

Thomas Nelson and the world

If the printing and publishing activities of Thomas Nelson and Sons were to be summed up, it would be in the words of John Buchan:

‘On the eve of the war [World War I] we must have been one of the largest businesses of the kind in the world, issuing cheap editions of every kind of literature not only in English, but in French, German, Magyar and Spanish and being about to start in Russian.’

If Buchan had written this statement after the Second World War, he would have also mentioned the publication of works in African languages such as Yoruba, Efik, Twi, Ga, Luganda, and Swahili.

Thomas Nelson and Sons owed much of its success to its continuing expansion. The company achieved this through development of its premises to increase production capacity, of new methods to distribute its books, and of offices overseas.

Innovation in sales

By 1818 Nelsons was already selling its books at the Edinburgh market place and at country fairs. In 1829 it took the innovative step of appointing a publisher’s representative, James McDonald, to call on book-shops in the South of Scotland and Northern England. William Nelson was very

active on the marketing side of the business and continually visited booksellers and sought out new markets. By the time he died in 1887 he had traversed three continents to set up a robust overseas business network.

Reaching the world

The company opened a number of offices in Britain and throughout the world. First to open was its London office at 35 Paternoster Row in 1844. When Nelsons opened its New York Office at 42 Bleeker Street in 1854, it became the first British publisher to establish a branch in the United States. By 1915 further offices were established in Leeds, Manchester, Dublin, Paris, Leipzig, Toronto and Bombay. Trading relations were also established in Australia (Melbourne) and South Africa (Cape Town). In 1961 and 1963 respectively, offices were also opened in Lagos and Nairobi.

These houses underwent a number of organisational changes. In the late 1940s the Toronto and New York offices were incorporated as independent companies. In 1960 and 1962 the Australian and South African offices became registered companies. In May 1962 the firm joined forces with the Thomson Organisation, heralding the splitting of the publishing and printing sides.

Paris office, 189 rue St Jacques

London office, 35 & 36 Paternoster Row

