

A Short History of the Religious Tract Society

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Introduction

The Religious Tract Society was not intended to be a children's publisher, nor was it ever only a children's publisher. This introductory essay sketches the outlines of the Society's history and changing activities to provide the context in which the later chapters on children's works should be placed.¹ It is the story of a great oak growing from a tiny acorn: when founded in 1799, the Society was a small, voluntary organisation with virtually no funds, no employees, and a very limited range of activities; by the 1870s, it was simultaneously a major Victorian publishing house and a charity supporting missionary and educational activities all over the world.

Although the RTS did produce books, tracts and periodicals for the children of the working classes of Britain, most of the publications to be considered in this volume were aimed at children from families of the middling ranks. For late nineteenth-century parents and guardians, the RTS imprint had become a hallmark of Christian respectability. Its books were morally and religiously sound, and could be expected to do positive good in the nursery and schoolroom. In contrast to tracts, which were given away, the children's books were intended to be sold. They were, therefore, contributing to the Society's annual profits. For some subscribers, the level of profits seemed inappropriate for a Christian organisation; for those in the know, the profits helped to fund missionary work all over the world. The dual reality of commercial and religious activity underlay everything that the Society did, and the perceived

¹ Fuller versions of the Society's history for the nineteenth century can be found in its jubilee histories: William Jones, *The Jubilee Memorial of the Religious Tract Society: Containing a Record of Its Origin, Proceedings, and Results. AD 1799 to AD 1849*, (London: Religious Tract Society, 1850), Samuel G Green, *The Story of the Religious Tract Society for One Hundred Years*, (London: Religious Tract Society, 1899). The only twentieth-century history is disappointingly brief: Gordon Hewitt, *Let the People Read: A Short History of the United Society for Christian Literature*, (London, 1949).

tension between those aspects was the cause of the most frequent criticism, even from its strongest supporters.

Desiring profit for profit's sake was unacceptable, but for the Christian, all wealth came originally from God, and it was his duty to look after it, increase it and do God's work with it. As one of the Society's publications explained, 'Man is but the... steward of his bounty'.² The pious Christian should be grateful to receive wealth with God's blessing, for with it, 'he knows that he may make war against ignorance, intemperance, ungodliness, and the monster evils that infest society. At home there is disease to heal, modest merit to reward, struggling industry to foster, and, above all, the glorious gospel to diffuse.'³ As stewards, it was incumbent upon the committee and officers of the RTS to be careful in their management of the Society's finances, and to make good use of any profits which should result. They believed that it was possible to combine the commercial interests of the publisher with the benevolent interests of the evangelical society. The ultimate aim of all profits was the diffusion of 'the glorious gospel'. Since the Society did make substantial profits from its book and periodical publishing, by the late nineteenth century, it was able to undertake an extensive scheme of charitable grants, funding tract production and distribution in Britain, Europe and the world.

1799: Origins

The Religious Tract Society was founded in 1799, when Britain was at war with France, and British society was being transformed by the Industrial Revolution. It was also a time of religious revival, as the evangelical movement begun by John Wesley and George Whitefield gained more support.⁴ Evangelicals placed a new emphasis on the importance of faith in Christ's atoning sacrifice as the only route to eternal salvation. Conscious acceptance of that sacrifice was essential, and evangelicals worked tirelessly to ensure that everyone – from their own children, to their servants, to the town beggars and the natives of the South Sea Islands – was

² [Henry Dunckley], *Money: A Popular Treatise on Its Nature, History, and Uses, Monthly Series*, (London: Religious Tract Society, 1852), 166.

³ *Ibid.*, 161-2.

⁴ David W Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989); Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington, and George A. Rawlyk, (eds.), *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond 1700-1990, Religion in America*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

enabled to make that life-changing decision. Reading, whether the Bible or the accounts of exemplary lives provided in tracts, was seen as a key route to conversion, and evangelicals were frequently involved in efforts to improve literacy and education, whether through Sunday schools at home, or through missionary work overseas. By the late eighteenth century, almost all the members of the Baptist, Congregational and Methodist denominations had become evangelicals, while the Clapham sect had done much to bring evangelicalism into the mainstream of the Church of England.

In May 1799, a Congregationalist minister named George Burder (1752-1832) [FIGURE? Portrait of Burder] came to London for a meeting of the recently formed London Missionary Society. The 1790s had already seen the establishment of several large evangelical organisations with missionary motives, including the Baptist, London, and Church Missionary Societies. Burder was convinced that yet another new society was needed. The existing missionary societies all had an overseas focus, and Burder believed that there was actually a need to spread civilisation and Christianity much closer to home. The activities of the Sunday schools had been relatively successful, but the semi-literate scholars they produced did not necessarily become Christians. Literacy was a transferable skill, useful for many things other than Bible-reading, and the absence of suitably cheap Christian reading material was preventing many working-class readers (especially those living amidst the temptations of the big cities) from seeing their route to salvation.

Burder suggested that a new society should be set up to print and distribute small pamphlets, stating the principles and importance of the Christian religion. These tracts were to be ‘silent messengers’ moving among the poor and bringing them to a knowledge of Christ. His proposal was met with enthusiasm, and after a series of early morning meetings in a local coffee house, the Religious Tract Society was formally instituted on 10th May 1799. It began with a treasurer, a secretary, ten committee members, and four rules.⁵ The committee was to have tracts printed, which were to be paid for on delivery. Members’ subscriptions would subsidise the cost of tract production, to make bulk distribution more viable for the well-meaning individuals and organisations who bought the tracts. There was no mention at this

⁵ Jones, *Jubilee Memorial*, 15.

point of any activities other than tract production and distribution, implicitly within Britain. In July 1799, the committee published an address in the non-denominational *Evangelical Magazine* explaining its objects, and seeking support. The importance of tracts was their provision, in a shortened form, of religious truths to all those who had been mentally awoken: ‘Thousands who would have remained grossly illiterate, having though the medium of Sunday-schools been enabled to read, it is an object of growing importance widely to diffuse such publications as are calculated to make that ability an unquestionable privilege.’⁶

The first tract published by the Society was prepared by the Independent minister David Bogue, and set out the aims and intentions of the Society. It contained seven guidelines, which were followed by tract-writers for the next century. Tracts were all to contain gospel truth, and a clear statement of the message that salvation can be gained only through faith in the Atonement: ‘so that, if a person were to see but one, and never had an opportunity of seeing another book, he might plainly perceive [his path to salvation]’.⁷ Tracts had to be so clear that they could not only be understood, but they could not possibly be misunderstood. Bogue’s other recommendations were that tracts should be plain, striking, entertaining, full of ideas, and adapted to a specific person or situation, rather than aimed at a general, and necessarily impersonal, audience. As he wrote, while ‘a plain, didactic essay on a religious subject may be read by a Christian with much pleasure... the persons for whom these Tracts are chiefly designed will fall asleep over it. This will not do; it is throwing money and labour away. Narrative, dialogue, and other methods which ingenuity will suggest must be employed’.⁸ This concern for the needs and capacities of their readers, as well as the necessity of a clear statement of the Atonement, continued to influence RTS writers throughout the century.

Although the early members of the Society were, naturally enough, members of the London Missionary Society and, therefore, nonconformists (particularly Congregationalists), the Society soon acquired members from most of the Protestant denominations of Britain: Congregationalists, Baptists, Methodists and Quakers, as well as from the established churches of England and Scotland. Roman Catholics and

⁶ *Evangelical Magazine* (1799): 307, quoted in *Ibid.*, 17.

⁷ [Bogue], Tract No. 1, quoted in Green, *Story of the RTS*, 6.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Unitarians, were, however, definitely excluded, with the consequence that all RTS members possessed common foes, and shared a relatively large amount of doctrine and practice. The committee continually insisted that all RTS publications must be non-denominational: ‘There should be nothing... like the *shibboleth* of a sect; nothing to recommend one denomination, or to throw odium on another; nothing of the acrimony of contending parties against those that differ from them’. The Society was committed to disseminating only ‘pure, good-natured Christianity’.⁹ These decisions eventually helped to make the RTS one of the more successful interdenominational societies of its day.¹⁰

Most of the work was done by a London-based committee of volunteers, all of whom had their own businesses and professions to attend, but yet devoted many of their early mornings and their evenings to the cause of the new Society. At these meetings, the members read and discussed all the tracts which had been submitted to them and selected suitable ones, a task that became increasingly time-consuming. The committee quickly employed an assistant, who, for £60 a year, was expected to ‘undertake the care of receiving correspondence, correcting the press, arranging and delivering the tracts, exhibiting the accounts, and attending the Committee when desired’.¹¹ When the society hired its first premises, in 1806, this assistant also acted as bookseller, selling tracts from a shop shared with a china and pottery retailer.

Before moving on to the next phase of the Society’s history, I would like to make two comments on the foundation. The first is simply to reiterate how limited were the aims of the founders: the Society was simply to print and distribute *tracts*; the target audience was the British working classes; and subscriptions were used to reduce the cost of the tracts. There was no mention of books, periodicals, foreign-language publications, let alone the possibility of running a grants scheme. My second comment concerns the absence of Hannah More in this story. Her efforts in producing the series of ‘Cheap Repository Tracts’ are well-known, and are often said to be the inspiration for the RTS.¹² However, to the best of my knowledge, there was

⁹ [Bogue], Tract No. 1, quoted in Jones, *Jubilee Memorial*, 18-19.

¹⁰ R H Martin, *Evangelicals United: Ecumenical Stirrings in Pre-Victorian Britain 1795-1830*, (Metuchen NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1983), Ch. 8.

¹¹ Jones, *Jubilee Memorial*, 113.

¹² On More, see Anne Stott, *Hannah More: The First Victorian*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); W Roberts, *Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of Hannah More*, 2nd ed. 4 vols, (London,

no direct link between the Cheap Repository Tracts and the RTS, and although the Cheap Repository Tracts certainly predated the RTS, they were not alone in that. The Society's jubilee historians liked to trace the history of tracts back to Luther and Wycliffe, but even without going so far, the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge had been active in tract production throughout the eighteenth century, while various individuals, including both Hannah More and George Burder, had tried their hands at tract production.¹³ What More and Burder had both discovered was that it was extremely hard work for an individual to sustain, which was why More ended the Cheap Repository after three years, and why Burder decided to found a society. It is also important to note that the SPCK, More and many of her supporters were Anglicans, whereas Burder was a Congregationalist with a vision of interdenominational cooperation.¹⁴ Due to the circumstances of its foundation, the young RTS was predominantly a nonconformist organisation, albeit one trying (ultimately successfully) to gain Anglican support, and the associated respectability and funds.

1800s-1810s: Shaky beginnings

For its first two decades, the Religious Tract Society remained a small-scale operation, run by volunteers, in precarious financial circumstances. There were, however, some important developments. The RTS had been planned as a single society, but there was such a groundswell of support for its activities that local societies with similar motives sprang up across Britain. There were 124 such societies by 1815, and almost 400 by 1850, with the greatest activity being in Yorkshire and Lancashire.¹⁵ The RTS wished to understand these as 'auxiliary' societies, assisting the London-based parent society, but many of the local societies regarded themselves as independent, and consequently felt no obligation to send funds to London. The Liverpool Tract Society (1815) bought most of the tracts it distributed from the RTS, but it also used some from Edinburgh and Glasgow, and

1835); G H Spinney, 'Cheap Repository Tracts: Hazard and Marshall Edition', *Transactions of the Bibliographical Society*, vol. 2nd series, 20 (1940), pp. 295-310.

¹³ On RTS histories of tracts, see Jones, *Jubilee Memorial*, Ch. 1; Green, *Story of the RTS*, Ch. 1..

¹⁴ For an extremely useful analysis of the early activities of the RTS (with comparisons to SPCK and CRT), see Driss Richard Knickerbocker, 'The Popular Religious Tract in England 1790-1830', Ph.D., Oxford University, 1981.

¹⁵ Aileen Fyfe, *Science and Salvation: Evangelicals and Popular Science Publishing*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 33.

from the Cheap Repository Tracts.¹⁶ The RTS had appealed in 1813 for auxiliaries to devote one-quarter of their funds to London, in return for discounts on tracts, but few responded.¹⁷ The tension was not resolved (and then not completely) until the 1820s, when the RTS devoted more effort to supporting local societies, encouraging the formation of new auxiliaries, and building a sense of community between the local societies and the parent society.

After the cessation of hostilities with the French, the RTS began to learn of European societies which had been set up to bring the evangelical message to populations of Roman Catholic and Orthodox believers. The RTS supported such societies with advice, assistance in translation, and sometimes with grants of money or printing paper. The first grant was sent to France in 1818, and the Paris Tract Society was established in 1820. The ideal was to set up a society modelled on the RTS, with its own subscribers, but – apart from the American Tract Society (1825) – few of the foreign societies were in locations with sufficient Protestant residents to become self-supporting. The RTS continued to send support to these foreign societies – and also to individuals, mission stations, and other educational and religious institutions overseas – throughout the century [FIGURE: RTS shop in Vienna]. This role in foreign evangelisation had not been envisaged by the Society's founders, yet it was to become the key role of the society in the twentieth century.

The 1810s were also the time when the Society gained more support from Anglicans, and, importantly, from more prominent Anglicans. Much of this was due to the work of Legh Richmond, the author of the *Dairyman's Daughter* (1810??). Richmond had already been associated with the RTS for several years, but in 1812, he was appointed as RTS Clerical Secretary, in a calculated attempt to increase Anglican support. The manoeuvre was helped by his appointment shortly afterwards as chaplain to the Duke of Kent. Richmond expended much energy persuading Church of England clergy of the true catholicity of the Society, and encouraging them to set up auxiliaries in their own localities. Many Anglican clergy at this time were worried about the possibility of being involved in an organisation that was run by nonconformists, and it must have helped that in 1816, the RTS decided to implement a rule that the executive committee membership would in future be divided half-and-half between the Church

¹⁶ First Annual Report of the Liverpool Religious Tract Society, 1815, iv.

and nonconformity, thus ensuring that neither side could be in absolute control. By the 1820s, the RTS had become widely respected by evangelicals from Church and nonconformity alike, and this widened support base may explain why the income to the Society rose to from under £1,000 to over £2,000 a year in the late 1810s (see Figure 1).¹⁸

The RTS was also helped by the success of the British and Foreign Bible Society, which had been founded in 1804 by members of the RTS committee.¹⁹ With their experience from the RTS, the Bible Society founders were careful to take active steps to dispel the initial suspicion of Churchmen. The Bible Society and its auxiliary network grew much faster than the RTS, and it provided a model for evangelicals all over Britain of how Church and nonconformity could co-operate. This brought more Anglicans to the Tract Society, and helped the development of the auxiliary network, although it should also be noted that the RTS and BFBS were often competing for the time and money of the same individuals.²⁰

As far as publishing activities are concerned, tracts were the dominant concern for the first twenty-five years. In its very first year, the Society had printed 200,000 copies of 34 tracts. By 1805, the total number of tracts issued had passed the one million mark, and by 1820, circulations were over 5 million a year, and there were 279 tracts on the catalogue. Despite the high circulation figures, tracts were not intended to bring in significant amounts of income, and that they did not, is clear from Figure 2. Although the RTS had initially tried to distance itself from the style of tracts produced by Hannah More, which it found to be both too political, and too far removed from real life, in 1805, the First Series of tracts was joined by a Second Series, usually known as the Hawkers' Tracts.²¹ These were explicitly intended to replace the 'immoral and disgusting... absurd and puerile' publications sold by itinerant hawkers.²² Despite being printed on poorer paper, and carrying such exotic titles as 'The Fortune-teller's

¹⁷ Jones, *Jubilee Memorial*, 183.

¹⁸ The Anglican *Christian Observer* began to support the RTS in the 1820s, Knickerbocker, 'Popular Religious Tracts', 124.

¹⁹ On the BFBS, see Leslie Howsam, *Cheap Bibles: Nineteenth-Century Publishing and the British and Foreign Bible Society*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Also Jones, *Jubilee Memorial*, Ch.6, and Green, *Story of the RTS*, Ch. 10.

²⁰ The fear that the BFBS was eclipsing the RTS can be seen in William Henry Jones, *Memorials of William Jones of the Religious Tract Society, Compiled from His Private Papers and Other Authentic Documents*, (London: James Nisbet, 1857), 91.

²¹ For RTS attitudes to the CRT, see Green, *Story of the RTS*, 10.

Conjuring Cap' and 'The Wonderful Cure of General Naaman', these tracts held true to the RTS principle of only using stories based on fact. As one of the evangelical literary reviews put it some years later, it was 'incomprehensible' that fiction should ever 'become an instrument to illustrate or enforce moral or religious truths'. Since the 'plot [was] invented expressly for the purpose', the author could clearly come to any conclusion, good or evil, that he desired, and the tale therefore could have no power to convince.²³ Only truthful narratives had that power of conviction.

From as early as 1803, the committee had remarked that it ought to print some tracts specifically for children, but it wasn't until 1809 that it made a list of existing publications which could be recommended for children, and not till 1814 that tracts were printed specifically for children. In fact, most of these early children's works were reprints, sometimes from the Hawkers' Series but on better paper, sometimes from such classic works as Watts' *Divine Songs* (1715). The few original works were short biographies of particularly pious children, such as those by Legh Richmond. These works for children, along with the First and Hawkers' Series, and a small collection of broadsheets for pasting on walls, comprised the activities of the Society's first twenty years.²⁴

1820s-1830s: Reorganisation and consolidation

As the Society entered the 1820s, it was allocated a day of its own for its annual meeting, in the week of evangelical meetings which were held in London in May.²⁵ It was now a well-established part of the religious landscape, with support from both Church and nonconformity. During the 1820s and 1830s, it attempted to regularise its relations with its auxiliary societies, and created more links with other evangelical societies working in Britain and overseas. Most significantly, however, these decades saw a complete reorganisation of the Society, transforming it from a charitable religious society, which printed some tracts, into a commercial publishing operation, run on evangelical principles. The changes affected personnel, the range of the publishing operations, and financial management, and they stimulated a rapid growth in the Society's income from sales.

²² Jones, *Jubilee Memorial*, 119.

²³ 'Cheap Literature', *British Quarterly Review*, vol. 29 (1859), pp. 313-45, at 332.

²⁴ Seventeen broadsheets were printed in 1814, Jones, *Jubilee Memorial*, 127.

Between 1819 and 1825, the Society employed its first three senior staff, who would run the business on a daily basis. These men carried considerable responsibility (unlike the earlier assistant), although they were still directly accountable to the weekly meetings of the executive committee. John Davis became the full-time Assistant Secretary in 1819, a post which was soon combined with that of Superintendent of the Depository. Davis looked after the accounts and correspondence, and had day-to-day guidance of the Society's affairs. He was joined in 1823 by William Jones, who became Corresponding Secretary and Agent for Auxiliaries, with the primary goal of strengthening the auxiliary network.²⁶ He spent nine months of the year travelling round the country, bringing the RTS into the regions in person. Two years later, William Freeman Lloyd became the Society's first Editor, although he appears to have shared the editorship with George Stokes, who (unlike Lloyd) was wealthy enough to be able to devote his services to the Society without remuneration.²⁷ These men guided the transformation of the society over the ensuing decades, with Jones succeeding to Davis's position in 1842. [FIGURE? Joint portrait of Jones, Lloyd and Stokes]

William Lloyd was a Sunday School teacher, a member of the Sunday School Union, and sometime editor of the *Youth's Magazine* and the *Sunday School Teachers' Magazine*. When he had joined the RTS committee in the late 1810s, there were only ten children's tracts on the catalogue. When he became editor in 1825, there were fifty-eight works for children, and by 1830, he had brought that total up to three hundred, as well as creating a monthly periodical, the *Child's Companion; or, Sunday scholar's reward* (1824, one penny). Many of these early works were written by Lloyd himself, or other committee members, but there were also contributions from Mary Martha Sherwood and her sister Lucy Cameron.²⁸ Lloyd did not merely want to provide more works for children, he wanted to make them more attractive, and more suited to the abilities of different ages and classes of readers. He suggested a series of titles with more complex language for advanced readers, and had them produced in 18mo with stiff covers (the typical format was 32mo with paper covers) so that they

²⁵ Until 1821, its meeting had been at 5am on the day of the LMS meeting, Knickerbocker, 'Popular Religious Tracts', 137.

²⁶ On Jones, see Jones, *William Jones*.

²⁷ On Stokes, see RTS Annual Report (1848): 81-95.

²⁸ F.J. Harvey Darton, *Children's Books in England: Five Centuries of Social Life*, 3rd ed, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 169-72.

looked more like books for adults.²⁹ Lloyd also improved the quality of the printing and paper of the children's works, and experimented with better methods for reproducing illustrations. The RTS was always an innovative user of new technologies, being an early convert to stereotyping and steam printing, and was later quick to see the possibilities of colour printing for children's books. It was working with Kronheim by 1850.³⁰

The children's works were not the only publishing innovations of the 1820s and 1830s, as the period also saw the launch of periodicals and bound books for adults. Whereas children's works could perhaps still be described as tracts, these other new works clearly could not, and this raised a storm of protest from subscribers and opponents alike, who believed the Society was being diverted from its true mission. As George Stokes later recalled:

All sorts of evil surmises were brought forward, and many evil results predicted as sure to occur. The funds of the Society would be perverted, its energies absorbed from more useful efforts;- all other religious periodicals, however able and considerable from their bulk and literary execution, would be interfered with;- children would be taken off reading their Bibles;- twice the quantity of letter-press which ought to be given for a penny was offered;- every bookseller would be more or less injured;- a cry of "monopoly" was raised, and a hundred more anticipations equally dolorous and threatening were urged by friends; to say nothing of the proceeding of enemies.³¹

The first RTS periodicals were intended to complement the tract work: the *Child's Companion* was initially intended for Sunday scholars, while the *Tract Magazine; or Christian Miscellany* (also 1824, monthly, one penny) was aimed at their parents. Both periodicals proved successful, although the extent to which their readership

²⁹ Jones, *Jubilee Memorial*, 127-8.

³⁰ Kronheim is first mentioned by name in June 1850, when he was paid for work done (see RTS Executive Committee Minutes, 04/06/1850). Since the preceding volume of minutes has been lost, there may have been earlier references. The Copyright Committee Minutes (19/09/1849) record the committee's decision in autumn 1849 to start a series of twelve children's books, with two coloured pictures each, selling at sixpence (for 32 pages, square). This may have been what Kronheim was then paid for in June 1850. The RTS minute books and correspondence are held at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, as part of the United Society for Christian Literature deposit.

included significant numbers of the working classes, as originally intended, is dubious. They had average monthly sales of 28,250 and 17,000 copies respectively in their first year, at a time when religious denominational magazines were among the best-selling monthlies available, with some achieving sales of around 20,000 copies a month.³² These two magazines were followed in 1828 by the *Domestic Visitor*, edited by Esther Copley. This periodical had trouble finding its audience. In its original incarnation, it was a quarterly intended to promote ‘the spiritual instruction of families, particularly domestic servants’³³. In 1833, it was re-launched as the *Weekly Visitor* (half a penny, weekly), with the same range of instructive and amusing matter as the *Penny Magazine* and *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal* (both 1832). After three years of failing to match its rivals, the RTS journal was transformed yet again, into the *Visitor* (monthly, 3d.). In this format, it achieved sales in the order of 10,000 a month, markedly below the circulations of the other RTS periodicals, and was assumed to be read primarily in middle-class evangelical families.³⁴ After Copley’s death in 1851, it was discontinued.

One of the main reasons for the opposition to the expansion of the RTS’s publishing programme was that it appeared to be moving its focus away from the conversion of the working classes, towards the devotions of middle-class readers. Subscribers were unhappy with the thought that their monies might be used to subsidise their own reading matter, rather than helping the needy; and felt that such a use of their monies would open the society to claims of unfair competition from other booksellers. It is not difficult to see why people were alarmed, because the volumes of bound books which the Society began to produce from 1825 onwards were clearly not aimed at semi-literate and impoverished workers. Priced at several shillings per volume (rather than several pennies per 100 tracts), these sermons, theological treatises, commentaries, histories of the Christian church and biographies of Luther or Cranmer were aimed at more affluent readers, who were already Christian.

³¹ [George Stokes], ‘On the Union of General and Scriptural Knowledge’, *Christian Spectator* (1844), pp. 89-90, at 89.

³² RTS periodical circulations are from Green, *Story of the RTS*, 33 and Jones, *Jubilee Memorial*, 134. For religious monthlies more generally, see Jonathan R Topham, ‘The Wesleyan Methodist Magazine and Religious Monthlies in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain’, in Geoffrey Cantor, Gowan Dawson, Graeme Gooday, et al. (eds.), *Science in the Nineteenth-Century Periodical: Reading the Magazine of Nature*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

³³ Jones, *Jubilee Memorial*, 135.

³⁴ RTS Copyright Committee Minutes, 19/09/1849.

When the committee made the decision, in 1823, to publish some bound books, it expected the experiment to be short-term, given the known expense of producing books.³⁵ The committee even felt it necessary to appeal for donations to cover the cost of stereotype plates, to enable the books to be sold more cheaply.³⁶ In fact, the books sold far better than anticipated. This was happening at a time when mid-priced reprints (i.e. those sold at five or six shillings) of standard works were becoming more common in the book trade as a whole, and the middle-class reading public was enthusiastically taking advantage of their increased access to books. The RTS reprints benefited from these market conditions, and it became clear that they could not only be entirely self-funding, but might even produce a surplus that could be used for other purposes.

The development of the book publishing programme was crucial to the later success of the RTS. As well as expanding the range of formats in which the Society published, it expanded the potential market for RTS works. Since tracts were aimed at the working classes as a charitable mission, they were sold to distributors at cost price, and produced no surplus. All overheads, therefore, had to be funded out of the benevolent income from donations and members' subscriptions. Given the audience to which they were being sold, the books did not need to be subsidised, and any resulting surplus could then be used to fund the tract overheads. Book production would therefore benefit tract activities, and evangelicals could now support the RTS not just by subscribing, but by buying books for themselves and their children. To make this system work, it was not necessary to price RTS books higher than competing books from commercial publishers, for profit margins were usually so large that the RTS (accustomed, in any case, to working with large print runs) was able to make a respectable surplus with books that were in fact slightly cheaper than competitors.

In the later nineteenth century, as book and periodical sales continued to grow, the trade surplus of the society enabled it to continue to subsidise the overheads of tract production, and also to make increasingly large charitable grants, as is clear from Figure 1. The Society's subsequent image as a major charitable organisation, assisting in missionary activities all over the world, was made possible by the success

³⁵ For an account of the origins of bound books, see *Christian Spectator* (1841): 26.

of its British publishing operations. At the time, however, the relationship between the ‘commercial’ book and periodical publishing wing, and its ‘charitable’ tract activities was often misunderstood, leading to various criticisms of the Society. In 1825, the committee decided to separate for accounting purposes the Trade Fund and the Benevolent Fund. This would enable members to see that their subscriptions were entirely used for tract activities, both at home and overseas; and to see that the publishing house was entirely self-sufficient. That goal of self-sufficiency for the publishing house was not actually achieved until about 1835, but for the following fifty years, the only subsidies in operation at the RTS were those derived from the profits of fair commercial trade, which were used to augment the Benevolent Fund. By 1850, the Trade Fund’s annual contribution to the benevolent activities increased the contributions from collections, donations and subscriptions by around 50%.

The increased number and range of RTS publications in the 1820s and 1830s, along with the greater retail price of some of these, meant that the Society’s income from sales grew almost exponentially throughout this period, and dwarfed the benevolent income, as is apparent from Figure 2. In 1815, the Society had received just over £2,000 in donations, subscriptions etc, and just over £4,000 from the bulk sales of its tracts. In 1835, its benevolent income had risen to £5,000, while the income from sales of tracts, periodicals and books was now an incredible £50,000. The RTS was not the largest of the evangelical organisations of its day, but in terms of income it was not far behind the British and Foreign Bible Society and the big overseas missionary societies (and it achieved this despite having a smaller membership).³⁷ It also had a respectable annual turnover for a London publishing house. The Society therefore moved into the 1840s as a quite different sort of organisation than its 1810s predecessor. From its tiny origins, it had become a large publishing concern with over sixty employees, issuing a catalogue of over four thousand items, in 110 languages, for a range of different audiences, and in a sufficiently strong financial position to take on a charitable role, supporting tract and literacy enterprises all over the world.

³⁶ Stokes funded four of the early books in this way, see RTS Annual Report (1848): 83.

³⁷ A comparison of the annual incomes of various societies was printed in the *Christian Spectator* in 1841 (p. 70) and 1844 (p.63). See also Fyfe, *Science and Salvation*, 30.

1840s-1850s: Solid respectability

At 8 o'clock on a September morning in 1844, a prayer meeting was held at 56 Paternoster Row, in the shadow of St Paul's Cathedral, to celebrate the opening of the new Depository of the Religious Tract Society (FIGURE? view of depository).³⁸ The size, expense, and solidity of the new building, described by one newspaper as a 'handsome architectural pile', was a symbol of the solid interdenominational respectability the RTS had achieved.³⁹ The new building was a physical necessity, since the houses formerly used by the Society in Paternoster Row were in such a poor state of repair that 'the principal walls had given way', and when the buildings were demolished, it was discovered that 'the principal timbers were decayed, and could not have sustained the buildings much longer'.⁴⁰ Numbers 56 to 59 Paternoster Row, with four houses in an adjoining courtyard, were replaced by the new Depository. The Society's administrative work continued to be based in another building in St Paul's Churchyard.

The description of the new building in the *Illustrated London News* well demonstrates the extent of the Society's operations by this time:

The interior of the building will be fitted up plainly and substantially, in every respect, as a warehouse. On the ground floor, one continuous room, the entire length of the building [about 120 feet], will serve as a shop and country department, in which it is important to have a supply of every work on the society's catalogue in all their various bindings; for this purpose, a vast extent of wall room is required; and, in order to render the entire height (about 14 feet) available to this end, there will be a light iron gallery. On each floor, except the shop, there is a small tram-road from end to end, to convey the work from any part of the premises to a hopper at the east-end of the building, which communicates with every floor.⁴¹

Equally, the Society's ability to use almost £14,000 from the Trade Fund to pay most of the building costs demonstrates its firm financial footing, and the success of the

³⁸ *Christian Spectator* (1844): 83.

³⁹ *Illustrated London News* (24/02/1844): 117-8.

⁴⁰ *Christian Spectator* (1843): 75.

⁴¹ *Illustrated London News* (24/02/1844): 118.

decision to diversify beyond tract publishing and distribution.⁴² The Society was now to be faced with two major challenges to its stability. The first was a consequence of the retirement and death of the men who had led the Society so successfully through the 1820s and 1830s. The second was the rapid expansion in the British book trade in the late 1840s and early 1850s, as the development of cheap mass-market print meant that the Society faced increased competition, some of which came from secular and anti-religious publishers.

Jones, Lloyd and Stokes all died between 1847 and 1855, while Samuel Hoare (the Hon. Treasurer) also died in 1847, and William Tarn (the Cashier) in 1859. This was, therefore, a period of management change-over. Fortunately, most of the transitions were made smoothly, in particular as Jones, Hoare and Tarn were all replaced by their sons. The most difficult task was that of finding a replacement for Lloyd as editor. The first replacement (Charles Williams) was disciplined and then sacked; the second appointee (William Haig Miller) declined to take up the post; and it was not until almost seven years after Lloyd had retired that the situation in the editorial department was regularised. Given the importance of the Society's publications to its mission, this could have destroyed the Society's reputation and its financial stability. That it did not, was thanks to the efforts of the senior assistants, James Whitehorne and John Henry Cross, who were eventually appointed joint editors in 1853.⁴³ Cross had been closely involved with children's works since joining the Society's editorial department in 1833. He had succeeded Lloyd as editor of the *Child's Companion*, and in 1853, he was given overall responsibility for all the children's works. He was said to have written over 600 works himself by the time he retired in 1875.⁴⁴

During these years, the Society began to realise that its target audience, and the conditions in which it operated, were changing. When the Society originally began to publish for the working classes, it was aiming at readers with very basic levels of literacy and education, and the sole purpose of the tracts was conversion. By mid-century, the gradual improvement in school provision and in adult education, had created a working-class audience with better literacy and more awareness of print and

⁴² The total cost of the building was around £16,000. A special subscription had raised an amount variously reported as £1,100 or £1,700. RTS Annual Report (1845): 84; Jones, *Jubilee Memorial*, 114-5; RTS Correspondence., Youngman to Macle hose, 03/09/1849.

⁴³ The arrangements in the editorial department are discussed in Fyfe, *Science and Salvation*, Ch. 4.

⁴⁴ Green, *Story of the RTS*, 69-70.

the information it could convey. Meanwhile, publishers' decisions to take advantage of new printing and distribution technologies, of which the steam press was the most visible, meant that there was a far greater range of cheap publications available to poor readers. Tracts were still particularly cheap, but they were no longer unique in their availability. All this meant that those made literate by Sunday schools were even less likely to use their literacy skills for Christian purpose, when they could instead choose to read the many works of informative non-fiction (in the sciences, history, geography) on offer from secular publishers such as Charles Knight or W.&R. Chambers, let alone the sensational and perhaps scurrilous fiction carried by penny magazines such as *Reynolds' Miscellany* and the *London Journal*. Some working-class readers had once welcomed the free tracts distributed to them, even if more for the novelty of print, than for the religious enlightenment. But now, such readers could afford to buy their own reading matter, and the RTS had to compete in the literary marketplace for the minds (and souls) of the working classes.

The Society did not object to the increased availability of cheap works on history or science, *per se*, but the problem was that even the more respectable publishers might present such material without a Christian framework, while radical publishers could make it appear specifically atheistic and materialistic. Readers might thus be led astray. The RTS's response was to further expand the publishing programme to include 'secular publishing with a Christian tone', in addition to wholly religious and theological works. When launching the new publishing programme, the committee highlighted the twin targets it had in mind: 'the rapid extension of secular information' and the 'unexampled activity of the sceptical and licentious press', which called 'loudly on Christians to abound in the work of the Lord'.⁴⁵ In the event, despite the prominence given to the 'evil', 'debasing', 'pernicious', 'disgusting' and 'soul-destructive' sections of the press, it was really against the informative works in which 'Christianity is frequently, if not altogether overlooked' that the RTS publications were most successful.⁴⁶

The first wave of the new programme was the publication of a series of books 'at a cheap rate, combining general information with religious sentiments'.⁴⁷ Announcing

⁴⁵ RTS Annual Report (1850): 141.

⁴⁶ RTS Annual Report (1851): 123; (1846): 106.

⁴⁷ RTS Annual Report (1846): 102.

this 'Monthly Series' (1845-55, 100 sixpenny volumes), the committee argued that 'all branches of knowledge must be imbued with evangelical sentiment.'⁴⁸ It was thus trying to take over some of the ground held by the secular information publishers, and to add Christian sentiments to it. Unlike all earlier RTS publications, the religious sentiments would not be the main content of the works. A similar tactic was followed with the launch of the *Leisure Hour: a family journal of instruction and recreation* (1852, penny weekly).⁴⁹ The 'Monthly Series' volumes had initial print runs of 15,000 copies, and the bestsellers of the series sold over 30,000 copies; meanwhile, the *Leisure Hour* sold 60,000 to 70,000 copies per week.⁵⁰ Both sets of figures are impressive ones, and demonstrate that the publications were clearly reaching at least some way into the working-class market. But they are also not nearly large enough to suggest that they were reaching substantial numbers of workers: the *London Journal's* circulation was approaching 450,000 by the mid-1850s.⁵¹

The first wave of these new secular publications may not have been as successful in reaching their alleged audience as might have been wished, but the decision to issue such publications was nevertheless incredibly significant. On an entirely practical note, it came at an opportune moment for the health of the RTS business.⁵² In the early 1840s, sales and circulations had begun to fall back after the rapid growth of the late 1820s and 1830s, a situation that can only have been exacerbated by the increased competition of the mid-1840s. The dip in sales income is clear in Figure 2. The RTS response was not limited to the 'Monthly Series' and *Leisure Hour*, for it also launched the 'Educational Series' of textbooks (1849) and the *Sunday at Home; a family magazine for Sabbath reading* (penny weekly, 1854). Equally, the existing periodicals were overhauled where necessary. The attempt to update the *Tract*

⁴⁸ RTS Annual Report (1850): 141.

⁴⁹ These projects are discussed in Aileen Fyfe, 'Periodicals and Book Series: Complementary Aspects of a Publisher's Mission', in Louise Henson, Geoffrey Cantor and Sally Shuttleworth (eds.), *Culture and Science in the Nineteenth-Century Media*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004) and Fyfe, *Science and Salvation*.

⁵⁰ Fyfe, *Science and Salvation*, 267-8.

⁵¹ Patricia Anderson, *The Printed Image and the Transformation of Popular Culture 1790-1860*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 14.

⁵² Haines has suggested that change in RTS publishing and finances at this time might be a consequence of the SPCK's loss of the monopoly for supplying textbooks to the National Schools Society. She suggests that the RTS secular publishing programme might be seen as an attempt to break into the lucrative textbook market, see Sheila R Haines, 'Am I My Brother's Keeper? Victorian Tract Societies and Their Work, 1840-1875', D.Phil., Sussex University, 1979, 30-32. However, most of the RTS secular books were not textbooks, and those that were, were far too expensive for National Schools,

Magazine, involving a short-lived *Penny Tract Magazine* (1846-7) took its circulation to only around 20,000 a week, but the *Child's Companion* managed to sell 39,000 copies monthly by 1850.⁵³ By the mid-1850s, the finances had entirely recovered, and the Society entered a period of sustained growth which far outlasted the decade of rapid growth experienced by the trade in general.⁵⁴

The new secular publishing had this effect on the finances because it reached audiences for whom the RTS had previously provided very little. Tracts were intended for the conversion of the heathen industrial working classes. Most of the bound books were intended for the devotions of middle-class evangelicals and their families. The new publications, offering information on a wide range of topics within a solid Christian framework and at cheap prices, were promoted as vehicles for getting the evangelical message to groups of readers unlikely to pick up any of the existing tracts, periodicals, handbills or broadsheets. But they also provided suitable reading material for working-class converts and lower-middle class believers, and it almost certainly these groups which accounted for most of the sales.

It could be argued that the transition to general secular publishing in the 1840s was, as the Society's centenary historian wrote, 'the most important [step] that the Society as yet had taken.'⁵⁵ First it had moved from tracts to other sorts of publications; then from aiming only at the working classes to providing for the devotional needs of the more affluent; and now, at last, it ceased to restrict itself to publishing on purely religious topics. Of course, the Society continued to insist that all its publications were written in a Christian tone, but the explicit topics ranged from science through geography to history and (even) to moral fiction for children.

As in earlier years, the change in publishing strategies met with strong opposition from those who feared the Society was forgetting its mission. The Reverend William Carus Wilson worried that 'the Society has departed from its original principles and practice' in publishing the 'Monthly Series'.⁵⁶ Others doubted whether 'a miscellany

⁵³ RTS Finance Committee Minutes, 18/09/1850.

⁵⁴ For graphs of the trends of the British book trade as a whole, including the slowing of growth post-1855, see Simon Eliot, *Some Patterns and Trends in British Publishing 1800-1919*, (London: The Bibliographic Society, 1994), and Simon Eliot, 'Patterns and Trends and the NSTC: Some Initial Observations, Part I', *Publishing History*, vol. 42 (1997), pp. 79-104.

⁵⁵ Green, *Story of the RTS*, 53-54.

⁵⁶ RTS Finance Committee Minutes, 20/01/1847.

of secular instruction was the proper work of the Society', or whether 'anything ought to be provided for Sunday reading, for any class or age, other than purely religious truth, such as the experienced Christian delights in'.⁵⁷ George Stokes took the opportunity to challenge subscribers on whether, of all the dire predictions that greeted the launch of the periodicals and books in the 1820s, 'any *one* of these anticipated evils has come to pass?'⁵⁸ He urged them to trust that the committee would be proved right again. As on the earlier occasion, the committee was soon able to justify its actions through the increased revenues made available for charitable tract work, and through the shreds of evidence that these Christian works of popular science (or history, or geography) were saving the souls of readers who were now too sophisticated for tracts.

1860s-1880s: Successful growth

The third quarter of the nineteenth century was a period of impressive and sustained growth for the Society, largely made possible by the introduction of the secular publishing programme discussed in the previous section. Many of the 'innovations' of later years can be seen as the gradual working-out of the implications of that decision, including the Society's famous range of children's publications. There seemed to be no limit to what the Society was now willing to publish, as long as it had Christian and moral values in the background. The *Boy's Own* and *Girl's Own Papers* in many ways represent the culmination of the new publishing programme: although solidly imbued with Christian morals, they were very different products from the simple text-only tracts intended to convert semi-literate working-class adults. Although the Society's sales income was ever-rising throughout this period, there was a significant jump at the point when the *Papers* were launched, in 1879 and 1880 respectively (see Figure 2).

As always, the Society's committee agonised about whether it ought to launch the *Papers*, and as always, it encountered criticism. Some subscribers feared that the new periodicals were 'too secular in tone, and desire[d] that the religious teaching which they contain should be much more extensive and prominent', but the committee was swift to point out that 'the attempt to give them an exclusively religious character

⁵⁷ Quoted in Green, *Story of the RTS*, 74.

⁵⁸ [Stokes], 'General and Scriptural Knowledge', 89.

would be to defeat the very purpose for which they were commenced'.⁵⁹ As usual, the impressive sales figures brought more funds to the Society's coffers, and enabled it to continue the work of spreading the Gospel all over the world. In addition to the mixture of informative articles that had characterised the *Leisure Hour*, the *Boy's* and *Girl's Own* included original fiction (often with an heroic Imperial flavour) by named authors, several of whom became successful children's writers. In addition to imbuing the contents with a stout moral tone, the papers' editors encouraged their readers to become practically involved in good works, and while the boys raised money for life-boats and homes for poor boys, their sisters sewed book-bags for sailors and knitted mufflers for the London poor.

The *Boy's Own* and *Girl's Own Papers* were part of a confident, successful programme of publishing that included just about everything a Christian household might need: from books and magazines for very young children, through works for adolescents, to magazines for family reading and books for the adults on everything from theological doctrine to popular science and ancient history. There were still tracts, though these had become far more sophisticated than their predecessors, and now dealt with issues of doctrine, or used the same formula of 'secular information with a Christian tone' that now characterised most of the other publications. There were also books for school prizes, and labels to stick in them; Christmas cards and calendars, and Bible puzzles.

The Annual Report of 1889 discussed the role of the enormous range of non-tract publications to an organisation which had chosen to retain the name 'Religious Tract Society'. Although clearly 'subsidiary to that which is directly evangelistic' and 'not obtrusively religious', these publications were nevertheless

permeated by Christian principle; always on the side of pure morals; always, whether in prose or poetry, whether treating of science or history, whether dealing with fact or fiction, with study or with sport, holding up for commendation all that is high and noble and pure in human conduct, and discouraging all that is false and low and mean.

⁵⁹ RTS Annual Report (1880): 2.

The aim was for all the Society's publications to be 'lively and interesting... truth teaching, but not dull; elevating, but yet attractive'.⁶⁰ As the list of subjects mentioned makes clear, there was virtually no subject which could not be given an evangelical overtone. Even fiction could now be explicitly mentioned, although there were limits to its role: moral fiction was seen as a helpful way of taking the message of salvation to certain audiences, particularly children and working-class adults. It did not appear on the Society's catalogue of works intended for Christian adults until almost the end of the century.

Despite this enormous and varied output for the British market, an examination of the Society's Annual Reports from the 1870s onwards would suggest that most of its concerns were overseas. The Reports typically devoted around six pages to the British publications and tract work, and used the remaining two hundred pages to report on overseas activities, whether the operations of foreign tract societies, or the efforts of individual merchants, diplomats and travellers in distributing tracts on the other side of the world. By 1850, the RTS was already proudly claiming to have printed 33 million tracts in 110 languages, but the reality was that the overseas activities at that point were still small-scale and sporadic. In the second half of the century, the attention shifted from Europe and north America to China, India, Africa and south-east Asia, and became increasingly institutionalised and large-scale.

The RTS's benevolent income remained relatively static throughout the late nineteenth century, at around £10,000 to £12,000 a year. The immense success of the British publishing operations, however, meant that it was regularly able to make grants amounting to twice or even thrice that amount, as is apparent from Figure 1. In the 1880s, the new periodicals were helping to fund annual grants of over £40,000. Some of these grants were made to missionary societies operating in Britain and Ireland, but most went overseas, where the RTS provided funds and expertise for tracts, school books, informative non-fiction, periodicals and posters. As well as working with the overseas missionary societies (FIGURE? Colporteurs in Papua New Guinea), the Society was willing to help individual missionaries, and to support the efforts of cognate organisations, such as the Christian Literature Society for China (1884), and the Christian Vernacular Education Society for India (1855, later the

⁶⁰ RTS Annual Report (1889):12.

Christian Literature Society for India and Africa). By 1900, the RTS claimed to have published in 230 languages.⁶¹

Although the spread of overseas operations was funded by the success of the home publications, the benefits were not entirely one-way. The activities of missionaries fed back into the British publications, supplying the tales of barbarous local customs, adventure in exotic locations, and exemplary Christian lives, which filled the pages of the Society's books and periodicals. Such tales acted as advertisements for the Society's missionary operations, and encouraged readers of all backgrounds to contribute to 'civilising' the heathen peoples of the Empire. Some children grew up wanting to be missionaries, while many others helped raise funds for the tract, bible and missionary organisations (FIGURE? Derby missionary fair). Thus, although the RTS began the century as a society run and supported by middle-class evangelicals to bring the British working-classes to Christ, it ended as a British society bringing education, British moral values and Christianity to the rest of the world.⁶²

1890s-1940s: Retrenching and reorientation

Unfortunately, the story cannot end as the imperial success story of the late nineteenth century. Although the British book trade entered a period of expansion in the 1890s that continued until the Great War, the RTS sales income began steadily to decline (Figure 2).⁶³ Initially, the committee attributed its changing circumstances to a 'general depression [which] has severely affected the book trade', and which, despite occasional optimistic claims of a revival, the Society perceived as lasting throughout the 1890s.⁶⁴ However, there was no such depression. Rather, as the RTS realised by the end of the decade, its publications were suffering from vastly increased competition. Annual reports complained about 'the entrance of many others into the field, once held almost exclusively by the Society', and described the Society's periodicals as having 'to fight more or less for very life'.⁶⁵ (The *Leisure Hour* was discontinued in 1906.) It cannot have helped that the influence of evangelicalism was finally waning, and that religious books were no longer in such universal demand as

⁶¹ Green, *Story of the RTS*, 201.

⁶² This role was already apparent in the conclusion to the 1850 jubilee history of the Society, see Jones, *Jubilee Memorial*, 640.

⁶³ On the growth of the book trade as a whole, see Eliot, *Patterns and Trends*, 13-14.

⁶⁴ RTS Annual Report (1888): 4.

⁶⁵ RTS Annual Report (1897): 3; RTS Annual Report (1899): 7.

they had been in the decades after mid-century. The news that Queen Victoria had agreed to become patron of the Society on the occasion of its centenary must have been one of the few pieces of good news for the British operations of the Society in the 1890s.

The enormous amounts devoted to charitable grants in the 1880s became deeply problematic in the 1890s. As circulations and sales income declined, the committee found it increasingly difficult to maintain the level of grants. Rather than discontinue regular grants, due to what it initially considered to be temporary cash-flow problems, the committee used thousands of pounds from the Society's capital reserves to supply the funds which the Trade Fund was no longer providing.⁶⁶ The Society appealed for more donations, and made a rare explicit statement of the fact that '*the prosperity of its trade is an essential help to its missionary work. There is no more efficient method of aiding this work than by helping to increase the circulation and sale of the Society's magazines and books.*'⁶⁷ Nevertheless, the committee eventually realised that there was no other option than to reduce the grants, and by 1910 had adjusted to a new level. The scenario returned to the pre-1850s situation, where the majority of grants were made out of Benevolent Income, supplemented, where possible, with trade surpluses. A close check was kept on spending by running the whole grants scheme a year behind the trade year.

The first decade of the twentieth century, therefore, was a time of reorganisation and retrenching. In addition to improving efficiency and cutting back on bureaucracy, greater efforts were made to increase support from the British subscribers and auxiliary societies. The local associations were organised into eight districts with their own secretaries, and given greater prominence in the annual reports. A young people's branch was founded. The new-found status quo was shattered by the Great War. The whole trade suffered, and the RTS reported that its paper prices rose 500% and printing costs rose 200% between 1914 and 1920.⁶⁸ The Society never really

⁶⁶ The committee drew over £4,200 in 1896, and over £11,500 the following year, RTS Annual Report (1896): 2; (1897): 16. Figures for earlier uses of reserve funds are not given.

⁶⁷ RTS Annual Report (1894): 2.

⁶⁸ RTS Annual Report (1920): 77.

recovered from that shock, commenting in 1933 that ‘things are different since the war’.⁶⁹

The inter-war years tell a story of continuing cheerfulness in adversity for the British operations. Tract circulation was down to one million, the lowest level since 1806.⁷⁰ In 1930, all the Society’s operations were moved under one roof (in its Bouverie Street premises) for the first time since 1837.⁷¹ In 1934, the structure of the local associations was reorganised to save £1,000 a year.⁷² As the Society’s third historian acknowledged, its survival was entirely due to its book and magazine publications.⁷³ Partly for this reason, coupled with a fear that the imprint ‘Religious Tract Society’ was old-fashioned and off-putting, a new imprint was introduced in 1932: the ‘Lutterworth Press’, named for the village where John Wycliffe had been rector.⁷⁴ The majority of British publications would eventually appear under the Lutterworth imprint, although some overseas publications continued to use the RTS imprint.

Finally, between 1935 and 1941, the biggest rationalisation exercise of all took place. The Society’s overseas operations had been increasingly focused on India, China and Africa, where it co-operated with the Christian Literature Societies for those areas. In contrast to its domestic role, the RTS overseas operations were more tightly linked to tract work, since school books, general interest magazines, and a variety of other informative books tended to be produced by the Literature Societies. In 1935, the RTS merged with the Christian Literature Society for India and Africa. This was followed, in 1941, with a merger with the Christian Literature Society for China. It was hoped that the ‘societies could work more effectively, more hopefully, and more economically as one body’.⁷⁵ The new society was the United Society for Christian Literature, and while the Lutterworth Press continued to publish a wide range of books and periodicals for the British market, most of USCL’s work has been done overseas.⁷⁶ It continues to promote literacy, education and Christianity to this day.

⁶⁹ RTS Annual Report (1933): 112.

⁷⁰ Hewitt, *Let the People Read*, 74.

⁷¹ RTS Annual Report (1930): 1.

⁷² RTS Annual Report (1934): 75; (1935): 20.

⁷³ Hewitt, *Let the People Read*, 74.

⁷⁴ RTS Annual Report (1933): 24; *Ibid.*, 77.

⁷⁵ RTS Annual Report (1935): 9-10.

⁷⁶ A brief history of the RTS, USCL and Lutterworth Press can be found in the celebratory brochure produced by the USCL, *Two Hundred Years of Christian Publishing* (1999), 13-20.

Conclusion

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the Religious Tract Society grew from a small voluntary organisation into a large, modern trading charity. Its story is one of an expanding sphere of operations, from industrial Britain, to Europe and north America, to the entire world. In the early days, the Society's officers had a fairly limited conception of their British market as made up of 'people like us' and 'the working classes in need of conversion'. By the end of the century, the range of products available amply illustrates that the Society had become aware of the diverse needs of audiences which differed by class, by age, and by gender, as well as by native language. In developing its extensive range of products, the RTS was responding to the changing circumstances in which it operated. It had begun at a time when cheap print was virtually unknown, and literacy levels were poor among the working classes. It could only survive in the increasingly competitive market for cheap print after mid-century by adapting to the competition, and to the changed expectations of its audiences.

It would be easy to see the story simply in terms of Figure 2, as a story of the increased profits associated with commercial success. But it is critical to remember that, no matter how effective and efficient a publisher the RTS was, it was also, always, a philanthropic organisation. The RTS committee members never set out to make a profit in this world, but always had their eyes fixed on the future world, in which glories never pass. They had to run their business carefully, because it was their duty as stewards of the Lord's bounty. When God's providence helped their business to be successful, it was then their duty to use the funds to further the Lord's work, by aiding the cause of literacy, basic education and Christianity all over the world. There is, then, a strong sense in which all the children's books and periodicals which will be discussed in this volume must be considered less as ends in themselves, but as means to a greater end.