books and literary culture in the UK. As currently conceived by the myriad of festivals worldwide dedicated to celebrating literary culture and the book, the literary festival conjoins the commercial aspects found in trade book fairs around the world (selling books, exhibiting new titles, offering space for trade representatives to meet) with the promotion of new and established writers through public readings, book signings and encounters with readers. The literary festival has become a major fixture on the publishing circuit, utilised to showcase new works by established authors and provide high visibility and marketing opportunities for publishers. The first multi-session literary festival of this sort in Britain was launched in Cheltenham in 1949.¹ In the post-war period, and particularly after 1970, the development of the literary festival continued, to the extent that by 2015, the number of literary and literature-related festivals in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales had risen exponentially to over 217.² This growth, which is explored later in this chapter, attests to the values (social, cultural and financial) of such events to local economies and communities. The work of literary festivals in terms of shaping writing, publishing and reading communities has continued to grow in the era of digital media. The opportunity to meet authors and fellow readers face-to-face, to buy books and other merchandise, and to align a liking for literature with travel and tourism, is being taken up by hundreds of thousands of readers every year. In the twenty-first century, an event- and location-based literary culture has also expanded opportunities for face-to-face encounters with virtual participation via social media interactions, live streaming, and podcasting.

The exponential rise of literary festivals needs to be contextualised within a broader set of book events and environments which have shaped the cultural environment of Britain over the course of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. The study of such events and environments might encompass a range of activities and spaces. These include literary

¹ Driscoll, *The new literary middlebrow*, p. 154.

² 'Festivals directory', <<http://literature.britishcouncil.org/festivals>>. Accessed 14 July 2015.

festivals and other live literature events, but also the spaces of the bookshop, book and literacy promotional activity, literary awards ceremonies, mediated book spaces, and sites of literary tourism. Such spaces are productive in examining the confluence of public sector funding and commercial operations, and the varying intents behind, and effects of, the making public of books and the literature they contain. It puts a particular spotlight on the author as the promoter of his or her books, the marketing of those books, and the ways in which readers have encountered both books and authors.

In the nineteenth century, there were already examples of literary events centred round the celebration of particular authors or texts that continue in renewed form to this day, such as the annual Robert Burns suppers organised worldwide on or near his birthday on 25 January to commemorate his contributions to Scottish literary culture, and extant in one form or other since 1805.³ The book-promotion tour, now so much a feature of authors for promoting their works, has its antecedents in nineteenth-century public lecture tours of celebrity authors such as Charles Dickens, who galvanised audiences in public performances across the U.K. and North America in the 1850s and 1860s, and Oscar Wilde, who lectured across the length of the U.S. in 1882 and 1883.⁴

Equally significant has been the incorporation of literary events within wider cultural contexts, as exemplified in the distinctive and vibrant annual Welsh, Scottish and Irish Gaelic language celebrations of literature, song, arts and culture, whose beginnings can be traced back to the National Eisteddfod, founded in Wales in 1861, the Royal National Mòd, begun in Scotland in 1892 and the Irish Oireachtas na Gaeilge (National Festival of Irish Language and Culture), founded by the Gaelic League in Dublin in 1897.⁵ All include recitations of poetry and prose, alongside essay competitions within a full programme of cultural events, with the purpose of encouraging appreciation of literary texts within respective language contexts.

Aside from such specialised cultural events, in the first third of the twentieth century UK book culture initiatives tended to focus on the promotion of reading and literary appreciation through library events, educational lectures and book reading schemes. It was a period marked by public, charitable or educationally supported and focused promotion of book culture. Generally non-commercialised in nature, it involved supporting activities such as talks and readings in library settings, lectures, book events and general book reading promotions run by and in Women's Institutes, Workers institutes, schools and book shops.

During the First World War significant time and effort was invested in 'soft power' promotion by government agencies for particular propaganda or cultural purposes (see Chapter 23). A secret War Propaganda Bureau was set up in September 1914 (and led from 1917 by the author John Buchan), with the aim of steering book publishing and cultural promotion efforts towards the fulfilment of wartime aims. Books, pamphlets, photographs and films were commissioned, advertised and promoted with government funding, and authors were sent to friendly countries on extended promotional tours aimed at reinforcing support for Allied war efforts.⁶ A typical example was Ian Hay (John Beith), author of the best-selling pro-war novel *The first hundred thousand*, which within two years of publication

³ See Pittock, ed., *Robert Burns in global culture*; and Watson, *The literary tourist*.

⁴ See John, *Dickens and mass culture*; John Cooper, 'Oscar Wilde in America', <www.oscarwildeinamerica.org/index.html>. Accessed 12 May 2016.

⁵ See <www.eisteddfod.org.uk/english/about-us/our-history/celebrate-150/early-eisteddfodau>; <www.ancomunn.co.uk/about/history>. Accessed 14 July 2015. Records of the Irish Gaelic League, Collection List No. 14, MSS G 1,318 /1 – MS G 1,416 /9, National Library of Ireland.

⁶ Buitenhuis, *The Great War of words*, p. 16.

in December 1915 had sold 115,000 copies in Britain and its colonies and 350,000 copies in the United States. On the back of this success, as Beith jokingly remarked from New York prior to embarking on a nineteen month lecture tour of North America, 'I was yanked off to this country a few weeks ago, and here I am, lecturing on the war and interviewing reporters, and generally countermining Boche propaganda'.⁷ He would go on to speak in over 330 venues across Canada and the United States between October 1916 and May 1918.

Following the end of the war, the British newspapers began taking notice of various attempts on the continent to establish national book events. In 1922 Florence hosted the first of an intermittent series of international book festivals, the 'Foire Internationale du Livre', repeated in 1925, 1928 and 1932. The Instituto Italiano del Libro, created specifically to support book culture across the region, managed the 1928 event, to which seventeen European countries contributed representative material and participants.⁸ Spain followed suit in 1926 with the establishment of an annual Fiesta del Libro (or Book Day) timed in October to coincide with the anniversary of Miguel de Cervantes' birth. Towns and cities across Spain were encouraged to put on events linked to reading and book promotion: publishers and booksellers offered ten per cent discounts on purchases made or books ordered on the day, libraries and public institutions in Ceuta, Salamanca, Seville and Valencia (among others) featured lectures and exhibitions on book-related topics, and in Barcelona authors conducted readings and autographed books in local bookshops.⁹ Correspondents commented on the way in which such locally based events were stimulating cultural interaction and reading, and recommended adoption of similar opportunities in Britain.

British publishers and national organisations considered ways in which such initiatives could be imported in manageable form. A few locally based groups began to run coordinated book events in which bookshops, libraries and local authorities joined together to promote books and reading. Early experiments in this direction included an annual book week begun in 1926 in Cheltenham, in which the latest works from fifty-three publishers were displayed in the Municipal Arts Gallery, accompanied by lectures and other book displays. By 1931 the number of publishers represented had risen to over 100.¹⁰ Bath inaugurated a Book Week in 1928, the launch of which featured lectures by Michael Sadleir and Basil Blackwell and an exhibition on the history of the book from Egyptian to modern times.¹¹ Cardiff followed suit in 1929 with a Welsh Book Festival, run annually through to 1939. Such efforts exemplified a fixed model of literary engagement, involving static displays of new books, exhibitions in public libraries on historical themes, and public lectures by learned authorities on the value of books and reading.

In 1925 the National Book Council was formed by members of the book trade with the aim of promoting books and encouraging leisure reading (see Chapter 26). Seeing the potential of centrally organising an annual series of national book weeks, it launched a trial event in October 1931 focused on religious books, presided over by the Archbishop of York, Dr William Temple.¹² An annual Boy and Girl's Book Week began the following year, featuring book-related items on BBC radio, an illustrated children's literature exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, and public events and exhibitions in

⁷ Quoted in Finkelstein, 'Literature, propaganda and the First World War', p. 104.

⁸ Williams and Noble, *Conference on international cultural, educational and scientific exchanges*, p. 125.

⁹ 'From a correspondent', *Times* 20 October 1927, p. 17.

¹⁰ 'Mayor opens Cheltenham book festival', *Cheltenham Chronicle and Gloucestershire Graphic* 29 October, 1932, p. 3.

¹¹ "'Book Week' At Bath', *Times* 22 May 1928, p. 10.

¹² 'Religious book week', *Devon and Exeter Daily Gazette* 22 August 1931, p. 5.

Birmingham, Glasgow, Liverpool and Oxford.¹³ In 1933 Harrods experimented with a Book Week featuring author appearances and signings from popular novelists such as Gilbert Frankau, A.G. Street and A.J. Cronin. The high number of sales recorded during the promotion led one of its directors to conclude that not only were people reading more but that ‘the public is hungry for books’.¹⁴

While such schemes involved general promotion of books in public spaces, the interwar years also saw the rise of book selling and book promotion schemes developed by commercial agents for private spaces, in particular the mail order book club, a U.S. importation (see Chapter 6). Exportation of book schemes was not always a one way flow between the U.S. and the U.K. In 1943, at the height of the Second World War, a concerted effort was made to promote British cultural values to its U.S. allies via a North American British Book Week, coordinated by the American Library Association, the British Information Services and the U.S. Office of War Information. Information packs were prepared that included advice on themes for exhibitions at local libraries and schools, pamphlets on British values written by J.B. Priestley and others, posters, maps and book lists and bibliographies on British civilisation and British contributions to civil democracy.¹⁵ Books Across the Sea, a private, benefactor-supported initiative with branches in Boston, Edinburgh, New York and London (the latter led by T.S. Eliot), funded guest speakers for these events, including May Lamberton Becker, journalist for the *New York Herald Tribune*, and her daughter, the well-known typographic expert Beatrice Warde.¹⁶ In the post-war period, books were again brought into play in the international environment in the exercise of soft power, alongside the growth of the global dominance of the English language. In 1970, for example, the British Council provided support for publishers and their products with an exhibition of ‘Paperbacks for Universities’ including more than 1000 books from fifty publishers, which was shown in the Lebanon, Peru, Chile and Venezuela in 1970. By 1978 ten ‘senior British publishers’ were invited by the Chinese Government to visit the People’s Republic of China, with a major exhibition of British books held in Peking the following year.¹⁷

The 1970s saw the development of the publishing trade fair SPEX (the Specialist Publishers’ Exhibition for Librarians), which by 1975 ‘felt sufficiently established to carry the sub-title The London Book Fair’. The one-day event attracted around 140 exhibitors and over 1000 visitors, among whom were counted ‘more than 50 overseas publishers on their way to Frankfurt’.¹⁸ (The Frankfurt Book Fair, a centuries-old institution, was resurrected after the Second World War, and over the coming decades established itself as the pre-eminent international rights fair.) In subsequent decades, the London Book Fair (LBF) would cement its place as one of the key events in the international publishing calendar, taking the decision by the 1980s to move its event to the spring, to avoid being over-shadowed by Frankfurt. Establishing itself fully as an international rights fair, LBF’s focus has been on trade interaction rather than with readers, unlike the continental European model of a book fair, which caters to both.¹⁹

¹³ ‘A children’s book week’, *Tamworth Herald* 20 August 1932, p. 6.

¹⁴ ‘Harrods has a book week’, *New York Times* 26 March 1933), E2.

¹⁵ Peterson, ‘So you’re celebrating British book week!’, pp. 283-6.

¹⁶ T.S. Eliot, ‘Books across the sea’, *Times* 9 November 1943, p. 5.

¹⁷ ‘Paperback Exhibition’, *Bookseller* 4 April 1970, p. 1904; ‘The book trade in 1978 January-June’, *Bookseller* 6 January 1979, p. 39; ‘The book trade in 1979 July to December’, *Bookseller* 12 January 1980, p. 153.

¹⁸ ‘The book trade in 1975 (II) July-December’, *Bookseller* 17 January 1976, p. 163.

¹⁹ ‘Trade events’, *Bookseller* 10 January 1981, p. 97.

Despite the trade orientation of LBF, the post-war period was characterised by the internationalisation and commercialisation of book events and book culture, with an increasingly reader-oriented focus. The Cheltenham Literary Festival, established in 1949, had swiftly followed the foundation of the town's Music Festival in 1945. The Edinburgh International Festival (of Music and Drama) was first held in 1949, and would eventually lead to the Scottish capital hosting twelve major annual festivals, including, from 1983, the Book Festival.²⁰ This festivalisation process as an aid to, and symbol of, post-war recovery reached its zenith in 1951's Festival of Britain. This was allied to renewed efforts by the National Book League (NBL; formerly the National Book Council) to promote books through national exhibitions and events, such as the 1951 exhibition on contemporary book production.²¹

The literary version of the festival, in the initial guise of Cheltenham, was described by the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1962 as offering an alternative to a traditional literary society, 'with the additional and by no means negligible advantage that it is an "event"; interest is stirred, attention focused and the whole thing touches a much wider public than a literary society could ever do.'²² The precursor of the Edinburgh International Book Festival had a similarly event-based imperative. In 1962, as part of the Edinburgh International Festival, an International Writers' Conference took place, organised by the publishers John Calder and Sonia Brownell, and Edinburgh's Paperback Bookshop's Jim Haynes as an 'experiment', as Calder wrote in the programme, 'in bringing writers to the public and the public into direct contact with ideas in collision.'²³ Approximately seventy writers from Britain, Western Europe, America, Israel, Ceylon, and India attended the five-day event, attracting large audiences (around 2000) to hear, and participate in, their debates in the University's McEwan Hall.

Other reader-facing initiatives were trialled. In 1971, an experimental open-air book event took place in central London for two weeks in late May and early June, with tents hired from a circus.²⁴ Martyn Goff, the new Director of the National Book League (NBL; latterly renamed as Booktrust, and accruing increasing levels of public funding), with Tom Maschler of Jonathan Cape and the Publishers Association, ran the 'Bedford Square Book Bang'. The Book Bang was a space for events and a bookshop, modelled on the generic promotion – and a message of wellbeing – of agencies such as the Milk Marketing Board, as Goff explained to the Publishers Publicity Circle prior to the event.²⁵

The Bedford Square Book Bang went hand-in-hand with NBL's broader activities to promote reading and literacy which are explored in Chapter 26. The NBL also became involved with the Booker Prize soon after its establishment in 1968 by Maschler in his role at the Publishers Association, and the food business Booker McConnell. From the beginning, Maschler was keen that the prize become an event in the literary calendar similar to that of the literary prize season in France. For the first ceremony in 1969 the organisers attempted to secure the Queen to make the inaugural award.²⁶ The ambition for the head of state to be present failed, but subsequently – particularly once Martyn Goff and the NBL had become

²⁰ See Bartie, *The Edinburgh festivals*.

²¹ National Book League, *Exhibition of books*.

²² Quoted in Driscoll, *The new literary middlebrow*, p. 155.

²³ Calder, 'The first literary festival'. Original programme of the 1962 International Writers' Conference, cited in Bartie and Bell, *The international writers' conference revisited*, p. 5.

²⁴ Report on meeting about the Book Bang, *Bookseller* 16 January 1971, p. 128.

²⁵ 'The shape of things to come in Bedford Square', *Bookseller* 28 November 1970, pp. 2464-6.

²⁶ Squires, 'Literary prizes and awards'.

involved – the Booker Prize would go on to achieve Maschler’s intention of bringing worldwide attention to books, as an annual fixture in the bookish calendar.

Away from urban centres, the concept and creation of the ‘book town’ was born. Richard Booth, a bookshop owner in Hay-on-Wye in the Welsh Borders, saw an opportunity for targeted rural tourism by encouraging further second-hand and antiquarian bookshops to open. The designation of the book town was self-declared in 1961, and was followed in subsequent years by Wigtown in Scotland (1998), and Sedbergh in England (2003). Hay’s designation initially owed more to an entrepreneurial local individual than regional funding or tourism policy, but Wigtown’s naming was the result of a competition adjudged by Scottish Enterprise in 1997. By the 1990s, Hay’s success in quantitative terms was evident: tourist numbers were estimated at half a million a year, with one in twenty tourists to Wales visiting the small town. Both Hay (1987) and Wigtown (1999) would go on also to host large literary festivals, with Hay subsequently making international festival partnerships around the world in Columbia, Ireland, Mexico, Peru, and Spain, as well as inspiring book towns from Australia to Finland, Malaysia, and Switzerland.²⁷

Other regional areas developed book events, with Ilkley setting up a Literature Festival in 1973. Inspired by Cheltenham, it was opened by poet W.H. Auden. From August 1983, the Edinburgh International Book Festival became the first regular event in Scotland to be dedicated solely to books and their creators. Unlike Cheltenham’s use of its spa town infrastructure, Edinburgh featured events in outdoor, tented spaces circling Charlotte Square Gardens. Its first Director, Jenny Brown, cites the Bedford Square Book Bang as Edinburgh’s inspiration, and indeed Martyn Goff acted as an early Board member. Before the festival’s arrival, Brown commented, ‘There was no out-of-hours culture, no demonstrated thirst for books and hearing authors talk. Author book readings were just not around so much. It wasn’t something that people did, or something that publishers demanded their authors do.’²⁸ The idea of an outdoor literary festival, akin in feeling to the music festivals that had sprung up throughout Britain in the previous two decades, was adopted by other UK literary festivals that followed, such as Hay (1988), the Bath Literature Festival (1993), and the Swindon Festival of Literature (1994). Such events operate via a mix of funding sources, ranging from local authorities, central and regional arts funding bodies, and commercial sponsorship, including newspapers. Tickets sales have rarely fully funded book festivals, and some, with controversy, have operated by expecting authors to perform without a fee.²⁹

In the final decades of the twentieth century, and the early years of the twenty-first, the effects of globalisation, the rise of transnational circuits of book promotional events, and the international development of annual, reader-focused cultural initiatives become central to the narrative of book events and environments. In 1995, UNESCO instituted ‘World Book and Copyright Day’ (WBCD) on 23 April (the death day of Shakespeare, Cervantes – thereby moving the date of the traditional Spanish festival – and de la Vega) in order to foster a focus

²⁷ Seaton, ‘Hay on Wye’; Seaton, ‘Book towns’; Murray, *The adaptation industry*, pp. 100-1. See also <www.booktown.net>.

²⁸ ‘The little festival that grew’, *Scotsman* 13 August 2004. <www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/the-little-festival-that-grew-1-543467>. Accessed 13 May 2016.

²⁹ Benedicte Page, ‘Authors call for boycott on non-paying festivals’, *Bookseller* 15 January 2016. <www.thebookseller.com/news/authors-call-boycott-non-paying-festivals-320338>. Accessed 6 July 2016.

around the world for the promotion and dissemination of books.³⁰ In the UK, however, as the primary focus was on schools, ‘World’ Book Day came to be celebrated on an itinerant weekday in March or April and has, since 1998, delivered £1 book tokens to schoolchildren, as well as inspiring events in which pupils (and teachers) dress as characters from books. By 2011, an ‘adult’ version of the event began in the UK as ‘World Book Night’ (WBN) under the instigation of Canongate publisher Jamie Byng. On WBN, which eventually settled on 23 April in line with the UNESCO WBCD, thousands of free books are given away by volunteers, and events take place around the country to celebrate books and reading.³¹

The events-based nature of the World Book Day and Night followed patterns of promotional activity around books at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It encouraged mass participation in which reading and literacy functioned in parallel with commercial imperatives. The apogee of such promotional activities were the launches for each of the successive books in J K Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series. These events included the midnight opening of bookshops with booksellers and buyers dressing up as witches and wizards, and for the fourth book in the series in 2000, a promotional tour for the author in a steam-train replica of Hogwarts Express.³² In *The late age of print*, Ted Striphas explains this activity as a consequence of an agreement by the English-language publishers of the books for a ‘global lay-down date’ which, through a desire to regulate territorial rights, heavily embargoed press coverage and controlled sales start points.³³ By 2012, a simulacrum of the Harry Potter ‘experience’ found a permanent home in the Warner Bros. Studio Tour, using many of the sets, props, and costumes from the film adaptations; and Kings Cross station manufactured a ‘Platform 9¾’, the departure point for the Hogwarts Express, featuring a luggage trolley seemingly entering into a solid brick wall at which fans queue to take photos.³⁴

Elsewhere in the UK, the opportunities for combining literature and locational tourism gave birth to UNESCO’s first ‘City of Literature’, in Edinburgh. UNESCO already had from 2001 an annual ‘World Book Capital’ scheme, but a small group of individuals (including former Directors of the Edinburgh International Book Festival and Publishing Scotland, and the Chair of the Scottish Arts Council) made in 2004 a proposal for a longer-lasting designation of ‘City of Literature’.³⁵ Once awarded, the designation then spread among a network to include Melbourne, Dublin, Warsaw, and Iowa City, as well as Norwich and Nottingham in England, and a greater Creative Cities network (encompassing gastronomy, music, film, and crafts, among others).³⁶ The links to cultural tourism were evident in the bid and continuing activities of Edinburgh City of Literature, with the website promoting a range of literary-related visitor activities and attractions. It also offers a ‘Literary Toolkit for

³⁰ See Larrea and Weedon, ‘Celebrating book culture’. See also Brouillette, ‘UNESCO and the book in the developing world’ for further information on UNESCO’s interactions with literature.

³¹ <<http://worldbooknight.org/about>>. Accessed 1 May 2016.

³² ‘2000: New Harry Potter most magical yet’, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/july/8/newsid_2496000/2496367.stm>. Accessed 1 May 2016.

³³ Striphas, *The late age of print*, p. 146.

³⁴ See <www.wbstudiotour.co.uk>; and <www.kingscross.co.uk/harry-potters-platform-9-34>.

³⁵ See <www.cityofliterature.com>; and *Chapter and verse*.

³⁶ See <<http://en.unesco.org/creative-cities/home>>. Accessed 13 May 2016.

Businesses’, which emphasises that businesses might be ‘sitting on a literary goldmine’.³⁷ The potential link between literature, tourism, and business is clearly encapsulated in this statement.

Alongside such positive assertions surrounding the rise of book towns, Cities of Literature and literary festivals, and their contributions to the promotion of books and local economies, has also come critique. Such events and environments are broadly inhabited by a limited demographic: the middle-class, predominantly female, and promoting books and authors which privilege a ‘middlebrow’ form of literature.³⁸ For others, the festivalisation of literature, and its concomitant harnessing of literature to local and regional economies in the service of urban redevelopment and rural sustainability, link book events and environments to a reading of literature within a creative economy.³⁹ Book festivals have clear links to regional economies, and are heavily used in the promotion of tourist destinations, as testified by the strategic partnerships and sponsorship arrangements with a variety of agencies. Concepts of cultural identity are thereby forged and commodified, conjoining literature to cultural heritage, the creative industries and political ideology. As such, their manifestations – albeit covered with some brevity here – are worth adding to the overall understanding and analysis of the history of the book, and its wider contexts, in Britain during the period.

³⁷ See <www.cityofliterature.com/the-literary-city/visit>. Accessed 13 May 2016. See also Sarah Brouillette, ‘UNESCO and the world-literary system in crisis’, *Amodern* December 2015, <<http://amodern.net/article/unesco-brouillette>>. Accessed 13 May 2016.

³⁸ See Seaton, ‘Book towns’, p. 391; Murray, *The adaptation industry*, pp. 98-101; Driscoll, *The new literary middlebrow*, pp. 152-93; Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, *Reading beyond the book*, pp. 6-7.

³⁹ See Brouillette, *Literature and the creative economy*.