

to make a lot of money – but there are books that need to be out there”

The Trust has also endowed, in perpetuity, a Professorship of Collaborative Anthropology at Cambridge University. Thus, the Rausing wealth is not for squandering.

So what drew her to publishing in the first place? She is an author, of course, with *History, Memory and Identity in post-Soviet Estonia*, which derives from her PhD, published by OUP, but in fact it was her husband who made the initial moves. “Eric had a friend in Italy who was a producer and who started a publishing company,” recalls Rausing, “so he was very keen. I’d always been a voracious reader and I thought it was a great idea.” At the outset, it was Abraham, “a person who can get things done”, who drove the process and it was former journalist turned *Granta* staffer Liz Jobey who introduced him to Philip Gwyn Jones, who had parted company with Flamingo/HarperCollins and was looking to set up his own bespoke publishing company. Rausing and Abraham began talking to him and soon discovered a good deal of common ground, notably a shared interest in “investigative non-fiction” and fiction in translation. Portobello Books was born in January 2005 and, while it shares a name with Abraham’s film

building up from our track record with Portobello. You have to demonstrate that you can publish a book well – not simply buy it, but promote it. It’s a very exacting process with a lot of aspects to it, and Philip is a very hands-on editor.”

Rausing – who is Publisher of *Granta*, and Chair of the *Granta*/Portobello joint board – admits that, “in many ways, coming in to *Granta* was difficult; there was quite a lot of suspicion”. She knew from the outset that *Granta* Editor Ian Jack (“an amazing editor and an incredible writer”) would leave, though he stayed on to effect a smooth transition, and Rausing was very involved in the appointment of Canongate’s David Graham as MD, Bridget Macleod as Sales Director and Cowley as the Magazine’s Editor – surprising many who thought that, having characterised Buford’s *Granta* as “shockingly masculine”, she was likely to appoint a woman. In fact, clarifying that remark today, Rausing says that “I meant shocking in a positive sense, as in always startling. I found the masculine thing very interesting, actually.”

Cowley, who began life at the *Bookseller* and was latterly Editor of the *Observer*’s monthly sports supplement, has yet to define what his

she’d grown up in Lund, a cathedral and university city much like Cambridge, where the student ethos made it easier to forget about the privileges she enjoyed. “There was always a sense of difference, but I think it was much harder for my mother to negotiate.” Her first degree was in history, which she read at York, where she was inspired by Professor John Bossy, now retired, “an extraordinary teacher and mentor and wonderful man”. From there she went to UCL, where an MSc was followed by a PhD under the tutelage of another mentor, Daniel Miller. “After the fall of the Berlin Wall, there were all these ethnic revivals going on and one of them was the Swedish ethnic revival in Estonia... I spent a year on a collective farm there which was at the centre of that and it turned out to be fascinating.”

After that, and the book, came marriage and then a son, and then, in 1995, the Trust, which is itself a business. “Philanthropy has changed and in a sense it’s much closer to running a small business than it used to be... It’s complicated. I used to believe that as long as the money was out there it would do some good. Now I think if you back the wrong people you can do damage. You have to be really careful about whom you are backing

g to the challenge

hundredth issue and Portobello its third birthday, **Liz Thomson** hears anthropist **Sigrid Rausing** is adapting to life in the book trade

company, Rausing emphasises that book to film or film to book projects are not forced. “The synergy is actually very difficult to use. The most unlikely books make good films and in fact a number of very successful films, such as *Brokeback Mountain*, started off as short stories. It’s often harder to make a film out of a long narrative novel.” Still, given that Abraham’s credits include *Embers*, from the Hungarian novel by Sandor Marai, and the Czech novella *Kolya* by Zdenek Sverak, the omens are good.

Scarcely had Portobello launched its first titles when Rausing was approached by Rea Hederman, then owner of *Granta* Publications and Publisher of the *New York Review of Books*, inquiring as to whether she might be interested in buying *Granta*. “I was tremendously surprised and excited by the opportunity because I’d always read *Granta* and loved it. I really liked Rea, who I hadn’t known, but Eric and I thought about it for a long time,” finally announcing the acquisition just ahead of Frankfurt ’05. “Portobello was already launched, which was why he approached us, but we hesitated because we worried whether buying *Granta* would mean that we were stunting the growth of Portobello. Eric and I struggled with that for a while, and with the structure – a publishing company and a magazine. What was invigorating was *Granta*’s history and quality and I had a belief, which I think is proving right, that *Granta* and Portobello could co-exist quite happily. They have a slightly different ethos and they are complementary, not competitive.” She acknowledges that Gwyn Jones had reservations at the outset, worried that resources would be redirected towards *Granta* so starving Portobello of cash. “But Philip is now Editor-in-Chief of books and it’s working very well. The clout, if you like to call it that, has been

Granta will be but Rausing is clear that *Granta* Books will return to its core values of literary non-fiction and narrative fiction, “which is what it does best. We’ve been thinking a lot about the look of the books, about improving the covers, which had started to look very cheap, and that devalues the content. It’s a little like the *Guardian* women’s pages, which were strongly feminist in the Eighties and then became very ironic and post-modern. They are still, but young readers don’t understand irony any more... There’s something about quality in and of itself that you have to fall back on.”

Rausing is, she says, “actively involved” in the whole publishing process and, of course, as a newcomer to the business she is well-placed to question received wisdom. “For example, is it sensible to be so minimalist with branding when you’re an independent? I don’t know the answer to that question but I think it needs to be discussed, though research is always expensive.” Citing Waterstone’s and Bloomsbury, she regrets the fact that independents who are successful inevitably become corporate. “As a consumer, I assumed that staff chose which books should go on front tables, but now I know it’s a commercial transaction. It’s depressing, because I lived in Hampstead in the 1980s and I remember what Waterstone’s was like then, with everyone crowding in to hear Allen Ginsberg for example... Daunt’s is great of course, and there are other independent bookshops which are wonderful.”

The books Rausing read in translation as a child gave her “a great sense of what England was,” and she came here when she was 17, attending boarding school in Oxford. “My family came two years later and I have this very vivid memory of sitting at my desk and realising I was never going to move back to Sweden,” where

and, therefore, you have to do a certain amount of research. We are constantly re-evaluating the projects we support, although once we’ve found them we tend to stick with them for longer than other progressive organisations,” Rausing explains. In addition to funds dispensed via the Trust, she also makes a wide range of donations via her personal Charities Aid Foundation account. Her politics are liberal, “a great tradition” often sadly denigrated, on both sides of the Atlantic, and she notes that “asylum-seekers have a terrible time. I grew up in a society which was so ethnically homogenous... Here in Britain, we always underestimate how much immigrant communities have given us.”

And publishing, how does she find that particular community? When Rausing addressed the Women’s Dining Club last summer she spoke of its “tribes”. Her unmade-up face breaks into a broad smile. “As I come from anthropology I thought it would be interesting to look at publishing in terms of tribes! I was talking about the male publisher... It was a piece of fun but it did contain certain truths. It’s much easier for men in society to have a leadership position and to be taken seriously. It’s difficult for women publishers to be that charismatic leader... I believe that for women to make it in this world, as in most others, they have to be exceptional. In academia less so, because it’s much more gender-neutral than publishing. And women are much less likely to negotiate over pay, which men do as a matter of course, so there’s a huge wage gap in publishing... I really believe in role models, and there aren’t enough role models in life in general... I lack a mentoring woman in my life.” Perhaps as she gets ever-more involved in the trade, Rausing will be able to provide the mentoring role she lacked. In her low-key and unaffected way, she surely has a great deal to offer.