The struggle for cheap books has always been a defining characteristic of popular political and cultural movements. The 'right' of people to the new forms of knowledge, to contemporary literature at prices they could afford, was a part of nineteenth century liberal (and entrepreneurial) thinking. 'Books for the people!' was a rallying cry for the utilitarians, the Chartists, publishers who had spare capacity on their new rotary presses, free-thinkers and auto-didacts as well. Yet 'cheap literature' was quickly constructed around a minefield of ambiguities, many of which remain with us today. For the association of books with cheap prices quickly led to the development of actual new genres around that association: 'penny dreadfuls', 'farthing novels', 'dime novels', 'twopenny trash' and so on. Around the possibilites of cheapness, literary aesthetics contructed notions of inferiority and degraded aesthetics.

Even so it has remained a radical, and revolutionary, demand - and even practice. Standard ideological texts have been published virtually free in many of the self-defined socialist countries. In Cuba, for example, all literary texts have always been free to whoever wants them. So it is not surprising that in Britain Penguin Books have always been considered a major gain for humanist and liberal values, and an object lesson in quality popular publishing. Like, I suspect, the majority of people who read Marxism Today, I remain indebted to Penguin's for much of my early, formative reading - bought new or secondhand as and when I could find the books I wanted to read. I can't imagine what life would have been without them.

Yet as the 50th anniversary of Penguin's approaches this autumn, in what is obviously going to be an orgy of self-congratulation, perhaps it is worth just registering a few reservations about the redoubtable Penguin's Progress. For the continuity - to be grossly unfair I know - between the recent Penguin launching, of Lace 2 at the Ritz in the midst of champagne, roast duck, handmade chocolates and a promotional speech which spoke of the honour of being associated with something 'as fine, as rare and as rewarding as this book', and the fairly sober earnestness of Allan Lane's original project, is becoming increasingly difficult to see. For the commercial cynicism which launched Lace 2 to the Penguin public - the kind of book which is known to publishers as the 'oven-ready trade' - is of a different order to the commercial and intellectual acumen which made Allan Lane realise in 1935 that given the right distribution networks (and the sale of Penguins through Woolworth's was a major ingredient in the success of the venture), the right mix of titles, some energetic promotion, it was possible to publish cheap books in large quantities and make a successful business out of it. Not that Penguin's were the first to do this. For there had been for many years two paperback publishing companies in Europe, Tauschnitz and Albatross, who had published hundreds of novels and plays by British and American writers in English for expatriate English speakers living abroad and for Europeans wishing to read contemporary fiction written in English in its original language. There was a copyright ban on these books being sold in Britain, but numbers of them did get into this country, and many can still be found in secondhand bookshops.

The first ten Penguin titles were a careful, even cautious, mix of worthy biography and autobiography, middlebrow fiction and one or two important and innovative contemporary novels, notably Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms. The more interesting developments happened two years later with the addition of the Pelican list (serious non-fiction) and the Penguin Specials (highly contemporary social issues). The first Penguin Special, Germany Puts The Clock Back, by Edgar Mowrer sold 50,000 copies in the first week before being immediately reprinted. This was, suddenly, radical publishing indeed. For the times, ironically, were propitious for the serious popular publisher. Gollancz had started the Left Book Club in 1936 and was able to secure print runs of 50,000 plus for many of his titles, even in hardback.

Yet in a way, Penguin books ideally suited the growing collectivist and earnest spirit of the late 1930s and the 1940s, naturally including the war years. If ever a publisher found a political and cultural milieu into which they naturally fitted, it was Penguins in that period. The austere cover designs which used single blocks of
colour to denote the series - orange for fiction, green for thrillers, blue for travel and adventure, red for biographies and yellow for miscellaneous - and the bold typography, combined to express the optimistic collectivism of the war and the postwar social settlement. In Richard Crossman's account of his first election campaign as a Labour candidate in Coventry in 1945, he wrote despairingly of the campaign as a Labour candidate in 1945.

In Richard Crossman's account of his first election postwar social settlement. In Richard Crossman's account of his first election program. 'Every twopenny or threepenny pamphlet at open air meetings is immediately snapped up and usually paid for with silver, for which no change is asked. I believe that if we had in stock 40,000 Penguins we could have sold them easily. The free literature is glanced through and tossed away. What we sell is taken home and thrown back at us at the next open air meeting in the form of precise and thoughtful questions.'

As someone born at the end of the war, I grew up consciously or unconsciously associating Penguin books with the best qualities of the popular radicalism of that era, and therefore an integral part of the socialist project. Yet as the postwar 'settlement' began to falter and then collapse as both excessively cold winters and excessively cold wars began to divide the popular radical movement from within, (for people wanted an end to austerity and a share in the promised consumer riches offered by free-market ideologies) so Penguin's too encountered problems. There was, for example, the interesting split with the American company, substantially over the use of illustrated covers. The American company wanted picture covers, but Allan Lane certainly didn't. So they went their own two ways.

But also, suddenly other paperback publishers were beginning to spring up in Britain, with similar concerns for quality mass publishing - but different methods! Ace Books, for example, started by Frank Rudman in 1956, published serious European and American writers - but gave a free hand to the book illustrators to illustrate them how they wished. So the postwar Italian social realist writers such as Moravia, Silone, Calvino, Flaiano, writing of partisan struggles, urban poverty, political intrigue, were wrapped in lurid covers which showed Silvana Mangano and Gina Lollabrigida lookalikes standing on street corners in provocatively torn dresses, quietly smouldering. The books sold in their tens of thousands. Ace and Dgit (but particularly Ace) looked like pulp publishers, but they introduced new writers to English readers that Penguin's wouldn't have dared to: Norman Mailer, Philip Roth, Gore Vidal, Tennessee Williams, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Chester Himes, Samuel Selvon, JD Salinger, Cesare Pavese, and so on.

These were the writers, as John Sutherland has so shrewdly noted, that the public libraries in the 1950s would not allow within a mile of their shelves. As he wrote in *Fiction and the Fiction Industry* in 1978: 'The paperback revolution of the late 1950s and 1960s gained much of its energy from fiction which the public library could be expected to disapprove of: *Woman of Rome, The Ginger Man, Lolita, Lady Chatterley's Lover, The Naked and the Dead, Catch 22, Candy.* Anyone who wanted to keep up with the frontiers of permissive fiction was forced out of the libraries; paperbacks often had the glamour, as it were, of an informal Index Librorum, Prohibitum.'

What is significant about this list is that not one of these books, as far as I know, was published by Penguin. The revolution had overtaken them. Meanwhile Allan Lane kept a fairly sharp eye on what Penguin would or would not publish. In 1966 Lane discovered that Penguin had published a book of cartoons by the French cartoonist Sine. Disliking the collection so much he entered the warehouse one night, loaded the entire stock on to a farm trailer and took it away and made a bonfire of it.

Despite this aberration, in the 1960s Penguin's did regain a lot of their radical and campaigning zeal, apart from their continuing programme of quality fiction publishing. The red 'Penguin Specials' - Raymond Williams on 'Communications', Ben Whitaker on 'The Police', Philip O'Connor on 'Vagrancy' and so on - were up to the minute, well researched but polemical contributions to contemporary social and political debates which helped form public opinion and even change legislation. The 'Penguin Education' series of the 1960s and early 1970s (until little Penguin got stabbed in the back by big Penguin!) was for me the most wonderful and inspiring collection of books about education that there could possibly be: *Letter to a Teacher, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Reading, How to*, confirmed one's belief then that radical educational practice was the key to political and cultural revolution. People couldn't wait to buy them as they came into the shops; well, some people.

In the 1970s Penguin seemed to be losing its grip. It was neither successful radical, nor successful commercial. The covers of the novels were often dreadful - particularly where there had been a film made of the novel and so Penguin covers mixed film stills with other elements and ended up with covers that looked as though they had fallen off the back of a lorry in Denmark Street. Penguin Education had been preemptorily shut down, Penguin Poetry curtailed, Penguin Specials as far as I can remember were also dropped, and meanwhile other publishers were moving into the quality paperback scene with a vengeance. The new development of the 1970s was the 'trade paperback', a larger format book with a very high class of design which sold at a rather higher price. Sphere's 'Abacus' and Granada's 'Paladin', Pan's 'Picador' imprints, and of course 'Virago' all began to produce important classic and contemporary fiction in elegantly designed large format paperbacks for the bookshop trade.

Large format paperbacks have given a new life to much important established writing, and have also been a vehicle for the rediscovery of many forgotten but important writers, particularly women writers as the continuing success of Virago has shown. Large format, attractively designed books of biography, history, intellectual theory, and so on have also brought new readers to established texts. Yet I do not think they answer all the problems of meeting the needs of the contemporary reading public - including the need to literally be able to put them in a jacket or coat pocket with ease and convenience. For to begin with, to many people they seem expensive at £3.95 or £4.95, particularly for fiction, even if compared with other cultural commodities they are not.

Secondly, the over-dependence on a new classicism in cover design - the frequent use of reproductions of exquisitely coloured old paintings, pastoral scenes, still lifes with geraniums, Camden School townscapes - has effectively sealed off the text reducing the books simply to artefacts: which is both good and bad at the same time. I regret the loss of the cheap, pocket book edition of the novel or biography I want to read, in the way that I regret that the political impulse that went into earlier forms of mass publishing is current-