
Abstract: When Harlequin Enterprises acquired Mills & Boon in 1972, they became the world’s dominant publisher of popular romance novels, thanks in part to a dynamic and innovative marketing operation. The intended audience of these marketing campaigns included current consumers of Harlequin and Mills & Boon books as well as what the company identified as “virgin territory.” Harlequin Mills & Boon took a different approach to marketing than traditional publishers, incorporating consumer goods marketing strategies that redefined standard publishing practices and shaped global perceptions of romance.

Wherever women are, we are.
- Malle Vallik, director, digital content and interactivity, Harlequin

When the Berlin Wall fell in late 1989, Harlequin Mills & Boon (HMB), a Canadian publishing company, realized a marketing opportunity in a virgin territory, so to speak. Wasting no time, the company gave away approximately 720,000 Harlequin romance novels at Eastern Block border checkpoints. Over the course of just two years, HMB sold seven million romance novels in Hungary and achieved $10 million in sales in the Czech Republic. This bold marketing tactic of offering free books in Eastern Europe, better known as “product sampling” in consumer goods marketing, was based on years of innovative strategies either created or finessed by HMB, who was, at the time, the international leader in romance publishing.

In 1972, Harlequin acquired Mills & Boon and became Harlequin Mills & Boon (HMB). During the 1930s and into the 1990s, HMB sought and largely achieved unparalleled success in domestic and overseas markets. The customers for both companies—an overwhelming majority

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3 In 1989, HMB had revenues of C$327 million and an operating profit of C$56 million, a significant portion of parent company Torstar’s C$149 million operating profit. Most of the sales—191 million books in all—occurred outside Canada: the books were distributed in more than 100 countries and translated into 19 languages. The following year, HMB’s operating profit rose to C$64.4 million. HarperCollins Publishers website: https://200.hc.com/stories/the-growth-of-harlequin-romance/#page-content
4 Mills & Boon was established in 1908 and focused exclusively on publishing romance novels by 1930.
of whom are women—constituted an audience primed for consumer goods marketing. Identifying women who read popular romance novels as a growing consumer market, Harlequin and M&B successfully offered a wide variety of options in terms of romance novel content and availability utilizing a large network of women writers and editors. As a result, M&B and Harlequin redefined standard publishing practices to reach romance novel readers at home and around the world, while relying on the labor of women and the consumption of their product by women, that supported their astounding success. Through archival research and a closer look at marketing techniques, this paper will show how Harlequin and M&B achieved global dominance through branding and managerial innovation, the shrewd use of consumer goods marketing, and through M&B’s established presence in former British colonies, resulting from the success of its “Colonial Library.”

The Publishing Industry & Consumer Goods Marketing

Understanding both the commercial and cultural functions of the publishing industry is critical to any analysis of the growth of Harlequin Enterprises and Mills & Boon, since the two companies adopted different approaches to selling books than traditional publishers. Marketers determined fairly early that women were the primary consumer of household goods. With the use and development over time of more sophisticated marketing research in the early part of the twentieth-century, consumer goods marketing strategies specifically targeting women—across industries—achieved greater effectiveness.

Consumer goods are generally divided into four categories: 1) convenience products, which include food, personal, and household products such as soap, toothpaste, and cosmetics; 2) 

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5 Popular fiction is defined as print stories that are mass-produced and mass-consumed, typically published under specific genres, and structured both artistically and commercially by the concept of narrative formula. Hoppenstand, Gary. “Genres and Formulas in Popular Fiction,” A Companion to Popular Culture, ed. Gary Burns, West Sussex: Wiley, 2016, 102.
shopping goods, which include clothing and electronics, among others; 3) specialty items, which include luxury goods or goods often associated with a brand name, like the Apple iPhone; and 4) unsought products, which are products consumers do not yet know they want or need.\(^6\) Multi-national consumer goods conglomerates such as Unilever, Procter & Gamble, Nestle, PepsiCo, Coca-Cola, and L’Oréal, to name some of the largest, all have invested enormous sums in market research in order to better identify their target markets and determine what motivates their target markets to make purchases. They use a business-to-consumer model as opposed to a business-to-business model.

The structure of the traditional publishing industry, on the other hand, is both different from the traditional consumer goods industry and distinctive: book publishers must compete both in the market for content (i.e. find books to buy and negotiate with book authors/agents), and in the market for customers (i.e. identifying appropriate booksellers/distributors\(^7\)). While some publishers have greater brand recognition than others, it is usually a relatively small number of books that dominate sales, with the specific author brand working as a significant draw.\(^8\) And, traditionally, publishers have sold directly to the trade because they are focused on selling large quantities in a single sale.\(^9\) The publishing industry only fairly recently acknowledged the need to adjust their business-to-business model to include a fully developed business-to-consumer

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\(^7\) Specifically, during the period covered in this article: 1930-1990. However, this clearly begins to change with the introduction of the Internet and direct online consumer marketing.

\(^8\) “…a small number of books (perhaps 20%) dominate sales (accounting for perhaps 80% of all sales), results in the so-called “power law” (known to economists as the “Pareto Distribution”). This means that book sales and revenues do not follow a normal bell curve, market shares change constantly, and success in the past is no guarantee of success in the future…” Greco, Albert N., Milliot, Jim, Wharton, Robert M. *The Book Publishing Industry*. New York: Routledge, 2014, 4. This does not seem to be the case with Harlequin and M&B.

approach. Thus, while Harlequin and M&B sold their popular romance fiction through booksellers, they also used consumer goods marketing strategies to build relationships directly with their audience of women readers.

Margaret Jensen claims that: “instead of being classified as simply a book publishing firm, Harlequin is more appropriately defined as a marketing company.” Ignoring the relevance of the romance novel itself, however, is a mistake. Somewhere between Jensen’s “marketing company” description and the distinctive nature of the actual romance novel exists the possibility of understanding the production of these books as a cultural product that is marketed in innovative ways. A wealth of scholarly analysis has focused on the content produced by the industry: the popular romance novel itself. Some of those studies include a close reading of a selection of novels and/or a study of the readers and/or editors of romance novels. With the exception of Paul Grescoe’s history of Harlequin Enterprises and Joseph McAleer’s history of Mills & Boon, little about the development of marketing strategies exist. In studies of the

10 Sutton, Kim Maya. How Contemporary Publishers Reach Out to Their Customers: Transition from B2B to B2C Marketing in the Publishing Industry. Hamburg, Germany: Diplomica Verlag, 2013. Within the last ten years, however, publishers have been also forced to deal with monumental changes in the industry such as e-readers, e-books, self-publishing, and Amazon—topics not addressed in this article.


broader publishing industry, Harlequin and M&B are only occasionally mentioned. And when they are, it is usually in terms of their ability to build relationships with their readers.14

**Mills & Boon and Harlequin Enterprises**

The British Mills & Boon was founded in 1908 by Gerald Mills and Charles Boon. In 1930, M&B started to focus exclusively on publishing romance novels, at which point the founders began to craft the M&B brand using various innovative consumer goods strategies. In his study of the firm, McAleer identifies the unique M&B approach: research distinct readership; nurture the demand; develop clever public relations; and change with the times in terms of the heroine’s evolution and general editorial policy.15 Other factors included M&B’s “Colonial Library” and the opportunities M&B afforded women to write and edit romance novels. M&B had more than 70 percent of the romance fiction market in the United Kingdom in the early twentieth century, and three million women regularly read their books.16 M&B became so popular that their name became a brand synonymous with a generic product. So, for instance, while “Kleenex” became a substitute for tissue, and just as “Xerox” became a substitute for photocopy, Mills & Boon became a name synonymous with romance novels. This would eventually be the case with Harlequin as well, although M&B appears to be the first publishing firm to enjoy this level of brand recognition.

During the Great Depression and WWII, M&B sold serial rights for upcoming romance titles to editors at popular women’s magazines and did a robust business with commercial

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lending libraries. The popularity of M&B romance novels spread across Europe and throughout the British colonies, including Canada where Mary Bonnycastle, the de facto editor-in-chief and wife of the founder of Harlequin Enterprises, took notice. Harlequin, established as a Canadian publishing company in 1949 by Richard H. G. Bonnycastle, followed a similar trajectory to M&B in the realization that higher profits were tied to romance novels. Mary Bonnycastle brokered a deal that gave Harlequin the exclusive distribution rights to M&B romances in North America. While not holding an official title in the company, Mary Bonnycastle worked closely with her husband’s secretary Ruth Palmour, and in 1957 they purchased the rights to reprint the M&B medical (doctor/nurse love affair) romance by Anne Vinton called *The Hospital in Buwambo*. The following year, Harlequin published 16 M&B titles—all medical romances.

Harlequin bought M&B in 1972 and in 1975, Torstar, the Canadian media company and owner of the *Toronto Star* newspaper, acquired a majority interest in Harlequin. In 2014, HarperCollins (News Corporation) bought Harlequin from Torstar for $450 million—in large part because of Harlequin Mills & Boon’s international scope. “It is one of the few truly global book brands. We will now have offices and publishing teams in 11 new foreign countries, which allows us a new platform to work with authors who want to publish globally,” said Brian Murray, CEO of HarperCollins.

**Building a Reputation in Marketing Innovation**

Even before they began to focus exclusively on romance novels as a specialized publishing house in 1930, M&B was creating new ways to market their books. For example, in 1930, ...
the early years at M&B, Charles Boon devised a promotion that would offer to send a “souvenir chapter” of one of their books to any address. An early example of product sampling, this is a strategy that M&B would go on to develop further with women’s magazines and one Harlequin would exploit through its own consumer goods marketing practices. To display their books in store windows, M&B book covers were beautifully designed with eye-catching colors and images—an innovative visual merchandising practice for this period.\(^{21}\) This attention to detail in book cover design would be seen throughout the 1920s and 1930s in print advertisements as well. W.H. Smith’s\(^ {22}\) Trade Circular “Popular Fiction List” in 1936 showed a series of brightly illustrated book covers with the tag-line “Jackets that Pull.”\(^ {23}\) These ads full of colorful and provocative book cover images stood out among competing content, and they also served as a kind of trademark for the M&B brand. Packaging and production became standardized, which served to promote the publisher over the individual author.

Following the trend in publishing, M&B also looked overseas for growth. As early as 1924 (and perhaps even earlier), M&B promoted a Colonial Library list throughout the British empire. As a result, by 1930, when the firm focused on romance book publishing exclusively, they had already established relationships with agents in international markets.\(^ {24}\) M&B’s English-language sales were prominent in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Singapore. In addition, foreign translation rights were sold to publishers in Norway, Germany, and Holland.\(^ {25}\) This international expansion was accomplished by M&B and other smaller publishers

\(^ {22}\) Founded in 1792, W.H. Smith is a British retailer that sold magazines, books, newspapers, stationery, and confectionary. It became one of the first retail chains and is responsible for the ISBN book identifying system. W.H. Smith also operated a commercial lending library from 1861-1961.
\(^ {23}\) M&B Archive, Special Collections, University of Reading, Reading, England. MB PUB/1/3.
\(^ {24}\) M&B Archive, Special Collections, University of Reading, Reading, England. MB PUB/1/1.
\(^ {25}\) McAleer, *Fortune’s Passion*, 46.
through licensed agents rather than the costlier system of establishing overseas branches. With its Colonial Library, M&B was building upon decades of the exportation of British literature to its colonies.

Macmillan launched the first Colonial Library in 1886. The following year the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works was ratified, which substantially decreased the potential loss of revenue from piracy for British authors and publishers. This marked a new phase in the production, distribution, and legal protection of books in an increasingly international publishing market. And, according to Graeme Johanson, there was a huge demand in the colonial markets for imported British books, especially Australia, which “was the largest market for British book exports continuously from at least 1889 until 1953.”

M&B placed ads that promised colonial booksellers a steady flow of books to keep up with customer demand: “Mills & Boon plan to publish 2-4 books each fortnight steadily throughout the year. Each book is well-written and well-produced. It is the quality of consistency which means you can safely go to your wholesaler and PLACE A STANDING ORDER.” Working on the reputation of the M&B brand and its ability to produce large numbers of books to keep up with the demand of its readers was instrumental in its expansion.

On the home front, M&B made headway with readers by selling their books to commercial lending libraries. Their business with commercial libraries was extremely profitable and the firm was, in part, defined by this relationship. M&B became informally known

26 For instance, M&B’s agent in Cape Town, South Africa, was Heineman & Cassell S.A. Pty. Ltd. M&B Archive, MB PUB/1/5, Special Collections, University of Reading, Reading, England. Agents in New Zealand and Australia also identified in M&B Archive, MB PUB/1/4.
29 M&B Archive, Special Collections, University of Reading, Reading, England. MB PUB/1/4. Ad date: August 3, 1944.
30 Libraries operated by businesses that charged a fee to check out books.
as a “library house” publisher of light fiction.\(^\text{31}\) In a report for the Society of Bookmen in 1928, publishers estimated that between 25 and 65 percent of all the books they published went to four of the largest commercial libraries: Boots Book-lovers, W.H. Smith, Mudie’s, and the\(^\text{32}\) Times Book Club. Most of these libraries functioned on a layered yearly subscription system, which allowed the member to borrow one book at a time, excluding the newest books. If customers were able to pay more, they would have access to the newest releases.\(^\text{33}\)

M&B understood the importance of the commercial libraries and encouraged their authors to stop by the libraries that offered M&B novels and introduce themselves to the library staff. M&B also ran contests in which librarians could win books for their library and distributed leaflets that encouraged readers to contact them if their local library did not carry M&B romance novels.\(^\text{34}\) Both M&B and Harlequin seemed to excel in nurturing relationships and the result was a tight-knit community of loyal readers, writers, and distributors. Clark and Phillips specifically refer to HMB when stressing the importance of community-building for successful marketing outcomes in publishing: “There are companies, notably Harlequin in the area of romance, which have built a direct relationship with their consumers and have a high proportion of their ebook sales from their website. The development of a community around content also encourages direct sales.”\(^\text{35}\)

When the British Public Libraries and Museum Act was passed in 1966, commercial libraries started to close their doors, and M&B lost a major source of revenue. However, two things were working in M&B’s favor: Well before 1966, M&B had been working with women’s


\(^{32}\) Ibid, 427.

\(^{33}\) Ibid, 430.

\(^{34}\) M&B Archive, Special Collections, University of Reading, England. MB PUB/1/4, 1940-1954.

magazines and by 1957 they were selling reprint rights to Harlequin. In fact, since the 1940s, M&B negotiated deals with editors at Women’s Weekly, My Weekly, and the People’s Friend and sold serial rights for upcoming titles. The serial contracts with women’s magazines provided a boost in sales and publicity for M&B, introducing some of the women’s magazine readers to the world of romance novel. But editorial policy was tested as authors pushed the boundaries of what had been considered proper moral values as manifested in the romance novel story-line in the women’s magazines. Magazine editors insisted on “moral uplift;” drinking and sex were taboo.

Even before WWI, M&B romance authors wrote about social problems including divorce, drug addiction, adultery, and rape. Story-lines during the 1930s often dealt with problems associated with financial hardships, and some of the heroines were older than the hero in the story, shifting the power balance. During WWII, a Barbara Stanton romance novel told the story of an Auxiliary Air Force heroine in love with a Polish Freedom Fighter in WAAF into Wife. Post-WWII story-lines included the realities of housing shortages and jobs for women. Yet M&B recognized that sensual stories were popular and they published them—even though women’s magazine editors and Mary Bonnycastle at Harlequin balked at this approach.

By the 1960s, M&B had to make another adjustment. Because they had relied on the commercial libraries, women’s magazines, and their own direct mail order service, they had not developed a strong sales force and distribution system in England—needed to compete in the paperback market. And since they advertised in every single M&B romance novel sold—

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36 Serials would run for 6 or 12 weeks depending on the magazine. The novel version would be put on the market a month or two after its multi-week run. McAleer, Passion’s Fortune, 228.
37 Grescoe, The Merchants of Venus, 50.
39 Ibid, 45. M&B had a direct mail order service since before WWI, a precursor to the Readers Services that Harlequin would later create.
sometimes with up to 16 pages of titles in the back of the book—M&B spent relatively little on advertising.\textsuperscript{40} The combination of these factors made Harlequin’s offer letter from Ruth Palmour and Mary Bonnycastle to buy reprint rights even more appealing when it came across John Boon’s desk. This arrangement worked out for Harlequin too—by 1964, they were offering M&B reprints exclusively. And only a few years later, Harlequin was making another offer to M&B—this time the offer was to buy the entire company, which they did.

**Lawrence Heisey Brings “Modern” Consumer Goods Marketing to Harlequin**

It is easy to imagine Richard Bonnycastle, the founder of Harlequin, approving of the hire of marketing maverick Lawrence Heisey as president of Harlequin, some 22 years after the company started.\textsuperscript{41} Born in 1903, Bonnycastle was trained as a lawyer, but preferred the adventure of working for the Hudson Bay Company. He eventually settled down and took a job at Winnipeg’s Advocate Printers, and started Harlequin as a way to take advantage of the burgeoning paperback book business. Neither Bonnycastle nor Heisey were ever really interested in book publishing—Mary Bonnycastle and Ruth Palmour ran Harlequin in the beginning. Richard Bonnycastle, Jr., son of the founder, eventually took on a leadership role, relocated Harlequin to Toronto in 1969 and, two years later, when sales were C$7.9 million a year, he named Lawrence Heisey Harlequin’s president.\textsuperscript{42}

Heisey had worked at Procter & Gamble and Standard Broadcasting; he brought consumer goods marketing to Harlequin and took the same approach to selling books as he took to selling Tide detergent for P&G. “I’m an old soap salesman,” Heisey said.\textsuperscript{43} Richard Bellringer and William Wilson were members of Heisey’s management team: “None of us came from the

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid, 45.

\textsuperscript{41} Richard Bonnycastle died in 1968—before Heisey was hired at Harlequin.

\textsuperscript{42} Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 18-37.

publishing world,” said Bellinger, “but we recognized we had a tiger by the tail. It seemed to us Harlequin fell into a category between magazines and paperbacks. Readers who become familiar with a certain magazine’s style and content, who come to rely on that, feel the same way about Harlequin books.” 44 One of the first things Heisey and his team did was to request intensive market research so they could understand Harlequin as a product—an intentional step toward consumer goods marketing. 45 Heisey had made it clear that publishing wasn’t the problem, marketing was.

Under Heisey’s leadership, HMB put resources into television and print ads—especially in women’s magazines. One of the more memorable strategies he put in place, however, was sampling. “Of the classical promotional devices in the consumer goods-business, the best of them is sampling,” 46 said Heisey, and in 1973, he would introduce the concept to Harlequin. Violet Winspear’s romance novel The Honey Is Bitter, for instance, was packaged in 100,000 boxes of Kotex feminine napkins. Harlequin also worked with Ajax cleanser and Bio-Ad presoak laundry detergent on sampling campaigns and offered free Harlequin romances through a mail-in offer with Colgate-Palmolive. On Mother’s Day, HMB joined with 60 McDonald’s fast-food restaurants across Canada to hand out free romance novels to customers. In the United States, HMB worked with direct-sales cosmetic giant Avon on a campaign that gave away 1.5 million romance novels. By the mid-1970s, HMB romance novels were in supermarkets and drugstores, making them a convenient purchase for women readers 47—and in alignment with a weekly household buying cycle.

47 Ibid., 89.
Both M&B and Harlequin were to a significant degree vertically integrated.48 Harlequin, for instance, bypassed the traditional retailer-distributor relationship for a considerable portion of its business by selling directly to the consumer through a mail-order service called Reader Service. Many readers subscribed to a whole series of Harlequin novels (as opposed to individual authors), through this service, which contributed to a uniformity in sales. The Reader Service direct mail system eliminated distributor-retailer expenses, provided a steady and reliable source of revenue that most publishers did not have, and thereby offered Harlequin another profitable source of revenue.49 M&B did the same. The Reader Service at Harlequin was likely modeled after M&B’s direct mail service, which was in place before WWI.

Brand recognition and customer loyalty also played a major role in lower return rates for both companies. When traditional publishers use a retailer-distributor to sell books, they must factor in a return rate—the rate at which unsold books are returned from the retailer. A traditional publisher could expect a return rate of 35-40 percent; HMB reported a return rate of around 20 percent.50 “Other companies print ten books to sell 6. We print 7.5 to sell 6,” said Heisey, in an interview with Forbes.51 The lower return rate, of course, allowed HMB to keep book prices low, which was key considering the number of books the romance reader would potentially purchase.

Heisey and his team had ambitions for even greater international expansion and once Torstar bought a controlling interest in HMB in 1975, the cash infusion fueled the desired growth. HMB stopped selling foreign rights (for the majority of its markets)52 and set up separate

48 Harlequin’s acquisition of M&B was a step toward greater vertical integration through owning the supplier of the product.
50 Berman, Forbes, 37.
51 Ibid, 37.
52 Harlequin had licensing deals with Brazil, Israel, Turkey because of inflation and currency issues. Grescoe, The Merchants of Venus, 106-107.
publishing companies\textsuperscript{53} overseas to publish directly in indigenous languages in France, Germany, Italy, Holland, Greece, Spain, Japan, Mexico, Venezuela, Costa Rica, Colombia, Australia, and New Zealand.\textsuperscript{54} In 1978, HMB entered Sweden, Norway, and Finland, giving away approximately 250,000 free books and breaking a Finnish distribution monopoly by introducing its own book racks in supermarkets.\textsuperscript{55} HMB was the global leader in romance publishing by 1981, “with 80 percent of the world market, 18 language translations, and sales of 107 million copies in 98 countries,”\textsuperscript{56} which demonstrated its ability to manage distribution and translation around the world. And with the introduction of new category lines, HMB continued the tradition of evolving editorial policies concerning story-line.\textsuperscript{57} In 1984, HMB acquired their main competition—Simon & Schuster’s Silhouette imprint. And by 1990, they had given Eastern European readers a taste of romance through their sampling efforts at Eastern Bloc checkpoints once the Berlin wall came down.

**Conclusion**

It would be a mistake to believe that M&B and Harlequin turned their back on traditional marketing practices to sell romance novels—there is no doubt that they worked with distributors-retailers. And in the case of M&B’s Colonial Library and commercial libraries, their relationships with distributors were critical to their international expansion. HMB redefined standard publishing practices and built their brand through their use of consumer goods marketing strategies such as direct mail, sampling, and the standardization of product, none of

\textsuperscript{53} Often joint ventures with local firms. For instance, in 1976, Harlequin bought a 50 percent interest in Cora Verlag (German mass-market publisher) to work with in German-speaking countries. Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 106-107.

\textsuperscript{54} McAleer, *Passion’s Fortune*, 284.


\textsuperscript{56} McAleer, *Passion’s Fortune*, 284-285.

\textsuperscript{57} The “Harlequin Presents” category line offered more sensual story-lines. Eventually, category romances would be marketed according to a “series” or “subgenre” line, which would indicate story-line: medical, historical, contemporary, sexual, religious, chaste, suspense, Western, and, later on, even NASCAR. Harlequin Company Website: http://corporate.harlequin.com/
which were commonplace in traditional publishing. As a result, both Harlequin and M&B were able to build strong brands that became synonymous with the romance novel.

M&B laid the groundwork for much of what Harlequin would adopt for its own use once it acquired the British firm. While Harlequin was particularly good at establishing itself outside North America, that expansion was, in part, built on M&B’s English-language Colonial Library.\textsuperscript{58} Thanks to Heisey, Harlequin excelled at consumer goods marketing, and this, combined with the acquisition of M&B, greatly expanded the company’s reach. HMB’s strong international presence ultimately attracted News Corp/HarperCollins. At the time of the sale in 2014, according to HarperCollins CEO Brian Murray, ninety-nine per cent of HarperCollins’s revenue came from English-language markets, and, by contrast, forty per cent of HMB’s revenue came from books published in languages other than English.\textsuperscript{59} HMB offered a foothold into international (and digital) markets that HarperCollins and News Corp. were able to exploit.

HMB’s international scope, combined with their subject-matter expertise, is critical. Perhaps this dynamic of cultural production and marketing is best summed up by Robert Thomson, the chief executive of News Corp, who said that Harlequin’s international “empathetic expertise” would be “redeployable across content: If you are connecting people in romance, you have insight into cultural mores.”\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{58} And as chairman of overseas business, it appears that John Boon continued to guide that expansion. Grescoe, \textit{The Merchants of Venus}, 118.


\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.