ABSTRACT

The nineteenth century was an age of societies, and many of them were involved in publishing. As charitable entities, seeking moral or religious aims rather than commercial profit, they are often assumed to operate outside the book trade and are often overlooked in histories of nineteenth-century publishing. Yet some of the societies became major publishing houses, particularly in the provision of religious, educational and children’s books and magazines, and as such, they had to interact with the rest of the trade. In the nineteenth-century, if they produced attractive and successful publications, they faced criticisms for being unfair competition for publishers who needed to make a profit; and if they produced dull and mediocre publications, the organisational structure of societies (publishing by committee) was blamed for making them uncompetitive. This paper reassesses the role of the publishing society in the early to mid-nineteenth century, by focusing on the Religious Tract Society, one of the biggest publishing societies and also one closely engaged with the trade. It demonstrates that being a society was not intrinsically a problem, but that convincing critics that a society was competing fairly and following usual trade practices was often tricky.
SOCIETIES AS PUBLISHERS:

THE RELIGIOUS TRACT SOCIETY IN THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY

INTRODUCTION

Publishing houses in the early to mid nineteenth century were typically owned and run by one, or a very few, people. It is therefore hardly surprising that the histories of those houses are intricately linked to the biographies of their owners, and that the interests of the house are assumed to follow those of the owner.\(^1\) Yet, despite the undisputed prevalence of owner-managed firms, there were alternative forms of management: the limited company would not become widespread until the 1880s and 1890s, but publishing societies were common throughout the century.\(^2\) Such societies were usually devoted to philanthropic aims: improving working-class education, supporting the temperance cause, or, most frequently, improving the religious condition of the nation. They were typically run by an elected committee reporting to an annual meeting of all members, and some committees were assisted by paid employees. The management structure of such publishing organisations was quite different from that found in the owner-manager firms, and bears some resemblance to the boards of directors reporting to share-holders that would become a feature of the limited companies. In a publishing house run by committee, decisions had to be reached by consensus, and hence discussed – and, if one is lucky, recorded – in a way which is rarer in owner-manager houses.\(^3\) Those decisions had to reflect what the members were assumed to want, and could not simply reflect the priorities or prejudices of an individual manager.

In the 1820s, Thomas Babbington Macaulay had declared that he was living in ‘the age of societies’, a sentiment shared by Sir James Stephen. Ford Brown dedicated an entire chapter to ‘Ten thousand compassions and charities’, and identified no fewer than twenty-six societies founded by evangelicals between 1790 and 1840 which had some involvement in publishing, not counting those founded solely by dissenting evangelicals nor those founded by secular groups.\(^4\) These societies varied tremendously in size, scope and success. Some were small
enough to be run entirely by volunteers, and were often short-lived, such as the Scottish Association for the Opposition of Prevalent Errors (c. 1846). Medium-sized operations, such as the Wesleyan Bookroom or the Trinitarian Bible Society, could hope for greater longevity but usually had a sphere of influence restricted by their limited resources. And then there were the large organisations, which were important charities and significant players in the publishing trade. These included the British and Foreign Bible Society (1804), the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (1698), and the Religious Tract Society (1799). These organisations had substantial turnovers, as Figure 1 shows, and were responsible for producing enormous numbers of religious books, tracts and Bibles. The Tract Society, for instance, was one of the five most important publishers of series in the late nineteenth century, along with Macmillan, Longman and Routledge.

The focus of nineteenth-century publishing histories on owner-managed firms gives the impression that publishing societies were atypical, lying outside the trade, and possessing unusual structures and goals. At least some nineteenth-century publishers shared this view. William Chambers, himself a successful publisher whose publications were often in competition with those of the societies, argued that ‘a society cannot, as a rule, compete with private enterprise’. An anonymous critic of religious publishing societies further claimed that societies not only could not, but should not compete with private firms, for, ‘when a charitable society enters into competition with individual interests… commercial injustice is almost sure to result’. According to this view, publishing societies were inferior imitations of commercial publishing houses and, furthermore, could be disruptive to the workings of those houses.

This essay reassesses the role of publishing societies in the nineteenth-century book trade, and will demonstrate that being a society did not necessarily result in either commercial mediocrity or injustice. The Religious Tract Society was one of the largest and most financially successful publishing societies, and although it faced accusations of interference in the book trade, its officers regarded it as being utterly grounded in that trade. My first section introduces the Society and its key critics. Part of the reason for the criticisms was that critics did not realise that the Society
had been transformed, by mid-century, from its small tract origins into a large, complex and experienced publisher of a wide range of publications. My second section demonstrates how firmly grounded the Society was in all aspects of the book trade, both production and distribution, and shows how the Society answered its critics. Finally, I examine the committee structure of the Society, and consider how it was able to be so successful despite such an apparent handicap. It can be argued that the Religious Tract Society was not a typical publishing society – it was richer, had more employees, and produced more publications than most – but that very success demonstrates that a society could function both effectively and fairly in the book trade, if it had the right committee, officers and administrative structures.

I. THE RELIGIOUS TRACT SOCIETY AND ITS CRITICS

The Religious Tract Society was founded in May 1799. Its founders were evangelicals belonging to the London Missionary Society, who saw the need for missionary work at home as well as overseas. They were delighted with the apparent progress of Sunday Schools in improving literacy levels among the working classes, yet simultaneously worried that there was a severe shortage of suitable cheap reading material for those new readers. The new Tract Society was to collect subscriptions to be used for producing and distributing religious tracts among the working classes. Gratuitous distribution was thought to be the best way of getting suitably religious reading material into households with little spare money and less inclination to spend it on the luxury of print.

For its first two decades, the Society remained relatively small-scale. Its committee operated out of half a rented shop in Paternoster Row, and it employed only one person to perform all the functions of subscription collector, warehouse keeper and bookseller. The Society contracted with printers for the production of tracts, which were then either sold to middle-class benefactors (at little more than cost price), or donated to other tract-distributing societies (the cost being covered by subscriptions and donations). By the late 1810s, the Society had begun to produce broadsheets and handbills in addition to its tracts, but its mode of operation remained similar.
At this point in its history, the Society occupied a very particular niche. It was not the only publisher in the tract-production business, but it was the largest of the societies involved. Few of the respected literary publishers were as yet interested in the working-class audience, and thus the activities of the RTS were little threat to them. Indeed, most criticism at this time came not from the book trade, but from evangelicals who thought the Society could do more. Where it did compete with the book trade, it was with the chapbook and ballad publishers, whose publications it described as corrupting, ‘immoral and disgusting in their contents’ and utterly lacking in religious sentiments. The RTS’s 1805 Hawkers’ Series of tracts, and its successors, was intended to mimic chapbooks closely enough to supplant them. Although the RTS claimed some success, it seems likely that there proved to be room in the market for both tract and chapbook publishers.

In the 1820s, the Society began to expand. Its children’s line was developed into an important range of tracts, books, and a periodical (The Child’s Companion, 1824). From 1825, it also began to publish bound books, beginning with church histories, treatises on scripture, and the writings of eminent divines. Concurrently, the Society took on more paid staff, employing not only a Cashier, but a Corresponding Secretary and an Editor, and expanded its premises. These changes brought the Tract Society into closer proximity to other members of the book trade, and the Society issued a statement explaining that it ‘does not at all desire to hurt, or even to interfere with, the booksellers’. The extent of potential competition remained limited by the Society’s focus on theological and religious books.

In the 1840s, however, the Society voluntarily and purposefully entered into competition with a larger section of the book trade. Just as in 1799, it was still concerned about the provision of suitable reading material for the working classes. It was opposed to cheap publications which had corrupting content, whether that was atheism or pornography, and it was also opposed to cheap publications which failed to mention Christianity at all – such publications might seem neutral, but were really ‘an enemy cruising under a neutral flag’. The Society noted that publishers were now paying more attention to the working-class market, but felt that most failed to recognise the spiritual needs of that audience. W. & R. Chambers and Charles
Knight were issuing cheap books and tracts which aimed to provide instruction for the same readers that the RTS sought to help, but offered them a vision of self-improvement that was secular rather than spiritual.\textsuperscript{17} By the end of the 1840s, the Society also had to come to terms with the rise of cheap magazines which were not even instructive.

Distributing religious tracts was no longer enough to protect the spiritual health of the nation because readers faced with so many choices were becoming discriminating enough to ignore unpalatable material. The Society decided to begin a much larger publishing programme, which it described in Thomas Arnold’s words as being on ‘common subjects, written in a decidedly religious tone’.\textsuperscript{18} In other words, the Society would no longer limit itself to theology, but would publish on history, biography, geography, the natural sciences, and almost everything that competitors were publishing.\textsuperscript{19} The RTS works would include religious sentiments where appropriate and would never be anti-Christian. The Society’s cardinal rule, that every publication must contain an explicit statement of the way to salvation through faith in the atonement, continued to apply. From December 1845, when the publication of the first volume of the Monthly Series marked the beginning of its new secular publishing programme, the Society was explicitly in competition with all those members of the book trade who sought the working-class and lower-middle-class market.\textsuperscript{20}

William Chambers’s claim now became an issue: was it possible for the Society, as a society, to compete effectively in the literary marketplace, and thus to supplant the secular and atheistic products? One answer to the question is to point to the continued and substantial growth in sales income of the RTS from the 1840s to the 1880s (as shown in Figure 2), only part of which can be attributed to the growth in the book trade as a whole.\textsuperscript{21} Another way of considering the question is to ask why contemporaries thought a society might not succeed in competing effectively. Chambers made his comment as explanation of the failure of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (1826-46), which had been one of his own firm’s early competitors. That society had enormous initial success, but was unable to sustain it. Sales of its \textit{Penny Magazine} and of its later treatises dropped off, and the society became increasingly embroiled in ever-expanding grand projects which
barely or never made it to completion. The society eventually closed in 1846 without officially making a loss but, as Scott Bennett has shown, this was due to the largesse of committee members and the willingness of publisher Charles Knight to absorb around £20,000 of losses during his involvement with the organisation. Chambers commented that the SDUK had problems targeting its publications at a suitable level for the intended readership, so that its works were not as attractive as Chambers’ own offerings. If that were not reason enough, he added, then the explanation had to lie in its being a society, and thus structurally disadvantaged in an enterprising world.

Another critic of religious publishing societies had been more forthcoming about the perceived problems of societies as publishers. In 1847, a pamphlet appeared entitled *The Power of the Press; is it rightly employed?* The anonymous author appears to have been an evangelical Congregationalist from the Paddington area of London. He criticised religious organisations for failing to do more to combat the irreligious and secular publishers and he proposed a complete reform of the Religious Tract Society. His suggestion entailed the Society ceasing all publishing operations, and concentrating on distributing the publications of other publishers. He clearly felt that distribution was something a society could do well, whereas the production and publication of works was not.

The pamphleteer believed that societies, by their very nature, could not compete effectively as publishers, for he agreed with Chambers that, ‘Individual enterprise must always lead the market in the matter of mere production’. The main problem was that societies, being run by committees, lacked ‘the stimulus of personal interest and identity in production’. This would result in money being lost in ‘bad speculations, or indifferently worked good ones’, and that a society, unlike an individual, would not learn from experience. The pamphleteer also suggested that part of the problem was that, because a charitable society did not actively seek profit, it was therefore satisfied with the certainty of mediocre results rather than the potential of excellent ones. In addition, he did not think committees could innovate, claiming that ‘the works of a society will seldom bear the stamp of originality’, making them even more likely to be mediocre. Moreover, the pamphleteer claimed that ‘when a charitable society enters into competition with individual interests
(as it does by commencing production) commercial injustice is almost sure to result.\textsuperscript{27} Christian organisations were morally obliged to avoid unjust behaviour and so, he argued, ought not to become publishers.\textsuperscript{28}

The RTS occasionally received specific accusations of injustice in the 1840s. Two disgruntled booksellers wrote to the Secretary to complain that its publications were unfair competition because they were (allegedly) subsidised by the Society’s benevolent income, and were thus too cheap for any other publisher to match.\textsuperscript{29} The booksellers’ suggestion that the Society should content itself with tracts, implies that it was the expanded involvement in book publishing which lay at the root of the complaints. A more subtle accusation of commercial unfairness was made by the Glasgow bookseller, James MacLehose.\textsuperscript{30} MacLehose was a devout Christian, yet, on receiving a visit from the Society’s commercial traveller in September 1849, he voiced ‘strong objections to the Religious Tract Society as a publishing establishment, and affirmed that no private publisher could compete therewith’. He summed up by expressing his ‘conviction that thus it stood in the way of enterprising publishers, who otherwise would have equally well supplied the market at a fair price.’\textsuperscript{31} MacLehose appears to have suggested that, although there were no direct subsidies of the RTS publications, there were nevertheless indirect subsidies resulting from advantages which a charity possessed over a private firm. He claimed that, as a religious institution, the Society paid no rent, and was exempt from taxes and local rates. He also suggested that the Society’s system of making grants of publications (e.g. to Sunday schools and foreign missions) allowed it to dispose of unsold stock without having to show a loss in its accounts. From MacLehose’s perspective, the RTS was succeeding in competing despite the problems of being a society, but it was only doing so because there were certain advantages in being a charity, and those disrupted fair trade.

As we shall see, the RTS denied all these criticisms, but the fact that they were made at all indicates the uncertainty and doubt that surrounded a society’s prominent participation in the book trade.

II. RELATIONS WITH THE TRADE
In response to criticisms, the Society’s officers claimed that it made every effort to conform to trade practices, both in its business with suppliers, contractors and distributors and in the way it competed in the marketplace. Although the Society’s management structure was quite different from owner-managed firms, in its arrangements with paper-makers, printers and binders, and in its use of distribution methods such as advertising, agencies and commercial travellers, it was extremely similar. The Society’s critics focused on the production of publications, claiming that the Society had unfair advantages over other publishers. In reality, it was in its distribution methods that the Society was occasionally unorthodox, but the financial value of the goods involved was so small that this does not seem to have generated criticism.

In keeping with its desire to be part of the trade, the RTS routinely kept an eye on what other publishers were doing, not just in terms of publications but in treatment of staff and responses to legal changes. The Society contributed to the fund for amending the insolvency and bankruptcy laws in 1849 and to that for the Booksellers’ Retreat in 1855, because that was what the ‘leading booksellers’ were doing. It investigated the claims of the Association of Booksellers’ Assistants for shorter hours in 1844, and set up a contributory benefit fund to cover sick-pay for its employees in 1846. On learning that ‘the Publishing Houses were making arrangements for their Assistants to visit the Great Exhibition, and giving them various sums to meet the expense [sic], according to their stations’, the RTS decided to do likewise. It did not, however, grant a Saturday half-holiday to its assistants – as was being done in the wholesale trade in 1853 – because RTS assistants already started work two hours later than those in the wholesale trade.

The RTS had insisted, since the 1820s, that ‘in its arrangements with printers, and binders, and other tradesmen, while the necessary attention is given to the fairness of prices and charges, no attempt is ever made to grind down, or cause unfair competition’. This desire for fairness extended to showing concern for the condition of the employees of its contractors. In the early 1840s, it investigated claims that staff at William Clowes were having to work on the Sabbath, and were relieved to learn that Clowes only permitted Sunday work for urgent Government printing.
January 1852, the Secretary, William Jones, made a point of reporting that he had personally given New Year’s gift books to every worker in the three main binders used by the Society, and had been ‘much gratified with the general appearance of the workpeople. They appeared to be kindly and liberally treated by their employers.’

In other words, the committee could rest assured that its workers were not being maltreated – an important issue, given the bad publicity that had surrounded the allegations against the Bible Society for relying on ‘sweated’ female labour, just a few years earlier. As far as its own staff were concerned, the RTS acted as the paternalistic employer. It organised quarterly meetings for ‘prayer and exhortation’, and, for more secular needs, it agreed in 1845 to close the Depository an hour earlier (at 7pm), so that staff could benefit from ‘healthful recreation, mental improvement and the duties and enjoyments of domestic life’.

Production and Distribution

One thing which ensured the RTS was a fully-fledged member of the book trade was that it was a publisher in its own right. The SDUK and SPCK, in contrast, lent their imprimatur to the publishers Charles Knight and J.W. Parker, and thus neither risked their own money nor were actively involved in the process of seeking tenders for paper, printing or binding. The RTS, however, had to deal with paper merchants, binders, wholesalers and retail booksellers, and therefore maintained connections with a large number of participants in the book trade, principally in or near London: in 1850 alone, they dealt with 3 paper merchants, 21 printers, 12 binders, and 7 engravers. The only part of the production process that came to be (partly) done in-house was binding. From some point in the mid-1840s – probably dating from the opening of the new building in 1844 – the Society had its own binding department, run by the experienced binder Thomas Dix. Nevertheless, it still relied heavily upon the services of John Davison, V.F. Zaba, and James Key, and used nine further firms more occasionally. Similarly with printers, the Society had a core of regular contractors, and a larger number of occasional contractors: in 1850 the bulk of the work was done by just ten firms, varying from large concerns like William Clowes and Childs & Son to individuals like W. J. Perry and Edward Gover who have left no
record but their imprints. Clowes, Childs and Gover were all long-term printers for
the RTS.\textsuperscript{44}

The Society’s work was divided among so many printers because there was so
much of it, especially with the new secular publishing programme at mid-century.
But the Society’s printing had also become fragmented over the years as printing
partnerships changed, and both partners applied to keep their share of RTS business.
When John Blackburn and Benjamin Pardon dissolved their partnership in 1848, both
men ‘solicit[ed] a continuance of the Society’s business’, which was granted to
Blackburn, whose association with the Society predated his partnership with Pardon,
and who took it into the new concern of Blackburn & Burt.\textsuperscript{45} And when Ward &
Griffith split in 1850, Bailey Griffith was able to secure RTS work for his new
employer, Mr Macintosh.\textsuperscript{46} The Society also had an early commitment to colour
printing – both for children’s books, and to help ‘reach a lower class than the papers
of the Society are at present doing’\textsuperscript{47} – which brought it into contact with a new group
of printers. It employed George Baxter and J. M. Kronheim for five jobs in 1850.
Colour printing, of course, was still very expensive: in 1854, Kronheim quoted the
Society 3s. per 100 for handbills printed in five colours, compared to 10d. per 100 in
black and white.\textsuperscript{48}

The Society routinely put new projects or requirements out to tender. Tyler &
Reed secured the printing contract for the new ‘Monthly Series’ (6d books with a
planned print-run of 10,000) because of the low quotation they put forward. Four
months later, they had to raise their prices but were able to retain the work because
their revised price was still lower than that from another printer.\textsuperscript{49} The finance sub-
committee regularly inspected samples of paper and printing, and examined
quotations. In October 1844, for instance, it requested tenders from three of the usual
paper-makers and at least one Scottish paper-maker, for paper to be given as grants to
overseas societies. The following month, the members inspected the quoted prices,
and examined the samples sent in. The two favourites were printed on, and re-
examined. They finally decided to buy two thousand reams from Dickinson & Co,
even though it was not the cheapest quote. They also asked for an additional sample,
in demy, from Spicer Brothers (whose quote had been 3s a ream cheaper), in
case it was suitable for India.\textsuperscript{50} Spicer and Dickinson were in fact two of the RTS’s main paper suppliers, but the tendering process enabled the committee to be confident that they were still getting the best deal, in both price and quality.\textsuperscript{51}

The Society’s reliance on volunteer committees to seek and assess quotations made it a little different from other publishers, but the overall process was similar. It was of necessity involved in the extensive networks of credit that underpinned the book trade, although it tried to be a responsible agent by paying its accounts on time and in cash. By the late 1840s, it had agreed to open running accounts with its most major creditors (including Clowes the printer and Dickinson the paper merchant) to ease everyone’s cash-flow.\textsuperscript{52} This high level of involvement in the book trade made it essential for the RTS to follow regular trade practices, if it were to maintain cordial relations with all those on whom it relied.

In distribution, the Society was also closely involved in the trade, especially by mid-century. Its tracts – like those of other tract societies – generally did not go through the trade, and were distributed gratuitously by philanthropic individuals and organisations. But whereas the Bible Society avoided the trade, and used its auxiliaries to develop its own national distribution system, the Tract Society frequently proclaimed that ‘the largest portion of our books are sold through Trade channels’.\textsuperscript{53} Once the RTS became a major publisher of books and magazines – which had to be sold, not given away – it saw clear advantages in distributing these through the existing channels, rather than trying to replicate an already well-established system. So, the RTS did the same things as other publishers: it advertised; it published a catalogue and sent out monthly announcements of new publications; it arranged with publishers in Edinburgh and Dublin to act as regional agents; it hired a commercial traveller to make personal contact with retail booksellers, and encourage them to stock RTS publications; and there were facilities in the Depository for customers to purchase in person or by post.

Advertising was essential for publishers, but the Tract Society faced the added difficulty that there were few periodicals in which adverts would catch the attention of the targeted working-class reader, rather than the middle-class reader of the monthlies and quarterlies. Like most big publishers, the RTS advertised in the
Publishers’ Circular, but where other publishers would also insert notices in the Literary Gazette, the Athenaeum and the Times, the RTS used the religious monthly magazines and the (evangelical) Patriot and Record newspapers – as well as its own newsletter for members, the Christian Spectator. In the early 1850s, in a concerted effort to reach a wider range of readers, especially for the new Leisure Hour magazine, the Society increased its use of provincial newspapers. In 1852, John Chapman, publisher of the Westminster Review, estimated that publishers spent about 20% of their sales income on advertising.\textsuperscript{54} The RTS figures for 1849-50 reveal that a tiny £363, or 0.7% of sales income, was spent on advertising.\textsuperscript{55} This was partly a difference in style: the RTS did not do large display adverts (except on special occasions), and its target audience was not the readers of the fashionable literary weeklies and monthlies.

The Society printed a complete catalogue of its works each year, including tracts, ‘Books, adapted chiefly for adults’, a children’s catalogue, and a list of foreign language publications (in over a hundred languages, by 1850). This was sent to all subscribers with the annual report, to other religious organisations and publishers, but also to booksellers. It was supplemented by a one-page list of new publications, printed every month and sent to booksellers.\textsuperscript{56} By the mid-1850s, that had developed into an order form which could be returned to Paternoster Row.\textsuperscript{57} Booksellers might also receive an occasional visit from the Society’s commercial traveller, Joseph Youngman. From 1841, he travelled in Scotland, Ireland and the north of England, and in his first three years, he claimed to have opened 113 new accounts, and secured extra sales of £9,300.\textsuperscript{58} During one month in spring 1844, he visited Cork, Limerick, Coleraine, Ballymena, and Londonderry, and convinced ten new booksellers, including four in the predominantly Roman Catholic south of Ireland, to take the Society’s publications.\textsuperscript{59} It was also Youngman who encountered the cogent criticisms of James MacLehose, while visiting his store in Glasgow’s Buchanan Street in 1849.

In its dealings with booksellers, the RTS offered terms very similar to those of other publishers. There was a trade discount of 25%, with 13 books offered as 12, and a further 10% for the settlement of quarterly accounts in cash.\textsuperscript{60} The Society
also made arrangements with booksellers in Edinburgh (Oliver & Boyd, from 1842\textsuperscript{61}) and Dublin (William Curry, Jnr, from 1844-48,\textsuperscript{62} and then John Robertson\textsuperscript{63}) to act as agents. Agents were allowed six months to settle their accounts, and would be entitled to further discounts if annual sales passed a certain level. Furthermore, they carried RTS stock on a ‘sale or return’ basis, allowing them to showcase more publications than they would otherwise have risked doing.\textsuperscript{64} Shortly before his bankruptcy, Curry was holding £600 of RTS stock.\textsuperscript{65}

Although the RTS seems to have been quite adept at using the regular trade channels for distribution, these alone were not enough to satisfy its aims. Chambers’s Journal had acknowledged the problem in 1847, when it commented that ‘Our object all along has been to reach the masses, but we cannot get to them. In vain…, do we cheapen literature to the verge of non-productiveness, the persons for whom we write and incur hazards are not those, generally speaking, who become our purchasers.’\textsuperscript{66} The RTS’s Christian Spectator quoted these remarks, reiterating the assertion that ‘the only sure way to reach the masses is to act aggressively – take the booksellers’ shop to their doors and firesides, and let them see and handle what is going on in the department of literature specially addressed to them.’\textsuperscript{67} Certain classes of readers could not be reached through the usual trade channels.

Neither Chambers nor the RTS could tell booksellers to promote their wares more aggressively, but they both considered the use of book and tract hawkers. Chambers cited examples of unemployed individuals whom they had supplied with instructive tracts to help them make a living, while the RTS was inspired by the enormous network of colporteurs developed by the American Tract Society.\textsuperscript{68} Such itinerant vendors sought out working-class readers directly, at their homes or meeting places. Thus, said the RTS, they could ‘frequently gain access to places far removed from all other agencies’.\textsuperscript{69} The Society cited with awe the statistics of the Town Missionary and Scripture Readers’ Society, whose five hawkers apparently sold no fewer than 68,000 RTS publications and 24,000 Bibles in 1848.\textsuperscript{70}

Chambers carried out a few experiments, but they could not run a national network of book hawkers. The RTS made more extensive efforts in the early 1850s. It hired two men (on weekly wages) to work in London in 1851; by summer,
each were selling around £2 of publications a month, but it was not enough to cover
the cost of their licenses and the experiment was short-lived.\textsuperscript{71} For its fiftieth jubilee
celebrations, the Society tried to hire ten hawkers to work in Ireland, but the task of
finding suitably pious and physically fit men proved too much for the Revd. William
Urwick of Dublin. He could find only three.\textsuperscript{72} These early efforts at using hawkers to
distribute cheap books and magazines were unsuccessful, but the approach was sound,
and when specialist societies, such as the Church of England Book-Hawking
Association and its auxiliaries, emerged in the later 1850s, the RTS was happy to
work with them and offer them reduced-price publications.\textsuperscript{73} For the Society, this was
not unfair competition with booksellers, but an important supplement and extension to
the activities of booksellers.

The RTS did have its own auxiliary societies at a local level – these had
sprung up in the early 1810s, and numbered around 400 in 1849 – but they tended to
be better at distributing gratuitous tracts and (in some cases) raising funds, than at
selling publications.\textsuperscript{74} Some auxiliaries tried to organise local shops, but they tended
to be very small, short-lived, and prone to financial troubles. The Totnes auxiliary
was in debt to London for at least three years, while in Liverpool the member in
charge of the depository went bankrupt in 1845.\textsuperscript{75} Nevertheless, the RTS increasingly
came to see the establishment of small shops or stalls – or the provision of RTS
publications to existing outlets – as an important way of reaching those who would
not enter regular bookshops. In 1850, it received warnings that ‘great efforts were
being made in Manchester and other large Manufacturing Towns, to open small Shops
in Poor districts for the sale of cheap and irreligious publications.’ Not only did these
shops sell corrupting reading material, they sold it ‘on the Lord’s Day’.\textsuperscript{76} Six months
later, in the annual report, a Manchester clergyman estimated that ‘in his small parish
he has at least one [irreligious] shop to each 500 of the population’; and in London, a
city missionary reported that ‘there are thirty-eight shops wholly or partially supported
by the sale of such trash, in the parishes of St John’s and St Margaret’s, Westminster’.\textsuperscript{77} The annual report concluded that the only solution was ‘the
establishment of similar shops conducted by pious persons’.\textsuperscript{78}
The committee apparently assisted the Manchester auxiliaries to set up such shops, though their success was not reported.\textsuperscript{79} It was also involved in similar activities in London, and between 1843 and 1856, it acquired the use of a stand in the Soho Bazaar in London, and possibly one in the Baker Street Bazaar.\textsuperscript{80} The Soho stand was run by a widow, Mrs. Stratford, who had ‘passed though much affliction and therefore calls for kindness and sympathy’.\textsuperscript{81} For the first few years, the stall sold around £200 of books a year, which the Society was convinced went ‘into Channels which would not have been otherwise reached’.\textsuperscript{82} The stall cleared a profit of around £3 a year.\textsuperscript{83} Unfortunately, the Society had not allowed for Mrs Stratford’s inexperience in accounts-keeping, and there were several occasions on which the books did not add up, to the Society’s loss. After the third of these, in 1855, by which time sales had fallen from their original high, the Society decided to discontinue the experiment.\textsuperscript{84}

The willingness of the RTS to use not only the usual distribution outlets of the book-trade, but also the unusual ones of auxiliary societies, bazaar stands and hawkers is illustrative both of its willingness to be part of the trade – unlike, say, the BFBS – and of its evangelical dedication to get its publications to as many people as possible. For a commercial publisher, profit was the reason for selling books, and the main target audience had to be those with the purchasing power, i.e. the middle classes. For the RTS, on the other hand, selling books was a way of bringing people to salvation (or keeping the converted on the road). This means that the target audience was potentially the whole of society, though the working classes were certainly the group of most concern. Profit was only of secondary importance, as a way to increase charitable work at home and overseas. The RTS aimed, therefore, to avoid making a loss. Critics might say such an approach was timid or likely to lead to mediocre performance, but it was actually the result of shrewd attention to production costs, combined with experimentalism in distribution. Running a distribution outlet like the stand in the Soho bazaar, which barely paid for itself at the best of times, was acceptable as long as it did pay for itself, because although there was no financial incentive to run the stand, but there was a strong moral imperative. For the Society, that was more than enough.
Competition

The Society claimed that, far from interfering with the trade, it had ‘much assisted both Publishers and Retailers of books by the dissemination of healthy knowledge, thus encouraging the desire for reading’. Small works have led to a demand for larger ones, it argued, and thus the wide circulation of the Society’s works should be seen as increasing the market for the publishers of more substantial works. The RTS could thus claim to be working alongside – not competing with – such firms as Blackie and Collins. But those firms were both run by pious Christians. Where the RTS did admit to engaging in direct competition, it was with firms who could be regarded as leading their readers astray. W. & R. Chambers were often mentioned in the RTS correspondence of the 1840s. It was the very success of Chambers’s secular publications – and presumably also those of Knight – which drove the RTS to provide instructive works in a Christian tone which could compete effectively for the same readers. If correspondents dared to suggest that the Society’s tracts and small works were not as cheap as they might be, the standard response was: ‘We furnish our Subscribers and the Trade with 44 pages for each penny we receive, which is far beyond even the popular monthly Tracts of Mr. Chambers.’ The RTS and Chambers actually had much in common in their desire to provide cheap reading material to improve the working classes, but their contrasting approaches to religion ensured that Chambers were always ‘the competition’ for the RTS. It is not clear whether Chambers knew this, or cared: in their first few decades of business, they had been far more conscious of the activities of the SDUK.

When the RTS was accused of unfair competition, it was most often with the simple claim that the prices of its publications were subsidised by charitable donations. In the early decades of the Society, subscriptions had certainly been collected precisely to fund the publication of tracts, as well as their distribution. But by the 1820s, the Society was beginning to publish more sorts of publication, and was realising the importance of separating the charitable activities from the publishing house to ensure that subscribers would not think their money was being misused. A Benevolent Fund and a Trade Fund were set up, the latter to be self-supporting, while the former would use the donations, subscriptions and legacies to make grants. By the mid-1830s, The Trade Fund had succeeded in becoming self-supporting. The
‘Financial Statement’ published in the annual report was structured so that it was easy for subscribers (or critics) to see that more money was being spent each year on grants than was being received as benevolent income – from which it would be clear that benevolent income was not subsidising publications, but rather the reverse. Figure 3 shows the Society’s balance sheet for 1849-50, laid out with the same headings and sub-totals as in the Annual Report. Under both Income and Expenditure, the Benevolent Fund appears first. Benevolent income amounted to £5,215 plus £847 in legacies, while the first Expenditure sub-total shows that £8,699 was spent on grants of various sorts. The Trade Fund had an income of £52,843 against expenditure of £47,506.

The ‘Financial Statement’ is, however, a carefully constructed document, and a careful reader will notice that £7,193 of the benevolent expenditure (i.e. everything except money grants, China, and the collector’s commission) was to enable charities and individuals to buy RTS publications at reduced price. This money never went to grant recipients, but was paid direct to the Trade Fund, so that the Trade Fund could be credited with the regular price for all publications ‘sold’. Depending on your frame of mind, it could be said that the Benevolent Fund was subsidising the Trade Fund, which would otherwise have run at a loss of around £1,800 because of ‘selling’ so many publications at reduced prices. On the other hand, the RTS firmly maintained that this was no subsidy, but a legitimate business transaction between its charitable and publishing wings, in which the Benevolent Fund part-purchased publications to use in grant-making activities. In any case, it was certainly not true – as some booksellers seem to have believed – that RTS publications were sold in the book trade at subsidised prices. The subsidised prices were only available to grant applicants, and usually concerned tracts. The Society made grants of tracts amounting to £4,608 in 1849-50, compared with only £1,213 of book grants to ministers, teachers, libraries and workhouses.

More subtle allegations of unfair advantage came from James MacLehose, the Glasgow bookseller, in conversation with the Society’s commercial traveller. He claimed the Society had the advantage of exemption from rent, local rates and taxes. Bibles were indeed exempt from paper tax, and this was a great help to the
Bible Society – but not to the Tract Society. With regard to other taxes, the Society’s traveller insisted that, ‘it pays moreover all Taxes and Rates (poor’s rate included) precisely as any other house of business’. Yet, it is only fair to point out that the Society had in fact attempted to gain exemption from local rates on the grounds of its charitable status, but had failed. MacLehose also claimed that the Society’s grants allowed it ‘to work off such portions of stock, as through the ordinary channels would be perfectly unsaleable’. The Society’s traveller responded by pointing out that most grants were of tracts – i.e. publications that did not go through ordinary channels anyway – and he could have added that, since the schools, libraries and ministers who did receive book grants did so for books usually chosen by themselves, the particular titles cannot have been undesired.

There are a few cases in the committee minutes which show that the Society did at least consider disposing of dead publications through the grants system, though there is no indication that they did so primarily to be able to claim them as ‘sold’ to the Benevolent Fund. In 1845, for instance, it decided to dispose of 114,000 odd numbers of the Child’s Companion by giving them to the London City Mission, to the major tract societies of Scotland and Ireland, and to other societies as far afield as the Orkneys and Toronto. On the other hand, in August 1850, the finance sub-committee received a report on the state of the warehouse, which revealed that the Society was storing 64,000 copies of thirty-seven titles in which the booksellers seemed to have no interest. The sub-committee did suggest that these books should be used in grants or sent to the colonies. But within a month, twelve of the titles had been given a reprieve, and by the following February, only eight titles were still on the list to be given away; the remainder were back on the catalogue at half-price.

The Society was actually very loathe to write-off its bound publications. It could have cleared its warehouse immediately, and made a small amount of money, by selling dead publications to a remainder merchant or even for waste-paper. But the Society’s goal was always to maximise circulation, not profit. Thus, the key thing was to break-even. As long as that had happened, the Society could be creative about dealing with the leftover copies. If there was any chance that they would eventually sell then they would be kept, and the price could even be reduced to cost. If
there seemed no chance of sales (as with out-of-date odd numbers), then using them in grants was at least a way of securing their circulation, and was a better option than pulping them.

Despite the grains of truth in MacLehose’s criticisms, the society’s traveller felt confident of that he could ‘disabuse’ him of the ‘misapprehensions, which have only served to prejudice this important Establishment in your esteem’. He did so by consulting the annual report, and writing a letter which bombarded MacLehose with facts and figures – thus demonstrating another use for the carefully constructed financial statement.95

The particular criticism which the Society took most seriously did not come from trade competitors – who would surely have wished it to be true – but from fellow evangelicals. The Manchester merchant, James Dilworth, suggested in November 1846 that the Society’s publications were more expensive than they ought to be.96 He cannot have been the first to make such a claim, as the subject had been discussed at length in an article in the Christian Spectator in January 1841. The editor made clear the committee’s conviction that the best way to carry out the Society’s mission – and to maintain it in the future – was not by using subscriptions to subsidise publications, but to run an efficient business. The route to maximum circulations was by ‘offering a superior article at such a price as shall promote the sales’, while also ‘allowing a fair and sufficient profit to all concerned in those sales in the way of business, and leaving proceeds enough to secure reproduction’. The article admitted that the Society’s sales income was now more than sufficient to do this, but pointed out that it had also ‘defrayed all the expenses connected with visiting the auxiliaries’ and ‘supplied a considerable sum in aid of the subscriptions’.97 Moreover, the profits on books and periodicals were essential in enabling the tracts to be sold at no more than the basic cost of print, paper and stitching, leaving out ‘any additions for Stereotype plates, sums paid for Copyrights, Editorial expences etc’.98 The committee was adamant that the pricing of its books and periodicals was appropriate, considered from both directions: it was cheap enough to be attractive, but it also generated important funds for the charitable works of the Society. No true friend of the Society could in
conscience suggest lowering the prices of books when doing so would reduce the number of tracts circulated.

III. PUBLISHING BY COMMITTEE

Apart from its focus on circulation, rather than profit, the way in which the RTS most obviously differed from regular trade practices was in its management by committee. In an owner-managed firm, such as Chambers or Collins, one or two partners were involved in the business full-time. There was a short chain of command between them and their staff, and they were closely involved in decision-making on a daily basis. The Tract Society was an organisation of about 3,600 members in the mid-1840s, and those members came from both Established and dissenting churches, and from all over the British Isles. How could such a large, disparate and dispersed organisation be a successful publisher?

The business of the Society was controlled by a committee which met weekly, usually in the morning before the start of the working day. This committee consisted of three honorary officers (who rarely attended), twelve elected ordinary members, the six trustees of the Society, and a variable number of ex officio positions for secretaries of organisations with similar aims and interests (who rarely attended). The committee meetings were also attended by the senior employed officers: the Cashier, the Corresponding Secretary/Superintendent and the Editor. The eighteen regular committee members and trustees were ‘professional men and merchants of high respectability’, who volunteered their time to the Society in addition to attending their own businesses. These men typically showed great dedication to the Society, both in terms of regular attendance and long-term commitment. In 1850, five of the six trustees had been involved with the Society for over twenty years, often having started out as ordinary committee members. A record of attendance was kept for the ordinary committee members, as the three least regular attendees were required to resign each year, to be replaced at elections. This ensured that ordinary committee members did attend regularly, and the result was often that even the resigning members had attended over forty meetings each year. The trustees, who were not subject to re-election, provided the legal continuity to the Society’s existence and functioned as institutional memory, allowing the Society to learn from its past
experiences, even when the committee had changed in the interim. Most committee members were in fact almost as long-serving as the trustees, and were as keenly interested in the fortunes of the Society as any owner-manager could have been in his own firm.

The existence of the three senior officers, who in turn were in charge of sixty employees, indicates the extent to which the Society had grown since its early days. It was no longer possible for a committee of volunteers to deal with all of the Society’s business with the help of just one employee. The officers were responsible for the day-to-day running of the Society’s publishing operations, based at the Depository at 56 Paternoster Row (warehouse, editorial department, retail and wholesale departments) and at nearby 65 St Paul’s Churchyard (administrative offices). All decisions about the charitable activities were made by the committee members, particularly the adjudication of grant applications. The committee also had to approve decisions made by officers, and had oversight and ultimate responsibility for the publishing wing. By the 1830s, it had become increasingly difficult to deal with all that business in just one weekly meeting, so sub-committees were set up. The most important of these were the finance and copyright sub-committees, each of which had about six members and met monthly, at the end of the working day.

The finance sub-committee set the wages and salaries of the Society’s employees and negotiated with them over holidays, pay-rises and benefit funds, dealt with the Society’s insurance policies and legal affairs and generally kept an eye on the financial aspects of all the Society’s affairs. There was some overlap with the copyright sub-committee, which dealt with all matters concerning the editorial department, including keeping the records of the copyrights assigned to the Society, ordering new manuscripts and paying for those received. The executive committee still had to approve the decisions of its sub-committees, but the effect was that the bulk of the discussion was removed from the early morning weekly committee meeting, leaving sufficient time for the grants and overseas correspondence.

The committee structure of the Society meant that the decision-making process was relatively slow. The Society’s first editor was William Freeman Lloyd (1791-1853), already the secretary of the Sunday School Union, editor of the Youth’s
Magazine and the Sunday-School Teachers’ Magazine, and author of numerous works for children. Writing on his retirement, in 1847, Lloyd explained that where a commercial publisher ‘can give an answer at once’ to a potential writer, the RTS had to put it to committee. A submitted manuscript would be read by the editor and two readers, and their reports delivered to the copyright sub-committee. If the sub-committee accepted the manuscript, that decision still had to be ratified by the executive committee (although it was usually a mere technicality). Since the executive committee generally agreed with the sub-committee, which had usually agreed with the editor’s recommendation, the process could have been streamlined by allowing the editor to make the final decision. However, Lloyd explained why this would not be a good idea: since most RTS publications were anonymous, the RTS itself was the sole authority for what it published. Most other publishers, said Lloyd, incurred ‘no responsibility for the contents of the Work’. The RTS decision-making process thus had to consider not only ‘Is it likely to sell for a profit?’ but whether it was suited to the Society’s evangelical aims and reputation. The range of interests represented in the committee – which was always a mix of Church and dissent, with a couple of foreign representatives – provided a check for the range of interests in the Society’s membership as a whole that no single man could imitate.

Although the RTS decision-making process might seem ponderous, it was very efficient compared with certain other publishing societies. In the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, for instance, the editorial work was done by the committee itself – not by a paid staff. As John Kitto, the deaf shoemaker who became a respected Biblical scholar (and who published with both the RTS and SDUK), reported:

I find that passing a book through the Committee, must be a great bore to poor authors. Six copies have been sent out to different members of the Committee. Two of them have come back with remarks, corrections, etc. I do not know whether I am to expect the others; but it is understood that the person who does not send back his copy has no objection to the publications, and sees nothing to correct.
This process was slow and had no clear completion date. Kitto reckoned that the committee review process would slow the publication of his book by three months. Time was not the only problem. In the absence of editorial coordination, each reader acted independently and could give advice that was inconsistent with that of the other readers. In the RTS, Lloyd as editor would summarise the reports of the in-house reader and the external expert in his own report, seeking a third opinion if there was significant disagreement. The result was a definitive editor’s report on the manuscript, with specific suggestions for the writer to act upon, rather than the uncoordinated ‘remarks and suggestions… written in the margin’ that Kitto was told he was ‘not bound to adopt’. The SDUK’s editorial problems were exacerbated by the practice of type-setting the work at an early stage to print proof copies for the committee members’ perusal. Thus, any changes would incur hefty correction charges, while a rejection would mean writing off money already expended.

The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge worked in a similar manner in the 1840s, with its system further slowed by the need for episcopal approval of all works. Potential works were put into proof and posted to five bishops, any one of whom could veto the work. If approved by the bishops, the work then needed unanimous approval from the monthly general meeting – which was in theory open to all members of the Society. There was no system whereby an editor could make advance revisions in communication with the writer before seeking committee approval – as at the RTS – so the SPCK manuscripts had to stand or fall entirely on the merits of their original form.

The RTS thus seems to have stood somewhere between the extremes of the commercial publisher and the benevolent society. It had to work with its subscribers and committees, and this undoubtedly slowed it down in comparison with an owner-managed firm. However, the business men on the committee took their duties seriously, attended the weekly meetings regularly, and did not have to wait for responses from absent committee members or distant bishops. Furthermore, although the decisions were all officially made by the committee, in cases of approving manuscripts, the committee generally accepted the editor’s recommendation. Thus the work of reading and revising manuscripts was left to the full-time staff,
who were able to ensure that problematic works were revised if possible, rather than being rejected outright. Bigger decisions about publishing policy, or suggestions for new publishing programmes, were made by the committee, though the ideas often originated in the editorial department. Where ideas originated with the committee, the presence of the editor at meetings helped to ensure that such recommendations were practical.

It is therefore clear that the editorial department, and the editor in particular, exercised a great deal of control over the publishing operations of the RTS. The editor was constrained by the committee structure, but his very existence enabled the Society to function far more effectively than those which did everything by committee. By the time the Society’s first editor, William Freeman Lloyd, retired in 1847, the editorial department consisted of four assistants and two readers, plus a couple of part-time readers. The in-house readers were typically young men, sometimes sons of committee members, whereas the editorial assistants tended to be older and might have come from professional careers. They were all educated men who had been appointed for their pious Christianity and their sound literary skills, rather than for relevant experience. One exception was John Allan Quinton, who was appointed in 1849 as an assistant in the children’s department.\(^{110}\) He had been ‘brought up a printer’, and had been employed in the business of Mr Birston of Ipswich, where he became ‘fully acquainted with the Printing business in all its branches’.\(^{111}\) Doubtless, the RTS would never have thought of employing such a man, had he not won the Society’s competition for a prize-essay ‘On the Sabbath, by Working Men’ in 1848.\(^{112}\)

Lloyd’s obvious successor was the senior assistant, Charles Williams (1796-1866). Williams had been in the editorial department since 1838, and possessed the unusual combination of a theological education and practical experience in the book trade: by the age of 22, he had become principal manager of a bookshop in Piccadilly but, having become a lay-preacher, he left the book trade to train for the Congregational ministry.\(^{113}\) Yet, despite these attributes and his decade of experience with the RTS, Williams did not do well as editor. By the end of 1849, he had faced two disciplinary hearings, and been dismissed at six months notice. He
continued to argue his case, sending a printed statement to every committee member, and prolonging discussion of an expenses claim until summer 1851. The committee remained convinced of ‘the dissatisfaction, on various grounds, that existed through a considerable period of time’. 115

The controversy with Williams focused on the accusation – formulated at a special meeting of an expanded copyright sub-committee on February 2, 1848 – that ‘Mr. Williams has inefficiently and negligently attended to the duties entrusted to him, by which they consider that the Society has been materially injured’. 116 Williams was summoned before the committee, and despite his unsatisfactory explanations, he was permitted to continue as editor under a new set of ‘Regulations for the future government of the Editorial Department’. 117 A year and a half later, however, after an unminuted discussion, the copyright sub-committee recommended, in ‘the interests of this institution’, that Williams be given the requisite six months notice. 118 The grounds of grievance were various, but centred on the claim that Williams was not doing enough to oversee the Society’s publications. Reading between the lines of the new regulations, it seems that he may have been accused of devoting too much time to his own efforts at authorship; of being careless in the selection of writers and the correction of proofs; and of not spending enough time in the office (he was expected to be there from 10am till 7pm). 119

The new regulations also insisted on increased communication between the editor and the other officers, and the committee. The committee was to see details of the plans for forthcoming book series, and there were to be formal monthly meetings of all officers, where the editor would have to report what was going on in his department, and in the trade more generally. The overall effect of the new regulations was to remind the editor firmly that he was an employee of the Society, and answerable to the committee. Williams’s arguments for the usefulness of his own writings – among other things, he wrote several series of children’s works on natural history – were deemed irrelevant to the charge of neglecting the Society’s interests. The dismissal of Williams demonstrated that the RTS committee expected to be able to control its paid employees, no matter how senior, and that they could find ways of exerting that control. With Lloyd as editor, the Society had successfully
expanded its operations from tracts, to theological books, and ultimately to more
general books, and demonstrated that a committee structure was not necessarily a bar
to an effective publishing strategy. But Lloyd had been better than Williams at
managing the critical relationship between editor and committee.

The 1847 comments in the anonymous *The Power of the Press* assumed that
commercial businesses were driven by the desire for profit, and that the lack of such a
desire in societies made them uncompetitive. In its role as steward of the Lord’s
wealth, the Society had to avoid making a loss overall, and to that extent, the
pamphleteer was right to say that the certainty of mediocre results was all that was
demanded. But it was the certainty that was the crucial point, not the mediocrity.
In fact, the Society positively welcomed trading surpluses from its books and
magazines, as it was that money which enabled it to make more extensive charitable
grants. The larger a surplus it could generate, the more good it could do. What drove
the committee and officers of the Society was the desire for increased circulations,
both through direct sales and through the use of trading surpluses to fund grants and
gratuitous distribution. This evangelical mission could be just as powerful a stimulant
as the desire for profit. Equally, it was not true to say that a committee was
structurally incapable of originality or innovation.

The Society did not leap into any new venture without first thinking carefully.
It was very conscious of having to look after its bounty, and therefore of avoiding
risky projects. In the late 1840s, one of the most pressing suggestions concerned the
launch of a new weekly periodical. The Society had launched a half-penny weekly
periodical, the *Weekly Visitor*, in 1833, in reaction to the *Penny Magazine* and
*Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*, but it had survived only three years in its weekly
format. By the late 1840s, it was a monthly with a falling circulation, and was utterly
ineffective against the new challenge from the likes of the *London Journal* and
*Reynolds’s Miscellany*, which were achieving enormous circulation figures with
content which the RTS regarded as most inappropriate.

The copyright sub-committee began to consider ‘the publication of a cheap
weekly periodical to counteract the pernicious works, now so largely circulated’ in
February 1848, but concluded that the current economic state of the book trade
made it a risky undertaking. The executive committee referred the suggestion back to the copyright sub-committee several times that year, before finally accepting the sub-committee’s conviction that ‘while a cheap weekly periodical is desirable, it cannot be undertaken by the Society on account of the large outlay that would be required, and the Weekly loss that would take place’. The new periodical was not launched until January 1852, and the new Leisure Hour soon claimed a circulation of 60-70,000 weekly, ten times that of the old monthly Visitor. This might seem like a key example of the committee structure delaying a desirable innovation, but it must be seen in context. The years 1848-49 were a bad time for the book trade. There was a widespread feeling of economic depression, several cheap magazines and book series ceased publication, and a few publishers (including Charles Knight) went bankrupt. The copyright sub-committee’s awareness of the risks saved the Society from the losses which would probably have resulted from the enthusiasm of the executive committee. It would have been rash indeed to speculate the Lord’s bounty upon a project with a reasonable likelihood of failing. And when the economic situation recovered, the committees could act quickly: the discontinuation of the Visitor was broached in July 1851, and the Leisure Hour was launched six months later.

As a large organisation with a flat management structure, the RTS might be even more able to innovate than a small owner-managed firm. It had a large pool of talent to draw upon, and suggestions for new publications or new strategies of distribution emerged from throughout the membership and staff. The editor’s was the name most frequently linked with new suggestions in the minutes, but other committee members were actively involved. It was a committee member, in January 1851, who ‘called the attention of the Committee to the spread of Socinianism and Infidelity among the working classes’, which resulted in a series of ‘short and simple Tracts on the Evidences of Christianity’. And it was committee members who suggested using colporteurs for distribution in London, and opening an additional shop in the West End, both of which were adopted.

The Society’s writers frequently offered idea for specific topics to be covered in publications, but they occasionally offered broader advice. The committee thanked three of the long-serving writers for offering ‘important suggestions’ and
‘valuable hints’ regarding the new weekly periodical in 1851.\textsuperscript{128} Even ordinary members of the Society occasionally wrote in with suggestions, which varied from the impossible to the important. In February 1852, a member suggested ‘the publication as a Monthly Volume of […] part of Mr. Smith’s Voyage and Shipwreck of St Paul’; the sub-committee rejected this idea ‘on account of the work being Copyright’.\textsuperscript{129} It was a member from Manchester who drew the committee’s attention to the rise of small shops in manufacturing districts.\textsuperscript{130} And it was another member from the north of England who, in summer 1844, had suggested the need for volumes ‘to meet “the new development and growing intelligence of the times”, and to “supply a large number of people who could only spare time enough for the perusal of a small volume, and whose means would not allow of a large purchase” with works of acknowledged merit and worth on literary or scientific subjects’.\textsuperscript{131} Despite the Society’s extensive experience with tract production and despite the success of W. & R. Chambers’s tract-like secular instructive pamphlets (which sold at a penny or three halfpennies), the Society did not begin to publish non-religious tracts until the early 1850s – with the Biographical Series – and never used the format extensively, despite the obvious advantages of a lower unit cost. In 1844, the committee took up their correspondent’s suggestion for ‘short volumes’ with enthusiasm, and began planning a series of sixpenny books in paper wrappers.\textsuperscript{132} The result was the hundred volumes of the Monthly Series (1845-54) and the Society’s move into non-religious book (and then magazine) publishing.

CONCLUSIONS

The Religious Tract Society, therefore, offers us a clear example of a society acting as a commercially successful and responsible publisher, participating fully in trade practices – though sometimes supplementing them – and certainly not limited to a dull and mediocre existence. Critics in the book trade had prejudices about societies, and suspected them of unfair practices. Sometimes, they were no doubt justified. Indeed, the \textit{Christian Spectator} informed its readers that the circulation of SPCK publications ‘still requires and receives aid from the subscriptions’, amounting to more than the RTS’s total benevolent income.\textsuperscript{133} With such eminent examples, it is perhaps not
surprising that the RTS officials had so much trouble convincing critics that the RTS played fair.

The accusations that the RTS was not wholly driven by profit were certainly true, but this did not lead to dullness. The RTS did seek limited profits, but more importantly, the evangelical mission to increase circulations was a powerful motivation. Again, it is true that the committee structure slowed things down, but it did not make them inefficient. It may have made it easier for new ideas to emerge, thus enabling the Society to be – at least on occasion – both innovative and original. This was the Society, after all, which published not only the ‘Monthly Series’ and the Leisure Hour in the 1850s, but the works of Hesba Stretton and the Boy’s Own and Girl’s Own Papers in the 1880s. Surely its prominence in the book trade – and especially in children’s publishing – could not have been so long maintained, at such a high level, if societies were intrinsically unsuited to being publishers.
CAPTIONS

Figure 1. Annual income from sales for six publishers, c.1845. RTS: Religious Tract Society; BFBS: British and Foreign Bible Society; SSU: Sunday School Union; PBHS: Prayer Book and Homily Society; Chambers: W. & R. Chambers; Blackwood: William Blackwood & Sons. Those bars coloured black are precise figures taken from the publishers’ annual balance sheets; those coloured grey are overestimates (the figures given for the societies include benevolent income as well as sales; that for Blackwood probably includes value of property and stock). Sources: RTS Annual Report (1846); BFBS Annual Report (1850); SSU and PBHS in Christian Spectator (June 1844), 63; Chambers Balance Sheet Book, NLS Dep 341/304, folios 33-36 (1846); , 2-3 (1845).

Figure 2. The income of the Religious Tract Society, 1800-1900. Source: RTS Annual Reports (I have been unable to locate copies of the reports for the early 1870s).

Figure 3. Financial statement of the Religious Tract Society for the year 1849-1850. Source: RTS Annual Report (1850).
NOTES


3 The minutes of committee meetings often provide useful information about discussions relating to new projects, and may have summaries of readers’ reports on manuscripts. Of course, minute books are also carefully edited, and cannot be presumed to be total records of complete discussions. The Religious Tract Society archives [hereafter cited as RTS] are held as part of the United Society for Christian Literature deposit, at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.


2
The RTS only applied the theory of gratuitous distribution to very cheap publications; their counterparts at the American Tract Society were willing to give away books and Bibles as well – see David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: religious publishing and the birth of mass media in America*. New York 2004, chs. 4-5.


[Coventry Patmore], 'Popular Serial Literature.' *North British Review* Vol. 7 (1847): pp. 110-36, at p.117.

Aileen Fyfe, 'Expertise and Christianity: high standards versus the free market in popular publishing.' In *Science and Beliefs: from natural philosophy to natural science, 1700-1900*, eds. Knight and Eddy, Aldershot 2005.


Even, eventually, fiction – although always with a high moral tone.

This series is the focus of Fyfe, *Science and salvation*.


Chambers, *Memoir*, p.117.

The anonymous author wrote to the *British Banner* (a Congregationalist weekly paper), and signed from Paddington, see 'Religious Literature and the Christian Instruction Society', *British Banner* (7 Jan. 1848), p.15.


29 See Jones to J.V. Hall & Co., 30 Aug. 1845 and Jones to E. Thompson, 01 Sept. 1849, RTS Correspondence [hereafter cited as Corr].

30 Youngman to J. MacLehose, 03 Sept. 1849, RTS Corr. On MacLehose, see James MacLehose, ed. *Memoirs and Portraits of One Hundred Glasgow Men, who have died during the last thirty years, and in their lives did much to make the city what it now is*. 2 vols. Glasgow 1886, Vol. ii, pp.343-6. My thanks to Morag Fyfe for this reference, and for tracking MacLehose’s business through the Post Office Directories.

31 Youngman to J. MacLehose, 03 Sept. 1849, RTS Corr.

32 RTS Financial Committee Minutes [hereafter cited as FCM], 15 Aug. 1849; 01 Aug. 1855.

33 RTS FCM, 26 June 1844 and 09 July 1845; 17 June 1846 ff.

34 RTS Executive Committee Minutes [hereafter cited as ECM], 20 May 1851.

35 RTS Copyright Committee Minutes [hereafter cited as CCM], 15 June and 20 July 1853.

36 Formal statement of relationship with book trade, issued in 1820s, and restated in [Stokes], 'Bound Publications III.', p.35.

37 Jones to J.H. Harris, 04 Jan. 1842, RTS Corr.

38 RTS ECM, 13 Jan. 1852.

39 Howsam, *Cheap Bibles*, ch. 4.

40 RTS FCM, 19 Jan. 1848 and 09 July 1845. The quote about ‘healthful recreation’ was actually from the memorial addressed by the staff to the committee to request the early closing.

41 These are the firms to whom the RTS paid bills in 1850, RTS ECM.
The first mention of Dix in the employ of the Society was in 1845, RTS FCM, 21 May 1845. Dix married the daughter of John Davis, the first Superintendent. His daughter Martha married Richard Jones, son of William Jones, the second Superintendent, and himself the third Superintendent. See RTS Misc. Papers, which includes a partial family history of the Jones family.

Again, I have examined the bill payments found in RTS ECM for 1850. The reference to ‘three principal binders’ is at RTS ECM, 13 Jan. 1852. Davison and Key had both been in business since the late 1820s, Charles Ramsden, London Bookbinders, 1780-1840. London 1987.


RTS CCM, 09 Feb. 1848.

See RTS FCM, 19 June 1850.

RTS CCM, 19 Sept. and 17 Oct. 1849 (children), 15/1/1854 (working classes).

RTS CCM, 28 Nov. 1854. The committee decided to inquire about the cost of printing in two or three colours.

RTS FCM, 23 Mar. 1846.

RTS FCM, 18 Oct. and 13 Nov. 1844.

Dickinson also supplied the Bible Society, see Howsam, Cheap Bibles, p.227, n66.

On the paper supplier accounts, see RTS FCM, 20 Oct. 1847. Clowes’s account was already in existence at this time.

Jones to Hall & Co., 30 Aug. 1845, see also Jones to E. Thompson, 01 Sept. 1849, RTS Corr. On the Bible Society’s distribution, see Howsam, Cheap Bibles, ch. 2.


Some monthly listings included non-British language publications, perhaps as space-fillers.

Copies of these monthly lists for 1842-59 can be found in RTS Publications List.

RTS FCM, 26 June 1844.
59 RTS FCM, 10 Apr. 1844.

60 Jones to E. Thompson, 01 Sept. 1849, RTS Corr.

61 In 1847, the original five-year arrangement was renewed, RTS FCM, 16 June 1847. Oliver & Boyd were still listed as agents on the 1900 Annual Report.

62 RTS FCM, 10 Apr. 1844.

63 RTS FCM, 19 Jan. 1848. Robertson held the agency until at least 1886, see cover of RTS Report (1886).

64 The ‘sale or return’ policy is implied by RTS FCM, 11 Dec. 1844, 16 June and 14 July 1847.

65 RTS FCM, 16 June 1847. Curry had originally been sent a stock of £638, of which half was sold within six months, RTS FCM, 11 Dec. 1844.


70 RTS Report (1849), appendix III, item 8.

71 They were being paid 10s. a week on top of the difference between trade and retail prices, RTS CCM, 18 Dec. 1850. Sales after ten weeks, RTS FCM, 16 Apr. 1851; after almost six months, RTS ECM, 29 July 1851.

72 RTS FCM, 06 Sept. 1848, 16 Jan. 1850; ECM, 25 June 1850, 29 July 1851.


74 Jones, Jubilee memorial, p.185.

75 RTS FCM, 13 Mar. 1844, 21 Jan. 1846.

76 RTS ECM, 29 Oct. 1850.
RTS Report (1851): 123.

RTS Report (1851): 123.

On Manchester, RTS ECM, 13 May 1851.

On Baker Street, RTS FCM, 20 Jan. and 02 Feb. 1847. This project disappeared from the minute books after its plans seem to have been finalised.

Jones to Capt. Trotter, 29 Apr. 1847, RTS Corr.


RTS FCM, 19 Dec. 1855, 12 Feb. 1845. Mrs Stratford was paid 12s. a week and 10% commission on all sales over £4 per fortnight.


Youngman to MacLehose, 03 Sept. 1849, RTS Corr.

Jones to Thompson, 01 Sept. 1849, RTS Corr.

Jones to Hall & Co., 30 Aug. 1845, RTS Corr. The same example is used in Christian Spectator (1845): 50, and in Jones to Dilworth, 06 Nov. 1846, RTS Corr.

Chambers, Memoir, pp.212-13. I have found no references to the RTS in the Chambers correspondence (held at the National Library of Scotland, Deposit 341).

Youngman to J. MacLehose, 03 Sept. 1849, RTS Corr.

The RTS was granted exemption from rates, under 5 Victoria 36, in 1844, but this right was soon contested and withdrawn. See RTS ECM, 09 July 1844; FCM, 11 Dec. 1844 and 17 Dec. 1845.

Youngman to J. MacLehose, 03 Sept. 1849, RTS Corr.

RTS FCM, 09 July 1845.

RTS FCM, 21 Aug. 1850.


Youngman to J. MacLehose, 03 Sept. 1849, RTS Corr. MacLehose’s criticisms can be deduced from Youngman’s responses.
Jones to Dilworth, 06 Nov. 1846, RTS Corr.


Jones to Dilworth, 06 Nov. 1846, RTS Corr.


Jones, Jubilee memorial, pp.67-9 gives brief sketches of the trustees.

Jones, Jubilee memorial, p.67n.

RTS CCM, 03 June 1840.

RTS Additional Deposit [hereafter cited as Add.] (item 23), Lloyd to Jones, 15 Sept. 1847.

RTS Add. (23), Lloyd to Jones, 15 Sept. 1847.

Quoted in John Edwards Ryland, Memoirs of John Kitto, DD, FSA, compiled chiefly from his letters and journals. With a critical estimate of Dr Kitto's Life and Writings by Professor Eadie, DD, LLD, Glasgow. Edinburgh 1856, p.543.

Ryland, John Kitto, p.543.

My discussion is based on Clarke, History of SPCK, pp.172-83.

Clarke, History of SPCK, p.149.


RTS FCM, 28 Mar. and 16 May 1849.

His departure from Ipswich was reported in ‘Public breakfast to Mr J. A. Quinton’, British Banner (4 July 1849): 428.

RTS ECM, 12 Nov. 1850; RTS CCM, January to May 1851.

RTS ECM, 12 Nov. 1850; see also 26 Nov. 1850. The committee won in the end, and it may be a measure of their annoyance that Williams was written out of the official histories.

RTS CCM, 02 Feb. 1848.

RTS CCM, 09 Feb. 1848.

RTS CCM, 17 Oct. 1849.


On the RTS as stewards, see Haines, ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’, ch. 2.


RTS CCM, 23 Feb. 1848.

RTS CCM, 20 Sept. 1848.

Visitor circulation had fallen to 6,800, see RTS CCM, 19 Sept. 1849; also 16 July 1851. For Leisure Hour figures, see Christian Spectator (March 1852): 697 (claims 70,000) and RTS FCM, 26 Sept. 1855 (sales had risen to 67,500, from 60,000 in first year).

RTS CCM, 16 July 1851. The timing was also determined by the death of the Visitor’s long-time editor in mid-1851.

RTS ECM, 07 Jan. 1851.


RTS CCM, 17 Sept. 1851.

RTS CCM, 18 Feb. 1852.

RTS ECM, 13 May 1851.

Jones, William Jones, p.124. Notice that the phrases quoted by Jones in this passage are those which also appeared in the promotion material for the Monthly Series. It seems highly probable that the account of what the ‘friend’ said has been shaped by the advertisements, rather than vice versa.
The decision was made by the executive committee (whose minutes for mid-1844 to 1849 do not survive), and passed on to the copyright sub-committee for action, RTS CCM, 14 Aug. 1844. Although the RTS chose paper wrappers to keep the price down for the working-class and lower-middle class market, more highbrow reviewers were not impressed. The Baptist Magazine (Vol. 38, 1848, p.28) bemoaned the fact that the first volume of the series had ‘no covers corresponding better with the character of the interior, than thin glazed paper’. Although the RTS subsequently offered the option of cloth gilt binding for ten pennies, it maintained that cheapness was essential in encouraging readers (and their parents, teachers and librarians) to use books rather than just admire them. The Society’s Christian Spectator (July 1846, p.145) recommended the sixpenny volumes for being ‘so cheap that we need not care if they are destroyed!’


On the RTS as children’s publishers, see the forthcoming Butts, ed. Scriptural and entertaining.