

# A life in books



Next month Martyn Goff's many friends in the trade will celebrate his eightieth birthday with a grand dinner. Liz Thomson meets the man who has, arguably, done more for the book trade than any other single individual

When Martyn Goff was just eight years old, he learned a valuable lesson that has stood him in good stead throughout his life. "I'd just come back from Australia and the headmistress asked if I'd had a good time and I said yes and she said she'd made a space the following afternoon for me to address my fellow pupils about the trip. I still don't understand this and it sounds boastful, so please forgive me, but the following day I spoke to a couple of hundred kids for about three-quarters of an hour after which they asked questions. It gave me such confidence that I've never worried about public speaking."

For the past 30-odd years since he became the Director of the National Book League (which became Book Trust) and became personally involved in first the Booker and then a host of other prizes and bookish events, Martyn Goff, OBE FRSA, has been the book trade's ambassador. The perfect diplomat, he is always impeccably turned out, gracious to a fault and the consummate networker, a keeper of secrets who knows how to mark a card without betraying trust and who works tirelessly behind the scenes to effect a resolution to whatever little local difficulty presents itself. One of the great and good, he is never grand.

He has spent almost 60 years in the book trade, first as a bookseller, but at what is, by any standards, a milestone birthday, there is no danger that the celebration will be a leave-taking. "My doctor says that both mentally and physically, you're better to take yourself close to the limit. Don't overdo it, but keep going, because it's much better for you. And I love it. I'm trying to slow down a bit. I've found someone to take over from me as Chairman of the National Life Story Collection, and I'm trying to leave the National Literacy Trust, which I started with Simon Hornby." Goff's other concession is to "spoil" himself, driving to work at Henry Sotheman, Britain's oldest antiquarian bookshop, from Clapham with Rubio Lindroos, his partner of 34 years, who is a bookseller at John Sandoe, in Chelsea. "And I go to less of the parties. I find that, by five o'clock, I've had enough." He's allowed, as they say, for in addition to the aforementioned commitments, Goff is also Chairman of Books for Keeps and the Wingate Scholarships, President of the Society of Bookmen and Vice President of both Book Trust and the Royal Overseas League. He is also, of course, a writer, with ten novels and sundry works of non-fiction to his credit.

Born into "a comfortably rich family", Goff was the youngest of three children. His father was a furrier, the largest manufacturer of fur coats in Britain who supplied everyone from Harrods and Harvey Nichols on down. He grew up in Hampstead, and the family employed maids, a gardener and a chauffeur. Young Martyn was sent to prep school but, when his parents decided he was becoming "terribly snobbish", they despatched him to the local primary school. "It was too far for me to go, so I went back and forth in a chauffeur-driven Rolls and I didn't even see how ridiculous that was." It's an indication of how times have changed that his classmates merely thought it "rather fun".

However, the idyll was exploded when his father went off with another woman. "My mother was absolutely shattered, because in those days divorce was a disgrace for the woman, even though she was the totally innocent party." To escape, his mother booked a passage for herself and her younger son aboard the *Oronsay*. Mother and son stayed mostly in Melbourne, also visiting Sydney and Brisbane – the voyage itself took a month – and Goff remembers it as "all quite marvellous". There was never any intention to remain in Australia and, on their return, they settled in a flat in Hove.

Despite the upset and upheaval, Goff remembers a largely happy childhood and enjoyed his time as a boarder at Clifton College. (A fellow pupil last year recognised him on the Man Booker telecast and got in touch.) By the time he left, the War had started and he put his place at Queen's College, Oxford, on hold and volunteered for the RAF. "I went in as a wireless man, though I was eventually grounded altogether because I quickly became more shortsighted. Four of my five years were spent in the Mediterranean." He received his commission from the King of Trans-Jordan, who then invited all twenty young officers to tea in the palace. "After that I had a fortnight's leave in Cairo and then returned to North Africa."



Martyn Goff: 'we all get a number of chances'

It was there, beneath the desert sun, savaged by mosquitoes and with scarcely minimal water supplies, that Goff read Siegfried Sasson's *The Weald of Youth*, sent to him by his brother, who was with the Eighth Army in Italy. "I'd always read a great deal but that just knocked me over and wrote to Sassoon, who sent me a nice reply. And that was that. I recently discovered from Jean Moorcroft Wilson, whose life of Sasson is just published, that he'd written to Maynard Keynes saying he'd had a total block and stopped writing and then, out of the Western Desert, had come an Aerogramme from some airman named Martyn Goff who said the book meant so much to him that it completely unblocked Sassoon. He was so taken by the enthusiasm that he immediately started writing another book. Isn't that extraordinary? After all these years!"

Come 1945, and Queen's restated their offer. But by that time Goff wanted to break free of the discipline that then governed university life every bit as much as the forces. "I started writing and, very quickly, I sold stories to *Liliput* and *The Strand* magazines. Then, after a lovely flush, I got nothing but rejections." His father, with whom he'd re-established contact in his teens, summoned Goff to lunch. "He said, 'you've had nearly five years' holiday' – can you imagine! – 'it's time you worked and you'd better come in to the family firm. You should start on Monday week'."

Goff was adamant that he wouldn't and was saved by a curious twist of fate. A cousin worked as what was then known as a travelling salesman, selling Czech glass. He was going to St Leonard's the next day and rang to suggest that Goff join him for the trip and a catch-up lunch. "He dropped me off and we arranged to meet at one, so I walked along the seaford. There was a building, with about fifteen shops, only four or five of which had been let. I can't tell you what made me do this but I said to myself it would make a wonderful bookshop, so I went straight to the agent and asked how much it was. He said it was £250 a year and I said I'd take it. He must have thought I was mad."

Goff designed the shop and, while the development was being completed, joined Zwemmers to spend three months, unpaid, learning the trade before opening for business in 1946, having employed as an assistant a boy from the local grammar school. His second member of staff was

one Ian Norrie, a regular customer who confided that he hated his job as a trainee on the local paper and really wanted to be a bookseller. Eventually, he went on to manage Goff's second shop, along the coast in Seaford, and to marry one of his customers, the late Mavis Norrie.

The business was successful, but the young entrepreneur was missing London, and spent his life driving up and down to theatre and concerts. A Hodder rep, Frank Whale, suggested he go and look at Banstead's Ibis Bookshop, which was for sale. But, having made an appointment to view it, Goff drove past and decided it was too fusty and dusty for his taste and that Banstead was more Surrey than it was London. Whale persevered, however, and suggested he try again, this time checking out the balance sheet. In the end, Goff took the plunge and soon transformed the Ibis (still trading under that name today) from a low to middlebrow shop, half of which had been a library, into a mecca for serious book buyers. Gradually, the south coast shops were sold.

Goff ran the Ibis for twenty years, by which time he was a published author and a regular reviewer and broadcaster. Then, in 1970, Michael Turner MD of Methuen, dropped by to suggest that he apply for the chairmanship of the National Book League, vacant at Jack Morpurgo's retirement. Happy with his life, Goff was reluctant but did so to humour Turner. He got the job.

Over lunch with Peter Parker, Chairman of Dillons University Bookshop and British Rail, Goff asked what he should do. "He asked me if I wanted *them* or they wanted *me*. I said they wanted me. 'All right,' he said. 'You don't need to do anything for a year except get to know your staff well, judge them carefully. At the end of the year, you've got to do something which will shake up the whole book trade.' And in that moment was born the Bedford Square Bookbang," from which the Edinburgh Book Festival took its inspiration.

Of course, Goff went on to transform the NBL, which became Book Trust in 1986, moving it out of its expensive Albemarle Street premises to its present location, streamlining the organisation and giving it a consumer role, lobbying against cuts in library hours, and so forth. Crucially, within months of Goff's arrival, the NBL took on the management of numerous prizes, beginning with the Booker, then run by the PA. He has been associated with what is now the Man Booker Prize for 32 years and derives from it particular pleasure. To Goff it owes both its media profile and its inter-

national stature and it was he who steered it through the tricky years following the death of founder and Booker Chairman Sir Michael Caine ("decisive, brilliant, a bully, totally committed to the prize") and the demise of the Booker empire.

When retirement from Book Trust beckoned at 65, Goff had no worries about filling his time. But when Sir Evelyn de Rothschild invited him to join Sotheman's he didn't hesitate. "Booker had asked me to continue and, as I was doing a lot of other things as well, I thought it would be useful to have an office in London. But I said I was willing only to come in as Executive Chairman, not Non-Executive Chairman." Goff still works five days a week in Sackville Street and his only concession to age is three serious holidays a year: Thailand in the dog days of January-February, Crete in June and Savannah every September, "between the Man Booker long list and the shortlist".

As to Goff the novelist, he volunteers that he doesn't think he was "ever good enough" for it to have been a career, though the most celebrated of his novels, *The Youngest Director* was a *succès d'estime* in Britain and went on to sell more than 30,000 in hardback in Germany. A brave novel for its day (1961), dealing with issues of sexuality in the workplace, it clearly gave its readers greater hope and confidence, and Goff takes pride in the letters he received in response to it. "People wrote asking how I *knew* – and of course I didn't. It never happened to me."

His other passions are music and art, both of which have found an outlet in his writing, with such books as *A Short Guide to Long Play* ("my brother thought of that wonderful title") and *The Royal Pavilion*. The visual arts have been "an absolute passion". "Julian MacLaren Ross, who was a Soho layabout, introduced me to John Minton, who introduced me to Graham Sutherland, who introduced me to John Piper, who introduced me to Henry Moore... and though I had almost no money at all, I bought something from each of them. I wouldn't like to tell you what they now cost to insure, but it all happened by the sheerest chance."

Goff's life is a seamless mix of the personal and the professional and his formidable address book enables him to 'put back' in all sorts of ways – to individuals, to the book world in general, to charity. A facilitator, then? "I hope so. I've been very lucky. I've really enjoyed all my life, from school and even through the Air Force, and I've learned a good deal. What I now must do is give other people the sort of help and advice that enables them to get somewhere and do something they wouldn't otherwise." He supposes he spends "an enormous amount of time doing charity works" but feels "you are nicely paid back if it works".

As to the book trade, Goff doesn't feel it has changed for the better. Bookselling, with its discounting of books destined to be bestsellers, "doesn't make sense" and publishers are fixated by short-term gains. He fears for literature. "A lot of talent will falter at the start because there aren't the places for it to go where it will be looked after." Editors, he feels, lack the time and the courage to do their jobs properly and with each Man Booker he observes "a gradual erosion of standards. The polish is no longer there... It's partly accounting, partly marketing. All sorts of people are interfering." And while newspapers devote increasing amounts of space to books, there is too much emphasis on the author as personality.

"Somebody in 50 years may prove me wrong, but I think I've been very lucky to have seen the best of the publishing industry in all sorts of ways." But if he's enjoyed the best of times, it's because he's made the best of the opportunities available. "You can say you're not lucky but, you know, we *all* get a number of chances in life. The trouble is that so many people fail to jump when the chance comes. Rightly or wrongly, I didn't do it instantly but I *did* take the NBL job, I *did* agree to run the Booker... That's the great thing: one needs luck, but then one needs to take the opportunities as they come and not grumble afterwards about missing them."

Anyone wishing to attend the dinner for Martyn Goff on 7 June should contact Maggie van Reenen on 0207 241 3501 or [maggievanreenen@aol.com](mailto:maggievanreenen@aol.com)