



Briefing Note 3—The Stocking Policy

From the beginning Gay's The Word's stocking policy has been to provide as wide and comprehensive a range of titles as possible, which naturally includes imported works from many parts of the world. No material which, in the opinion of those in charge of the bookshop, is racist, sexist, pornographic, or which presents negative perspectives on gay or women's liberation, is allowed.

In the words of those who run Gay's The Word: 'Believing books to be the most fundamental source of information, delight and enlightenment available to ordinary people, we have aimed to be a focal point for literature for, by, and about gay people—for the material which reflects our proud heritage, pleases us, entertains us, helps us, teaches us, liberates us, affirms our gayness, and motivates us to be proud, and angry at our oppression.'

A Threatened Achievement

From a mere 400 titles when the shop opened in 1979, almost 4,000 have been carried on the shelves up to April 1984, when the HM Customs and Excise raid of 10 April savagely reduced the range available to the customers. Although all the stock bar 22 titles has now been returned, the Customs raid and the subsequent detention of an estimated £9,000 worth of books at the port of entry seriously threatens the bookshop's arduous achievement of the past five years: the build-up of customer access to the true (and in a large degree, new) wealth of publications by and for gay people flowing from the world's presses.

New Departures

When the bookshop opened the ideal of a comprehensive stock was restricted by the number of titles actually available. With a few honourable exceptions mainstream UK publishers had shown themselves extremely reluctant to publish books openly written by or intended for lesbians and gay men, despite the relatively large and unprovided-for market whose hunger for new material was privately acknowledged by many of those who worked inside the mainstream publishers.

The original stock back in 1979 leaned heavily on books whose content reflected little or nothing of the contemporary lesbian and gay male experience. Indeed the overt subject of these books often was not homosexual at all, but they had been written by famous authors known in their own day, or subsequently, to have been gay: Wilde, Woolf, Forster, Isherwood, Genet, Mishima, Angus Wilson, James Baldwin. Works by these and many other authors who are regarded already with respect by the mainstream literary culture (and its bookshops) continue to be an integral part of stock. Almost from the moment of foundation of Gay's The Word, however, the possibility emerged of adding to these titles a wealth of brand-new works and long-lost gay writings retrieved from oblivion. The reason was two-fold:

- successful efforts made by Gay's The Word to contact overseas publishing houses, lesbian/gay-owned or mainstream, which were pioneering in new reading matter for gay people at a time when British publish-

ing in the area was still virtually non-productive.

- the emergence of lesbian or gay-male owned and directed publishing houses in the UK itself, which has both coincided with and given impetus to radical new departures from certain of the mainstream houses.

The American Contribution

The United States has been the English-speaking world's pace-setter in the production of books created out of, commenting on, and seeking to entertain the 'gay pride' generations which have arisen around the world since the liberation movements of the late 1960s-early 1970s. Many of the famous names in mainstream American book publishing—Random House, St Martin's Press, and Avon Books may be cited—have long had 'gay lists'. Nine independently owned lesbian and/or gay male US publishing houses were known to Gay's The Word by 1982.

A very particular demand among British gay men for romantic fiction, unsatisfied by British publishing, had long been recognised, even before Gay's The Word opened its doors in 1979, as a result of the pioneering mail-order service of the original *Gay News* (British fortnightly for gay people 1972-1983), whose monthly sales of over £1,000 of books had primarily been accounted for by imported American fiction specially written for and by gay men.

The stock of Gay's The Word covers political pamphlets, poetry broadsheets, newspapers and journals, mainstream books, small-run books often published by lesbian or gay community groups, weighty theoretical tomes, and books whose plain purpose is to amuse. It was obvious to Gay's The Word from the start that if it was to fulfil its aim of being a comprehensively stocked lesbian and gay bookshop it must provide customers with the chance to choose from the surge of gay publishing in the USA. Since HM Customs and Excise raided the bookshop on 10 April 1984, it has become clear that all consignments from the USA are being 'detained'. Before the

Customs action, imported books and periodicals of direct interest to lesbians and gay men accounted for about 35 per cent of Gay's The Word's turnover.

Mainstream British Publishers

In Britain generally a changing attitude to the 'gender specific' and 'sexual orientation' markets can be traced to the impact on mainstream publishers of houses such as Virago, specialising in books by and for women. Where in 1973 and earlier a short-lived lesbian and gay bookshop, Bethnal Rouge, in London's East End, failed to persuade representatives of, for example, Penguin Books that 'gay lists' from the established houses were even then overdue, by 1981-82 many were prepared to launch individual titles into the UK gay market if not a 'gay list' as such.

Hardly a single mainstream British publisher is now unrepresented on Gay's The Word's shelves. The celebrated names range from Jonathan Cape, Chatto & Windus, Collins, Hamish Hamilton, Heinemann, New English Library, Faber & Faber, and Constable among hardbacks to Penguin, Corgi, Abacus, Arrow, Sphere, Fontana, and Granada in paperback—and even this is not exhaustive.

Among the titles which represent a decisive shift of attitude towards the modern gay and lesbian movement and the readership it has created, Penguin's *Book of Homosexual Verse* (1983) can be mentioned; Faber's collection of gay short stories *Mae West Is Dead* (1983); Burnett Books/Hutchinson's biography of the homosexual mathematician, *Alan Turing: The Enigma* (1983); Routledge & Kegan Paul's *Prejudice and Gay Pride* (1983); all of these openly written by and/or edited by openly gay and lesbian people, and expected to be of interest to heterosexuals as well.

Lesbian & Gay Publishing Houses

The failure of the mainstream UK publishers to offer 'gay lists', however, even fifteen years into

the modern 'gay revolution', has lately been made up for by the development in Britain as well as in the USA of independent lesbian or gay male controlled publishers, whose books now constitute some of the most valued and widely read in Gay's The Word's stock.

There are now three independent lesbian or gay male houses in the UK who commission new work and rescue titles long out of print. Oldest is Onlywomen Press, the lesbian and radical feminist publishers who celebrated their 10th birthday this year, and who have brought out 21 titles—most recently, the first-ever British collection of lesbian feminist fiction, *The Reach & Other Stories*.

In 1980, just after Gay's The Word's opening, Gay Men's Press was founded. It has since brought out over 30 titles, has some 20 published or in preparation for 1984 as a whole, and is planning still larger output in 1985. In late 1982 a second house founded by gay men, Brilliance Books, started up and has since published more than a dozen titles for lesbians and gay men, with 12 already out or planned for 1984 as a whole and some 15 projected for 1985.

The output of these houses has been eagerly welcomed not only by Gay's The Word's customers but by 'alternative' and 'mainstream' bookshops throughout the country, and in America and elsewhere abroad. It will nonetheless be seen that upwards of 100 titles so far from the UK's own lesbian and gay publishing houses, plus a relatively restricted number of relevant titles from the older mainstream houses in Britain, would not yet be enough to stock a truly comprehensive gay people's bookshop—and even if it were, it would not be desirable to restrict the UK reader's access to what is being created in other countries.

An Open Culture

Properly seen, Gay's The Word's success since 1979 has only been one aspect of a widespread British and global phenomenon, the growth of an open lesbian and gay culture in place of the previous subterranean one. Like Lavender Menace in Edinburgh and Glad Day bookshop in Toronto on other occasions, Gay's The Word is being made to bear the brunt of official hostility to changes which 'mainstream' bookshops, and occasionally even the literary columns of the press, no longer see a problem in accepting.