

Preface

The Flight of the Penguin

Allen Lane died in 1970. Shortly before his death, as the founder of Penguin Books, he met with some of Britain's leading academics to propose that a consortium of British universities acquire Penguin Books. Penguin published everything from crime thrillers to Penguin Classics, including Pelican (nonfiction), Peregrine (first editions), Puffin (children's books), and the hardback Allen Lane imprint. By 1970, Penguin was as popular a national institution as the BBC.

Lane's was an early attempt to link two different types of knowledge institutions: popular but serious publishing and learned but modernizing universities. It came to nothing. The university sector at that time was incapable of making use of the popular reach, industrial resources, and global reputation of the firm that had so astoundingly democratized the reading public. The idea of a great publishing venture *as* a university did not accord with universities' self-conception. Indeed, the day after Lane's death, Penguin was sold to another media giant, Pearson; it would later be internationalized as part of Penguin Random House.

In the context of today's debates over control of the systems of scholarly communications and the societal impacts of textbook costs for students, it is clear in hindsight that an opportunity was lost. Universities might have led the transformation of knowledge institutions from closed cloisters to open and globally networked competitors in knowledge services. It took another generation along with the emergence of digital and internet technologies to force that change, eventually making universities an integrated (if specially protected) part of creative, knowledge, and service economies, in which environment they are by no means the dominant players.

In 2012, Pearson withdrew from trade publishing and began the divestiture of Penguin that would be completed by 2017. In January 2018, a distressed Pearson announced yet another cost-cutting venture, including a near-terminal retreat from the field of content production.

So has Lane's dying initiative now come full circle? With universities increasingly focused on funding publishing infrastructures and supporting open educational resources, is there an opportunity to lift the pace in rethinking their embrace of a more open and competitive knowledge role? Could they even be major players in the creative, knowledge, and service economies? What would it take for universities to be ready to take these opportunities in the future?