

# *Closing ranks: the Publishers Association in Victorian Britain and its powerful place in institutional formation*

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Published Version

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Joseph, M. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3045-9897>  
(2025) Closing ranks: the Publishers Association in Victorian Britain and its powerful place in institutional formation. *Business History*, 67 (6). pp. 1490-1511. ISSN 1743-7938 doi: 10.1080/00076791.2024.2393603 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/113561/>

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To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00076791.2024.2393603>

Publisher: Taylor & Francis

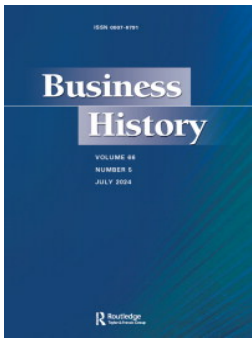
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Marrisa Joseph

To cite this article: Marrisa Joseph (30 Aug 2024): Closing ranks: The Publishers Association in Victorian Britain and its powerful place in institutional formation, Business History, DOI: [10.1080/00076791.2024.2393603](https://doi.org/10.1080/00076791.2024.2393603)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00076791.2024.2393603>



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Published online: 30 Aug 2024.



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# Closing ranks: The Publishers Association in Victorian Britain and its powerful place in institutional formation

Marrisa Joseph

Henley Business School, University of Reading, Reading, United Kingdom

## ABSTRACT

Professional associations have been explored as institutional agents and can be powerful mechanisms for instigating practices into an industry. Despite this identification there is a lack of research which delves deeper and explores the contexts that allow strategies which contribute to institutional formation; which in turn can create professional associations in the process. Through an analysis of archival letters and newspaper articles surrounding the formation of the net book agreement in the Victorian British publishing industry, this paper illustrates how individuals formed the Publishers Association to further their own causes and protect their business interests. This paper argues that the construction of the professional association was used as the vehicle for individuals with the most power in the Victorian publishing industry to instigate change.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 5 May 2023

Accepted 13 August 2024

## KEYWORDS

Institutional formation; power; professional associations; publishing industry; Victorian; Britain

Professional associations have been argued as organisations which can be instrumental in creating, reproducing and legitimising practices (Boussard, 2018; Chacar et al. 2018; Friedman & Afitska, 2023; Greenwood et al. 2002; Millerson, 1964; Pemberton, 1994). They can be important for the progression of professions and professional activity and can be influential in how professions represent themselves to each other and the wider society (Greenwood et al. 2002). Drawing on these perspectives, this paper seeks to widen the discussion of the role of professional associations in institutional formation by exploring the conditions which gave rise to the Publishers Association. Founded in London 1896, it was formed primarily to uphold the net book agreement which prohibited underselling; defined as the selling of books below the advertised price.

When the agreement was formed at the turn of the twentieth century, it was deemed in the best interests for publishers, booksellers and authors. So much so, they collectively agreed to uphold the agreement formally through constitutions of professional associations; that of the Booksellers' Association, the Society of Authors and most noticeably the Publishers Association. Yet what has received little attention in research is why the construction of the professional association was suited to achieving these aims, and what were the decisions of individuals which prompted institutional formation at this point. Therefore, this paper questions, why did the Publishers Association prompt institutional formation in

**CONTACT** Marrisa Joseph  [M.joseph@henley.ac.uk](mailto:M.joseph@henley.ac.uk)

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the Victorian publishing industry, and how was it used by the publishers with the most power to facilitate change?

The publishing industry is generally understood as 'the commercial activity of putting books into the public domain' and comprises of a conglomeration of businesses that contribute to this activity including authors, booksellers, printers and publishers (Feather, 2006, p. 1). The publishing industry has been considered as conservative and can be slow to change (Sutherland, 2013). Yet despite its outputs being highly individualised, the processes that constitute how business was – and is still – done is largely homogenised across the industry (Joseph, 2019b).

These characteristics make it an apt field to illustrate the drivers of institutional formation in order to further explain how practices have been instigated and adopted.

This paper argues that the construction of the professional association allows dominant organisations in an industry to put in place processes that favour their own objectives, illustrated by the formation of the Publishers Association and the mechanisms that were utilised by dominant actors. The paper also examines how individuals were able to use their power to construct practices that were widely adopted throughout the industry. Through an analysis of letters from business archives, newspaper articles and privately printed histories, this paper argues that some publishers – in particular the dominant London firms – pushed their collective interests through the construction of the Publishers Association. These actions consequently prompted institutional formation, influencing and governing practices that would stand for generations.

## Professional associations and institutional formation

Over past decades, understanding institutional change has become a dominant strand of research within organisation studies (Battilana & D'Aunno, 2009; Glynn & D'Aunno, 2023; Micelotta et al. 2017). Increasingly studies within business history are also drawing on institutional theory to understand sites of institutional change and the effect on individuals and their wider institutional environments (Chacar et al. 2018; Maclean et al. 2022; Marquis & Qiao, 2023; Wąsowska, 2022). Examining how and why particular strategies can appear relevant and legitimate, alongside tracing these intricate and complex changes over time have prompted further dialogue on this topic. In particular, researchers have argued that there should be a deeper exploration of processes in which we can trace institutional change as opposed to predominantly focussing on outcomes (Abdelnour et al. 2017; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Suddaby, 2010). Related to this argument is the approach of institutional formation. This addresses the dynamics of nested micro processes which contribute to the spread of institutional practices, as opposed to mostly focussing on the diffusion of structures and practices (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Lawrence, 1999; Leibel et al. 2018; Lowndes & Lemprière, 2018). Lawrence (1999) has referred to this approach as an institutional strategy. Patterns of organisational actions which are concerned with the formation and transformation of institutions; they can both be deliberate and intentional, as well as unintentional and emergent.

Understanding processes – whether these are intentional activities by individuals and organisations or not – requires us to examine evidence to demonstrate when, how and why they began. Consequently incorporating a much stronger emphasis on the lived experience of individuals and the activities that take place at the micro level of organisations (Harrington,

2015; Levy & Bui, 2019). Research on institutional formation is increasingly bringing this aspect to the foreground, with studies arguing that discussions should embrace the perspectives of individuals with more vigour, to further understand the choices and actions of actors in relation to field level changes and the subsequent impact on institutional practices (Harrington, 2015; Lawrence et al. 2009; Maclean et al. 2016; Powell & Colyvas, 2008). The field level constitutes the taken-for-granted meanings, norms and regulations that are inherent within organisational structures which influence how they operate. Examining what prompts change at this level can further our understanding of the relationship between individual actors and the influences that govern their actions, alongside the strategies they employ which prompts institutional formation (Harrington, 2015; Levy & Bui, 2019).

Löhlein and Müßig (2020) discuss that studies which address individual motivation are rare, as they have been neglected due to highly individualised characteristics. Yet there are studies which have argued for bringing the individual perspective back to research as they can be powerful agents for instigating change in institutional fields (Battilana et al. 2009; Leibel et al. 2018; Suddaby et al. 2016). Despite the increasing calls for research to focus on individuals, Harmon et al. (2019) discuss that examining micro foundations does not have to be limited to the perspective of individuals. They highlight that individuals can 'pull down' from their environments which govern their actions and local practices, consequently these actions can be 'built up' into structures (Harmon et al. 2019, p. 465). These discussions highlight that there is scope for more research which examine lower-level analysis of individuals and organisations. Tracing outcomes of processes relies on studies analysing what Suddaby (2010, p. 16) refers to as the institutional story, it requires research to examine the 'symbols, myths and processes by which organisations interpret their institutional environments'. This approach is apt for bringing further insight to the micro level of institutional formation and change. Although studies have highlighted that there is limited empirical research which demonstrates why certain actors are able to overcome pressures to uphold institutionalised practices, and instead instigate change (Löhlein & Müßig, 2020; Micelotta et al. 2017).

Greenwood & Suddaby (2006) explore who would be the most likely actors to engage with instigating change. They discuss that those who are dominant, in the centre of institutional arrangements are less likely to be motivated by change or are less likely to come up with novel changes as they benefit the most; indeed, their interests are aligned with current practices. Furthering this perspective, Hardy & Maguire (2017) argue that those at the periphery are more likely to engage with disrupting institutional arrangements as they are less privileged by the current system, and are less constrained by normative practices. They are more likely to be innovative with what change could look like, however they lack sufficient influence, resources and power to mobilise change. Multiple strands of research analyse the motivation for institutional formation whilst attempting to identify strategies for achieving change. Yet it has been argued that there is a gap in research which explores the intricate processes that critically interrogate how institutional behaviours are instigated, formed and maintained (Decker et al. 2018; Hardy & Maguire, 2017; Leibel et al. 2018; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010).

The concept of power has been argued as an under discussed area of research in the context of institutional formation (Hardy & Maguire, 2013; Lawrence, 2008; Levy & Scully, 2007). Levy & Scully (2007) argue that actors who are powerful within an institutional field are those who have access to resources. Action tends to revolve around those who are in a position of dominance, and in particular they deem formal authority as an important source

of power (Levy & Scully, 2007). Löhlein & Müßig (2020, p. 4) offer a competing perspective arguing that 'actors who occupy elite positions in fields possess differential access to status, political power or other key resource which provides them with greater insight to recognise opportunities for change'. This perspective highlights that there is a gap in research which explores how those in power are able to recognise opportunities for change, alongside identifying the structures of power which facilitate change and the strategies used to achieve objectives.

One mechanism that has been identified as a site for instigating different processes is the professional association. Greenwood et al. (2002) discuss that diffusion of institutional change can happen when there are opportunities for new ideas to be compellingly presented over existing practices. Despite their importance as sites of institutional change (as they play an important role in constructing behaviour), there has been little research dedicated to understanding professional associations as organisations, including their internal policies, structures and procedures, with calls for more studies to address this research area (Friedman & Afitska, 2023; Parker, 2007). Professional associations could be viewed as vehicles for diffusion, sitting at the intersection of pushing forward change whilst reinforcing institutional norms.

Professional associations – in contrast to trade unions which predominately deal with remuneration and working conditions – are mainly concerned with advancing the social and economic status of particular organisational groups (Millerson, 1964). It has been argued that the formation of associations is a commonly used practice by individuals to induct and construct a normative pattern within an organisational field (Greenwood et al. 2002; Millerson, 1964). They play an important role in both reinforcing norms guided by an established institutional order, whilst also engaging in actions geared towards changing established institutions (Greenwood et al. 2002; Holm, 1995; Washington, 2004).

Greenwood et al. (2002) argue that diffusion is one way in which institutional change can take place. Diffusion occurs when an idea is presented as more favourable than existing practice, and when it is taken up by actors it later becomes institutionalised (Greenwood et al. 2002). Understanding how ideas 'flow' and 'stick' with an emphasis on microprocesses at the individual level, can help account for the mechanisms in which spreading ideas are embraced (or resisted) and institutionalised (or not) (Chandler & Hwang, 2015, p. 1447). This paper embraces this perspective, as it explores how professional associations were used as mechanisms to diffuse ideas which in turn prompted institutional formation.

Tracing how individuals push for change within the publishing industry is discussed within research on book history. Scholars highlight the significance and importance of the Booksellers Association, the Society of Authors and the Publishers Association (Feather, 2006; Kingsford, 1970; Rose, 2007). These professional associations have been identified as instrumental in professionalising authorship and as products of increased professionalisation within the wider publishing industry (Eliot, 2007; Joseph, 2019b). However, analysis of these organisations is mostly in the historical examination of how the net book agreement was constructed (Eliot & Freebury, 2010; Feather, 2006; Kingsford, 1970). There is a gap in research from the perspective of book history which analyses these professional associations at the micro level, to explore how practices were built into the industry. Therefore, this paper will explore the mechanisms used by publishers to facilitate change, and questions why establishing the Publishers Association prompted institutional formation in the Victorian publishing industry. In addition, this paper contributes and furthers other studies in business history

that focus on the emergence and development of business associations in Europe. It progresses discussions on this limited area of research and the strategies business associations employ to further their own interests (Bocqueraz, 2010; Eichenberger et al. 2023; Perchard et al. 2024; Pitteloud, 2023; Rollings, 2022). By exploring the strategies that led to the formation of the Publishers Association, this paper will examine how and why institutional formation was brought about through an analysis of historical sources.

## Method and sources

This paper draws on narrative sources which highlight the perspective of individuals, including published collections of letters alongside those held in archives, in conjunction with opinion pieces in periodicals and newspapers. The research focuses on incorporating details from narrative sources that highlight the thought processes behind actions, alongside tracing the outcomes from decisions and their next steps. It pieces together information from a range of sources that demonstrate different perspectives and approaches from the same individual which can bring to the foreground a nuanced exploration of how individuals instigate institutional formation alongside the tools and processes they use to do so.

The focus is most noticeably on the Macmillan Publishing House, as one of the early partners of the firm Frederick Macmillan (1851–1936) was instrumental in establishing the net book agreement. The activities of this organisation are central to this paper due to its position of being a market leader alongside the publishing houses of Longman, Murray and others. Many documents from the early years of these houses have been preserved in business archives located at the British Library and the University of Reading.

The publishing industry is a part of the wider commercial industry of the book trade, consisting of retailers, distributors, booksellers, bookbinders and printers. Initially, in the seventeenth century, the areas of printing, bookselling and publishing were wrapped up as an entity. But as some who worked in the book trade continued to turn their businesses towards publishing, by the end of the nineteenth century the separation of functions began to become more prominent, progressing into a fragmentation of what we would now recognise as the modern publishing industry (Feather, 2006). I do not analyse these functions in detail as the paper concentrates on publishing, although I examine the relationship between these businesses. However, I discuss the effect the book trade had on the publishing industry in nineteenth-century Britain, as the retailing of books had a significant impact on publishing (Feather, 1984, 1994). The activities of the professional associations at the heart of this paper frame the periodisation of the research, exploring their foundations in the late nineteenth century up until the creation of the net book agreement in 1900. This was the defining pinnacle of contractual arrangements, demonstrating the culmination of strategic change enforced through the associations.

Although the publishing industry trades on making information, ideas, thoughts and debates public, sources which demonstrate detailed motivations and processes authored by individuals working in publishing can be difficult to find. Company archives tend to prioritise records concerning the executive functions within organisations, providing access to the correspondence of top managers or minutes taken at high-level meetings (Decker, 2013). What is typically less preserved is ephemeral daily life, as seen through middle-management decisions or the activities of non-managers. As such, the routines, emotions and other interconnected elements of specific work practices can be hard for historians to

untangle (Kirsch et al. 2023). Archives have an abundance of business correspondence which in the context of this research does not particularly highlight the motivations for decision making; or how Popp and Fellman (2020, p. 1535) highlight ‘voices from the shop floor’. Therefore, an approach needs to be taken in which gaps or silences in research can be addressed. Decker (2013) refers to this as source triangulation, in which historians use a variety of sources to build a more comprehensive narrative.

The sporadic nature of sources written from the perspective of decision makers in the publishing industry provides an additional layer of interest for this research. Sir Frederick Macmillan and William Heinemann – who will be discussed in more detail later in this paper – both use the platform provided by publishing to push forward their own practices in an attempt to have them legitimised. It has been argued that sources should be read against the grain, that analysis and interpretation should not stop at what is on the surface in order to corroborate factual accuracy, bias and potential hidden meaning (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). It is within this reflexivity that historians can be more critical of their sources, enabling research to be increasingly challenging in its approach (Barros et al. 2019).

It should be noted, that despite there being evidence from sources, there is still the challenge of concretely knowing an individual’s intentions; hence the increased need to draw sources from multiple locations and to be critical of them. Source criticism is used throughout this paper however it is used with a dual approach. Firstly, as a mechanism to be critical of accuracy and bias, but also to allow attention to focus on the construction of the source itself. Being reflexive and looking beyond the face value of what a source is saying is important. Although, I argue in the context of this paper that it is just as important to focus on what is being portrayed on the surface as this can be as telling as going beyond the words on the page.

Source criticism is apt for a handful of integral sources that inform this paper. *A Remedy for Underselling* (1890) by Frederick Macmillan and *The Hardships of Publishing* (1893) by William Heinemann are narrative sources used to galvanise those working in the publishing industry to their way of thinking. These sources are written by two key individuals who are pushing for change, and both sources are written with the intention to generate support for their cause; this is evident in the language used. As I mentioned earlier, sources written from the voices of decision makers in the industry are not as abundant. Therefore, these sources at face value have particular importance alongside the critical analysis of bias, factual accuracy and hidden meaning. In addition, how these sources are made available is an important factor to note. Choosing to privately print as opposed to printing an article in a leading industry newspaper, provides further information and should be included in the approach to understanding the source and the story of what the words portray; an aspect discussed later in the paper. These sources provide an insight into the motivations for creating particular practices and the mechanisms in which individuals choose to gain support for their respective ideas.

## **Historical context: book trade regulations and the net book system**

In order to understand and appreciate why the Publishers Association (which I shall refer to as the Association) was founded and how it became a dominant organisation in the industry, there needs to be a discussion of the long-standing disagreement between booksellers and publishers. The establishment of the Association is intertwined with the creation of the Net

Book Agreement, which was an arrangement between the publishers and booksellers of Victorian Britain not to sell discounted books below the advertised retail price; this was referred to as underselling (Ansell, 1998; Feather, 2006). The agreement itself was not an entity inscribed in UK legislation, it was initially a trading agreement within the publishing industry that was supported by booksellers (Dearnley & Feather, 2002).

In the early 1800s new forms of literature such as serialisation in newspapers and the growing dominance of the circulating library were squeezing the business of the bookshops, leading to a rise in underselling which was a large problem for booksellers (Joseph, 2019b). Publishers would set the price of their books, yet booksellers would provide significant discounts to readers. This led to profit margins being threatened as booksellers continued to drive prices down in order to compete with one another. Publishers were gradually losing their shop windows as bookseller after bookseller went out of business (Joseph, 2019b). As retailing continued to fall into decline, the threat from underselling spread beyond the realms of the booksellers and became a significant problem for publishers alongside authors as payment by royalty was becoming increasingly popular (Bonham-Carter, 1978).

In an attempt to save their livelihoods, a group of booksellers proposed that publishers should fix a retail price which the booksellers would uphold. The publishers would have to sell to them at a discount which would provide a fixed profit margin to both parties and would ensure that the value of literature would be protected in the marketplace (Feather, 2006). The first half of the nineteenth century saw two attempts by booksellers – who had mobilised as the Booksellers' Association (BA)<sup>1</sup> – and publishers to create bookselling regulations in 1829 and 1848. In both cases the regulations were almost impossible to enforce hinting to some booksellers that there should be a free trade in books (Feather, 2006; Joseph, 2019b; Weedon, 2003).

Free trade versus retail price maintenance divided the opinion of London booksellers, prompting a public discussion on the benefits of regulation which was captured in *The Leader* (1850–1860); a radical newspaper which set out to provide a platform for 'the most advanced opinions on the questions of the day' (Brake & Demoor, 2009, p. 351). The article set out the terms for restrictive practices highlighting that booksellers who kept a shop in London would need to become members of the BA. They would receive a 30% discount on the advertised retail price and would not be permitted to give their customers more than 10% discount. A breach of these conditions would see the bookseller cut off from the supply of new books from publishers ('The Bookselling Question: The Arbitration', 1852). Booksellers Messrs Bickers and Bush were referred to as the representatives of the undersellers and led the opposition to price maintenance as they were content to operate on a narrower profit margin ('The Bookselling Question: The Arbitration', 1852).

The article 'The Bookselling Question: The Arbitration' (1852) which documented the debates regarding price maintenance highlighted an interesting point. In order to represent their interests and attempt to enforce the regulations, publishers had been permitted to join the BA; today this would not be permissible as the association only represents those who are booksellers. Publishers needed to protect their interests, therefore they ensured that their influence would be recognised in the organisation that was upholding the regulations, guaranteeing that they would still benefit. As noted by a journalist, although the association was established by retail booksellers, 'publishers and wholesale booksellers had considered it their interest to support such associations' ('The Bookselling System', 1852). Representatives from some of the largest houses in Britain had a seat at the table including

John Murray III (1808–1892), either George (1801–1858) or Francis (1805–1885) Rivington,<sup>2</sup> Henry Bohn (1796–1884) and William Longman (1813–1877) who acted as Chairman ('The Bookselling Question: The Arbitration', 1852). This demonstrates that long before the founding of the Association, the construct of professional associations was used to instigate institutional formation. As with the Association at the end of the century, the most influential houses with the most market share were those at the helm. They were in position to set the objectives which favoured their businesses.

A meeting led by Lord Campbell (1779–1861) a distinguished lawyer and politician, presided over a committee which was selected to arbitrate the opposing sides, and it ultimately ruled against the BA concluding that its proposal of 'the regulations [were] unreasonable and inexpedient' ('The Bookselling Question: The Arbitration', 1852). The ruling prompted the BA to be disbanded and free trade resumed ('Authors, Publishers, and Booksellers', 1852). This once again led to books being sold cheaply forcing many booksellers to declare bankruptcy due to heavy cash flow problems (Feather, 2006; Joseph, 2019b).

Almost half a century later, underselling again became a prominent topic for the publishing industry, however it was some of London's most influential publishers leading the charge to revive bookselling regulations. This time it was Frederick Macmillan who pushed forward the publishers interests and was ultimately successful. He shared the view of his uncle Alexander Macmillan (1818–1896) co-founder of the Macmillan publishing house with his brother Daniel (1813–1857) Frederick's father, that the 1852 decision was not a 'wise one'.<sup>3</sup> Alexander was staunchly against underselling and believed that publishers 'should be allowed to regulate the distribution of [their] own wares'.<sup>4</sup> In agreement, Frederick considered the decision taken by Lord Campbell in 1852 to be a 'selfish and narrow-minded stance', and so looked to galvanise his fellow publishers to address underselling in the publishing industry.<sup>5</sup>

A key source which exemplifies how Macmillan used his influence and power to push for this change is an article titled 'A Remedy for Underselling', published in *The Bookseller* in March 1890. The article is a correspondence letter written to the editor Joseph Whitaker (1820–1895) highlighting that 'the time is right to take some serious action on the part of all concerned towards a settlement of the 'underselling' question'.<sup>6</sup> Frederick discussed the many letters he received from booksellers across the country, indicating that it's not just his opinion, but that many in the industry agree with him; demonstrating that he had support to instigate change. Frederick mentioned that for all of his 'twenty-three years of experience in the trade' the 'burning' question – as he refers to underselling – had been a constant source of contention.<sup>7</sup> Frederick implored the editor to receive replies from the readership as to whether they agreed to his 'remedy', which would eventually become the net book agreement.

This letter is evidence of how Macmillan was able to test the waters and gauge the appetite for a resurgence of bookselling regulations, one of the first steps to instigate change across the sector. In addition, it highlights the strength of his power. Macmillan mentioned that he had received letters on the topic, which purports that others with perhaps less influence in the industry looked to him to solve the problem; as though he had been informally nominated to "lead the charge". He discussed his length of experience in the industry, which signals that he could be trusted to take leadership for an ongoing problem that it seems that no one else could solve. What is striking is the final sentence in the opening paragraph of letter. Macmillan highlighted that it's the worst problem for the bookseller, not the publisher. His tone implied that he cared deeply about the bookseller as 'it is rapidly

becoming impossible for a bookseller, pure and simple, dealing in current literature to make profit from his business.<sup>8</sup> It was likely that Macmillan did care about the bookseller, especially as his father and uncle began their business as booksellers before they moved into publishing (Joseph, 2019b). Furthermore, booksellers are an integral part of getting literature into the hands of the reader. Macmillan put their plight front and centre implying that he was on their side, especially as he needed the booksellers to conform in order to make the net book agreement viable.

*The Bookseller* – as Frederick pointed out – had many columns dedicated to the discussion of underselling, and so Macmillan began his campaign in the ‘recognised organ of the [book] trade.’<sup>9</sup> Founded in 1858 by Whitaker, *The Bookseller* (which is still published today) was primarily for booksellers and publishers, covering notices of individual publishing and book-selling companies, trade news, copyright issues, lists of new books and accounts of industry celebrities (Brake & Demoor, 2009). Other periodicals that covered the business of the publishing industry also discussed underselling. Attempts had been made long before Macmillan to address underselling by appealing to the general readership of publishing professionals in *The Publishers’ Circular* however it had not garnered any traction (F.S., 1876, p. 1187). Mostly an outlet for news on the publication of new books, *The Publishers’ Circular* was considered to have more of a conservative stance towards the topic (Brake & Demoor, 2009), a likely reason as to why Macmillan chose not to use this periodical for his letter.

Frederick firmly believed that regulation was the key to stopping underselling, demonstrated by the title of his proposal to entrench regulation in the industry; Frederick referred to his idea as a remedy, this is the answer. The letter is only a page long however its contents are embers which became ignited into the net book agreement. Frederick could have chosen a wealth of other publications, including his own *Macmillan’s Magazine* which had been in print since 1859. However, to ensure maximum impact, he chose to begin his campaign in a trusted publication whose editor was known to be a defender of the bookselling trade (Tedder & Coohill, 2020). Whitaker in his editorial placed a few pages before Macmillan’s correspondence urged the readership to voice their support or lack thereof by returning printed slips.<sup>10</sup> Macmillan likely recognised that the readership of *The Bookseller* through the responses that Whitaker agreed to collate would be the most prudent way to get confirmation of the support for his plan. These factors illustrate how choosing *The Bookseller* was an important part of instigating institutional formation, due to its influence in the industry.

The difference between regulations being accepted the second time round, was that Macmillan gave booksellers the illusion of choice as opposed to offering complete price maintenance or overall free trade. Booksellers could voluntarily enter into a net book agreement, by which ‘net books’ were subject to being sold at the published price and no less (Joseph, 2019b). In contrast, no regulations could be placed on subject books. These books did not have any restrictions placed upon them, meaning booksellers were free to pursue their own pricing and were not bound to honour the price set by the publisher. Macmillan argued that this method was favourable as it allowed publishers and booksellers to choose how their books were sold (Macmillan & Bell, 1924). However, the power was in the hands of the publisher, as they were at liberty to decide which were subject versus net books and the bookseller had no choice but to comply, otherwise they would be barred from selling some of the most popular titles. An early draft of the net book agreement was sent to the London Booksellers Society (predecessor to the Booksellers Association of 1895) in June

1894, this Memorandum ensured that the booksellers would 'pledge...not to give discount[s]'.<sup>11</sup>

Macmillan chose a high quality title as a way to test whether it would sell due to its 'net-ness' rather than its quality (Macmillan & Bell, 1924). The first net title was *The Principles of Economics* written by Professor Alfred Marshall (1842–1924), a well-known economist and Professor of Political Economics at the University of Cambridge, as it was expected that his book was to be a strong market leader for student texts in Economics (Macmillan & Bell, 1924). This has been noted as a surprising choice considering the topic, especially as Marshall himself was against the net book system and strongly opposed regulation on bookselling (Guillebaud, 1965). *The Principles of Economics* was published in July 1890, with poor initial sales as the title was boycotted by booksellers; they refused to stock any titles which had pricing regulations imposed on them (Macmillan & Bell, 1924). However, the issue for booksellers was that they still had to purchase stock from publishers and wholesalers. The publishers had power here, especially those who had commissioned literature from leading authors; therefore, Macmillan was in a strong position. He was able to ensure that any bookseller who opposed his net system was cut off, coercing them into retail price maintenance, as without agreeing they were not able to compete; they couldn't sell the most popular titles of the day (Macmillan & Bell, 1924). The net book system allowed publishers to wield power within the market, as they controlled the supply of titles and booksellers had to conform, otherwise they would limit their ability to trade.

Although a voluntary agreement, the enforcement of price maintenance was undertaken by the Macmillan publishing house. The first to be cut off were Messrs E. & J. Stoneham who openly disregarded the regulations and discounted Macmillan's net books. Their account was closed, and subsequently they adhered to the rules to avoid going out of business (Joseph, 2019b). Macmillan sought further reinforcement and targeted the main wholesalers of his titles, requesting they not supply any bookseller who were in breach of the rules. He also ensured that the publishers from other leading houses including Charles James Longman (1852–1934) of Longman to outwardly give support.<sup>12</sup>

Breaking down the practices of generations was not instantaneous. It would take years of talks for London booksellers and authors to collectively agree to Macmillan's proposal, and by 1894 the net book system spread beyond the capital with the support of over a thousand booksellers.<sup>13</sup> In January 1895, the Associated Booksellers of Great Britain and Ireland was formed, and one of their key priorities outlined in the constitution was 'maintain[ing] net prices for all books published on the net system'.<sup>14</sup> This professional association reinforced to the book trade that retail price maintenance was the accepted practice. However, to cement the net book system into an institutionalised practice and to 'police' those who pushed against this change, publishers also needed a collective voice (Kingsford, 1970).

## **The Publishers Association: an industry called to arms**

Despite the net book agreement being the catalyst that launched the Publishers Association, talk of formal industry representation of publishers had been lingering in the background for a few years. Booksellers had their professional association and had been collectively representing themselves since the 1820s (Feather, 2006). Authors who had long been campaigning for years to have a stronger voice had also come together in the form of the Society

of Authors founded by prominent author Sir Walter Besant (1836–1901) in 1884. Publisher William Heinemann (1863–1920) noted in the early 1890s that there was little unity between publishers, and they needed to have representation in the industry which protected their collective interests (Heinemann, 1892). Although the net book agreement was the catalyst which prompted the Association to form, it widened its objectives to address other factors that affected their businesses such as copyright and improving the relationship between authors and publishers (Kingsford, 1970). It is important to note that the ground work for a professional association was laid some time before the net book agreement was introduced.

Heinemann was a relative newcomer to the industry as he started his house in 1890 (Fritschner, 2009). His first book *The Bondman* (1890) written by Hall Caine (1853–1931) was a commercial success, and he focussed his commissions on books aimed at the subscription libraries (Fritschner, 2009). He became a respected publisher, but was also known for despising literary agents, referring to them as ‘parasites’ (Heinemann, 1893, p. 663). He continually pushed for the advancement of publishers, and considered literary agents and their alignment mostly to authors as a threat (Joseph, 2018). In order to gather the London publishers to a united front, in 1893 Heinemann published *The Hardships of Publishing*. This privately printed collection of letters he had initially sent to leading industry periodicals *The Athenaeum* and *The Bookman*, alongside some personal letters sent to him by his peers discussing whether the publishers should have their own professional association (Heinemann, 1893). Despite his calls for ‘a publishers’ union, a publishers’ society, a publishers’ club’, the leading London houses did not push forward with his suggestion (Heinemann, 1893, p. 14). Heinemann was not in a powerful position within the publishing industry he was at the periphery, therefore no one acted on his suggestions; an aspect that will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

Although Heinemann wanted an association to support the rights of publishers, it was evident – maybe somewhat surprisingly – that booksellers had a role in pushing the publishers to form an association. In his book on the net book agreement, Macmillan pointed out that as the booksellers had their association to uphold the netbook agreement, there needed to be a corresponding organisation led by publishers, ‘as there was no body or association of publishers with whom the booksellers could deal’ (Macmillan & Bell, 1924, p. 19). Initially there was the discussion of whether to appoint a committee within the Booksellers Association which would primarily deal with matters concerned with retail trade (Macmillan & Bell, 1924). Instead it was decided that a publishers association should be formed ‘which should have continuous existence and be in a position to deal with all questions affecting the welfare of the trade’ (Macmillan & Bell, 1924, p. 19).

Sources in the archive of the Longman Group demonstrate that discussions were being conducted well in advance of the public meeting held in November 1895 at Anderton’s Hotel in London, in which votes were taken to form the Publishers Association. The archive contains a series of letters between Sir John Murray IV (1851–1928), George Henry Longman (1852–1938) and Frederick Macmillan in the summer of 1895. The correspondence outlines their decisions on how the net book agreement should look, how it was going to be enforced and how they would create a joint response to the booksellers.<sup>15</sup> As discussed earlier, Macmillan had proposed the introduction of net books in 1890, and by 1894 the London booksellers had resolved to adopt this approach which had been agreed at the Annual meeting of the Retail Booksellers on 4 May 1894.<sup>16</sup> The letters between Murray, Longman

and Macmillan demonstrate how they took measures to move towards creating an association with the prime objective of eradicating underselling in the industry.

In a letter from Murray to Norton in May 1894, Murray discussed that he had been asked by Mr. T Burleigh Honorary Secretary of the London Booksellers Society 'if some 5 or 6 publishers will meet a similar number of booksellers to hear their case' and he agreed to set up a meeting.<sup>17</sup> An association inaugurated in November 1890, the London Booksellers Society was formed to call 'attention to their grievances' in a united front to publishers ('Booksellers of To-Day XII - Mr T Burleigh', 1890, p. 1415). It is not evident whether Burleigh wrote to other publishers or why he chose to write to Murray to initiate proceedings. Murray agreed and wrote to Longman to organise a 'conference... Thursday May 24 at 5.30 [50 Albemarle Street] with Bentley and Blackwood.'<sup>18</sup>

Due to limited sources, it is difficult to confirm why Murray chose the specific people to come to his home to discuss how to work with the booksellers, when the issue was far spread across the industry. This can be an issue in tracing historical developments in research. Important decisions were often made in social environments in which documentation does not exist due to meetings being informal in nature (Joseph, 2019a; Popp & Fellman, 2020). However, what is clear is that those who met with Murray in private became instrumental in the construction and governance of the Association. Letters in the archive confirm that decisions had already been made in advance of public consultation at the meetings held at Anderton's Hotel and Stationers' Hall in the autumn of 1895. A series of letters between Longman, Macmillan, Murray and Blackwood confirm their approach to the booksellers, advocating for 'concrete action among leading publishers' as without it 'nothing can be done.'<sup>19</sup> This demonstrates that although these leading publishers are aware of the power they have within the industry, they identify that in order to have their agenda put into practice uniting behind a single organisation would provide them with the strongest positioning. In advance of submitting the draft of what would become the net book agreement, Macmillan sent a copy to Longman stating that 'the enclosed memorandum gives all the points on which we ought to have...opinion.'<sup>20</sup>

These sources confirm that a small number of publishers were the driving force in constructing regulations which favoured their businesses, demonstrating their power and how they chose to use their influence. The publishing houses of Macmillan, Longman and Bentley have been described within book history as Leviathan, these were 'a relatively small constellation of rich firms' which dominated the industry and were responsible for publishing the majority of popular fiction at the time (Joseph, 2019b, p. 44; Sutherland, 2013). The Murray publishing house could also be deemed as one of the most influential and likely deserving of this title, as they published prolific authors including Lord Byron (1788–1824), Jane Austen (1775–1817) and Charles Darwin (1809–1882) (Zachs et al. 2016).

The archive contains a series of letters written from Macmillan to Longman highlighting that they had the agreement from booksellers to go ahead with the net book agreement. Macmillan sent a draft copy of the entire agreement that had been drawn up with the London Booksellers Society months before the public meeting at Anderton's Hotel.<sup>21</sup> The correspondence between Longman, Murray and Macmillan suggests that the draft was not circulated more widely. The memorandum confirms that the London Booksellers Society would 'not allow discount on so called netbooks, and the Council of the Society has appealed to the London publishers to assist them in carrying out this resolution.'<sup>22</sup> This demonstrates the

strength of these individuals to push to initiate change. They deemed that they held positions with sufficient power, to the point that they were comfortable with drawing out a framework for how retail price maintenance should be operated within the publishing industry. These communications document the first steps which eventually led to the creation of the Publishers Association.

It would take a further year of back and forth between a select group of publishers and the booksellers to negotiate the final terms of the net book agreement. In October 1895, a circular was sent to the London publishers from Longman, Macmillan, Murray and a handful of other leading publishers to attend a meeting in Stationers' Hall (Corp, 1948). The first meeting was reported in *The Publishers' Circular*, highlighting that 'the three points...to be brought before the meeting...are of such a moderate nature that there should be little difficulty in coming to a partial solution' ('Publishers and Booksellers', 1895, p. 386). The three points are not reported, however a short report of the outcome was published a few days later, confirming that the publishers and booksellers agreed to consider 'forming a joint committee of publishers and booksellers' ('Notes and Announcements', 1895, p. 415). Despite the booksellers leaning towards a joint committee, it was reported in the *Publishers' Circular* that Murray made a 'long speech' detailing why booksellers could not be included in a committee, discussing that it 'would be unfair and misleading' for them to be appointed ('Proposed Establishment of a Publishers' Association', 1895, p. 594).

The article highlights that Murray believed that booksellers would expect 'some concession' if they were appointed, implying that there was a concern of bias in decision making that would be in the interests of the booksellers and not necessarily both parties ('Proposed Establishment of a Publishers' Association', 1895, p. 594). In the process of rejecting this committee, Murray instead proposed that there should be 'some union or association of publishers to deal with matters such as that before them' ('Proposed Establishment of a Publishers' Association', 1895, p. 594). Colonel Routledge of Routledge & Sons publishing house seconded the motion and the resolution was carried unanimously. It was reported that all agreed it was 'only by the formation of an association that publishers could satisfactorily deal with questions such as those raised by the Booksellers Association' ('Proposed Establishment of a Publishers' Association', 1895, p. 594). The letters discussed in the previous section of this paper confirm that a unified committee of publishers had been discussed and essentially agreed. This so called 'long speech' seemed to be a carefully planned pitch to ensure the rest of the publishers went along with the decision of the leading publishers.

A further meeting was organised as a 'call to arms' to the other London publishers at Stationers' Hall in November 1895 (Joseph, 2019b). This became the first meeting of the Publishers Association. The first role to be elected was President and the honour went to Charles Longman on the suggestion of Macmillan (Kingsford, 1970). Charles had control of the Longman publishing house and was more senior in the business in comparison to his kinsman George who had been present at the meetings at Murray's house (Briggs, 2004). Heinemann was voted in as Chairman, his first order of business to draft the rules and regulations of the Association, a task which suited his ambitions as he had continuously been an advocate for a publishers' society.<sup>23</sup> He would later be elected President in 1909, a position he held until 1911 (Fritschner, 2009). In March 1896, the first general meeting was held at the Stationers' Hall. It was formally deemed in the First Rules of the Association that the

object of the association was 'to promote and protect by all lawful means the interests of the Publishers of Great Britain and Ireland' (Kingsford, 1970, p. 213).

This initial meeting allowed for discussion and agreement to the rules of the Association, including the 'definition of what a publisher was' as 'anyone could call himself a publisher; but it was obvious that for the purposes of that Association they mean book publishers' ('The Publishers' Association', 1896a, p. 103). It was decided by the first Council that those eligible to join the association must 'carry on the work of *bona fide* book publication' and this continues to be the leading criterion for determining membership (Articles of Association *The Publishers' Association*: Updated 25th April 2023, 2020; Kingsford, 1970). In line with this view, the Association has continually prided itself on being a 'collective voice' of the publishing industry (*Our History*, 2020). This can be seen in reporting from the time, as the first meeting in which the rules were adopted confirm that it was a 'large and representative meeting of publishers' ('The Publishers' Association', 1896b).

The full list of attendees were published in *The Bookseller* and *The Publishers' Circular*; 60 were in attendance and by 1896 the Association had 58 paying members (Kingsford, 1970; 'The Publishers Association', 1896a). In 1895, there were 117 entries under the title of 'publisher' in the Post Office London Directory, these entries are listed underneath individual names as opposed to registered companies. Consequently, it has been difficult to trace how many registered publishers there were at the time as records did not hold definitive information.<sup>24</sup> Although not a complete list of publishing houses, it gives an indication of roughly how many of the London houses signed to be members of the Association in its infancy.

The leadership of the Association was appointed by those who were in the room at the time, supporting the argument that this organisation was used to reinforce the position and power of those who were dominant in the industry. The article does not confirm the reasons for why particular persons had been chosen to lead speeches or who had legitimate right to vote. Despite this seemingly informal approach to the formation of its first Council, the Association set out how the leadership should be formed under rules IV and V in the *Officers of the Association* and *The Council* (Kingsford, 1970). A journalist writing for *The Bookseller* in 1896 noted that 'the rules of the Association have purposely given them very large powers both of initiative and action' although they did not illustrate further what they believed these powers were ('Trade and Literary Gossip', 1896). The first rules bar retail booksellers and indicate that the publisher must be trading for at least a year before they are able to join. This clearly defines the boundaries of who would be permitted to have influence in promoting and protecting the interests of publishers. This observation demonstrates how the construct of the professional association allowed for the leading publishers at the time to become powerful as they were governing how the industry operated, initiating practices that supported their own objectives.

## **A powerful mechanism for institutional formation**

Despite the key objective for the establishment of the Association being to uphold the net book agreement, the membership indicated a much broader remit in relation to the level of influence over how the industry operated. Voting rights are allocated to publishers according to their size and turnover. Therefore the bigger the publisher the more power they have to set objectives as they prefer, and the construction of the Association was set up to facilitate

action in this way (Memorandum and Articles of Association of the Publishers' Association Limited, 1996). It has retained its objective of being representative of the leading publishing houses in Britain, representing over 80% of the industry by turnover, and this is one of the criteria which determines eligibility of membership.

Although the Association was unsuccessful in keeping the net book agreement intact, their efforts in attempting to enforce it demonstrates how professional associations can be vehicles for institutional formation. Through the analysis of historical sources, it has been possible to trace how the net book agreement became rooted in the industry. Frederick Macmillan led the way for a practice that gave his business an advantage and used his influence to convince his peers that it was the best way forward. Their agreement led to others with less power in the industry to imitate as they were not in a strong position to oppose. The most important factor that allowed this practice to stand was the adoption by the booksellers and their professional association to provide further legitimacy (Joseph, 2019b). The structure of the professional associations ensured that members were upholding the objectives of those with the most power, almost ensuring compliance which was a crucial step in forming the agreement.

As discussed earlier, Heinemann – who had been extremely vocal on establishing a professional association for publishers – was at the periphery of the industry, therefore his calls did not carry as much weight with his peers. His publishing house was new in comparison to some of the Leviathan houses who had been there for generations, and his unsuccessful attempt demonstrates his lack of power to enact change. The comments from Heinemann's peers further highlight that power is a crucial component of institutional formation. Interestingly, Macmillan initially was not in favour of collective representation. In his letter to Heinemann, he comes across nervous that other key stakeholders in the industry – most noticeably authors – would see an association for publishers as 'as an act of hostility', as the 'authors whose books are most worth publishing' often did not quibble about their agreements (Heinemann, 1893). Macmillan was pushing for the balance of the relationships not to change because his publishing house was in a strong position. They had long been known as the house that fostered and nurtured strong relationships with their authors (Joseph, 2019b).

Understanding the power dynamic of the industry at the time, gives further weight to the argument that power is a key component of institutional formation. This is illustrated by publisher George Bentley (1828–1895) who wrote to Heinemann highlighting that he would 'gladly join if a movement was initiated by Mr. Murray or Mr. Longman' (Heinemann, 1893, p. 71). Eventually Murray was a leading voice in instigating 'a movement' and George's son Richard Bentley (1854–1936) would be one of the founding members of the Publishers Association, present at the 1895 meeting at Stationers' Hall ('The Publishers' Association', 1896a). George Bentley himself was a leading publisher, and grew up in the midst of one of the most prominent mid-Victorian printing and publishing families (Patten, 2004). Referring to Murray and Longman, he highlighted that the Leviathan houses were the ones to lead and the industry should follow their direction. Bentley's comments reiterates how influence can guide the progression of an industry, as leaders can use their power to manoeuvre actions (Joseph, 2019b).

The Association has continued to represent the interests of the leading publishing houses and is dedicated to advancing the industry. It lobbies for publishers at the national level and produces research for the benefits of the public and its members on market size,

publication numbers and general trends, ensuring that the importance of publishing both culturally and economically is widely communicated. Many of the leading contemporary houses have had their interests rooted firmly in the objectives of the Association since the Victorian times. With their sizeable votes they continue to ensure that the leading houses are those who set the agenda. This reiterates that the Association pushes forward the objectives of those who have the most power, which consequently can enable them to garner the most advantage.

## Conclusion

Despite no longer enforcing the net book agreement, today the Publishers Association has continued to represent the interests of the houses which are responsible for the bulk of Britain's publishing output. It has held on to its Victorian roots, ensuring that those who have the most influence and power in the industry have their interests represented at the highest level. Analysing the formation of the net book agreement and the origins of the Publishers Association, has illustrated how the structure of professional associations can be used as vehicles for institutional formation. They can be mechanisms in which industries can push compliance of its members, and in the context of this research was used as a way for the most powerful publishers to control the marketplace. The Publishers Association was used as a formal way to instigate the net book agreement, which replaced existing practices, pushing the industry to embrace the change. In addition, examining how the Publishers Association was founded highlighted the powerful positions of Macmillan, Longman and Murray and the strategies they used which consequently triggered institutional formation.

This paper has addressed the question as to why the Publishers Association prompted institutional formation in the Victorian publishing industry, demonstrating how publishers with the most power were able to facilitate change through an analysis of letters and newspaper articles. The paper has brought to the foreground a micro level analysis of institutional formation. The sources examined have provided evidence of the motivations behind individual decisions, alongside identifying actions which prompted change in a wider context; illustrating an aspect which has been argued is lacking in research in business history and organisation studies (Harrington, 2015; Micelotta et al. 2021; Powell & Colyvas, 2008). The discussion illustrates how an historical methodological approach can contribute to theoretically understanding the dynamics of micro processes and what triggers institutional formation, which leads to the spread of institutional practices (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Lawrence, 1999; Leibel et al. 2018; Lowndes & Lemprière, 2018). In addition, this paper as an empirical study contributes to the histories of professional associations (Bocqueraz, 2010; Eichenberger et al. 2023) and of those in the British publishing industry (Feather, 2006; Kingsford, 1970).

The history of the Publishers Association exemplifies how those with power can use professional associations for their own gain, illustrated by the difficulty that newcomer William Heinemann faced to rally his peers. Yet the idea was carried forward once proposed by Frederick Macmillan and John Murray, demonstrating that individuals with key resources - such as power - are in a dominant position to push for change. As the leading voice for publishers to represent themselves in the wider context of the book trade, this professional

association became a vehicle for institutional formation. Those in significant positions were responsible for writing the objectives and rules, allowing the opportunity for individuals with the most power who governed the Publishers Association to consequently steer an industry.

## Notes

1. This association is not to be confused with the Associated Booksellers of Great Britain and Ireland founded in 1895 who now refer to themselves as the Booksellers' Association (of the United Kingdom and Ireland); this title was adopted in 1948.
2. The article in *The Leader* does not confirm which member of the family had joined the Booksellers' Association.
3. As outlined in a letter to the Right Hon. W. E. Gladstone, MP, 10th April 1868; Graves (1910, p. 287).
4. Graves (1910, p. 287).
5. Letter to George Norton Longman from Frederick Macmillan, 6th June 1894, MS 1393 Part II 11/15, Longman Group.
6. Macmillan (1890, p. 244). LOU. LD65, BL.
7. Macmillan (1890, p. 244). LOU. LD65, BL.
8. Macmillan (1890, p. 244). LOU. LD65, BL.
9. Macmillan (1890, p. 244). LOU. LD65, BL.
10. Whitaker (1890, p. 241). LOU. LD65, BL.
11. *Copy of Memorandum drawn up by Messrs Macmillan and Co.* copied June 1st 1894, MS 1393 Part II 11/14, Longman Group.
12. Letter to George Norton Longman from Frederick Macmillan, 28th May 1894, MS 1393 Part II 11/12, Longman Group.
13. Document dated 25th April 1894, stating the names of London and country publishers agreeing to 'not give away a greater discount than 3d in the 1/-' MS 1393 Part II 11/1, Longman Group.  
Notice of establishment of the Society of Booksellers sent to Longman Publishing House from E. Gowing-Scopes, 22nd May 1894 regarding the size of markets and various publishing outputs; MS 1393 Part II 11/11, Longman Group.
14. This organization was an expansion of the London Booksellers Society, and now is referred to as the Booksellers' Association (of the United Kingdom and Ireland). Minutes of the first General Meeting were published in *The Associated Booksellers of Great Britain and Ireland* (1895, 6th February). *The Bookseller*, pp. 122–123. LOU. LD65, BL.
15. MS1393 Part II 11, Booksellers Archive, Longman Group.
16. Letter from T Burleigh Hon. Sec London Booksellers Society, May 4th 1894, MS 1393 Part II 11/19, Longman Group.
17. Letter from Murray to Norton, 10th May 1894, MS 1393 Part II 11/10 Longman Group.
18. Letter from Murray to Norton, 10th May 1894, MS 1393 Part II 11/10 Longman Group.
19. Letter to G. H. Longman from John Murray June 22nd 1894, MS 1393 Part II 11/18, Longman Group.
20. Letter from Macmillan to Longman, May 31st 1894 MS 1393 Part II 11/13, Longman Group.
21. 'Copy of the Memorandum drawn up by Messrs Macmillan & Co.' June 1st 1894, MS 1393 Part II 11/14 Longman Group.
22. 'Copy of the Memorandum drawn up by Messrs Macmillan & Co.' June 1st 1894, MS 1393 Part II 11/14 Longman Group.
23. Article in *Letter Book 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1895 – 9<sup>th</sup> March 1901*, PA archive.
24. Confirmation by email to the author; Companies House 24th October 2023 and Office for National Statistics (Census Data) 26th October 2023.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

**Marrisa Joseph** is Associate Professor of Organisation Studies & Business History at Henley Business School. Her research focusses on the business practices of organisations in the creative industries due to her experience of working in the publishing industry. Marrisa's first book *Victorian Literary Businesses* was published in 2019.

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### ***A note on archival sources***

Documentary sources from archives are referenced throughout this paper. I have cited the item in the endnotes with an abbreviated reference to the archive in which they are held. Where possible I have used the citation for the archive provided by the holding organization. Below are the full details of the archive collections cited.

- Longman Group Archive, Archives of British Printing and Publishing, Special Collections, University of Reading, (cited in endnotes as [item location, Longman Group]).
- Archives and Manuscripts, British Library, London, (cited in endnotes as [item location, collection name,], BL).

The Publishers' Association Archive held at the Publishers' Association Head Office, London, (cited in endnotes as PA Archive).