

How to get published

The best way to get a book into print is to have a good and indulgent friend who runs a publishing house. Failing that, a friend who is a literary agent or the editor of a series for a publisher. Going cold to a publisher or an agent is risky, discouraging but can work out. Many distinguished and successful authors faced years of rejection. Self-publishing is the ultimate humiliation.

I was lucky. About twenty years ago an academic historian friend was editing a series of modern history. He said to me one day: ‘You know a lot about the Labour Party and Europe; why don’t you write a book?’. That became *Labour’s European Dilemmas*. At a modern history seminar it occurred to me that no one had written a book about conscription in Britain for the generation from the militiamen of the summer of 1939 until 1964 when the last National Servicemen trickled out of the army. Again my friend helped, even though the publisher ludicrously priced the book at £75.

While researching that book I came across Sir Ronald Adam, who had been Adjutant General in 1941-46. This was the second highest post in the army, responsible for recruitment and training. Adam had new ideas on selecting and training officers and men, and brought in scientific selection methods that ruffled many feathers, including Churchill’s. Adam recognised that ability was to be found among men and women of all origins, not only from the ‘officer-producing classes’ on which the British army and navy (less so, the air force) had long depended. Men and women of gentle birth found themselves forthrightly refused commissions. Also, in an army of soldier-citizens fighting an ideological war against fascism Adam encouraged discussion groups and debates among the ranks, leading to the nonsensical accusation that this had brought about Labour’s landslide in 1945. I suppose this could have been termed ‘radicalisation’.

This time I wrote to directly to a publisher, the History Press, a company that produces a steady line in popular history. Their first reaction was that my proposal was too specialised but after a few weeks another of their commissioning editors wrote to say they were interested after all. We reached an agreement, with the book coming out in 2013. They asked if I had any other ideas, so I sent in an outline on how Britain in both world wars had relied on recruiting men (and in the second war, women) throughout the British Empire — or by 1939 the Commonwealth and Empire. But they did not in the event show any interest.

At this point the editor who had finally accepted *The Radical General* and later left the History Press, got in contact from his new employer, Fonthill Media. They were interested in my proposal, and the rest is indeed history. So *Volunteers and Pressed Men* has just come out.

Over twenty years production methods have changed. First of all, I had to master a computer. I put the first text onto floppy disks, later turning to CDs. Paper proofs of the first three books were sent for correction. With Fonthill everything was done on line. Images too were all selected and acquired on line, some from Canada, Australia and New Zealand. I did print out the final proofs because I found that easier, just as I had printed out the successive chapter drafts, transferring handwritten amendments back to the computer. The final text submitted had to have the chapter heads in one colour and the crossheads in another, while later editing changes had to be in colour too. So I had to wrestle with some technicalities.

As far as the research was concerned I'm old-fashioned, taking notes from archives and books on to reporters' notebooks, transferring them to a computer later. This helped me to absorb their content and marshal my thoughts. A more agile, younger mind would have put everything straight onto the computer, with all texts and corrections prepared in like fashion, without a sheet of paper in sight.

Of course, all four books had to have a framework, with the 80,000 to 100,000 words allocated early on broadly into chapters. I invariably overwrote but cutting down was salutary.

Has it been profitable? In monetary terms not at all. If I have earned 50 pence an hour I would be surprised. A few royalties still trickle in from the first book, now out sixteen years. But it's been satisfying. I look upon it as a hobby on which I have persuaded publishers to spend their time and money. I haven't been reduced to self-publishing.