

Trading books: publishing and selling books about Asia and the Pacific

The Asia-Pacific Special Interest Group (APSIG) arranged a lunchtime seminar on 6 November at the National Library of Australia which focussed on current trends in publishing and selling books, a topic of interest to academics, researchers and librarians. The appreciative and diverse audience who came to listen confirmed this choice of topic.

Sally Burdon of the Asia Book-



room which sells antiquarian, out-of-print and new books on Asia told us of the impact of the internet and how a bookshop in Belconnen, a quiet suburb on the outer edge of

Canberra, has developed an international trade and clientele.

Sally comes from a long-established bookselling family. Previously operating as The Old Bookroom, in February 2003 they decided to take the plunge and change from a general bookshop selling a wide variety of books to the Asia Bookroom — and they have not regretted their move. The response has been strong and widely supported internationally, especially from the United States, Great Britain and Europe. Now demand is growing from the Asian region.

Canberra is one of the world's centres for the study of Asia with many visiting scholars and students and a large population of academics. With the Australian National University, the Australian Defence Forces Academy and the National Library of Australia's extensive collections on Asia, it is a natural focus for researchers.

Sally is a great supporter of Asian studies and regrets the present decline in the study of Asian languages and subjects within Australian universities due to lack of government support. She feels it is important for everyone to foster an understanding between Australia and our neighbours.

The distribution of the catalogues from the Asia Bookroom on their website has been highly successful in generating sales from overseas and Sally thinks that they are better known

overseas than in Australia. Previously, mailed-out catalogues would generate mail orders a few weeks later. With the speed of the internet and e-mail, orders now arrive very quickly and have a rapid turnaround.

She has noticed a marked improvement in the quality of book production in Asia. Many fine new books are being produced in Thailand and India. One of the Asia Bookroom specialities is children's books on Asian themes. They are developing their backlist of titles and out-of-print items.

It was great hearing of a successful Australian export business.

More information can be found at <http://www.AsiaBookroom.com>.

Ian Templeman of Pandanus Books at the Australian National University, had just returned from a writers' festival in New Caledonia and gave us an up-to-the-minute report on current publishing trends. Again, the internet is making a strong impact.



Pandanus Books has been set up recently at the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies in order to publish books on their subject disciplines on Asia and the Pacific. Some are written by ANU researchers, while others are selected from offers made to them. Probably their best known publication to date is *White butterflies* by Colin McPhedran published in 2002, which has received very warm reviews both in Australia and overseas and has sold very well. Colin McPhedran wrote of his early life as a school boy as part of the elite in Burma just prior to the Second World War. When war broke out, still of school boy age, he then escaped the Japanese by walking through the mountains to safety to India but was forced to leave his mother, dying, behind on the track as white butterflies settled on her body. As a young man, he landed by an odd circumstance in Bowral, NSW and still lives there.

There is a film option on the title and Ian is hopeful that it will be made as an Australian movie.

Ian explained how Pandanus Books tries to achieve a balance each year on Asia and the Pacific and also a balance of non-fiction and fiction.

One challenge for a press, which must operate on cost-recovery lines, is how it manages the publication of academically excellent work, which has modest market potential.

Overseas distribution is important, and problems in this area can cause small publishers to fail. He has recently set up an arrangement with the University of Hawaii Press which will act as their North American distributor. The Pacific, which is included in Pandanus Books' brief, can be difficult. Often libraries, institutes and universities in the Pacific lack the funds to purchase western books. Ian is trying to deal with this problem by seeking sponsorship for particular Pacific countries so that copies can be distributed on a gratis basis.

In 2004, Pandanus Books hopes to publish twenty titles compared to fifteen this year. An interesting new development will be the free-to-air publication on the internet of all new titles, sometimes with additional data or illustrations which cannot be included in the printed version because of costs.

Ian is working hard to build up their backlist of titles.

Pandanus Books also handles the sales of all publications including back titles from the Research School. This is a great help to researchers as university publications are often hard to acquire.

A most interesting report of a new but vigorous and successful publisher.

More information can be found at <http://www.pandanusbooks.com.au>.

The Asia Pacific Special Interest Group are very grateful to the One-Umbrella for sponsoring the refreshments at the event. ■