

75 years of Penguin Books

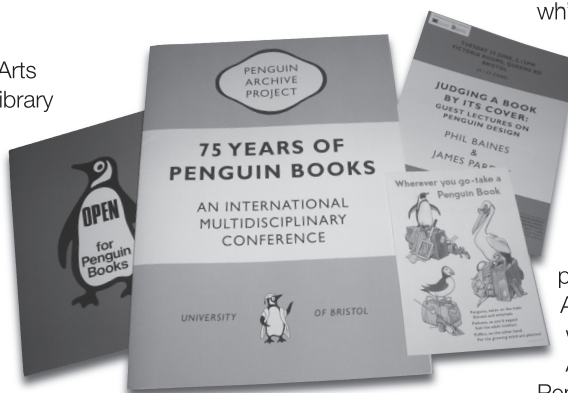
Aletta Stevens reports on an unforgettable tour of the Penguin Archive and on the final, translation-themed day of the international Penguin conference in July, organised by the Penguin Archive Project



Aletta Stevens is a freelance Dutch translator. She studied English Language at Sheffield University and has been involved with her husband's publishing and bookselling businesses. Penguin paperbacks were an important part of her schooling in the Netherlands.

As we approached the Arts and Social Sciences Library I wondered why it should be that the Penguin Archive is located at the University of Bristol and not in London, the heart of the publishing world. Only later did I realise that we were walking past the very place that holds the key to that question: Bristol Grammar School. For it was here that the founder of Penguin Books, Allen Lane (1902-70), was once a pupil.

The story goes that by the time he had become Managing Director of The Bodley Head publishers and was waiting at Exeter railway station after visiting Agatha Christie, he was frustrated by the lack of good reading available. Thus was born the idea to set up a publishing company producing high-quality, serious paperback books affordable for everyone. At that time, hardback books were expensive and paperback books meant poor-quality writing. Working out of the crypt of the Holy Trinity Church on Marylebone Road, London, Allen Lane began to sell Penguin paperbacks through railway stations, tobacconists and high-street stores such as Woolworth's for sixpence, then the price of a packet of cigarettes. After just one year, three



million copies had been sold and a publishing revolution had begun.

A rich history

In 1965 Allen Lane donated his signed collection of early editions to the university in his hometown. This was the beginning of the Penguin Archive, which now contains the archives of Penguin Books Ltd from its foundation in 1935, including those relating to Pelicans and Puffins. There are over 2,000 boxes of private correspondence, photographs, design artwork, advertising material and merchandise. DM1819, for example, relates to the contents of Allen Lane's filing cabinets. The

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collection is still growing, with one metre of new Penguin publications being added every month. The Archive also houses private deposits, the legal papers relating to the *Lady Chatterley's Lover* obscenity case, and the working papers of Betty Radice, translator and editor of the Penguin Classics series.

In 2008 the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) provided a generous grant to create an online catalogue of the Penguin Archive. This project, now halfway through its intended trajectory, is being carried out by a team of academics led by Dr John Lyon of the University of Bristol's Department of English. Its main research areas are the Penguin translations of the classics, Penguin Specials and their socio-political impact, and modern poetry. To continue the democratic spirit in which Penguin Books was conceived,

the project also aims to make links with the general public by organising events such as the 'Penguin Days', which explore Penguin books for the reading public and the Penguin Collectors Society.

On the lower ground floor our party of 15 squeezed into the Archive room, where we were welcomed by Special Collections Archivist Hannah Lowery and Penguin Project Archivist Rachel Hassall. After an introduction, we were invited to view the items on display. An enormous scrapbook with press cuttings covering different decades and languages lay at the head of a long table. Cautiously we filed past numerous treasures: black-and-white photographs of the Lane family and the old Penguin offices; the original Penguin cover and logo designs by the then 21-year-old office junior Edward Young, featuring the now iconic black typography on a horizontal grid of two orange panels with a white band in between (in the Penguin colour coding, orange stood for fiction); a 'Happy Spring' card hand-drawn and signed by the Finnish children's writer Tove Jansson renowned for her Moomin stories and illustrations; and a two-page letter from Enid Blyton explaining why she felt unable to give Allen Lane her support in the notorious *Lady Chatterley's Lover* trial of 1960. To



be allowed to pick up this signed letter and read Enid Blyton's words in her own handwriting was an unexpected privilege.

Tour highlights

A selection of remarkably well preserved Puffin newsletters sent out by the Puffin Club brought back memories for ITI Western Regional Group coordinator, Anna George: 'When I saw the *Puffin Posts* it was as though a part of my childhood that I had not given much thought to suddenly jumped back out at me in the shape of those rather bright psychedelic covers with the cartoon-style Puffin character. Thinking back, the arrival of the *Puffin Post* would have been quite an event for me as a child of the 60s/early 70s living in the countryside with no TV, computers etc whose main leisure activity was books.' She was also quite moved to see the rather worn copy of *Orlando the Marmalade Cat*, as it evoked early memories of being read to while looking at the colourful illustrations of the feline hero and his friends.

The highlight for me was the contents of a small bookcase. It housed a selection of the earliest signed first editions, recognisable as such by the fact that they have 'The

Clockwise from above: The Victoria Rooms, where the conference was held; Archivists Hannah Lowery and Rachel Hassall; the Penguin and the Classics panel

Bodley Head' printed on them, the name of the publishing company owned by Allen Lane's uncle, John Lane. When it ran into financial difficulties, Allen Lane inherited control and launched Penguin Books as its imprint. It was difficult to believe that we were actually allowed to handle these historic and valuable paperbacks with their distinctive but now most delicate paper covers. On opening them we gasped to find the authentic signatures of, among others, Ernest Hemingway (*A Farewell to Arms*), Dorothy L Sayers (*The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*), André Maurois (*Ariel: A Shelley Romance*) and Agatha Christie (*The Mysterious Affair at Styles*).

As a final treat we were allowed to look at the library shelves crammed with double rows of Penguin publications through the ages. I left thinking how wonderful it would be if one day there would be a Penguin Museum with enough space to display all these beautiful covers and spines, and all the gems that the Archive holds.

Thoughtful papers

Back at the conference at the Victoria Rooms for tea and biscuits, we looked back on the papers presented

that morning. The first panel session entitled 'Penguin and the Classics' had kicked off with Robert Crowe's intriguing talk on the translation of titles in the Penguin Classics series: the ways in which titles were translated and selected, and how and why these changed with the times.

This was followed by Amanda Wrigley's uplifting paper on Penguin Classics and BBC Radio, in which she illuminated their symbiotic relationship. Allen Lane and John Reith, then Director-General of the BBC, shared an ideological position with regard to educating the masses. It was partly thanks to the scholar and translator Philip Vellacott (1907-97) that a large number of Greek dramas were adapted and broadcast by the Third Programme. These were often accompanied by articles in the *Radio Times*, an inspirational idea quite unimaginable today.

Brian Arkins concluded with his presentation on the Penguin translations of Greek and Latin authors, starting with the launch of the Penguin Classics series in 1946 and its legendary editor (until 1964), E.V. Rieu. Rieu's translation of Homer's *Odyssey* became a significant and lasting commercial success. Arkins explained how Penguin began to



employ poets such as Robert Graves as translators because they were perceived to write better than academics. In relation to this, one of the points in the discussion which followed was whether Penguin translations fell in between literal translation and re-creational/poetic translation, and whether this mattered if Penguin readers were not concerned with the original language.

Translation and Penguin

After the coffee break, the 'Translation and Penguin' session opened with Tom Boll's 'Surrealistically meaningless: Pablo Neruda and Penguin Books'. He illustrated the difficulties in translating the Chilean poet and Nobel Prize-winning author by means of a close reading of a passage from *'Arte poética', Residencia en la tierra (1933)* translated by Nathaniel Tarn. In Britain, Pablo Neruda was championed from 1956 by the prolific translator of European literature JM Cohen, and a series of Neruda

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translations with different approaches followed between 1961 and 1974.

The next speaker was none other than our very own ITI member Adrienne Mason, well known to members of the ITI Western Regional Group, who presented 'The Early French List in Penguin Classics', in which she also paid attention to the general translation aspects of Penguin. She pointed out what a unique resource the Penguin Archive is in providing a context for Penguin translations. It shows, for example, that Penguin translators were mostly academics, that EV Rieu's translators were privileged to provide their own introduction and notes to their translations, and how the sales figures and translators' remuneration and royalties changed with time. In the new educational market, the diffusion of French culture was considered very important, and over the years the Penguin list of French titles was transformed from being quite conservative and aimed only at secondary education to being much more adventurous and suitable also for higher education.

Patrick Waddington concluded with 'On the Eve of a Turgenev Revival? Gilbert Gardiner's Penguin Classics Translation and Its Impact on Some English Authors', a look at the 1950 title *On the Eve*, translated directly from the Russian, which sold out in a year. Previously, translations

Clockwise from top left: the Penguin Archive display; ITI Western Regional Group members Anna George and Alison Hindley; issues of the Puffin Post

of Russian works had often come through German, French or Dutch. Constance Garnett was another translator of many Russian works of literature who contributed to the way British perception of foreign cultures was shaped by Penguin translations.

The conference was rounded off with Kim Reynolds's 'Whatever Happened to Happily Ever After? Visions of the Future in Children's Literature'. This was an exploration of the way in which children's books changed from the happy pre-war fantasies about a better future to the post-war science fiction of anxiety about apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic scenarios.

Clutching our conference bags with their complimentary copy of Italo Calvino's *The Complete Cosmicomics*, we reluctantly left at the end of an inspiring day. As I headed for the station, I reflected on the apparent irony that mass-produced paperbacks are now the subject of academic research. But then many Penguin translators and authors were academics, and when Allen Lane gave his collection to Bristol University he put into action yet another visionary idea. 

LINKS

www.bristol.ac.uk/penguinarchiveproject
For an interesting list of books about Penguin, see:
www.penguincollectorsociety.org/shop