

**HARRY KARNAC (1919-2014):**

**THE PRINCE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL BOOKSELLING**

by

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On Friday, 4<sup>th</sup> April, 2014, at approximately 2.00 a.m., Harry Karnac died at the age of 94 years. Although he had never undertaken a psychological training, had never worked with patients, and had never taught a theory seminar, the name of Harry Karnac will be remembered long after those of most contemporary mental health clinicians have faded away. As the founder of the unique bookshop which still bears his name after more than half a century, and as the progenitor of a publishing firm which now produces nearly one hundred new psychotherapeutic titles each year, Harry Karnac's contribution as an educator of psychoanalytical students and as a disseminator of psychological culture remains unparalleled.

Born on 27<sup>th</sup> November, 1919, Harry Karnac became a professional bookseller early in his career, and by 1950 had opened H. Karnac (Books), a small, unprepossessing shop at 58, Gloucester Road, in London S.W.7. At first, Karnac sold ordinary books (gardening manuals, biographies, novels, and such like). But one memorable day, Dr. Clifford Scott, a noted psychoanalyst who worked nearby at 49, Queen's Gate Gardens, in South Kensington, not far from Harry Karnac's shop, suggested that the young bookseller might do well to stock a pamphlet written by his psychoanalytical colleague

Dr. Donald Winnicott. Harry Karnac knew virtually nothing about psychoanalysis, and although he regarded Dr. Scott's suggestion with a certain amount of scepticism, he nevertheless ordered some copies of Winnicott's publication *The Ordinary Devoted Mother and Her Baby: Nine Broadcast Talks (Autumn 1949)*, privately printed in London by C.A. Brock and Company, and hence, not widely available. To Harry Karnac's great delight, the Winnicott pamphlet, based on the now legendary radio talks for the British Broadcasting Corporation, sold particularly well; and before long, Karnac began to sell other psychoanalytical titles too. Eventually, H. Karnac (Books) became *the* place for purchasing books on psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, and it gradually became a haven for mental health practitioners not only from Great Britain but, also, from abroad. Indeed, no self-respecting Continental clinician visiting London would fail to pay a visit to Gloucester Road.

One must remember that in 1950, no one had access to the Internet or to Amazon, so if one wished to purchase a book, one had to walk into a shop ... in person. Indeed, unless one entered a bookshop in the flesh, one would not even know which new volumes had recently appeared in print. And so, Karnac Books became not only a psychoanalytical shop but, also, an unparalleled research centre.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Karnac devoted more and more shelf space to psychoanalytical texts, and soon, the books occupied an entire floor of the shop. He also developed a flourishing international mail-order service, shipping books to practitioners overseas. In doing so, Harry Karnac played an incalculable role in helping to educate mental health professionals worldwide by providing them with essential reading material in a field still regarded by many with suspicion.

Gradually, Harry Karnac became increasingly immersed in the world of psychoanalysis, not only professionally but also personally. He had become the premier seller of psychoanalytical books but, furthermore, he had developed a warm acquaintanceship with many of the leading figures in the field, most especially with Donald Winnicott. Often, Winnicott would pop into Karnac's bookshop on a Saturday morning, as he lived not too far away in Belgravia, also in southwest London, and the two men would chat for many hours. Harry told me that from time to time, Mrs. Clare Winnicott, Donald's second wife, would ring up the shop and ask Harry to send her husband back home! I once asked Harry Karnac what sort of books Donald Winnicott purchased from the shop. Apparently, he rarely bought psychoanalytical books, preferring general biographies instead; indeed, each week, Winnicott would return to buy another slew of biographies. When Karnac asked Winnicott how he could plough through so many biographies so quickly, Winnicott laughed and explained that he read only the first chapter of any biography – the one devoted to early childhood – explaining to Karnac that by chapter two, after the subject of the biography had grown up, he lost interest! This seems a most fitting confession from an experienced paediatrician and child psychoanalyst.

Harry Karnac also embarked upon his own personal psychoanalytical treatment with Masud Khan. I believe that Harry found his analysis a useful experience, though like many who ultimately had to witness Khan's later deterioration into alcoholism, violence, and ill health, Harry lamented that none of Khan's professional colleagues could save this once distinguished psychoanalyst. In later years, Khan frequently came into the shop and took books aplenty, and apparently Harry never charged him.

By the 1970s, Karnac Books had become a veritable “mecca” for clinical practitioners of every shape and variety, and the business continued to flourish. Eventually, Harry Karnac launched his own very modest publication arm, which débuted, quite appropriately, with the release of the British edition of *Boundary and Space: An Introduction to the Work of D.W. Winnicott*, written by Mrs. Madeleine Davis, a longstanding member of the Winnicott Publications Committee, in collaboration with Dr. David Wallbridge, an Independent Group psychoanalyst. The American firm of Brunner / Mazel, Publishers, in New York City, had produced the American edition of this book, and Harry Karnac released the British edition. This important text – the first, and still one of the best, expository works on Winnicott – became a popular and serious introduction to Winnicott’s ideas, and would remain a *locus classicus* until the appearance of Adam Phillips’s evocative book on *Winnicott*, released some seven years later.

I shall never forget my very first visit to the bookshop on Gloucester Road in either late 1982 or early 1983. A young student at the time, I had seen advertisements for the shop in many different journals, and I could not wait to visit in person, eager to enrich my growing collection of psychological books. I walked into the shop, which, to my surprise, I found completely deserted, with not even a salesperson behind the till. As I scoured the many bays of shelves, I saw endless volumes on cookery, gardening, sports, literature, but nothing – absolutely nothing – on psychoanalysis. Concerned that I might have entered the wrong building in error, my eyes suddenly glanced towards the very back of the shop, and there, perched on a high shelf, occluded in darkness, I spied a bust of Sigmund Freud. I walked towards this plaster cast reproduction sculpture –

undoubtedly the famous work by Oscar Nemon – and there, hanging from a railing beneath Freud’s head, I saw an old, dusty, dark velvet curtain. With some timidity, I walked through the curtain, padded down a dimly lit, narrow, creaking staircase, and then, to my amazement, I entered a brightly lit basement room, full of nothing but books on psychoanalysis! Like a little child in a sweet shop, I felt as though I had stumbled upon Ali Baba’s hidden cave, crammed with secret treasures. With literally no other customers in the shop, I soaked up the quiet atmosphere in this windowless, noiseless room with reverence, and began to scan the multi-coloured spines of the many titles which lined every bit of wall space.

Eventually, an elderly bespectacled man with white hair and a salt-and-pepper beard and moustache appeared, as if from nowhere, and introduced himself to me as the proprietor. When I told him that I had recently begun my postgraduate studies, Mr. Karnac took a benevolent interest in my reading. I had already selected a few titles for purchase, and he objected to every one of them. I remember that I had chosen a book about schizophrenia, as I had only just begun to work with psychotic patients at the time. Harry ridiculed this book, written by a prominent American psychoanalyst, and told me he did not rate it in the least, and insisted that I should purchase, instead, Dr. David Malan’s best-selling book on *Individual Psychotherapy and the Science of Psychodynamics*! Whether Harry took such an interventionist approach with all of his customers, I really cannot say, but I appreciated the tip.

Certainly, the friendly atmosphere at Gloucester Road, and later at Finchley Road, stoked many a bibliophile’s passion, so much so that I have often remarked that Harry

had unwittingly caused many of us to develop a new form of psychopathology, which I have dubbed, affectionately, as “Karnacitis” – a highly incurable condition!

Whenever I came to visit the shop, Harry always greeted me cordially, ever happy to recommend his favourite new titles. And when, some years later, I embarked upon research for a biography of Donald Winnicott (which would eventually be published by Karnac Books, although I could not possibly have suspected this at the time), Harry helped me tremendously. Not only did he grant me a lengthy formal interview in which he shared his many reminiscences of Winnicott but, also, he gave me a pre-publication copy of his indispensable Winnicott bibliography which proved invaluable to my work; moreover, Harry even read a draft manuscript of the entire book, for which I shall remain deeply grateful. Thereafter, he never failed to share further reminiscences of Winnicott and his circle as they popped into his head. And over the years, I would frequently find a message on my answering machine: “Brett, it’s Harry Karnac. I’ve just remembered another story about Winnicott ... Call me!” Of course, I did ring back straight away, and I must say that Harry – a great raconteur – never disappointed, always recalling something pertinent and enlightening.

I know that other scholars have benefited from Harry’s generosity in this respect, in particular, the American psychoanalyst Dr. Linda Hopkins, who developed a great friendship with Harry and his family while writing her exemplary biography of Masud Khan. I know that Harry treasured her many research trips to England, and enjoyed the fact that she remained a good friend long after the publication of her book.

After his retirement from Karnac Books in 1984, Harry served as a consultant to the company. He also used his later years most creatively, working for quite some time

at the Portman Clinic in London, helping to sort out its voluminous archive of old case notes.

Contemporaneously, Harry devoted himself to the completion of a very detailed bibliography of Winnicott's writings, a project which he had actually begun in the 1960s. Harry executed this task most assiduously, publishing an early version in 1993 under the title *D.W. Winnicott: A Chronological and Alphabetical Bibliography*, which he printed privately. Over the next several years, he kept updating the bibliography, which appeared as an appendix in several Winnicott-related tomes. Eventually, Karnac produced a remarkable bibliography of the many books, articles, and reviews devoted to the life and work of Winnicott, written by scholars from all around the world. Not at all fearful of newfangled technology, Harry mastered the art of e-mail, and he engaged in a prodigious correspondence with numerous Winnicottian authors, asking each of us for complete listings of everything that we had ever written *about* Winnicott, or which might have been influenced *by* Winnicott. Harry's scholarly text, *After Winnicott: Compilation of Works Based on the Life, Work and Ideas of D.W. Winnicott* – some two hundred forty-one pages in length – appeared in 2007, under the imprint of Karnac Books.

Harry soon became the king of bibliographers, and in 2008, he published a comparable reference volume containing details of every book and essay written by Dr. Wilfred Bion, as well as listings of numerous studies about Bion penned by other authors. *Bion's Legacy: Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Sources of the Life, Work and Ideas of Wilfred Ruprecht Bion*, also published by Karnac Books, remains an indispensable tool for clinicians and scholars alike. Extraordinarily, in his ninetieth year, Harry Karnac then crowned his publishing activities with one final book, *Melanie Klein*

*and Beyond: A Bibliography of Primary and Second Sources*, which appeared in 2009, also bearing the eponymous Karnac label on the title page. Serious researchers will long cherish all three of Harry's bibliographies, as each contains numerous entries which one cannot necessarily find on the traditional electronic search engines.

Clearly, Harry had used his old age well. Certainly, few other retirees would have had the capacity to remain so intellectually engaged and so fertile into their tenth decade of life!

After sixty-four years of continuous operation, Karnac Books has become the world's premier psychoanalytical and psychotherapeutic bookseller and publisher. Those who followed Harry as owner, firstly Cesare Sacerdoti, then Dr. Judith Feher-Gurewich and Dr. Michael Moskowitz, and more recently, Oliver Rathbone, the incumbent Managing Director and Publisher, have each made enormous and original contributions to the expansion of Karnac Books. But all would acknowledge that without the pioneering work of Harry Karnac, the flourishing world of psychoanalytical books might not exist, and if it did, it would certainly be much impoverished.

A profession cannot thrive without its books. They represent the very lifeblood of progress. And the modern psychological profession owes its very pulse to the vision and the bravery of Harry Karnac for having embraced an area of work which evoked tremendous suspicions during the post-World War II era. A very splendid man, with a big heart and an infectious sense of humour, Harry Karnac will be much missed.

London, 7<sup>th</sup> April, 2014.

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