

Angus & Robertson and the Case of the “Bombshell Salesman”¹

JASON D. ENSOR

We had become convinced, as we still are, that the best way of selling Australian books in the U.K. is ... to become, in effect, a small British publisher.²

Overseas branches cannot forever remain independent of local politics, as Angus & Robertson’s London office was to learn through the activities of its travelling salesman Bernard Robinson. As part of its post-Second World War rebuilding operations, in late February 1950 Angus & Robertson’s Sydney publisher George Ferguson notified the company’s London office manager, Hector MacQuarrie, that the firm’s catalogue was nearing completion and the pressure increased for MacQuarrie to have salesmen ready to cover London, Scotland and the English provinces.³ So too for regular advertisements (“as attractive as those of, say, Faber, Chatto or Jonathan Cape”)⁴ to begin appearing in *The Bookseller* (UK) to “prepare the way for ... travellers.”⁵ Angus & Robertson was very enthusiastic about the cargo of books in transit from Sydney to London, producing circulars for display in the Bank of New South Wales (West End, London) and Australia House, but while the London office was “enjoying considerable success in the London area” in generating orders it had “little to speak of outside the metropolitan area.”⁶ There were it seemed “frightful problem[s]”⁷ enticing travellers to manage provincial sales—no one wanted to do it⁸—and MacQuarrie had to employ salesmen from British publisher George G. Harrap to circulate titles; MacQuarrie feared the potential ire of the Australian book trade if this was ever discovered. Already a subscription salesman for Angus & Robertson in Sydney and interested in working in England, Bernard Robinson was appointed by Ferguson to market Angus & Robertson titles to the provincial libraries and meet the “greatly developed United Kingdom interest in Australia.”⁹ Robinson would arrive in London in April 1950 and would travel books from one province to the next on a commission of 15% per sale.

¹ Mrs. Woods to George Ferguson, 12 October 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML. All archival correspondence is sourced from the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia.

² George Ferguson, “Publishing in London by Angus & Robertson Limited: A Paper for the Guidance of the Board,” unpublished, August 1970, MSS 3269/34 ML.

³ George Ferguson to Hector MacQuarrie, 28 February 1950, MSS 3269/440 ML.

⁴ George Ferguson to Hector MacQuarrie, 6 April 1950, MSS 3269/440 ML.

⁵ George Ferguson to Hector MacQuarrie, 22 February 1950, MSS 3269/440 ML.

⁶ Hector MacQuarrie to James Askew & Son, 6 December 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

⁷ Hector MacQuarrie to George Ferguson, 9 March 1950, MSS 3269/440 ML.

⁸ Hector MacQuarrie to George Ferguson, 30 June 1950, MSS 3269/440 ML.

⁹ Hector MacQuarrie to T. E. Smith (W. & R. Holmes Books Ltd.), 17 October 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

Of equal importance, Ferguson wanted to know whether British booksellers and librarians were “interested in Australia and books about Australia.”¹⁰ He recognised that the library trade was controlled by the British Publishers’ Association, in which libraries obtained a 10% educational discount from local booksellers via a licence, but hoped Robinson would nevertheless “find a way of arousing interest”¹¹ without “raising Hell with the booksellers in England.”¹² MacQuarrie agreed that direct selling to libraries might “generate a prejudice” against Angus & Robertson when booksellers were eventually expected to purchase quantities of stock from the London office; however, MacQuarrie was prepared to “take a chance here and let Robinson make the attempt” as a country salesman.¹³ Frank Sanders, who had been with the British Publishers’ Association since 1932,¹⁴ informally advised MacQuarrie over a “sherry and a bit of red at the Arts Theatre Club” that since Angus & Robertson’s books were published in Australia they technically remained free to do as they pleased on account of not being signatories to the Publishers’ Association’s Library Agreement.

Angus & Robertson often sought advice from British publishers in their own territory, just a month earlier asking Stanley Unwin for a list of the “best literary agents in the main European countries,”¹⁵ and Hector MacQuarrie thus related to Ferguson that:

Since we are Dominion publishers, we are not bound by this agreement, and we are at perfect liberty to sell direct to the libraries at a discount of 10%. While Sanders could not possibly give an okay, he did not seem to think, personally, that we would be making any serious mistake.¹⁶

The business of selling Australian books abroad was “just waking up”¹⁷ and Ferguson did not see what right the “God Almighty Publishers’ Association”¹⁸ had to interfere with Angus & Robertson’s activity in London and agreed with Sanders’ interpretation. The decision to configure Bernard Robinson’s work as part reconnaissance (“information ... is what we are really paying for”)¹⁹ and part direct sales was endorsed in Sydney, with unofficial tacit encouragement from a high-ranking member of the Publishers’ Association—at least until booksellers were

¹⁰ George Ferguson to Hector MacQuarrie, 28 July 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

¹¹ Hector MacQuarrie to George Ferguson, 29 March 1950, MSS 3269/440 ML.

¹² George Ferguson to Hector MacQuarrie, 6 April 1950, MSS 3269/440 ML.

¹³ Hector MacQuarrie to George Ferguson, 13 April 1950, MSS 3269/440 ML.

¹⁴ R. E. Barker and G. R. Davis, eds., *Books are Different: An Account of the Defence of the Net Book Agreement before the Restrictive Practices Court in 1962* (London: Macmillan, 1966), 411.

¹⁵ George Ferguson to Hector MacQuarrie, 13 September 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

¹⁶ Hector MacQuarrie to George Ferguson, 3 October 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

¹⁷ George Ferguson to Hector MacQuarrie, 22 November 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

¹⁸ George Ferguson to Hector MacQuarrie, 12 October 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

¹⁹ George Ferguson to Hector MacQuarrie, 8 May 1950, MSS 3269/440 ML.

interested in Australian books. In practice, it would test the company's resolve to operate on its own terms as an independent Australian publisher in London.

Within six weeks, "bombshell salesman"²⁰ Robinson had raised the business of Angus & Robertson's London office, selling several hundred pounds worth of books, and had succeeded in "acquainting British librarians with the fact that there are such things as Australian books."²¹ But, unprepared as the overseas branch was for a sudden jump in sales to a total of £600 per month,²² there was not enough stock to meet this volume of sales and a third of Robinson's orders could not be supplied. As a provincial salesman who received no commission on unsupplied books, Robinson bypassed MacQuarrie and complained directly to Ferguson that the situation was "far from satisfactory,"²³ given the high expense of travelling around Britain with his wife while towing a caravan filled with Angus & Robertson's forty best titles.²⁴ Pressed for an expense account that included a hotel and a car plus a salary totalling £25 per week, Ferguson countered that there was not enough business to pay the expenses of a provincial traveller although he conceded that Robinson had proved to him the value of keeping a salesman on the road. MacQuarrie's right-hand London office worker, Mrs. Woods who processed all orders, reported that "for the first time in history, a representative is carrying our range over the whole of the country and the bookshops have been skipped."²⁵ Ferguson met Robinson's request halfway and cabled that commission would now be paid on all orders regardless of existing stock levels and whether orders could be immediately fulfilled or not. In the meantime, experiencing "acute space problems,"²⁶ the Sydney office contemplated setting aside stock originally reserved for its local sales and shipping this instead to London.

The problem as MacQuarrie saw it was the nature of the orders which might create an uncertain dependence on Robinson for shifting reserve stock. MacQuarrie believed that sending books in greater quantities than the London office could clear would "make a stiff fight a desperate one."²⁷ (In fact, an "avalanche of books" arriving at the London office in May 1951, to meet the impact of the Bank of New South Wales brochures, would have a depressing effect on staff.)²⁸ Although the majority of books handled by Robinson went to libraries in weekly sales averaging £80 to £100, they were in bundles of twos, threes and fours. Because the titles sold by Robinson were "the cream of [Angus & Robertson's]

²⁰ Mrs. Woods to George Ferguson, 12 October 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

²¹ George Ferguson to Hector MacQuarrie, 27 October 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

²² Hector MacQuarrie to George Ferguson, 30 June 1950, MSS 3269/440 ML.

²³ George Ferguson to Hector MacQuarrie, 28 June 1950, MSS 3269/440 ML.

²⁴ Hector MacQuarrie to George Ferguson, 20 July 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

²⁵ Mrs. Woods to George Ferguson, 12 October 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

²⁶ George Ferguson to Hector MacQuarrie, 27 October 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

²⁷ Hector MacQuarrie to George Ferguson, 10 January 1951, MSS 3269/442 ML.

²⁸ Hector MacQuarrie to George Ferguson, 9 May 1951, MSS 3269/442 ML.

production over the last ten years,”²⁹ MacQuarrie foresaw an end to the current sales boom within a year,³⁰ believing that the office could “not contemplate anything like a repetition of such orders.”³¹

MacQuarrie confirmed that the London office’s “progress [was] real” but counselled Ferguson that it may also be temporary, its continuation ultimately depending on factors external to Robinson: “Progress in this market is founded on vastly improved production by you, on better books published by you and, if I may say so, the drive developed by you.”³² Ferguson agreed that the list would not support Robinson “after he [had] given the librarians the once over.”³³ The Sydney office suggested that MacQuarrie consult once again with Frank Sanders on whether he “might know of one or two smaller British publishers who could do with representation.”³⁴ These British publishers would conceivably coincide with the signing on of the lists from two other Australian publishers—S. Ure Smith (founded in Sydney, 1939) and F. W. Cheshire (Melbourne, 1926)—which the London office would also represent and which would augment the “serious fight”³⁵ to sell Australian books in international markets. Cheshire was largely concerned with the production of art books and Ure Smith confined its work to publishing school textbooks; neither published fiction.³⁶ However, Ferguson wanted to constitute Angus & Robertson’s London office as “the *only* authority on Australian books”³⁷ in Britain, irrespective of which publishers’ lists it marketed, and he emphasised new responsibilities for MacQuarrie:

You will be representing the three leading Australian publishers when you have these two houses in addition to A. & R., and you should on all occasions and in every way try and influence the trade in England to refer all their inquiries for Australian and New Zealand books to you.³⁸

The employment of Bernard Robinson became a turning point in how the company moved towards realising this ambition. Robinson’s activities would eventually foreground the need to cooperate with the local book trade, particularly local bookselling customs, and prompt the Sydney office to reconsider its outsider status as an Australian publisher conducting business in the heart of the Commonwealth. MacQuarrie might have characterised Angus & Robertson as

²⁹ Hector MacQuarrie to George Ferguson, 20 July 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

³⁰ Hector MacQuarrie to George Ferguson, 27 September 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

³¹ Hector MacQuarrie to George Ferguson, 12 September 1950, MSS 3269/411 ML.

³² Hector MacQuarrie to George Ferguson, 17 October 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

³³ George Ferguson to Hector MacQuarrie, 31 August 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

³⁴ George Ferguson to Hector MacQuarrie, 20 September 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

³⁵ Hector MacQuarrie to George Ferguson, 27 September 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

³⁶ “Angus & Robertson will distribute for Cheshire and Ure Smith,” *The Bookseller*, 7 April 1951.

³⁷ George Ferguson to Hector MacQuarrie, 6 October 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

³⁸ George Ferguson to Hector MacQuarrie, 4 December 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

"the poor orphans in the wind raised by the Big Rich Publishing Boys of London as they swish by in their grey Bentleys"³⁹ but in October 1950 he responded to the first protest against Robinson's activities from a bookseller in Glasgow, W. & R. Holmes, with a reply that would set in motion important changes in Angus & Robertson's London practices and contest MacQuarrie's later assessment of the company as "an outsider to the British book trade":⁴⁰

While we, as Australian publishers, believe we are in no way bound by the Library Agreement because we are not members of the U.K. Publishers Association and our signature to that agreement could not be given, we nevertheless wish to abide by all U.K. agreements. At the same time we dislike taking any drastic action which might discourage Mr. Robinson who, travelling by car with his wife, simply has to earn adequate commission or abandon his expedition.... The position bristles with difficulties but we must admit that the great interest shown by librarians in our books has been most gratifying.⁴¹

While distancing Angus & Robertson from the travelling salesman by describing him as freelance, MacQuarrie sought to hedge Angus & Robertson's bets by claiming that the Australian publisher wanted to "please the booksellers, the librarians and U.K. readers"⁴² but not discourage Robinson who was obviously doing very good business. MacQuarrie described the history of the salesman's work for Angus & Robertson as a one-man "crusade on behalf of Australian books."⁴³ He laid the responsibility for Robinson's actions on British booksellers and advised that booksellers needed to demonstrate more interest in stocking Australian titles if they wished to avoid unwelcome sales techniques in the future. To Robinson, MacQuarrie immediately recommended that:

you had better work through the booksellers. If you don't, I expect there will be, shortly, a big outcry. These sort of things gather in force. On the other hand, I, personally, and most certainly for the Firm give you full marks for magnificent work.... [But] I think you had better use your overwhelming personality and salesmanship on the booksellers. This would be, perhaps, of lasting benefit to us.⁴⁴

MacQuarrie knew that if the London office was "to put the sale of Angus & Robertson books on a firm foundation,"⁴⁵ it could not afford in the long run to

³⁹ MacQuarrie quoted in Neil James, "Spheres of Influence: Angus and Robertson and Australian Literature from the Thirties to the Sixties" (PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 2000), 258.

⁴⁰ Neil James, "Spheres of Influence: Angus and Robertson and Australian Literature From the Thirties to the Sixties," unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sydney (2000): 258.

⁴¹ Hector MacQuarrie to T. E. Smith (W. & R. Holmes Books Ltd.), 17 October 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Hector MacQuarrie to Bernard Robinson, 17 October 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

⁴⁵ Hector MacQuarrie to George Ferguson, 18 October 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

antagonise booksellers by risking the continuation of Robinson's sales techniques. Ferguson and MacQuarrie could reasonably defend Robinson's actions being in the nature of reconnaissance but could not defend their continuation. Yet because Robinson's orders were placed directly with libraries, Angus & Robertson anticipated a sizeable slump in sales after he moved on. W. & R. Holmes' primary complaint was that although Angus & Robertson was "not in any way bound by the library agreement a great many Librarians to whom Mr. Robinson is selling, *are*."⁴⁶ MacQuarrie felt conflicted in the position of being "immensely pleased while enduring some concern"⁴⁷ and openly admitted this to Robinson:

I'm hanged if I can speak with a clear ringing voice, telling you precisely what to do. You are "breaking in" to a local market, crowds of interested persons will try to squash you out until you have got on top of such frustrations: after which they will elect you to the Rotary Club.⁴⁸

Reviewing how other bookseller-publishers (such as Basil Blackwell, H. K. Lewis and Bailliere's) managed their conflicting interests, Ferguson believed the answer lay in turning the London office into a licensed library supplier for Australasia in Britain, operating under the company name rather than through a traveller. (On this point, Ferguson was directly addressing complaints about Robinson. The travelling salesman was not averse to librarians misunderstanding his name as Bernard *Robertson*, as the other half of the company's namesake,⁴⁹ and had on occasion misrepresented that his list was not available anywhere else.⁵⁰ Moreover, Robinson had hinted to W. & R. Holmes that "he had authority to ignore" the Net Book Agreement, which MacQuarrie thought might undermine the London office's attempts to integrate with the local book trade.)⁵¹ At the very least, the London office could coordinate the dispatch of books to British firms which were authorised library suppliers.⁵² Thus, in a change of tone from when Robinson first arrived in April 1950, Ferguson reminded MacQuarrie that "eventually it is the bookseller that counts, because only through him may the great British public be reached."⁵³ After all, Ferguson privately believed that "when you go into a bookshop in London as a representative, you are facing somebody who is in the box seat with a whip in his hand."⁵⁴

⁴⁶ T. E. Smith to Hector MacQuarrie, 24 October 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

⁴⁷ Hector MacQuarrie to James Askew & Son, 6 December 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

⁴⁸ Hector MacQuarrie to Bernard Robinson, 25 October 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

⁴⁹ Hector MacQuarrie to George Ferguson, 2 November 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

⁵⁰ George Ferguson to Bernard Robinson, 19 December 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

⁵¹ Hector MacQuarrie to George Ferguson, 17 October 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

⁵² George Ferguson to Hector MacQuarrie, 15 November 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

⁵³ George Ferguson to Hector MacQuarrie, 1 November 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

⁵⁴ George Ferguson to Walter Butcher, 18 December 1956, MSS 3269/447 ML.

It is clear from Ferguson's subsequent correspondence with MacQuarrie that Robinson's work had proved four things which Angus & Robertson took into consideration during the development of its future plans: one, that a library market now existed for Australian books in the United Kingdom; two, that the interest of booksellers in Australian titles could be (and was) aroused by the perception of lost profits due to rogue sales techniques; three, that low or no stock could damage the company's prestige; and four, that an annually revolving list of books would be needed to sustain the newly established interest of British librarians and booksellers. Though tensions had temporarily arisen between British booksellers and Angus & Robertson's London office, MacQuarrie argued that Robinson's "crusade" had not been a false move but had instead stirred things up in their favour: "a strategic retreat is now called for," he recommended.⁵⁵

Ferguson agreed and the problems (and opportunities) that Robinson provoked for the Australian publisher were joined by four responses: one, that Angus & Robertson would represent other Australian publishers, adding the publications of Cheshire and Ure Smith to the London list in order to "maintain a sufficient flow of [new] books each year"⁵⁶ from the beginning of 1951 (they were, however, to "keep a very cold eye on Australian and New Zealand fiction" whose sales chances were "not very good");⁵⁷ two, that MacQuarrie should appeal to Frank Sanders for advice on "becoming members of the Publishers' Association and thus bringing [Angus & Robertson's] books under the scope of the Net Book Agreement"⁵⁸ (Sanders responded that he "saw no reason" why the Australian firm should not join the association);⁵⁹ three, that operations in London "must be backed up by stock as nothing could be worse ... than to start a rush of people looking for Australian books and then to have no books"⁶⁰ (even so, Ferguson would lament several years later that "it is almost impossible to walk the tightrope between having too few and too many");⁶¹ and four, that the London office might also explore becoming legally "registered as library suppliers of Australian and New Zealand books."⁶² In short, Ferguson was "sorry to lose Robinson"⁶³ but he saw "no other way of keeping the goodwill of the British trade and thereby gradually inducing them to sell Australian books to the British public."⁶⁴ Angus &

⁵⁵ Hector MacQuarrie to George Ferguson, 7 December 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

⁵⁶ George Ferguson to Hector MacQuarrie, 1 November 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

⁵⁷ Hector MacQuarrie to George Ferguson, 21 November 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

⁵⁸ George Ferguson to Hector MacQuarrie, 1 November 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

⁵⁹ Hector MacQuarrie to George Ferguson, 21 November 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

⁶⁰ George Ferguson to Hector MacQuarrie, 16 May 1951, MSS 3269/442 ML.

⁶¹ George Ferguson to Hector MacQuarrie, 15 December 1953, MSS 3269/445 ML.

⁶² George Ferguson to Hector MacQuarrie, 1 November 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

⁶³ George Ferguson to Hector MacQuarrie, 15 November 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

⁶⁴ George Ferguson to Hector MacQuarrie, 22 November 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

Robertson would strive to “work in close conformity with U.K. practice,”⁶⁵ noting that the goodwill of library suppliers was more important to the company than Bernard Robinson.⁶⁶

In a frank letter just six days before Christmas 1950, Ferguson explained this revised situation to Robinson:

The truth of the matter is that A. & R. cannot risk offending the book trade in England. It has always been the policy of the firm to abide by the correct rules and usages governing the trade in the various parts of the world, and we can never depart from this. Furthermore, from the practical point of view it is essential that we do not antagonise the booksellers because if we do we can give up forever the whole idea of selling our books to the public in England, and that is what we eventually must achieve. It therefore seems quite apparent that all future library orders for our books must go through established library suppliers ... and you [will] not be able to use our name or say that you [are] representing us, because to do so [will] only upset other booksellers.⁶⁷

There was little doubt in the minds of Ferguson and MacQuarrie that Robinson had been significant to their success in the second half of 1950 and more generally to the exposure Angus & Robertson received in the book trade. Privately, MacQuarrie and Ferguson recognised how much Angus & Robertson owed to Robinson, “fully appreciative”⁶⁸ of his work even as they expected an “anguished letter”⁶⁹ in response to their pre-Christmas reprimand. Where previous efforts had failed, Robinson had managed to “thrust into libraries a large quantity of [Angus & Robertson] books and [stir] up stagnant waters that needed stirring.”⁷⁰ MacQuarrie eventually doubted whether anyone else could in fact move the kind of books that Robinson did; that is, “a mass of past books, older Idriess, etc.”⁷¹ In the sale of Angus & Robertson’s books throughout the United Kingdom, Bernard Robinson was a pioneer although he could not escape censure from the British book trade—for his prohibited methods of “confining ... attention to libraries and largely ignoring the booksellers”⁷²—nor, when pressure mounted against them, from his employer Angus & Robertson.

Robinson was unable to support himself through the more acceptable practice of obtaining a small commission from sales to booksellers only. British booksellers traditionally controlled the distribution of texts to British libraries. For booksellers

⁶⁵ Hector MacQuarrie to James Askew & Son, 6 December 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

⁶⁶ George Ferguson to Hector MacQuarrie, 18 December 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

⁶⁷ George Ferguson to Bernard Robinson, 19 December 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

⁶⁸ Hector MacQuarrie to George Ferguson, 22 January 1951, MSS 3269/442 ML.

⁶⁹ George Ferguson to Hector MacQuarrie, 4 January 1951, MSS 3269/442 ML.

⁷⁰ Hector MacQuarrie to Bernard Robinson, 20 February 1951, MSS 3269/442 ML.

⁷¹ Hector MacQuarrie to George Ferguson, 8 January 1951, MSS 3269/442 ML.

⁷² Hector MacQuarrie to Bernard Robinson, 20 February 1951, MSS 3269/442 ML.

to buy stock, the difference between the price a text could be purchased and the price it could be retailed had to be sufficiently attractive. For Robinson, this meant that his price to booksellers had to be low but also above the minimum price set by Angus & Robertson (which needed to show profit too). The need to make the price of Angus & Robertson's books more economical to booksellers applied downward pressure on Robinson's own commission. Therefore, by circumventing booksellers altogether and selling directly to libraries, Robinson could raise the price of books and facilitate a higher margin in profit, due to the greater commission he gained by effectively "turning himself into a bookseller."⁷³ Such methods played a crucial role in helping Angus & Robertson negotiate and establish a stronger position vis-à-vis English booksellers and force the British book trade to take serious notice of a colonial firm operating in London. It is not unreasonable therefore to assess Angus & Robertson's response to Robinson as somewhat harsh after—it would appear—duly using him to test the waters and gain important information about the library trade, only to appropriate and redirect his findings towards the company's own nation-building and profit-making endeavours.

Certainly Robinson's *modus operandi*, while tacitly supported by Ferguson, MacQuarrie and even Frank Sanders of the U.K. Publishers' Association, exposed the tensions connected with running a branch office separated from its parent company by thirteen thousand miles: what could work in Australia might not necessarily be acceptable in Britain. It became increasingly apparent to Ferguson and MacQuarrie that if Angus & Robertson was to succeed in London it could not forever operate outside established channels of trade and distribution in the local book trade. With Robinson described as "plain poison"⁷⁴ by the British booksellers whom Angus & Robertson now courted, the London office needed to roll back its association with the salesman promptly, a move that in retrospect seemed "quite inevitable"⁷⁵ to Ferguson. Indeed, to reuse Robert Haupt's 1988 description of British publishers defending their monopoly of the Australian market for foreign titles, Angus & Robertson was in "retreat where necessary" from any association with Bernard Robinson's activities and appeared keen to "avoid set-piece battles" with English booksellers.⁷⁶ Reasonable attempts were made to keep Robinson employed (in a markedly reduced capacity) in the scheme of selling Angus & Robertson's books "under circumstances," MacQuarrie cautioned, "we can permit"⁷⁷ but negotiations quickly broke down. MacQuarrie's final correspondence to Robinson was especially cheerless and, though targeted personally at the salesman without reference to the company's complicity regarding

⁷³ Hector MacQuarrie to George Ferguson, 17 October 1950, MSS 3269/441 ML.

⁷⁴ Hector MacQuarrie to George Ferguson, 22 January 1951, MSS 3269/442 ML.

⁷⁵ George Ferguson to Hector MacQuarrie, 20 April 1951, MSS 3269/442 ML.

⁷⁶ Robert Haupt, "The Book Rebellion," *The Age*, November 5, 1988.

⁷⁷ Hector MacQuarrie to Bernard Robinson, 26 January 1951, MSS 3269/442 ML.

its part in this turn of events, it captured the conditions which forced Angus & Robertson ultimately to rethink its London office operations, notwithstanding the expression of some latent anger at being caught:

You have been defeated, if you are defeated, by a variety of factors—the existing organisation for library supplies, Net Book Agreements plus Library-Bookseller Agreements, all the little blokes making a modest living in the book trade who have been dug in for years and the fact that at present our current list alone cannot, without loss to us, support you.⁷⁸

Not surprisingly, Bernard Robinson “ceased operations”⁷⁹ with Angus & Robertson in February 1952 and the county territories of England, Ireland, Scotland plus Wales were handed over to four travellers from Hamish Hamilton Ltd. who would call on bookshops throughout Britain, absorbing Robinson’s activities.⁸⁰ Confident that Australian books would not “disgrace them,”⁸¹ Angus & Robertson engaged the services of Hamish Hamilton at £750 per annum which was paid in regular monthly instalments as “a contribution towards the travellers’ remuneration and expenses.”⁸² This was in addition to Hamish Hamilton negotiating a six percent commission on the invoiced value of all sales made in each territory, both direct and indirect.⁸³ Hamish Hamilton would carry three lists, including Angus & Robertson’s, which took in total an hour and a quarter to go through with each bookseller.⁸⁴

The company expressed regret about losing Robinson during a time when it needed “above everything else ... people who can sell” outside London. Yet it was clear to Angus & Robertson that it could not continue the provincial traveller’s work. Robinson had certainly obtained “easy sales” for Australian books but at the risk of “bringing about a situation which it might take ... years to live down.”⁸⁵ Instead, the company would use travellers from Hamish Hamilton Ltd., underlining Angus & Robertson’s “definite intention” to now coordinate the sale of its books through normal channels in the United Kingdom.⁸⁶ If anything, Robinson’s activities had proven that booksellers acted as a kind of cultural barrier to the entry of new titles into the British market and, in this manner, informally controlled the circulation of texts within their jurisdictions. Such an environment was what pushed Bernard Robinson to employ rogue sales techniques and singly prove the

⁷⁸ Hector MacQuarrie to Bernard Robinson, 20 February 1951, MSS 3269/442 ML.

⁷⁹ Bernard Robinson to Hector MacQuarrie, 15 February 1951, MSS 3269/442 ML.

⁸⁰ Hamish Hamilton to Aubrey Cousins, 15 January 1952, MSS 3269/316 ML.

⁸¹ George Ferguson to Hamish Hamilton, 7 February 1952, MSS 3269/316 ML.

⁸² Hamish Hamilton to Aubrey Cousins, 15 January 1952, MSS 3269/316 ML.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Vera Wellings to Aubrey Cousins, 4 April 1952, MSS 3269/18 ML.

⁸⁵ George Ferguson to Hector MacQuarrie, 15 January 1951, MSS 3269/442 ML.

⁸⁶ Hector MacQuarrie to Bernard Robinson, 24 January 1951, MSS 3269/442 ML.

existence of a library market for Australian books in the United Kingdom. This in turn encouraged British booksellers, indignant that their (Publishers' Association-protected) library trade had been deliberately bypassed, to reassess Australian books in view of their own commercial interests.

As a result, the London office's independence from local industry politics proved unsustainable as its business became more fully integrated into the cultural and political apparatus of the British book trade. In order to gain the confidence of British firms and continue the business of persuading booksellers "that certain Australian books can be sold,"⁸⁷ the case of Bernard Robinson led Angus & Robertson to restructure its sales arrangements, revise its standing within the local book trade as an outsider and explore alternative ways of selling Angus & Robertson books in the United Kingdom.

⁸⁷ George Ferguson to Hector MacQuarrie, 15 January 1951, MSS 3269/442 ML.