

Shortcut for the armchair traveller

Nick Smith – The London Times Higher Educational Supplement
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Nick Smith unearths a publisher who can supply rare or out-of-print travel books at the click of a mouse

As you read this, someone somewhere is tearing out their hair. This person is a biographer of the early 20th-century explorer Ernest Shackleton, and the cause of all this frustration and despair is the difficulty of getting hold of a first edition of the great man's book *Aurora*. You could try a copyright library, or you could go to a book fair in New York, where for \$100,000 (£54,000) a dealer will be only too pleased to track down one of the five or six copies that are circulating in the commercial world of antiquarian book collecting.

But imagine that you could, at the click of your mouse, order the printed text or even a facsimile of the first edition of *Aurora*, neatly bound and delivered to your door within 24 hours for under £20. Now imagine that virtually any out-of-print, rare or collectible travel book could be accessed that way.

Enter CuChullaine O'Reilly, who describes himself as a "literary archaeologist". He is one half of the US-based husband-and-wife publishing team that will bring *Aurora* to the masses. Their Classic Travel Book company will publish it on demand, book by book, so that not a single copy will be pulped. The process will ensure that researchers and academics - who are among the O'Reillys' main customers - will be granted unprecedented access to valuable primary source material at an affordable price.

Many great 19th and 20th-century travel texts are out of print, and mainstream publishers cannot or will not do anything about it. The problem in the past has always been lack of a large market for such books. But, argues O'Reilly, most books serve a limited market. More than half of those published in the UK sell fewer than 250 copies a year, so the traditional publishers' objection that "the book won't sell" simply doesn't hold water.

"It just doesn't make sense that so much great literature is out of print," he says. He believes that the combination of herd mentality and lack of vision in publishing is the main reason for bookshops being awash with works of "polished mediocrity".

According to a study commissioned by the British Library, 90 per cent of newly published work will soon be available digitally. O'Reilly thinks this might help to "ensure that financial considerations are no longer the sole motivating factor in publishing and library sciences".

The Classic Travel Book company was born of the O'Reillys' love of long-distance equestrian travel. They are the original Long Riders, founders of an international guild of horsemen dedicated to the traditions and philosophy of geographical exploration on horseback. The Long Riders' Guild is also dedicated to the preservation of equestrian literature, for which there is a limited market.

The guild established a publishing arm that was gradually overtaken by the more generalist Classic Travel Book imprint, which has more than 200 titles on its growing list. It contains works from long-forgotten explorers such as John Duncan and George Younghusband, as well as the less famous works of big names such as Robert Louis Stevenson, Leonard Woolf and, of course, Shackleton.

"Any book selling fewer than 500 copies a year is a good candidate for making available on demand," says Suzanne Wilson-Higgins, commercial director of Lightning Source, a Milton Keynes-based company specialising in printing, binding and distributing on-demand books.

And while their traditional clients are academic, professional and scientific publishers, business is increasingly coming from specialist trade publishers and imprints such as The Classic Travel Book company. They have also brought into print a wide spectrum of what Wilson-Higgins calls "non-traditional" publishers. These include old-fashioned vanity self-publishers as well as database publishers, the so-called "content aggregators" who source digital collections of books or even scan out-of-copyright titles, rework the covers and sell them (quite legally) over the web.

As Wilson-Higgins says: "No warehouse, no stock, less risk."

And no waste. "To fell forests and then pulp books is not a responsible act," O'Reilly says. "Our mission to preserve rare and important travel knowledge is tempered by the realisation of our ecological duties as publishers." The publishers believe they have a moral duty to share the profits they make with the academic institutions, scholarly societies and charities associated with travel writers, past and present, featured on the Classic Travel Book list. For example, they are working with author Glynn Christian - the profits from Christian's book will help create a community library on remote Pitcairn Island.

Mike Berry, an independent antiquarian bookseller and owner of Somerset-based Rare Books and Berry, believes print-on-demand will enhance his traditional business. "I can supply books to customers where previously the rarity and cost made this impossible, so the reader wins. It will not affect the sale of first editions, as this is a collectors' market," he says.

Berry thinks that collectors will even go for print-to-order books. "I am happy to make these available - people want to use bookshops as well as the web."

The reader may be considered the winner in all this, but the writer is not doing too badly either. Robin Hanbury-Tenison, described by The Sunday Times as "one of the greatest explorers of the 20th century", has more than a dozen of his books on the Classic Travel Book list and sells them via his website.

Hanbury-Tenison, who, as editor of The Oxford Book of Exploration, is no stranger to traditional publishing, decided his most recent book, *Worlds within: Reflections in the Sand*, should go straight to the on-demand format.

"It's the second instalment of my autobiography and doesn't have the wider appeal of some of my earlier books. It was a book I just wanted to write, and I didn't want to get stuck into the process of lengthy meetings with publishers and so on. I just sent off the manuscript, and in ten days I had a copy of the book in my hands."

Nick Smith is the former editor of the Royal Geographical Society's "Geographical magazine and has been a judge on the Thomas Cook Travel Book of the Year awards.

LIFE IN THE SADDLE

Before you get 100 pages into CuChullaine O'Reilly's 600-plus page novel *Khyber Knights*, the protagonist is being tortured in a prison cell in Pakistan. It is a terrible scene where two men are held in separate rooms and forced to listen to the other's sufferings while their assailants try unsuccessfully to beat a confession out of them with cricket bats. They are accused of being in possession of a large amount of heroin.

Basha, O'Reilly's wife, says the book is based on her husband's real-life experiences. "It is a terrifically exciting but educational book. A few names have been changed here and there, but that was basically what happened."

O'Reilly is known for his journeys through Pakistan, which form the source material for *Khyber Knights*, widely held to be the best and most authentic book on the country written in English.

Basha O'Reilly is the other half of the publishing partnership behind Classic Travel Books and the Long Riders' Guild website, described by the O'Reillys as "part-museum, bookstore, tack room and Guild Hall" and as containing "the world's largest collection of equestrian travel information". She is known in equestrian circles for her ride from Russia to the UK and as author of children's book *Count Pompeii - Stallion of the Steppes*, first in the Little Long Rider series.

Long riders do just that. They ride long distances. They are a tight-knit, though far-scattered, community whose significance lies in the quality of their literary output.

The O'Reillys plan to circumnavigate the world on horseback, a feat never before accomplished.

Details: www.thelongridersguild.com