

left on the shelf

Self publishing can all too often mean shelf publishing – that's as far as most copies will ever get. Or is it? Jonathan Eastland had some bad experiences with publishing houses, did it him himself, and now he's a publisher too...

"Henri Cartier-Bresson is one of the finest and most eminent image makers of our time"...

So begins the descriptive blurb in Thames & Hudson's 2003 book catalogue heralding the imminent release of the ultimate volume on the master photographer, *Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Man, the Image & the World*.

With over 600 illustrations on 432 pages this is not the largest book published on H.C.B. and his work, but it will surely rank as the thickest and the heaviest!

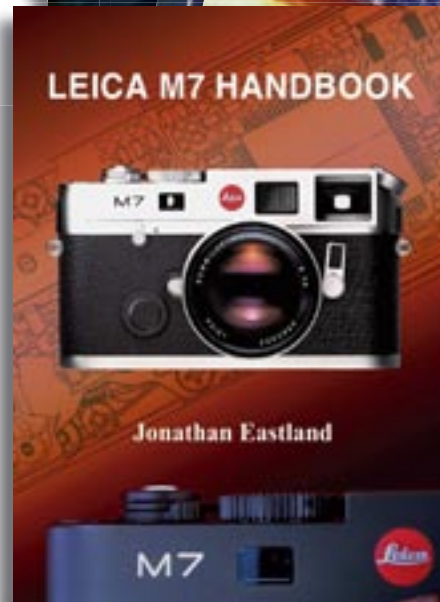
I am not alone in being an avid collector and reader of selected photographic books as well as seeing the media as a more lasting and useful public relations publishing vehicle for my own work. But a glance through a recent catalogue of two hundred or so different second hand photography titles reminded me that in the almost 37 years I have been freelancing, the majority of titles about celebrities in the photographic world, have changed little. These 'names' comprise a handful of the vast sea of working freelance photographers world wide, quite a percentage of whom see as their goal, the publication of a book of their work at some stage or another during their careers.

There is nothing wrong with this aim. It is an ambition I advocate as one likely to help rather than hinder one's progress along this precarious and often impecunious path. I can say this with some confidence now that I have experienced the after effects of having had some fifteen titles published with my name on the cover. However, while this may seem like an effective figure, there are other photographer authors I know of held in far higher esteem than myself with considerably more titles to their credit, as well as a few obtaining genuine fame, with fewer.

Believe it or not, more than a hundred thousand new book titles are published annually in the UK and registered with the International Standard Book Numbering



Camera at Sea was Jonathan's first venture into publishing. 'Tall Ships' was a commissioned volume.



Today, Jonathan is well known as an independent publisher of his own books on the Leica M system. These have proved to be an international success story.

Agency. Similar figures are obtained in the USA and in countries across the EU. This amounts to a whopping logistic of which a respectable proportion are attributed to photography. It is not difficult to understand, then, that the budding but as yet unpublished author, might look at the shelves full of photographic titles in Blackwells of Oxford, and deduce that fame (and possibly fortune.) is not an impossible dream.

The effect which such con-

frontations can have on the really determined will vary from acute frustration – every subject on earth is covered – to (in my case.) an adrenalin rush at the prospect of starting work on the next tome.

Not all photographers experience the need to be published in this way. Regular or occasional publication in more temporary media such as newspapers or magazines seems to satisfy their needs of self expression. Others, anxious to show the world what they are capable

of, seek to service the needs of an egotistical appetite. Some are authors of important documents which demand collective publication to achieve a desired result. And there are those who genuinely feel their experiences, written down and illustrated, may help others to achieve goals by providing useful, interesting or entertaining knowledge, on aspects of life which demand a deeper understanding.

But with the new ultimate volume on the master photographer about to hit the shelves, I wondered, in the light of the convenience, easy access and (relatively) low cost of current electronic technology, whether demand for photographic books in general was still strong.

Judging form

Jamie Camplin, editorial director of photographic titles at Thames & Hudson told me,

"I don't think it's contracting. But it's an area that has been difficult from the beginning of time. Considering the general public interest in photography, one might have expected the market to grow, but it isn't. Good photography is available at little or no cost; the wider audience can imbibe whatever they want from many sources."

The first consideration in planning a book project ought first to answer the fundamental questions, 'why do I want to do this? Who will it benefit?' Neither is easy to answer with any degree of honesty, but honesty is what ultimately endows the end product with some integrity and worth.

"Lots of photographers approach us with ideas.", said Jamie. "They often seem to have their sights set on some wonderful exhibition space for which the book idea is merely a catalogue. A book is not an exhibition; it is something greater than the sum of its parts."

"I am not unsympathetic. We receive a lot of approaches. But essentially, it is the subject [of the book] which has to be saleable."

But ideas for a book that starts

out for all the right reasons often ends up on the shelf as a product completely at variance with the original concept. There are a whole bunch of reasons as to how and why this can happen. Not least are the concepts mangled in the corporate think tanks of large publishers and/or because of author naivety.

I had the idea for my first book "Men, Ships and the Sea" in my early twenties. It was to be a heavy, roto-gravure tome, illustrating the day-to-day lives of professional sailors in the different specialities of seafaring from fishing to deep sea salvage and all the boring stuff in between. Years of work to amass the images and no one to pay for it.

False start

Youthful enthusiasm overlooked integrity in favour of encouragement and the promise of 'important sales' voiced by experts. The first publisher I visited commissioned a dummy, asked for a lengthy synopsis, a time schedule and proffered a sample 'Memorandum of Agreement' (a standard book publisher royalty contract.).

Several weeks elapsed, during which time I had self-assigned myself back to sea in the hope of adding more dramatic works to the pile. On my return, a letter from the publisher announced the departure of the editor with whom I had discussed the project. (I was to learn that in freelancing, one of its occupational hazards is the frequent departure and replacement of commissioning editors.) Undeterred, I went to see another publisher noted for their nautical lists.

'Yes,' said the distinguished editor, 'but what I really need is a book that will explain to the reader how some of these pictures were made. Do you do yachting?'

I confessed that I didn't but that it might be possible if he really thought it necessary. Before I had even left his office, my mind was racing ahead. 'Men, Ships...' could wait. If what this guy wanted was something else and was willing to pay, it would be a step forward, both for my work and the financial stability it would surely bring.

A month or two later my synopsis for this new book project and the layout out had been accepted. A contract was promised. In the meantime, there was some urgency to try to obtain co-editions from other publishers at the upcoming Frankfurt Book Fair. I needed to write. So write I did, through the worst of spare winter months. By



Admirals' Cup 1971 – Italian team yacht Tarantella enjoying a roller coaster ride in fierce conditions. One of several images published in the original 1975 'Camera at Sea'. Now I have ideas for a larger, more luxurious and expensive project. I haven't a clue right now if it could ever be done, but who knows what the future will bring?



Special interests can help the self publisher to focus attention on gaps in title lists of large publishers which are often of a more general nature. The extensive military sections of my photo library service book projects covering navies and aviation topics, both of which appear to do well with packagers and specialist publishers. Leica., 21mm Auper Angulon, Kodachrome.

Spring, I had finished a 40,000 word text, printed and edited the images, written captions and incurred some hefty debts at my local dealer for the supply of paper and chemicals. The whole caboodle including a dummy layout, was carefully packed and dispatched to the publisher. It had been an exhausting and financially burdening experience.

At no stage had it occurred to me that 'market forces' might play a part in the decisions of publish-

ers about what and what not to publish. Importantly, I had not given a single thought to the terms of any contract which might come my way. I just 'knew' that authors received piles of royalties and excellent advances. My optimism for what I was about to receive reflected in the cheerful demeanour of my two youngsters, their mother and the sunny ambience of the home. Things were looking up.

Then, bombshell A battered homeing pigeon was timourously

opened. I read the letter. 'We have decided that this is not really for us. We have made an editorial decision to keep to our current topic list for the next year.'

Suggestion of an alternative publisher was mentioned, but I never got to the end. Instead, I felt a sense of anger welling up. Anger at myself for having been naïve enough to fall into the common trap set by the devious delusions of ego. Youthful optimism, the eager and perhaps, impatient need for

wider recognition, had all played their part in frustrating early publication of the book.

Some years later, when I had stuffed some of my pride deep into a pocket, the first – Camera at Sea – was published. Several other books in the technique vein by different publishers followed and I found that by default, I had hit on an approach to writing about photography that English publishers liked. These were saleable products, as the modest but useful royalty returns indicated. But whenever I raised the possibility of a volume devoted to a representative selection of images I considered worthy of some artistic merit, enthusiasm waned.

Sometimes, I thought, I detected a note of scepticism. 'What have you done?' was never asked, and in this sceptical assumption I was also wrong. But while I could in all truthfulness point to thousands of published images in all sorts of media around the world, the real problem I learned, was that English book publishers didn't think there was much interest in books about boats and the sea.

Over the hurdles

The need to find page space for the accumulation of library images also drives the search for suitable book publishers. Large chunks of loot can be obtained from book packagers, publishers who design and produce 'product' to order for other publishers, and I had had several good experiences of working with such businesses early on.

But again, there are aspects of package publishing over which the author has no control and one of these can dramatically affect the look and perception of the end result. Such was the case of "Romance of Tall Ships".

I had devised the project to make use of some of the thousands of images residing unused in the library. A synopsis was prepared detailing the book format, page extent, number of words of text (which I proposed to write.), the number and type of illustrations required and from where they could be sourced together with several pages of sample pictures, text and contents. The project I had in mind was certainly pictorial in nature and I thought, balanced by some well researched copy giving a thorough insight into the topic.

The format I had in mind was more trade edition than the larger supermarket 'this-will-do-for-Harry's-birthday' product. Once I signed the contract, which clearly



As writer, photographer, designer and producer of my own books, keeping a lid on expenditure is paramount. A photo library of your own is a bonus; there are no additional costs for reproduction fees. Field trip expenses can also be kept to a minimum by dining out at more frugal establishments when abroad! Used in the Leica M6ttl Handbook. photo:Jonathan Eastland/Ajax. Leica, 50mm f/2 Summicron on Kodachrome. Oil drum scan.

stated I would not be involved in the design debate, I still had hopes of a finished work that might look as if it had some integrity attached to it, even on a remainder pile on Waterloo Station. You can guess the rest.

Yet even supermarket product can have an effect it seems, and I received several calls from well wishers having seen the book as far apart as Dover and Warsaw. The more galling aspect is, having signed away certain rights, (sometimes necessary in package publishing.) there are usually no additional monies forthcoming for foreign editions of the work. But while smugness or irritation may be afflicted by the designer on the author over a run of several years, there is a longer term benefit for the author simply because of the book remaining in print and on display.

Perhaps after the headlong rush of youth, it is true a more introspective period follows and it is now some time since I accepted the idea that whatever pictures I produce, the clamour of publishers at the door is simply not going to happen. I am not H.C-B and I do not "break all the rules.", as he does according to Jamie Camplin. In anycase, book publishing hardly ever works in this way for the relatively unknown. Like most painters, you still need an agent or have to be prepared to get out and flog the canvas, mix with the right people and befriend them to help you get what you want.

And when you get what you want, it does not always reimburse the effort expended in purely mon-

etary terms. The benefits are often less tangible; more to do with author perception, goodwill and public relations perhaps. Going alone The lessons of self publishing "Camera at Sea" in the 1970s have reverberated since. It was a modest commercial success. But all through the subsequent years of producing titles for other publishers, I nurtured the idea of one day being in a position to take control of my own publishing destiny and be properly rewarded for my efforts.

Photo finish

Three years ago, a publisher reneged on a contract to produce a slim camera handbook. The terms of the contract required the advance I had received for writing the book be returned, or a prolonged wrangle. I paid up and was faced with binning 9 months of work or slogging it out to find another publisher. I was not enamoured by either prospect and made the decision to publish the book myself, re-creating at a stroke, a book publishing arm for the agency and a massive logistical and financial headache.

But neither one of these has been really stressful; they are actually not too different from the normal day-to-day problems encountered in managing a picture library once the infrastructure necessary to handle dispatch is in place. My bigger headache centered on the intangible aspects of ethics; the possible effects of stigma for far too long associated with something called vanity pub-

lishing and whether or not I could endow my book publishing ideas with some integrity as I would like, or whether they would be received simply as more additions to the existing and substantial pile of superficial pulp.

Any doubts I might have had about vanity publishing were quickly dispelled. Ajax Editions, as the publishing arm is now imprinted, is a commercial trade publishing business. When, as I hope one day it will be able, it undertakes to publish the work of others, authors will be offered a royalty contract and not asked to pay for the print costs. As writer, designer and producer of essentially how-to-technique books, the question of integrity with regard to content has to be placed in perspective. For the moment, I think this aspect is satisfied. More pictorially oriented tomes which may be added to future title lists will need a different editorial appreciation. Superficiality will not be tolerated, but as a publisher, there is always going to be a risk that others apply the description to certain titles.

It's too early to tell if this venture will be financially successful; more importantly whether it will ever be capable of underwriting the kind of 432 page works one occasionally and dreamily envisages stacked on the bookshelves of Blackwells of Oxford. In reality, and happily, the consequence of publishing the first title was the receipt of a very real letter of thanks from a stranger in New York for setting him on a new adventure in photography. It seemed more than just reward; better than fame.

