REVIEW ARTICLE

SELF-PUBLISHING


As Bill Hornadge explains (p. 48), Bettina Cummins wrote a little book of 24 pages in 1982, called *How to Self-Publish*, produced by William Alfred Cummins of Berowra, N.S.W., but, although a fine example of private press book production and containing some useful information for the would-be publisher, it "could not provide an in-depth treatment of the subject such as I have attempted." Hornadge’s own book is thus the first in Australasia to deal at all extensively with the growing activity of "self-publishing," and to give advice on the subject. That a book like his does fill a real gap in the local market is evident from the fact that a second edition was necessary in 1984, and also, of course, from Joanna Beaumont’s success in not only managing to publish a somewhat similar book in the year of Hornadge’s reprint, but selling her title well enough to warrant another impression of her book, too, the year after it was first published. An important distinction in the publishing history of the books is that Hornadge’s was not changed for the second edition, while Beaumont’s includes corrections, a new chapter "Defining your market," and, commendably, material especially for New Zealand readers "who, until now, have lacked a self-publishing guide." (It is true that Hornadge aims at the Australian market only, although of course most of his material is of interest to New Zealand readers as well.)

These books, then, provide something of a novelty in the publishing scene in Australia and New Zealand. The authors do not pretend that they have not been preceded by others writing about self-publishing elsewhere, but for Australasians these are two fairly elaborate guides designed to help the by now quite large number of self-publishers in their thinking and their practice. It is clear that self-publishing is today an established feature of the local scene. There are not only many self-publishers, but several of them publish more than one book, and the total number of self-published books is quite large. There is the likelihood that this situation will continue, and, as the books produced by self-publishers are often of a different nature from those sold by the more ostensibly commercial publishing-houses, the phenomenon of self-publishing is of importance to anyone interested in books, such as the readers of this journal. The appearance of these two books thus provides an opportunity for considering the whole question of self-publishing with some attention as an activity which is not new, either here or elsewhere, but more widespread than before. It is, moreover, found to be of special significance by both the self-publishers and their readers — who, judging from the success of many self-published books, are not a
small group, and, who, as a result of the efforts of the self-publishers, gain access to material which might otherwise well have remained unpublished.

At this stage I must own up to a degree of personal involvement which Perhaps has already become obvious, by implication, in the previous paragraphs. I am (or at least have been) a self-publisher myself. In 1982, I published a book (still for sale!) called Aspects of Australian Culture, edited by Joost Daalder and Michèle Fryar (Adelaide: Abel Tasman Press, pp. iii + 139), which could be legitimately described as self-published if for "editor" one reads "author." I am hesitant about doing this, because (1) I was not the only editor, and (2) in any substantial sense I was not the author. I in fact wrote only two pages myself, and otherwise my intellectual/authorial involvement consisted only of planning the book, seeking material for it, vetting the material and editing it. In all of these tasks, except the optimistic concept of the grand design, I was materially aided by my co-editor, who also was one of the 25 real authors. But the book was certainly "mine" in that I not only developed the idea for it in the first place, but also identified (as I still do) with its content. When the (small) publisher for whom it was prepared was not able to produce it as planned, I took on the task, with all its attendant agonies and pleasures, in much the same way as someone publishing work truly his/hers. Possibly, I felt a greater responsibility than I would have done towards my own work, although one knew on the other hand that, if an individual contribution were criticised, it would not hurt as much as if one had actually written it. But even criticism of work one has selected (as distinct from written) makes one suffer with the author; and, of course, I was as vulnerable as any self-publishing author with respect to the content in general, and especially all features of technical book production. It is not unusual for a "self-publisher" to be in fact someone who publishes a compilation of other people's work, and for present purposes I do not think the distinction with a true self-publisher a very important one.

The more important distinction, I feel, is one which both Hornadge and Beaumont might have made more sharply: it is the difference between the "big" commercial publishers who must make money and the small non-commercial publisher who does not necessarily despise a profit if it comes but does not have that in mind when embarking on the publishing venture. Hornadge does, I concede, make a good point when he gives as one of the reasons for self-publishing in the strict sense the fact that perhaps "you want to make money" (p. 6). It seems significant, however, that he mentions this factor last. Both he and Beaumont give much advice that would be of great benefit to someone who wants to make money in publishing. But both authors also indicate, implicitly rather than explicitly, that the self-publisher who primarily wants to make money is in for a great deal of difficulty unless the objective is approached very carefully.

Why is it that really making money is so difficult in publishing of this nature? Speaking both from my own experience as well as from my reading of the books under discussion, I would say that the money-making self-publisher needs the following to be successful. First, one should know a great deal about the enterprise of self-publishing in general. In this respect, undoubtedly books like Hornadge's and Beaumont's are very helpful. However, as they do not discuss any specific venture that a self-publisher might contemplate (which is
understandable, as all books are different and the authors are addressing more than one reader), the potential entrepreneur is still left to consider all details involved in the publication of the individual book envisaged. There is, then, no short-cut eliminating the need for experience. Closely related to this is the question of time. If I published another book, I would be more successful because I would know better what to do, in all relevant areas, within the time at my disposal. I add, here, that I suspect that most self-publishers only have very limited time — although that fact is not one to which Hornadge and Beaumont pay very much attention. If the self-publisher is also an active author, the time spent on writing must be deducted from the time available for publishing. Where the self-publisher is not primarily an author, he may well have a job, or (for example) children to look after. The ideal self-publisher, I would say, is someone who can devote all his time to the undertaking, and probably few of us can, or else we might as well set up a publishing business. There is nothing wrong with that, of course, but it should then be clear that the self-publisher either must be rich (with no need to work), or might as well publish other people’s work (why limit oneself to one’s own?), or extraordinarily business-like. And it should be understood that to be commercially ‘viable’ (in any economic sense), publishing needs a huge financial outlay. The authors are agreed that, viewed commercially, the recommended retail price of a book needs to be ‘around five times the actual cost of editing, setting, printing, and binding the volume in question’ (Hornadge, p. 52). Assuming that the average self-publisher cannot save much on the essential cost of production involved (other than editing perhaps), the bill is going to be quite enormous either for a small number of books or for a large quantity. It should be realised that a small print-run is still expensive: the cost of type-setting, for example, remains constant, in absolute terms. Thus, proportionately, a print-run of say 1000 copies costs more than one for a larger number. On the other hand, if one goes for a really big printing, the total cost for the whole operation is bound to be big, though the cost of each ‘unit’ (individual book) will come down. Obviously, a big outlay on advertising and distribution is going to be necessary to shift a very large number of books. A further disadvantage of self-publishing, if financial gain is one’s motive, is the fact that most people will (I believe) rather buy a book from a publisher they know than an obscure one, and will be particularly reluctant to purchase a book if the publisher is also the author. One can hardly blame the average customer for this. A known publisher, if he is a good one, has a name to lose; and if someone publishes a book written by himself there is no guarantee that any proper vetting has taken place. (Neither Hornadge nor Beaumont pay enough attention to this disadvantage of self-publishing, although it is important both commercially and intellectually.)

Making a profit, then, should hardly be the self-publisher’s first concern, and I would suspect that, if queried on the matter, most self-publishers would admit that they did not go into self-publishing for the money it might produce (or, if they did, that they were too optimistic). This is not to say that self-publishing may not produce a profit. But probably, if it does, one should be a professional fulltime publisher; and I, for one, would in that case ask myself whether I could really produce the books that I want to see the light of day,
whether I only want to produce my own books, and whether there are not yet other types of business in which I could earn more.

If my thinking about the matter is correct, much of the material offered by Hornadge and Beaumont is simply not to the purpose, however good in itself. And I do get the uneasy feeling, in reading their books, that many of us self-publishers (or at any rate small, non-commercial producers) are not really being catered for as much as we should be. For example, both authors point out — with obvious accuracy — that fiction and poetry are hardly likely to bring much to the self publisher. What they fail to do is to provide help to budding novelists and poets who might well get discouraged by the reactions from commercial publishers but who do have something worthwhile to say. It is exactly such literary writing which is most likely (in many cases) to suffer from an economic situation in which only ‘safe’ books get published, and, although no doubt much of it does not deserve to be printed, the question of whether or not it should be ought not to be left purely to economic chance. For one thing, publishers of such material might qualify for aid from the Literature Board of the Australia Council or the equivalent body in New Zealand. But, although such help may make the essential difference between publishing or not, the would-be publisher of literature or other non-commercial material still needs to be told what can be done to minimise the financial risks of publishing so as possibly to ‘break even.’ It is unlikely that one will do so if one pays oneself a salary, for example, or calculates the amount of interest one might have earned by not spending one’s money on publishing and selling one’s book. But there are certainly a number of things which may usefully be done. Hornadge and Beaumont mention them, but they do not clearly distinguish between a small, non-commercial publication and one which might as well be undertaken by someone who has made, or will make, a lot of money.

I do not profess to know how one would best proceed in publishing; say, a book of poems by a totally unknown poet — oneself or someone else. But I think there would be much more of a challenge in a venture of this kind than, say, a ‘How-to’ book of the kind which authors are more interested in, and which, in a sense, their own books on self-publishing are. One does hear of successful publications of books of poetry by unknown authors, and no doubt some readers could tell me exactly how it is to be done. I know of efforts by ‘collectives’ which have not come to grief, and I think a poet might avoid ruin by first establishing a name for himself in one of the many literary journals. Presumably similar situations exist with respect to other kinds of writing which are notoriously unprofitable. For my own part, I can only speak with some degree of knowledge about the sort of book represented by Aspects of Australian Culture — essentially a book of essays for a rather small (but not minuscule) market, with a reasonably appealing title. There must be many similar books which are typically suitable for self-publishing.

The first thing to establish, I think, is that one’s book must fill a real gap in the market. One thing which made me reasonably confident about proceeding was the fact that I knew there was no similar book in existence. I also knew that there was a potential demand: part of my reason for preparing the book was that
I knew next to nothing about Australian culture myself but wanted to find out about it — so I asked others to inform me, and I assumed that readers would share my own curiosity. I knew enough about Australians in general to be aware that even those who are informed about events in their country usually remain interested in hearing about them, or at least in seeing someone else's account: things have not been 'done to death' here, and there is a strong fascination with things Australian simply because they are Australian (not attempted before, presumably different as the 'product' of a particular place, etc.).

I would not say that I had done what Beaumont calls 'research' about the question of originality and need, but I certainly did a degree of homework, and I would not have persuaded any publisher, myself included, of the responsibility of what I was planning if I had not checked bibliographies, talked to people, etc. In the event, this initial work proved the more useful when, after completion of the book, the publisher who was going to print it was not able to do so. I had to decide on the instant, virtually, whether to send back all contributions to writers who in many cases had spent time on them specifically for this book or to 'self-publish'. I decided on the latter because I knew the book would fill a gap and meet a demand, although of course there were other factors involved as well.

One other pertinent reason was that I knew I had assembled very good contributions. This was possible in part because the contributors themselves could see a case for the book which I envisaged originally, and thus I was able to persuade good writers to produce material for me, which not only ensured a high standard of work, but also that the contributions were purposeful; and these factors essentially sold the book to its readers, as was obvious from the fact that most bought the book after seeing no more than a brief description of its content. I like to think that prospective purchasers could assess the merit of the book simply from that description even if all contributors had been obscure, but it is realistic to assume that the fact that many of the contributors were 'names' played an important part. I doubt, in fact, that I would have achieved any substantial sales if the 'names' had been absent, and I am sure that a greater degree of promotion (and thus a more substantial financial outlay) would have been needed as a result. I add here that no-one was paid for work contributed. It will be seen from all this that the book started with enormous advantages, and the fact that sales, though sound, have not been colossal shows how difficult, from a financial viewpoint, self-publishing must in many cases be.

I had other financial advantages. I could not qualify for a subsidy, and the so-called book bounty which I did receive is granted to anyone who (within reasonable guidelines) prints 1000 books or more, although, for sure, the bounty reduces the cost for each book produced. (Its existence was one reason why I printed 1000 books, not 500 — though I would not have done so if I had not felt convinced I could sell more than 500.) My chief financial benefit was that, as an academic, I could legitimately do the work on the book as part of my job and did not need to pay myself a salary — if I had actually charged myself for all my labour I would now be very poor indeed. Also, as a member of a tertiary institution, I had access to all sorts of tremendously important resources which others would normally have to pay for — I am thinking particularly of such
things as lists of addresses of libraries and other potential customers. Most importantly, some journal-editors were prepared to enclose a leaflet concerning the book when copies of their journals were mailed out anyway: these leaflets, briefly describing the content of the book and asking people to buy it by filing in their names and paying by return of mail, were enormously successful. They were aimed at the right people, and, as valuably, they saved a huge amount of postage. Without them, I think I might not have sold enough copies of the book, as the cost of the postage would probably have made it too dear. Other advertising, I found, whether in the form of direct advertisements or reviews, did not produce a clearly measurable return, though Hornadge and Beaumont appear to believe in it — probably with good reason if a different kind of book is involved. In the case of Aspects of Australian Culture, most sales were generated by sending leaflets to people directly — subscribers to relevant journals, libraries, schools, etc.

Thus, in the area of sales, my experience is only partly in tune with what Hornadge and Beaumont recommend. Many of the things which I did and have here described are things which they approve of, but I do not think that I would have sold as many copies of Aspects as I have if I had adopted their methods of promoting and advertising it instead of the direct-correspondence approach which they are right to say is dear, but which was highly effective in my case (much more so than they say it could be), and the cost of which was reduced through my educational connections. Without those, I think I would have floundered, and I do not see how Hornadge and Beaumont would have taught me to sell the book. This is no major criticism of what they say: I merely think that their advice is of limited value with respect to certain books which can only be sold in fairly small quantities and on which it would be irresponsible to spend large promotional costs.

Library suppliers, I found, were very useful, and willing to buy the book at the low price I had set for individuals. But, with the low price set, booksellers were a mixed blessing. Some, usually adventurous small shops in places other than Sydney and Melbourne, sold good numbers of the books comparatively easily. There is little point in ‘selling’ one’s book to booksellers unless one is sure that the booksellers themselves are going to get sales. Booksellers will almost never directly purchase a book like Aspects (or many other books for that matter), and if they do not sell one’s copies one will have to accept them back on a ‘sale or return’ basis — frequently in shocking condition. I think this is another good reason for trying to sell one’s book directly to one’s customers. The alternative is to ‘go big’, which in effect, it seems to me, is what Hornadge and Beaumont are recommending.

I think they might also have warned one more about the amount of time which the self-publisher needs to set aside. Yet, in my instance, if I am now reluctant to do any further self-publishing, it is not because of financial problems. I have, at least in an informal sense, covered my costs; most of the 1000 books which I printed have, fortunately, been sold. I am sure, too, that they have ended up in the right hands, which is more important than the matter of money by itself. But I have found the whole exercise far more wearing than I had
anticipated, and first of all at the production stage. I am told it is normal to encounter many problems when one's book is typeset, printed and bound; but Hornadge and Beaumont write as though my problems were unusual. To be fair to the firms I employed, all the problems were solved satisfactorily — but they did take up a great deal of my time. Much of the work of writing to prospective customers, sending out books, etc. was done by Michèle Fryar and my wife, and they did an excellent job; but again this work was more time-consuming than one would gather from reading Hornadge and Beaumont.

Nevertheless, there are errors which I could have avoided if I had known these two books. For example, I did not think of making the cover of Aspects glossy; it is a typical example of the care of Beaumont's book that she does advise one to do so. A glossy cover is in fact essential if one wants to sell through bookshops, or else any books that are returned will almost certainly be in unsaleable condition (particularly if stickers have been used). Beaumont also gives one a number of very useful addresses which I either did not know at the time I produced Aspects, or found out about only with the greatest difficulty. With respect to all technical matters, hers is a very thorough, professional and useful book. I think Hornadge is more thought-provoking, and probably more helpful, about many of the larger areas with which I have been concerned here. He has many interesting stories to offer about self-publishers and how they succeeded or failed; despite the presence of many spelling errors, I found his book more absorbing to read than Beaumont's. The two works are, in fact, often complementary, and I would recommend both to would-be self-publishers. Their experience is less limited than mine, and it is possible that I am very wrong in thinking that their approach is likely to be far more valid for certain kinds of self-published books than others. If on the other hand any self-publisher benefits from remarks which I have here added to those made by Hornadge and Beaumont in their books, I shall be delighted to have contributed to any success.

Joost Daalder, Flinders University.

NOTES

1 I hope I shall be forgiven for using "he", etc., from here on rather than "he/she".
2 The decision had to be a quick one because some of the material made reference to specific contemporary events.