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8th IPEd National Editors Conference

13–15 September 2017, Brisbane

IPEd National Conference Papers

Cunningham, S 2017, 'A life in editing (The editing life)', *Proceedings of the 8th IPEd National Editors Conference: Advancing Our Profession*. 13–15 September, Brisbane. Institute of Professional Editors, pp. 2–10, http://iped-editors.org/Professional_development/IPEdConferences.aspx.

Invited keynote address
A life in editing (The editing life)

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Sophie Cunningham began working as an editor in 1988. Since that time she has worked as an editor and/or publisher at McPhee Gribble, Penguin, Allen & Unwin, Lonely Planet and Meanjin as well as chairing the Literature Board of the Australia Council and being a co-founder of the Stella Prize. She has had four books published by two different houses: Text Publishing and New South.

In a personal presentation, Cunningham tracks her skill development from workplace to workplace. She considers how the ways those companies functioned were examples of both different workplace cultures (independent publishing versus larger corporations) and a rapidly changing industry. The pattern of her working life has been – with the notable exception of her time at Allen & Unwin – a cycle of working with independent companies (McPhee Gribble, Lonely Planet, Meanjin) that became absorbed into larger companies (Penguin, the BBC, MUP). Her time at the Australia Council was also characterised by a massive restructure. Over these years the industry was digitising in ways that at first affected production, editing and writing practices, and in more recent years impacted explicitly on copyright issues and the willingness to pay (or not) for content and those who develop that content. Cunningham then touches on the ways in which working in-house set her up for life as a freelancer and enabled her to work with publishers in her capacity as an author. As well as a personal survey on the last 30 years of the industry, she offers her views on the future direction of the Australian publishing industry.

Cunningham also considers how she managed to develop a career during years in which there was no formal career path for publishers (no tertiary courses, formalised job descriptions, pay scales or consistent job titles). She also considers how she developed both a collegial network and a stable of authors, as well as offering advice on how others can foster such connections and addressing the importance of mentors to one's professional development.

The publishing industry has changed so much since I started working in it in about 1988. This means that I'm not always convinced that what I have to say is relevant to the kinds of challenges that many of you will be dealing with today. I want to touch on the way my experiences at the various companies I worked for over the years were of their time, as well as about the kinds of skills each different workplace gave me.

My first job was with McPhee Gribble, an independent Melbourne publishing house. There was no formal training – even if I'd wanted to do a course, courses weren't available back then. The system was more like an apprenticeship.

I started working at McPhee Gribble – this story is both charming and slightly embarrassing – because Hilary McPhee was my landlady. She asked me if I wanted to read some manuscripts for the firm where she was a publisher. I didn't know what publishing was. This was a bit like not knowing that cows produce milk; I'd just go to the milk bar just like I'd just go to the bookshop. I did love books, I just hadn't given a lot of thought to how books might appear in the world. That said, once I started reading manuscripts and once I was asked to do more work at McPhee Gribble, I very quickly felt that I'd come home. While I hadn't

known such a job existed – an editorial assistant, I suppose you would have called me – I was very pleased when I found that it did.

McPhee Gribble taught me the importance of mentorship. I would be given manuscripts and told to edit them, from my earliest days there. Then Hilary would go through my work and give me feedback on what I'd got right and wrong.

One of the main pieces of advice she gave me, which has been the most important piece of professional advice I've ever had, was to trust my judgement. If you don't trust your judgement, you can't do your job. Your job IS to make a judgement, and to do so with confidence. People often ask me, 'How do you know you're right?' All I can really say on that, I suppose, is that if your judgement is consistently wrong you find out pretty quickly and you probably end up moving into another profession. You just have to assume that your instinct for what is working, and why that may or may not be so, is correct. That doesn't mean that you shouldn't be diplomatic about how you express that, or that you don't have to learn a lot of technical skills, such as developing communication skills when it comes to setting out what you think on a manuscript. The ways you articulate to authors how things can be improved are very important. But the basic instinct, I think, for me anyway, came from having read voraciously from a very young age and having a strong sense of how language worked.

I was about 22 at this stage, but was soon given the honour of working on books – by which I mean proofing, reading, and production work – by Drusilla Modjeska, Helen Garner, Tim Winton, Karen Goldsworthy, Morris Gleitzman, Michael Cathcart, Red Symons and Kerry Greenwood (one of the first books that I edited was the first book in Kerry Greenwood's Phryne Fisher series), just to name a few.

Greenwood is worth dwelling on because she taught me something that was incredibly useful – you learn the most from authors who are most receptive to editing. She worked incredibly hard, but she really appreciated an editor's input. She wasn't hugely fussed about whether a character had a green dress which became red later on in the day. She was really happy that an editor would pick those kinds of things up. More literary writers have such a strong sense of what they want that while you can offer them technical support, you feel much more constrained about offering any other advice. A few years later I edited *Cloudstreet* – I was a bit older by that stage – and while I learned a lot about language from editing that book, Tim didn't need a lot from me; his work was polished by the time I got it. On a job like that you really are more of a copyeditor or production editor, whereas with someone like Kerry there was much more engagement with the whole process.

Back in the '80s, there weren't computers. I was still working on paste-up, which meant when you were checking proofs you were literally making sure that the slabs had been pasted in the right order (let me tell you that they were not always in the right order!). A lot of my early training involved running my fingers along the pages, to feel when there was a break. Once a break was found I checked to see that the text had been correctly carried across. So it was a very different craft. It was more material, obviously. (I have not done a huge amount of editing on-screen, but I have been edited on-screen as a writer.) One of the early books I copyedited was *Wild Card* by Dorothy Hewett. There's a sequence in the first edition of that book where as a kid she goes to the milkbar to buy some lollies, and then suddenly she ends up somewhere else because there's just a whole chapter that got whacked into the middle of that chapter and then she's suddenly back at the milkbar – you

know, a chapter and a half later. The terrifying thing is that no one noticed. When I called up Dorothy, mortified, saying, 'This is a disaster, and we're going to have to pulp,' she said, 'No one's going to notice, love.' She had a kind of stream-of-consciousness style that meant we could smooth those problems over!

I was obviously incredibly privileged to be able to work with writers of that calibre from such a young age and be trusted to do so. And while both Hilary and Diana Gribble kept an eye on me, they also gave me a huge amount of rope. When I was Chair of the Literature Board of The Australia Council, research was being done on gender and the arts, particularly theatre. There was a period in the '80s and '90s when women started doing more directing, more production, more writing in theatre, but that was waning; there was a sense that there was more gender inequity now than there was 30 years ago. One of the things that that report identified was the lack of mentorship for women in that industry. I actually think that that's true in lots of industries – less so in editing because I think a lot of women work in editing and do mentor each other – but that identification of mentorship and having a life coach, a business coach, a mentor, is incredibly important. I certainly wouldn't have done nearly as well as I did if I didn't have women who were prepared to stand by me over many years.

McPhee Gribble was taken over by Penguin in 1989. I was at Lonely Planet when it was taken over by the BBC in 2008. When I was at the Australia Council there was a restructure and extraordinary cuts. I worked at *Meanjin* as it was being absorbed into Melbourne University Publishing. So I've spent a lot of time working with independent, autonomous bodies that then get taken over by larger organisations. I realise that this is now the norm, but when it first happened it was quite traumatic. I believed that this really lovely little independent studio in Fitzroy with couches and coffee and literary soirees was normal, that being able to work endlessly on books I loved was just how it was.

When McPhee Gribble was taken over by Penguin, I had a whole new skill set to learn. I had to learn how to work within a corporate culture, and I had to learn that being an editor isn't just about editing a book, it's about being able to advocate for that book with the sales team and marketing people and the larger structures of the company. Those skills were difficult for me. I've talked about an instinct for language, which I do think I have, but there is a management side to the job. One needs a capacity to be constructive and not dismissive of other points of view; that, I had to learn. I also had to learn the difference between building a list and publishing (even when I was still an editor) rather than just editing the text. I also had to be aware of the context in which I was operating. I educated myself about context – partly just by attending lots of meetings, partly by taking myself off to lots of writers' festivals. I attended and participated in a lot of industry events and I made a point of doing that from a young age. I wasn't particularly encouraged to do that by anyone, I just realised it was important. Constant engagement with the industry connects you to your work and the importance of that work. It also means, I think, that you're taken more seriously and it helps build networks. It's really important.

When Hilary left McPhee Gribble/Penguin to go to Pan Macmillan and I was made publisher, I was still young and relatively inexperienced. That was in the early '90s, and most of the more senior established writers like Helen Garner or Tim Winton went with Hilary McPhee to Pan. The advantage I had was that there weren't other young publishers around, so I made a real point of building my list with an eye for generational change and younger writers who hadn't been published. I asked my friends who they were interested in, what blogs they were reading, who they listened to on the radio. I went to parties and talked

endlessly to people about what they were working on. I went to lots of writers festivals, and I made a real point of developing – again, this was not something I had formally articulated or learned – a bit of a brand so that editors from other publishing houses might call me and say ‘Look, we can’t publish this but maybe you would be interested in it’. I published Richard Flanagan’s *Death of a River Guide* – he was only a young man at that point; Fiona McGregor; Tim Conigrave’s *Holding the Man*; and some of the more established writers like Gabrielle Lord and Kerry Greenwood stayed on with me at McPhee Gribble.

I continued to edit. I really enjoyed editing very much. Being a publisher is demanding and I found that unless I was doing some editing I felt too disconnected from why I was even bothering to do it. So I really did try and keep quite a bit of that going even though it was less of the detailed editing. Certainly less copyediting and less proofing.

For all that I had some problems working at Penguin and dealing with that big corporate culture, they were a company really committed to having desk editors. They had a strong editorial tradition. Again, I didn’t know how lucky I was to be working in a company that was committed to that part of the process. I was grumpy about how corporate they felt without really realising what an extraordinarily good job they did. It was not until I got to Allen & Unwin, which was more reliant on freelancers (they had production editors in-house but the text editing was done out-of-house) that I understood how that can affect how you work and what a different job production editing was to editing text. Until that time I’d worked at companies where you did a bit of everything and there wasn’t the same distinction between those jobs.

So, at Allen & Unwin editors project managed books, but the text was often edited by me before being handed over to a freelancer. There’s even more of a culture of that now, not just at Allen & Unwin, but at most publishing houses. Indeed I was having a conversation with a couple of writers earlier this year and they were talking about their awareness of the pressure that freelancers are under and the fact those freelancers aren’t compensated for the amount of work they do, the emotional heavy lifting in particular. Freelancers deal with the author’s neediness and stress. These issues – an inevitable part of the process – would once have been handled in-house. Editors seem reluctant to put a figure on that. They don’t say, ‘Look, I spent two hours on the phone to the author because they were freaking out’. What you tend to do is bill for hours spent on the text. One of the reasons I don’t do a lot of freelance editing is that I find it almost impossible to get compensated adequately for the amount of work that’s involved.

At Allen & Unwin I had less control over what happened to my books. It was harder for me to make promises that I could always deliver on. It also became apparent to me that marketing was more important than I’d understood when I was younger. I talked about the brand development that I did at McPhee Gribble, but at Allen & Unwin I had an incredibly broad list which made it hard for the people in marketing to quite know what to do with me or how to effectively sell my list. My real strength there was books on popular culture. I published a book called *Gangland* by Mark Davis. I published Paul Kelly and Neil Finns’ lyrics. I published Catharine Lumby on feminism and Kath Albury on sexuality. I published a few books on the politics of Aids. I worked with a lot of Indigenous writers and I worked with novelists like Luke Davies and Alex Miller. I don’t think I connected these titles – as interesting as they were – into a coherent list. I would sometimes get frustrated when other people in the company didn’t get what I was doing. To be honest it probably took me 15

years in the industry to really understand how important that communication was. I really wish that I'd developed those strengths earlier on in my career.

One of the things that happened when I was at Allen & Unwin was the Harry Potter books landed on us, which – apart from meaning a couple of years of really good Christmas bonuses – gave me an insight into the impact that big books have on the ecosystem that is a publishing house. So, when I started at Allen & Unwin it had (and indeed it still has) an extraordinary educational list and educational/trade crossover – books on politics, specialist books, health books. It published debut authors that didn't necessarily sell in large numbers. I think the company's sense of what a best-selling book was was affected by having Harry Potter. I used to say, 'Look, I think this book's going to sell 4000,' and people would say 'Great!' And then Harry Potter sells 120,000 in three weeks or whatever. The production editors were going crazy finding printers that could print the books fast enough. And so the sense of what a best-selling book was really changed; it put pressure on all the publishers and indeed the editors of the company. I don't know what it's like there now, but it meant that there were a few years where it was harder for me to feel that I had traction within the company because the overseas books were making such an impact. I talked to editors who were at Penguin Books around the time that Bryce Courtenay's books were selling in large numbers, and they talked about the similar impact those books had at Penguin.

In general these days, my understanding is that there is more of a split in the industry between books just tanking and books doing spectacularly well. I'm sure you've been told that the mid-list no longer exists in the way it once did. I think those things affect publishers and their budgets and the number of books they feel that they want to take on. Success can also make publishers more risk-averse because they develop a fantasy that you can find the next Harry Potter; it's not a particularly healthy way to commission or to think about ideas, because these things usually build. Something like Harry Potter was one out of the box, but, for example, Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* was the first of his books to sell in enormous numbers. He must have had five or six novels published before that and he'd won the Vogel and other awards. Sold respectably. By the time he had that level of success he'd been writing for 15 years. But it's more unusual for authors to stay with a publishing house for that period of time these days, either because their publishing house rejects them or they reject the publishing house. Agents in that system have more power and authors orientate themselves more to agents than they do to the publishing house. As a publisher I've found that frustrating because having to work closely with agents is a different kind of job; you're really just trying to win a book in a bidding war and it's more like a beauty contest than about editorial skills. I became less engaged with the industry as it changed character. As I've mentioned before, it's hard work; you work very long hours, so you really have to feel committed to what you're doing. And once I realised it was partly about who could just throw the most money at a situation ... it becomes less rewarding.

I want to move on now to offering advice based on things I learned over my years in the industry.

Be direct (as an editor). I used to be too polite. I don't mean that you should stop being supportive and diplomatic, but you also have to let an author know whether something is working or not and why it's not working. If you don't, the general public does, or reviews do, or the book tanks and it becomes obvious that there's a problem. I used to want authors to like me. But I learned to stop worrying about that. It was when I was at *Meanjin* (2008–2010) and I started doing close editing again that I got better and better at being direct and talking

about what wasn't working in a way that was constructive and didn't make an author anxious. That skill that took me a long time to develop. You're not the author's friend; it is a professional relationship and I do think sometimes people lose track of that.

Another issue, I think, is an understanding of ethical issues and legal issues when you're working on books. It's important that you understand defamation law, just for starters. As well, you need to be across personal and mental health issues, because quite often you're working on books where people are talking about traumatic issues. Sometimes editors push authors to be clearer, or to expand on particular material without quite understanding the pressure that this might cause. So while I said earlier that the author is not your friend, you do have a duty of care to the author, and I think you need to be aware of the ways that they might react and how adversely they might react. You also have to protect them from their worst selves; there are quite a few books I've worked on where they'll have entire sequences slagging off ex-partners (really!).

After I left full-time publishing, I worked briefly in a bookshop and I really wish I'd done that at the beginning of my career. The first few nights I was working at the Brunswick Street Bookstore, I became ashamed as I remembered all these marketing meetings where I'd be presenting these groovy sepia covers and the sales guy's going, 'Oh, that's not going to work,' and I was thinking they didn't know what they were talking about. And then I walked into a bookshop for work and saw a sea of covers that looked exactly like ones that I was really insisting were going to be just the ticket. It gets back to my point about context: even though a lot of the covers my designers came up with were amazing, you really need to be aware of what that cover's going to look like in a room with hundreds of other books. And I didn't really get that until I was working in the shop and seeing those books all coming in day after day. Another thing I realised at the bookshop was that despite the endless conversations I used to have as a publisher about whether something was fiction, nonfiction or memoir, that was often of no interest to the customers. They just wanted to read the book that was about someone who had lived through a cyclone, or whatever, and they didn't really care if it was fiction or nonfiction; they often couldn't even tell me if it was fiction or nonfiction – they'd just tell me, 'Oh, there was article in the paper ... it's about a cyclone.' So you realised that unless you're on the ground you don't really know what chance a book is going to have, and the salespeople are the people on the ground. In fact, I had dinner with one of my former bosses the other night and apologised for – well, I didn't exactly apologise; I'm a bit too proud to do that – but I did intimate that I wish I'd been a bit more aware of the pressures the sales teams were under.

I mentioned that I worked at Lonely Planet. That was a company where there was a lot of management and middle management. A company that didn't really know if it was a print or digital company. A company where authors were more akin to journalists than authors and so were being paid by the word. There was such a focus on consensus at that company, which sounds really lovely, but it meant that not a lot happened. So I hope I learned something about meetings and how to run them effectively. It's an important skill to have.

I should say I learned a lot from having books published and being edited myself. Working with an editor was a fantastic experience. One of the things I learned is that you really have to be able to stand up for yourself. Certainly I already knew that if you're editing someone and they say, 'Oh, everything you say is right; I'll do exactly what you say,' that can be a bad sign. It means they're not actually sure of what they were trying to do. You want someone who can fight you on particular points. And, in general, I'm easy to edit because 90% of the

time I'll say, 'Yep, yep, that's great'. But I really stand my ground on particular issues. Both as an editor and an author, you have to retain a connection with your work and why you're doing it. Otherwise it's very hard to find your way.

The last comment I'd make before we open to questions is that I was one of the founding members of the Stella Prize, and I'm still on the Board of the Stella Prize. That means that, again, I'm seeing the publishing industry from another angle. What I've found is that every 'job' has had something to teach me. Certainly Stella has made me even more aware of how contested is the political space, the context, within which publishing is operating these days. How important issues such as diversity – both of the people published and the people employed within companies – are. Other issues, such as sexual harassment, are becoming more discussed. People who are my age in the industry tell stories that are, in retrospect, horrifying. Things we just thought – as young, female editors – we had to tolerate. Those things are changing, and they're changing for the better.

I'll just say a little bit more about being a freelancer. You probably all know much better than me how much you have to learn about running a business as well as being an editor. I've already mentioned how hard it is to charge what you're worth, but unless you do that it can be very hard to make enough money to run a successful business. I'd also note that in my experience of being a freelancer there is a real downturn in the industry. Of course ever since I started in the '80s, people have been saying 'books haven't been selling as well', but now they're really not selling as well. Where there is real growth is in festivals and the performance of words: writers as performers. Grants are becoming much more important to writers and, indeed, to editors, through mentorships; I get paid as an editor to mentor, through various grants. From what I've gathered about the people here, you are already doing a lot of work outside of publishing houses, but that's happening more and more, having to apply for development money and for grant money if you're going to work really closely with an author.

Audience questions

Delegate: I started editing, probably a bit later than you, but also – as I like to say – in the 'black and white' days when we mostly edited in hard copy and waited patiently for blues to come a few weeks later. Would you talk about the tools you use these days; do you edit on-screen?

Sophie: Yes; the most recent stint I had as an actual editor was at *Meanjin*, and I edited on-screen. To some extent, I learned how to do that effectively by being edited on-screen for my own books. I had had no formal training and it is really quite different. It's a blunter tool. Certainly screen edits can look quite terrifying, because every little change creates a comment or whatever – I think it is more nerve-racking for authors. But I learned from Mandy Brett, my editor who, after major reworks, sent me a clean version as well as a transparent edit, so I could see how much better it read. When I worked on paper, I'd be more conversational in my comments in the margin, or I'd ask questions. You have to edit on-screen differently. I'd also note that there was a period of time when the way authors wrote was quite different as a result of moving from typed manuscripts to screen or digital submissions. If you're having to retype every draft, manuscripts are more tightly drafted by the time you submit them. But if your idea of a new draft is that you have reworked some

scenes that weren't working, but you haven't retyped the bit in the middle that seems to be working, things were quite a bit flabbier for a while, the submissions. I think authors are getting much better these days at working with that and understanding that. You have to develop new disciplines, I think, both as a writer and as an editor, once you start to edit on-screen.

Delegate: [Inaudible – about the next iteration of on-screen editing and editing into Google Docs]

Sophie: At RMIT, where I do some work, they do that. What kind of publishing or editing do you?

Delegate: It was just for a journal for short, up to 1000-word submissions, and the writers were preferring to work in Google Docs because they were younger writers and it's what they know. They're digital natives, so they don't want to go backwards; they want to go forwards and you want to engage with them, so you have to engage with them on their terms, to a degree.

Sophie: Yes. And I would also say that younger writers are more comfortable with that kind of interactive way of working. I've had authors who've done versions of that on blogs, where they've published chapters of their books and then reacted to basically crowdsourced editing. I would have a nervous breakdown doing that. But I think a lot of younger people are okay with that, which possibly is a strength. I'm not sure.

Delegate: Sophie, thanks for the talk. I was just wondering if you've edited any fiction in translation and how you handled that compared with just English fiction? If that makes sense.

Sophie: No, I haven't. I've published books that have been translated, but they were brought in from overseas, so I didn't actually have to work with language. Where we have the most interesting and complex conversations around language and, in fact, I think both Roly and Uncle Joe have touched on this in their own ways, was when working with vernacular language. When I was working with Indigenous writers I'd find some editors trying to change language to create more 'proper' English, which is a disaster. The way people speak, the vernacular, gives language a real power. Not just with Indigenous writers but with Irish writers, or whoever. You really have to let people's voice come through and not over-edit and not obsess about correct English under those circumstances.

Delegate: Thank you, Sophie, very much for your talk. You've described a world where, when you started in the world of words, boundaries were fairly fixed, I think, roles were fairly defined, and now those boundaries are almost not there and the roles are a lot more fluid. With you, as an author of several books and also as a freelance editor, could you describe how you market yourself?

Sophie: Less and less would be my answer to that question. I used to have a website but I've taken it down. I am on a lot of social media. I think social media's important, but I don't think you can force it. I do think when publishing houses tell authors to get a social media profile, and you see them earnestly trying to tweet and whatever, it can be painful. You have to either feel that you enjoy that or you don't; it doesn't necessarily do you any favours. But I do use Facebook and Instagram; Twitter to a lesser extent. I don't really know how I market myself, to be honest. Issues of privacy are an issue under those circumstances. When I was at the Australia Council I did start getting hate mail and that actually made me very nervous

about having a public profile. I think a lot of female authors, if they're writing – not just female authors, Benjamin Law's going through it now – I do think it's a double-edged sword. On the one hand, you do want to have a high profile but, on the other hand, having a high profile does make you quite vulnerable to attacks. You need to be prepared to handle that part of the modern world and it's difficult; I don't have an easy answer for it. But I think it's one of the reasons I took my website down.