



Opinion: Oxfam - time to examine the terms of trade

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Friday afternoon, 4.45, towards the close of the Muswell Hill Oxfam Bookshop's close of first-day business. Balloons adorn the doorway and posters in the window proclaim the charity's message: BE MOVED BY THE STATE OF THE WORLD, OUTSPOKEN ABOUT WHAT'S UNFAIR, EXCITED ABOUT MAKING A DIFFERENCE. Well, indeed! This is the sixth charity shop in the left-leaning, muesli-eating, arty-farty North London enclave that is home to a number of writers, artists and musicians, as well as publishers and agents. In the decade or so I've lived here, I've never ceased to marvel at its sense of community, and I like the fact that I can step out of my Arts and Crafts mansion block and, within a 10-minute walk, can buy a new kitchen, a bed or a bookcase, coffee from the century-old coffee shop, cheese from the cheese shop, bread from the baker, fish from the fishmonger, meat from the butcher, fresh fruit and veg from the greengrocer, flowers from the florist and, most remarkably in a way, CDs and guitar strings (or a guitar, should I wish to add to my collection) from a music shop, as well as books from two independent bookshops. It's pretty unusual these days.



But as charity shops, with their advantageous rates and rents and absence of payroll (generally, only the managers are paid) multiply, some of those old-fashioned retailers, most of them of long-standing, are threatened. I've long been angered by the growing range of new musical instruments on offer in Sue Ryder. Yes, the charity does good work - but so does Les Aldrich Music, supplying strings and reeds and sheet music to the area's innumerable musicians, amateur and professional, students and teachers. The owner-manager has taken his complaints to the Sue Ryder shop, but they fell on deaf ears, so he charges those who come to him asking that he set up the fiddles and flutes and (poor-quality) guitars they have bought there. I don't blame him.

At the Muswell Hill Bookshop, the manager was philosophical when we chatted as Oxfam readied its new premises for opening day - there's not much he can do, as he said. One of the staff, who'd read development studies at uni, seemed generally in favour of the Oxfam Bookshop concept. When I raised the subject with an Oxfam volunteer while buying honey and teabags, I got a rather impolite response that implied I was an uncharitable tight-wad. Interestingly, on a subsequent visit a different member of staff was, I felt, in sympathy and encouraged me to raise my concerns at the Bookshop, with which the general shop shares a manager, and to write to Oxfam HQ.

I will, but on Friday I took some photos and browsed. It was a perfectly pleasant experience. Bob Dylan and George Harrison were being played at a meaningful volume - *The Concert for Bangla Desh*, which I haven't listened to for years. The shop's signposting was good. There was an easy chair and another less comfy-looking seat and, in the children's corner, a couple of kids sat on the bright chequerboard-carpeted floor reading, much as you find anywhere. Really, the only thing missing was a coffee shop - which, with all those Fair Trade supplies available literally across the road, is perhaps a pity.

I didn't purchase, didn't find any must-buys. Fortunately, in so many ways. But there was plenty to buy, and I'd say that a good deal of it wasn't second-hand at all. Leastways, there were a lot of books with no sign of cracking on the spine and no creased pages. HarperCollins featured prominently: lots of Reginald Hill and



Michael Dobbs; two sets of *Lord of the Rings*, one trade paperback, one mass-market; lots of Raymond E Feist and Andrew Gross; Barbara Erskine and Paullina Simons; and some Cecelia Ahern. In the Performing Arts section, I spotted three copies of Faber's *The Music of Elliot Carter*, which looked brand spanking new. Ditto *The House that Trane Built*, published by Granta. There were two copies of *The British Army Fitness Guide* (Guardian Books), published earlier this year. In the children's section, Chicken House and Scholastic were prominent, with Philip Pullman and Philip Reeve in plentiful, pristine supply. There was lots of second-hand stuff too of course, and audiobooks on cassette, plus some LPs and CDs, and sheet music, all of those obviously recycled.

It was busy; people were buying, commenting to each other, and to the hippy behind the counter, in approving tones about the range. Indeed, if you're a punter, what's not to like? And, of course, well-stocked, quasi-second-hand bookshops always offer the promise that you might find that obscure, long out-of-print title you've always been looking for (though these days you'd look online and probably find it easily). I spent many a lunch hour in Skoob when it was in Sicilian Avenue, and found some gems.

I poked my head into the stockroom, which was bright and airy and carpeted and would, I'd guess, compare favourably with stockrooms in indies and chains across the country. Some good books, I remarked cheerily to the guy who was working there. Some of them are new - you buying publishers' remainders? He said Oxfam doesn't buy anything (which can't be true: all those foods, all those hand-crafted gifts are surely paid for) and it may be the case that publishers are happy to donate overstocks, save on the warehouse space. He said they'd had a lot from *The Times*, review copies he thought; Oxfam gets quite a lot from newspapers, with which they keep in touch. And then there's all the donations. Everything is sorted centrally, he explained, which of course I knew. Indeed, I'd guess the expertise among Oxfam booksellers compares favourably with that of many people working in the chains these days.

I'll be curious to see how it goes - it seems unlikely to fail and I can envisage a bonanza come Christmas. I shall visit regularly, and at some point break my cover. But I think there does now need to be a full and frank discussion about how charity shops go about their business. Oxfam has just put out a boasting that it is the country's third largest bookseller - which is worrying, because it will expand further and there is no doubt that it will put local indies out of business. 'But the danger to the Muswell Hill Bookshop comes from Amazon, not from Oxfam,' said one customer I chatted to. Yes it does, for when people are less affluent they go to indies to peruse the latest fiction and non-fiction - and, having made their selections, order them more cheaply online. Manager Tim Robinson told me he was noticing it happening last Christmas. And with Sainsbury's just a few doors away, he can't begin to compete on cookery and celebrity-driven titles. The Oxfam Bookshop, five minutes' round the Broadway, can't help but siphon off some custom, especially if it sells new titles. The public should be concerned about that, even if the is a worry too far. Charity shops selling books is one thing, charity bookshops quite another.

But what of authors? The Management Committee of the Society of Authors has been keeping a watching brief on the issue and does receive occasional queries and grumbles from members, who are generally supportive of Oxfam and therefore reluctant to pursue the issue. However, if the economic situation deteriorates, advances slump and authors are culled, they may find a voice.

One well-known agent has suggested there should be some sort of 'micro-payment' for every second-hand sale. While that's feasible in principle, no government is likely to legislate - not least because it would be making an exception of books as opposed to other second-hand goods. As an alternative, perhaps Oxfam should be asked to pay a 5p levy to ALCS for every second-hand sale. But then what about all those second-hand sales via Amazon? And if they argue the case, authors and their representatives will likely stand accused of taking the bread out of the mouths of those infinitely worse off than they. What a PR disaster that would be!

Government should review the terms of trade for charity shops, or at least those which are permanent fixtures on our high streets. That at least would go some way to levelling the playing field between Oxfam *et al* and their shopkeeping neighbours. Meanwhile, perhaps those of us who depend on the book trade for a



living should ensure that our review copies and those books we cull when the home library gets too out of hand don't go to Oxfam. After all, there are plenty of other charity shops to choose from. Just avoid Sue Ryder.

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