

LOUIS HEMMINGS recalls a career spent working with books and describes his experiences as Ireland's first on-line used theology bookseller

## ***THE SAMOVAR STORY***



I was brought up to appreciate books. There were "rainy day" art books pulled out for bored boys. There were the hundreds of orange Penguin paperbacks, each side of the fireplace. There were the off-beat, mid-teen purchases: ***Trout Fishing in America*** by Richard Brautigan and ***The Third Policeman*** by Flann O'Brien, both books part of the initial launch of Picador publishing. I was smitten with reading.

When I became a Christian at the age of eighteen, I read three important library books: G.K. Chesterton's ***Autobiography***, Malcolm Muggeridge's ***Something Beautiful for God*** - about Mother Theresa - and, most importantly, Richard Wurmbrand's ***In God's Underground***, about the Christians suffering under Communism.

Around that time, I also got involved with the remains of the Dublin branch of the *Evangelical Library*. It was housed in a loft room in the YMCA, and was now an anorexic ghost of its better past. I believe there were two active members borrowing books by the time I came on the scene.

Having got permission, I set about re-ordering the room, dumping damp and perished books, while attempting my own crude cataloguing. A few months after I finished this, the library committee met. They decided to throw the library books into black bin bags and donate them to a start-up, rural Bible school ... Ho Hum!

It took another few bumbling years to discover that I really should be



working with books. I had previously worked in a back-street clothes factory; as a kitchen porter; assistant in an art shop; a printer's apprentice; in my parents' mohair textile factory. For a while I also did an internship in an evangelical Christian bookshop. Why I never thought of working with books still has me mystified, thirty five years later.

When I finally figured out my career direction, my first job was in used book selling, at *Carraig Books*, Blackrock, Dublin. It was a biblio-blessing, of which I was to later write:

*....See those rows of books jutting in and out: octavo, quarto, small quarto, large quarto, landscape and folio; all of them show flagtips, white cards peeking out the top edges, with my badly typed bibliographic information on them.*

*Between the pages are forgotten letters, bookmarks, old stamps, rusty paper-clips, and lined note-paper marking pages or passages. Sometimes refutations, pencilled annotations, written in by would-be scholars on the page's edge.*

*Those books held secret dialogue; clashing ideologies peacefully co-existing at last; breaking through hostile borders, where time has disarmed the guardians of prejudice and hatred ....*<sup>5</sup>

After two interesting years in that used bookshop, I went to work in *Hodges Figgis*, Dublin, in the unloved bargain book basement. I got that job while selling one of my early chapbooks of poetry to the Irish buyer there. A while later I left, to become manager of the small, re-established A.P.C.K. in St Ann's Church, Dublin.

I was given a free hand in promotion, ideas and stock holding. I advertised Anglican books in Catholic journals, to widen the customer base. I generated copy-writing slogans for a *Lion Publishing* / APCK advert, echoing the sixties petrol slogan "put a tiger in your tank". My witty riposte was: "Put a *Lion* in your living room!"

One of my early customers at the A.P.C.K. was an elderly theological bibliophile and Baptist pastor. He was almost blind and almost deaf. He and his wife had a garage full of subject-sorted & shelf labelled theology, church history and missionary books. His wife would read them to him, he would mull on their content and pour their passion into sermons. Often I would be invited around to tea at their house and would come away borrowing the same books that I had sold them a few weeks before! Notably, the well regarded Baker Book House reprints.

I visited other religious book shops of all persuasions and saw gaps in the religious book selling market in Dublin. No other bookshop was selling Feminist Theology, Church History or Eastern Orthodox Theology (nor the

choral Orthodoxy liturgical records). Obviously, I started sections for all these non-represented subject areas. I put on sale-or-return book displays at Eastern Orthodox conferences, as well as the mandatory displays at *Church of Ireland* conferences. It was all an exhilarating experience, a privilege, for someone who had not even finished secondary education.

Two years later I left to become assistant manager in a shopping centre general bookshop. At first, I really relished the challenge but a few over-optimistic years later, my entrepreneurial spirit chafed at some of the management structures. I gave it six years of my Christian best, sticking my neck out for the gospel, and sometimes defusing complications. I then down-shifted to working there part time.

There were times of opportunity on a wider level. Like the incident of the father who came in to report that his young son had stolen books. The father wanted me to "teach him a lesson". That would have been the harsh and detrimental way. What would my heavenly Father have wanted me to do?

I quickly prayed. The pre-teen boy very nervously entered the bookshop alone. I took him over to the area where the books were stolen from, so that he could put them back. I then quietly said: "I think that you have learned your lesson. I want you to have a book as a present", gave him a copy of the redemptive book *The Cross and the Switchblade* and sent him on his way.

Basically I see those years as mostly a failure, from a spiritual point of view. I turned the other cheek too often, too easily. But sometimes blessing broke out of this broken jar. When Holly, our stillborn daughter briefly entered our lives, then left for heaven, I got opportunities among staff and customers to open hearts & minds.

My wife and I published a booklet on our experience of stillbirth. I was allowed to sell it at my bookshop and through wholesalers, countrywide. Little did we know, that it was a publishing first in Ireland, for parents to share such a story. Obviously, it had muscular Christian content. To top that publishing adventure, we got thirty minutes of uncensored airtime, on a national shock-jock radio show. All this also gave opportunities for sacred conversations, that naturally came about, in that bookshop.

It seemed that the bookshop was not being allowed to reach its full potential in regards to turnover. One pioneering project that I established there, was the servanthood aspect, of offering to order any book not in stock. The copy-writing slogan I dreamed up for that was: *S.O.S. Special Order Service*.

I was handling a couple of hundred special orders each month. One of my coups with this service happened in an unusual way. A priest ordered a Yale University book, called something like, *The History of Classical Biography*. It was an expensive book and well outside our non-academic stock range. The priest declined to collect and pay for it, in a rather arrogant manner. I seethed. I thought, I'll show that brat! So, I photo copied the cover & mailed it to a customer in the west of Ireland, as it somewhat matched his

<sup>5</sup> Extract – see <http://cowbird.com/author/louis-hemmings/#1/8928>



bibliographic profile.

Reader, he not only bought that expensive book but ordered at least the next five volumes in the series, two of each volume in fact. He became an important special order customer after that event. A nice turn-around, indeed.

But the nagging doubts continued. Nevertheless, over time, the management frustrations and the Sunday Trading issues were my deal-breaker. I was taught by example to hard work & creatively by the example of my parents textile entrepreneurship. I was recently to write a homage to my pioneering parents:-

.....bless me, paternal hand-crafted cloth,  
baptise me, maternal rural-tinted palette,  
this dreamer homages such vision:  
the fabled family coat of many colours.  
O wooden loom, now silent, once you held  
my parents hallowed hopes & dreams.  
O mohair, brushed plush mohair,  
wrap me with hope, faith & love:  
your bog-cotton soft song inspires.<sup>6</sup>

I decided to try to get my Carriage Books, used bookshop, job back. The owner had by this stage, scaled down staff and didn't need me. However, he offered me about thirty boxes of used theology books and his theology customer mailing list, for a very reasonable price. Of course, that was an offer I found hard to refuse. I bought the lot without hesitation. I was ambitious. I bought myself an expensive table-top photo-copier for my postal mailing lists. Then, shortly after having paid six hundred pounds for that, my brother arrived from the UK with an early Mac computer. He basically said - "*get off that silly photocopier and get on-line*". O Pioneer! There wasn't even an Internet server in Ireland. I was dialing up the American-based CompuServe in London to get online!

In those early on-line days of 1991, while still working at the bookshop, I moonlit, selling my used theology books by night. I slowly built up this little business, managing to make myself quite ill, juggling the two jobs. After a few more years as a full-time assistant manager, I changed to being a part-time worker.

I called my modest ministry *Samovar Books*. Why such a name? There are two reasons. I didn't want a typical cringe-inducing Christian cliché name. I also wanted the name to reflect a little of who I am. Apart from being a Christian, I am also a closet Slavophile. I became such through reading the *Keston College* materials published on behalf of (Russia's) persecuted

Christians. My brother drew a samovar tea urn for my invoice and letter head logo. In the centre of the samovar I put the words: *Slava Tebye Gospody!* That Church Slavonic phrase, translated roughly states: "*praise be to you, O Lord*". Admittedly obscure - but anyone inquisitive can always ask the origin. And some actually did ask.

Selling books on-line was thrilling and very fulfilling. I slowly built up an e-mail mailing list of two thousand seven hundred apparently-interested people, over two decades. How did I do this? I simply sent out a million one-on-one e-mails to clergy, professors, students and anyone that expressed any kind of interest in theology books.

A few recipients of these exploratory, introductory e-mails accused me of spamming them. I preferred to call it "*creative sniping*". Today I would term those emails "*guerilla marketing*". I only asked people who I thought might be interested, not just anyone. Such an approach is much harder to do these days, due to web forms and spam filters. Apart from my private mailing lists, I decided to list on the precursor of what is now [Abebooks.com](http://Abebooks.com). I also listed on other sites, including Amazon.

About ten years ago, one Canadian theology librarian asked me to see if I could obtain a certain used book. After a few months I found him a copy. I was about to post it out to Canada when I thought: "*hang on, there's an opportunity here*." I e-mailed that customer, asking would he like to see my top fifty books, according to his bibliographic profile. I had catalogued about one thousand books that summer, which few had seen on-line. When he accepted the offer to see my little list he bought about twenty books, to add to his original "wants list" book. Not bad, I thought. Let's see can we improve even more.

I offered a listing of my one thousand recently catalogued books. He accepted my long-list offer, broken down into (non-Dewey!) categories. In a few days, the original US\$ ten book order turned into a US\$ 700 invoice-value order. Nice one! A lot of my business model is based on this experience. If you don't ask, if you don't do creative follow-up, you will never know what might happen. That customer has ordered many books since then. In fact I have created over one hundred multi-book invoices for his library over the past twelve years.

In 2001 I quit working even part-time at the bookshop, to wholly devote my time on-line. There have been ups and downs but its mainly been a fun ride! I have listed over fifty thousand books during that time and sold many thousands. My taxable turnover from 2001 to 2012 has come to over US\$ 130,000.

I've had some terrific exchanges and even made a few friends. One satisfied customer flew my family over to London and put us up in a hotel for a weekend, when they read about our stillborn child. Another customer sent me an epicurean "food parcel" of delicious coffees and dried organic fruits from California!

<sup>6</sup> Extract - see <http://cowbird.com/author/louis-hemmings/#!/33498>



I constantly tried to think "*outside the box*". I introduced Irish interest books and a portion of those are cross-sold to my theology customers. I asked a number of times for permission to sell my used books at the *Church of Ireland* General Synod. Another first. These and other ideas added substantially to my quite modest turnover.

Over the past twenty years I have catalogued about fifty thousand books and have generated over ten thousand invoices. I was on-line before *Amazon*, albeit in a rather more modest way! Due to server issues, it had recently been taking me nearly three days to send out each list to what had now become a reduced seventeen hundred subscribers. So, when I got a no-response to my summer list, I asked myself a few questions. Who is reading, interacting or buying? I decided to go through my mailing list and delete all but three hundred and seventy subscribers. I trust that my "season" in used theology book selling is not over. The pruning process rather reminded me of Gideon's steadily God-induced, diminishing army!

In recent, quieter times I offered to look after Carraig Books, so that the owner could go and play a round of golf! We started off this arrangement by me being paid in credit. Useful if there are books I want. The passing trade in one of the last Dublin used bookshops is very patchy. Seeing this and also working on my own various on-line projects, I decided to change my terms and conditions. I now charge the bookshop a sandwich and coffee meal deal per afternoon. Longer working periods have variations on this foody theme!

So, we'll see what the future holds for on-line used theology book selling. The combined effects of the credit crunch and the advent of e-books will impact my business adversely. The last three years have been disastrous financially for selling my used books on-line. Recently, I managed to acquire thirty five boxes of ex-library Irish interest books. This has turned my fortunes around fortuitously. The revived turnover may be the start of something new or it may be the last gasp. Who knows? However, whatever the future holds, I bend the knee and bow the heart to God, for allowing me the privilege of being in a position to do all that I have with used books.

God is a God of second-chances, from the Garden of Eden to post-Celtic Tiger Ireland. One aspect I love in life is second chances. Who doesn't? I like second chances, in particular for neglected, or forgotten, or currently un-trendy authors. Being an ambassador, representing The Christian Author's Second Chance has been a bonus. I trust that some have been blessed, saved or strengthened in His purposes through my pioneering online ministry.