



Arts & Humanities  
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## Penguin Archive Podcast Transcript

**Duration:** 0:13:20

AHRC: Welcome. This is a Podcast from the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Interviewer: I'm talking to Dr John Lyon, Head of English and Reader in English at the University of Bristol.

John many thanks for joining us this afternoon. The Penguin Archive which we've just looked around is an extraordinary Archive. How did it come to be here at the University of Bristol?

John Lyon: Well we're sitting in Bristol and the reason is quite simply round the corner, that Allen Lane who was born Allen Williams founded Penguin Books. A distant uncle took him into the publishing world and he founded Penguin Books in 1935.

He has associations obviously with the City of Bristol but also the University of Bristol. Particularly he worked with Bill Williams who was an important Director in Penguin and Bill Williams in turn worked with Phillip Morris who was, for a while after the Second World War, a Vice Chancellor at the University of Bristol. And they were all much involved with questions of education in the course of the war, the Forces education.

So that this group of people saw writing and publishing and books as very much bound up with the way people lived their lives, the way people were led to think. So it's not surprising that Penguin was founded and the Bristol connection makes us very pleased to be host to this extraordinary resource.

Interviewer: It is an extraordinary resource and it's an extensive one. Just give a sense of its scope for us?

John Lyon: There are always gaps, because there are gaps in every archive. But we have copies of almost every Penguin, Pelican, Puffin book ever published until the '70s often, well usually with an autograph from the author. And that's one half of the archive as it were. Where then Penguin Books very kindly continue to give us everything they publish.

The other half is paper, paper that would extend to some five, more than 5,000 box files, editorial files, dealing with every book that was published. Files from Allen Lane's personal filing cabinet. The files of Eunice Frost who was an extraordinary influential woman in Penguin, one of the first women in the publishing world. And we have more or less the contents of her house when she died, in terms of paper that relates to publishing and books.

So it's extraordinarily diverse. I would be lying if I pretended I knew everything that was there. That's part of this Project to create an online catalogue so that whoever you are, whatever your interest is, you can find out if we have some material that may further your research or allow you to pursue your interests.

Interviewer: Just give us the sense of some of the highlights there amongst the correspondence in particular.

John Lyon: Well in general the surprising thing is that most academics go to the publisher that they associate with their author and look there. But Penguin, because it published books after they'd been published by the initial publisher, has a huge amount of correspondence from virtually everyone that you could name. And I think many academics overlook the Penguin Archive as a resource and would be surprised at the letters that we have.

I suppose one particular thing that's attracted a lot of attention recently, and we've just had a conference on the subject, is 'Lady Chatterley's Lover'. Where we have the papers of Michael Rubenstein, the lawyer who acted for Penguin and who wrote to the great and the good asking if they would be prepared to give evidence. And of course we have replies from everyone, some saying "Yes.", some saying "No.", some saying some quite extraordinary things.

Interviewer: And the thing about Penguin is it's not just another publisher it's actually, in some ways, a mirror of the changing British Society, as it changes from the '30s, '40s, '50s and '60s. Give us a sense of that that mirroring that Penguin does to British Society?

John Lyon: Well I've always argued that certainly Penguin mirrors the period from the '30s and the run up to the Second World War, certainly into the '80s. It mirrors it in terms of the way we think but also it mirrors it in the way that we'd look on Penguin in some sense designs, the look of those decades.

The Project has been going long enough now for me to make a tentative claim that Penguin doesn't merely reflect the times but actually Penguin is shaping the times. And one fairly uncontroversial example of that would be that as the Second World War broke out,

rationing set in, here there was a shortage of paper, the Government had to restrict publication and it isolated one publisher to be essentially given almost carte blanche. And that was the publisher that had sold most in the immediately preceding year which was Penguin. And Penguin published throughout the Second World War. The Government encouraged Penguin to publish specifically for the troops abroad. So that if you were serving in the Forces in the Second World War and you had a book in your pocket, it would be likely to be a Penguin.

But of course Penguin's politics have always lent slightly to the left, have always been sceptical. So that essentially Penguin is arguing for what went on to happen, which was the victory of the Labour Party in 1945 and the creation of post war Britain.

Interviewer: The Penguin brand is one of the most recognisable brands around, what does it mean to you?

John Lyon: First of all that it is a recognisable brand. It's for the first time ever that people have recognised books not by the author or the subject matter but by the publisher and the look of that publisher.

What it means to me, at my age, I think is accessibility and seriousness. Seriousness not devoid of humour but knowing as I was growing up that if I bought a Penguin I'd be buying a book that was worth reading.

Interviewer: Now your Project here, which began last year, is looking at three particular areas of research, three particular imprints that Penguin created. What are those?

John Lyon: Those are Modern Poetry, most immediately British poetry but they extend far beyond that to American poetry, poetry in translation. The second area is Penguin and the Classics, translations of the Greek and Latin classics, which is the way that most people in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, not necessarily being taught Latin and Greek, got their knowledge of Homer and Plato and Virgil and so on.

And the third area is especially exciting, it was the area that Allen Lane thought was Penguin's greatest achievement which is the area of the Penguin Specials. And those were, unlike most, Penguins specially commissioned books where the author was writing usually on matters of current affairs, socio political questions. And those clearly were engaging with the contemporary world in a very direct way. And demonstrably can be seen to have a very great impact on the way the world was.

Interviewer: And the project is funded by the AHRC. What is the Project going to be delivering in the future? You've got three more years to run.

John Lyon: We're trying to do two things here. We're trying to serve the academic community long term by creating an online catalogue of the Archive so that people don't have to come to Bristol or go through a long process of enquiry to know that they have something to come here to see. We're also trying to establish examples of what the archive can tell the academic world in, for example, the three areas that you've already mentioned. But the other area we're looking at, of course, is giving the great democratic publisher back to the general public.

So far we've had a launch with the Penguin poet, James Fenton at the Watershed Centre, the Media Centre in Bristol, which sold out, which suggests that the people of Bristol have an appetite for poetry and penguins.

We've had a conference on Lady Chatterley. We're having a further conference on Penguin and Translation in December. We have an international three day conference on all and anything Penguin or Puffin in the end of June, start of July in 2010 where we've got a distinguished array of key note speakers including Sir David Cannadine, Sir Christopher Ricks, Professor Kim Reynolds - - first Professor of Children's Literature - - Professor Simon Elliott who's the distinguished Professor of History of the Book. And we're inviting papers on anything that Penguin has an interest in. And that's almost like saying we're inviting papers on anything.

Beyond that, we're planning an exhibition because Penguin has an extraordinary visual appeal and that is something that's been demonstrated in the past. We hope to hold the exhibition in Bristol and give Penguin back to the people and more particularly to the people of Bristol.

We're also planning further conferences in relation to Penguin Specials and the Penguin Classics. We're also finding that having tried to engage the general public, the general public have very kindly decided to engage us and are coming to us with their Penguin stories with enthusiasms, interests, information, gifts at times. Everyone has a Penguin story and they all want to tell it and all of this material's interesting.

We're trying to extend the Archive by a series of interviews with important people associated with Penguin. But we're also working with our students to build up a record of people's reading habits and that invariably involves tales of Penguins and Pelicans and Puffins. And this is all rather nicely centred around the fact that 2010 is the 75<sup>th</sup> Birthday of Penguin and the 70<sup>th</sup> birthday of Puffin which of course is the children's wing as it were of Penguin.

Interviewer: One of the aspects of the Penguin brand if you like is people's affection for Penguin and so on. And it must be a particularly interesting and exciting area, that engaging the public in that particular way?

John Lyon: Yes it is because people's lives have been changed by Penguin, there's no doubt about it. In that a lot of people of my generation went to University because Penguin educated us into a position where we could go to University. Books were affordable but they were good books, they were serious books, they were books that made you think. And that I think is one of the personal attractions for me of the Project.

Interviewer: And what would be your particular favourite amongst Penguin books? What would be your 'Desert Island' Penguins?

John Lyon: Well it's rather odd for an English academic to have to single out one Penguin. I suppose the oddity is that I teach a lot of Henry James and Penguin has published Henry James over the years again and again. But strangely enough, I can only teach even my students reading from a different edition, a very battered copy of Henry James' 'The Ambassadors', since it's where I started and it's the one I know.

Interviewer: John Lyon, thank you very much.

John Lyon: Thank you.

AHRC: That was a Podcast from the Arts and Humanities Research Council. For further information please go to [www.ahrc.ac.uk](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk). Thank you for listening.