

The Winds of Change: Blowing the Dust off Jackets



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The old proverb 'You can't tell a book by its cover' could be changed today to 'You can certainly sell a book by its cover'. Publishers of all kinds are now issuing their books with attractive covers, to catch the public eye. This method of marketing through attractive visual images has even reached the world of law publishing. Until now legal titles have appeared as solid monocolour tomes with perhaps a gold or silver border to highlight the title. A metaphorical image, one that is representative of the anonymity and solemnity of the bar and bench, as displayed through the donning of wig and gown, may be construed from this constant use of monotonous. In recent years the covers of law books have begun to be divested of this traditional attire and a refurbishment of their livery has commenced. A positive image accenting both colour and representation of the text is coming to the fore in legal book cover design.

John Carter in *Publisher's Cloth*, written in 48 hours in a New York hotel room, and published by Constable in 1935 wrote:

From the earliest days of printing down to the beginning of the nineteenth century, the normal condition of any book during its wholesale period of existence was one of unblushing nakedness. Whereas today, in England or the United States, a bookseller whose collector returned with half a dozen copies of a current best seller in folded sheets, with or without a flimsy blue wrapper, would reasonably suppose that the publisher had taken leave of his senses; it would never have occurred to his eighteenth century predecessor to expect them in any other guise.¹

It was regular trade practice, up to the end of the eighteenth century, to pass on responsibility for both the choice and cost of binding to the retailer. These bindings are known as trade bindings and must not be confused with publisher's or edition bindings. In the words of historian, Ruari McLean:

'Publishers' Bindings' means book covers manufactured in quantity, all identical, as opposed to hand-made bindings of single copies ordered individually and each a unique piece of craftsmanship.²

It was not until the introduction of cloth as a material for covering books during the early 1820s by William Pickering publisher, of Chancery Lane, that publishers began to enter the former domain of the retailers. Pickering had recognised that there was

¹ Carter, John *Publisher's Cloth An Outline History of Publisher's Binding in England, 1820-1990* Penn, Bucks: University Microfilms, 1970, p 6.

² McLean, Ruari *Victorian Publishers' Book-Bindings in Cloth and Leather* London: Gordon Fraser, 1974, p. 7

a growing public demand for books to be covered in something better than the currently used temporary paper boards but which would not be as financially excessive nor time consuming as placing an individual order for leather bindings.³

Materials other than leather and cloth were also in use for publishers' bindings during the nineteenth century. They included wood, imitation tortoise shell, malachite and a highly varnished papier-mache which, in some instances when coloured black, resembled ebony. However, books in edition-bound cloth were recognised as a viable alternative to leather or vellum and became a commercial possibility after a series of experiments by Pickering's binder, Archibald Leighton. These experiments produced in 1828 "a smooth, highly glazed book cloth of real elegance" followed in 1830 by a cloth, the grain of which imitated that of leather for which it was seen as a "tolerable substitute."⁴

The introduction of binding cloth coincided with a period in the English printed textile industry when design had reached a peak in both colour and variety. The first form of decoration placed on the cloth bindings was, as noted above, an embossed grain which imitated leather. Other patterns both linear and floral were placed on the cloth grain followed by gold tinting. With the development in printing techniques towards the end of the nineteenth century coloured paper was used in the form of inlays on the cloth bindings.

Stiffened paper boards continued to be used as a cheaper alternative to cloth. Indeed the use of paper has never ceased as a covering material 'despite some gaps historically in extant examples'⁵. The earliest surviving examples of paper-covered books are a paper woodcut wrapper dated 1482 from Augsburg, and another dated 1490 from Ferrara. Paper woodcut wrappers were still in use up to the middle of the sixteenth century in Italy, Germany and France. From the seventeenth to the early nineteenth century three main types of paper covers were produced: wrappers, cases and boards. It has been stated that the case or slip case 'can be called the progenitor of the book-jacket, since its function was to attract and protect'⁶. Giles Barber perceives the use of printed wrappers on periodicals in the eighteenth century as the 'natural forerunners of the 19th-century book wrappers with advertisement'⁷. Regardless of the question as to which of the two styles could be considered as the precursor of book covers, attraction and protection are the two functions associated with the purpose of book covers, whether they be hard covers, soft or loose jackets, and regardless of the material used.

3 Ibid p 8

4 Carter, John op cit p 11

5 Cloonan, Michele Valerie *Early Bindings in Paper: A Brief History of European Hand-Made Paper-Covered Books with a Multilingual Glossary* London: Mansell, 1991, p 5

6 McLean, Ruari *Victorian Publishers' Book-Bindings in Paper* London: Gordon Fraser, 1983, p 10

7 Barber, Giles "Continental Paper Wrappers and Publishers' Bindings in the 18th Century" (Spring 1975) 24 *The Book Collector* 40

Design of Decorated Covers

Prior to the nineteenth century in England, titles were seldom placed on the spine of paper covered books. If there was title identification on the spine it was either embossed, printed directly on the spine, or via a paper label pasted onto the spine. Spare labels were sometimes included within certain books. These books were 'substantial, serious books, works of literature', and therefore led McLean to surmise that the paper covers of such books were obviously intended by their affluent owners to be replaced at some later stage by leather.

During the same period patterned papers known as 'Dutch floral or Dutch gilt papers' were produced in Germany and also in Italy. These papers were used by publishers and binders to decorate the paper covers of children's books, pamphlets, music and special productions. The earliest known examples of decorated paper covers placed on books intended not for children, but for the larger mass of the English population, the working class, are from *The Infants Library*, published around 1800 as a series on religious subjects.

The emergence of book cover design in the 1850s as a profession, as opposed to being allied with a trade, may be seen in the work of Owen Johns, Henry Shaw and John Leighton⁸. Further impetus may also have been given through changes in English design brought about by two movements in the late 1800s. The first being the arts and craft movement exemplified in William Morris and his Kelmscott Press, the second movement that of Art Nouveau.

Periodicals such as *The Poster* and *The Studio*, beginning in the early 1890s and continuing into the twentieth century, both illustrated and disseminated the innovations and methods in design. Notable artists of the day, some of whom have since become world renowned such as Pissarro, Ricketts, Housmann, Beardsley, Bonnard and Toulouse-Lautrec, began to specialise in book cover and dust-jacket design.

From Cover to Dust Jacket

The earliest recorded dust-jacket, as opposed to wrapper, dates from 1832. Its history is, however, unable to be traced until the turn of the century. This results from the fact that many were discarded as they were regarded as merely serving a temporary purpose, namely, to afford protection only for the period when the book was in transit from publisher to reader. In a similar manner, the wrappers of books in the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries protected the contents until such time as the owner could afford to have them bound in leather.

It seems likely that the practice of including illustrations on the dust jacket led to the demise of decorated book covers. The twentieth century phenomenon of collecting modern first editions focused attention upon the dust-jacket. Not only were they illustrated, but they contained a blurb, biographical details of the author

⁸ McLean, Ruari *Victorian Publishers' Bookbindings in Paper* op cit p 11

and sometimes a portrait. Due to these added features they came to be seen as an integral part of the book and therefore worthy of being retained⁹ While this may be true for book enthusiasts or collectors, dust-jackets are still being relegated to the waste paper basket. Interestingly the 1993 Design Review awards in New York gave one of their awards for packaging to book covers designed by the publishing house Alfred A. Knopf. One of the jurors stated 'the trouble with viewing this work as packaging, is [that] packaging by its very nature is meant to be opened, its contents removed, and then discarded. With book covers this is clearly not the case.'¹⁰ However, in most libraries, during the final processing stage of a new book, the jacket is still being removed and discarded so the call number can be placed on the spine

Some Recent Developments

While decoration of covers, be they wrappers, paper boards, leather, cloth, paper or any other type of material, has grown prolifically over the last three centuries in the areas of fiction and non-fiction, nothing on a commensurate level has occurred within the area of law. That is, until recently, when a marked change may be evidenced within the arena of cover design in legal publishing. There are now many instances of broadly based publishing firms placing legal books on the market with eye catching covers. Some of the more visually attractive texts which have caught my eye recently include:

Shaw, M. N. *International Law* 3rd ed Cambridge University Press, 1994 (Figure 1)
The paper cover, not a jacket, of this edition is entirely overlaid with a reproduction of part of a painting by Prudence Lovell, *International Court of Justice*. The title sounds pedestrian but the painting which is reminiscent of fragments of a classical fresco has been delicately executed in watercolour, and takes on an ethereal quality while portraying such solemn and weighty hearings

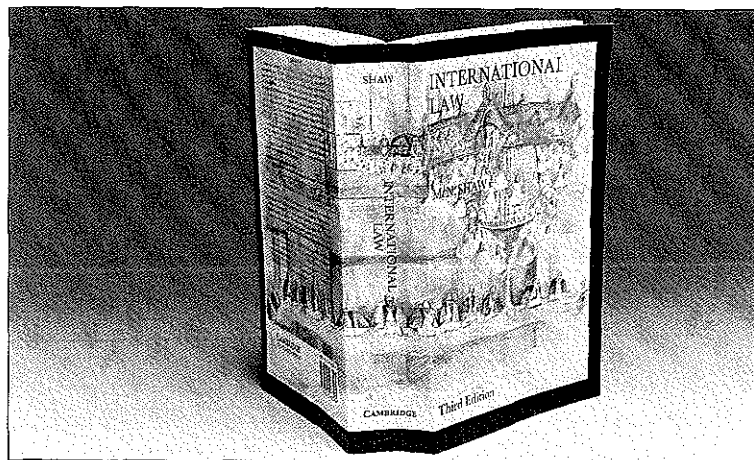


Figure 1

9 Carter, John *ABC for Book Collectors*. London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1974, p 79

10 "Packaging" (1993) *I.D Annual Design Review* 111

Stone, L. *Broken Lives: Separation and Divorce in England 1660-1857*. Oxford University Press, 1993 (Figure 3)

The jacket design is a reproduction of detail from a painting by Joseph Wright of Derby, *Peter Perez Burdett and his first wife Hannah*. I assume the painting is representative of the contents of the book as the title states 'first wife'. Presumably there may have been a second as a result of separation and divorce, of this I am not certain.

I M.C. Asser Instituut *The Influence of the Hague Conference on Private International Law*. Nijhoff, 1993.

The hard cover has a superimposed photograph in sepia tones. It bears a distinct similarity in both arrangement and architecture to the cover illustration for the previous title. The photograph was taken in 1893 and shows the members assembled at the first session of the Hague Conference on Private International Law.

There are others in this category of 'not strictly legal publishers' which do not use the medium of reproduction paintings, but whose covers are wholly constructed by the designer. The designs usually consist of linear shapes and appear to have been produced on a Macintosh. What is different though is the use of vibrant colour as opposed to the former nondescript colours.

Books in the non-legal non-academic market are normally sold to wholesalers and shops before they are published. The book jackets are used as a primary sales tool. It has been claimed that people 'go into a bookshop, look at a book jacket and if it is to their liking, they pick it up, turn it over, read the copy on the back and if they like that, they read the first paragraphs of the book'.¹¹ Helen Semmler in a short article on book covers has listed her factors for good book design:

[A good book cover] should reflect the contents of the book and it should be intriguing enough for the potential buyer to select it from all the surrounding books in the bookshop. It should identify the publisher; it should be original, and the author should like it as well.¹²

Cover design in the music recording industry began with simple brown paper covers for 78s. The covers had the middle cut out in order to read the label on the record. Many were not illustrated while others simply had the *His Master's Voice* logo stamped on the cover. With the introduction of long playing record albums, covers, like their counterpart on books, came to be seen as having intrinsic decorative value. The latest CD music covers are, like many of the vinyl covers of the late 1960s and early seventies, aligned strongly with the musical or personal style of the artist. An example of this may be found in the flashiness in design for the cover of one of the Prince CDs which is a gold foil covered box with purple embossing.

The legal book market may not be in the best seller category or 'top of the pops' market, however it does have access, on the whole, to a guaranteed clientele. Legal

11 Eliahoo, Rebecca "Cover Stories" (1989) 485 *Design* 37.

12 Semmler, Helen "Judging a Book by its Cover" (July 1988) *The Australian Author* 15.

publishers should not, like other publishers, have to tout for business. After all, best sellers are in a category of their own; very often all the cover needs is the author's name or title to ensure success. Then again who could forecast that Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* would top the general hardback best seller list? And as has been stated 'The question is would Hawking have sold even more copies of his work had it been more attractively packaged?'¹³

Reasons for Change

Why then, have two of the major legal publishing companies in Australia commenced to change their previously dour image and clothe their stock in more attractive attire?

According to Law Book Company's Editorial Manager, Judith Fox, the cover design policy was in part aimed at the student market. The Company wanted to make the covers more interesting for students. They saw students as more forward thinking and no longer trammelled by traditions of the past. Law Book Company felt that the genteel air of a gentleman's club should be banished from the image of law book covers. I, for one, would certainly hope so, as statistics show that there is a high percentage of women both practising and studying law. Judith Fox further elaborated that as students had to constantly refer to these texts throughout their studies they felt the covers should be made attractive in order that they would be more appealing.

In a conversation with Butterworths' Editorial Manager, Margaret McLoughlin, I gleaned that the change in attitude to book covers emanated from both internal and external forces. The external source was market driven in that competition was rising from sources outside the purely legal field. With the marketing of items becoming more important, attention to covers was placed high on the editorial agenda. The internal factor leading to change was the desire by Butterworths to differentiate its products from those of other companies. In order to achieve this goal they targeted the book cover.

Some Examples

Law Book Company has on the whole chosen to use reproductions from both Australian and European art on their covers. The theme of the paintings together with, in some instances, the wording of the title, are representative of the subject content of the text.

The overall design is aesthetically pleasing. The effect is increased when applied to student texts as the approach to study is made somewhat more pleasurable than in the past when the opening of a drab cover was the first step to knowledge.

¹³ Eliahoo, Rebecca op cit p 37

Bradbrook, A. *Australian Real Property Law* Law Book Company, 1991

Cover illustration - Australian painting, Elioth Gruner, *Morning Light*, 1916.

This gloriously executed painting depicts a man surveying a pastoral property in the early morning light. It is centrally placed on the cover with a background colour that has been expertly selected for its tonal relation with the painting.

Certoma, G. *The Law of Succession in New South Wales*. 2nd ed. Law Book Company, 1992 (Figure 3)

Cover illustration - European Painting, Jacques-Louis David, *Marat Assassiné*, 1793? Marat was forced to lie in a medicated bath as a result of catching a skin disease while working in the sewers for the French revolution. The bath literally became his office and he was later murdered in it by a counter revolutionary.

Gillies, P. *Criminal Law* 3rd ed. Law Book Company, 1993 (Figure 2).

Cover painting - Australian Contemporary, Robbie Kina, *Inter Soul Searching* Exhibited at Behind the Bars, an exhibition organised by Women at Work, a community-based project which assists women who have been affected by the criminal justice system.

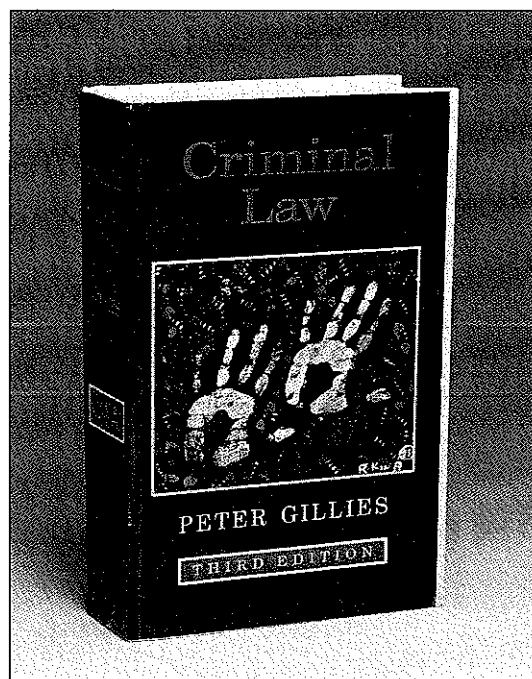


Figure 2

Callard, L. *Business Valuation Practice*. Law Book Company, 1994.

Cover illustration - European Painting, Quentin Metsys, *The Moneylender and his Wife*, 1514

In this instance the title of the painting aligns itself with the title of the book, as does the content of the painting. Once again the background colour together with the colour highlighting the bibliographical details have been chosen with care and an eye possessing tonal sensibility.

Greenbaum, A. *Australian Income Taxation: A Concise Casebook* Law Book Company, 1994 (Figure 3)

Cover illustration - Australian Contemporary, Jeffrey Samuels, *This Changing Continent of Australia*, 1984.

The title reflects the statement in the blurb on the back cover of the book "Tax legislation has grown in length and complexity, so that the nature of taxation law has changed dramatically . . ." The design pattern in the painting further illustrates this sense of change. The painting may also be viewed as a sign of change in the move from realist to abstract paintings. Indeed one item, which I will mention briefly as it has just been published, M Le Brun and R Johnstone, *The Quiet Revolution: Improving Student Learning in Law*, is a complete reversal of the previous covers in that it has relied entirely on graphic design.

Butterworths has conversely used graphic designs for most of their covers. Some of them are vibrant in colour with geometric designs reminiscent of Mondrian. Other graphics display more sobriety in colour and design and appear on the covers of the Casebook Series. The designs are so consistent in their appearance that it is easy to identify a Butterworths publication by simply looking at its cover. In this they have achieved their goal of differentiation from other companies.

Smith and Hogan *Criminal Law*. 7th ed. Butterworths, 1992.

Cover illustration by Laura Andrew

The illustration is untitled, and I assume it was commissioned by the firm. It is a most striking representation of a large bird with outspread wings and a gold ring in its beak, evoking the very fitting theme, considering the subject content of the book, the thieving magpie. The designer has successfully created an illusion of both flight and ascendancy through the placement of the illustration on the cover. It extends from the whole of the front cover across only a part of the spine and dips into the lower right hand corner of the back cover.

Finlay, H. et al. *Family Law: Cases, Materials and Commentary* 2nd ed Butterworths, 1993

No cover acknowledgment

Here we have one of a set of designs created for the Casebook Series. The designs for each of the series are identical in their use of graphics. They are basically black and white graphics placed in a box on the front cover. What makes each title unique and relieves the otherwise tedium of repetition, is the arrangement of individual blocks of colour at strategic points on the cover. The same block of colour is placed around the authors' names, the title, and along the spine. The use of an identical graphic design allows for immediate identification of each title as a Butterworths publication.

Ligertwood, A. *Australian Evidence*. 2nd ed. Butterworths, 1993.

No cover acknowledgment

The cover is strikingly reminiscent of the Modern paintings of the 1920s by the Dutch artist, Piet Mondrian. The design pattern consists of large blocks of coloured squares set on a grid pattern. The depth of the colours used is bold and vibrant and definitely meant to attract attention.

Mackie, K et al *Outline of Succession*. Butterworths, 1994 (Figure 3)

No cover acknowledgment

The use of brilliant primary colours juxtaposed across each other in sharp geometric shapes certainly makes this cover a success in the attraction stakes. The cover is in sharp contrast to that of a title with similar subject content published by Law Book Company and discussed above.

Booker, K et al *Federal Constitutional Law: An Introduction* Butterworths, 1994 (Figure 3)

Cover illustration: Student design: Michael Lambert, Hornsby TAFE Creative Services, *The Effects of Good Government*, Fourteenth century fresco (1338-1339) by Ambruogio Lorenzetti

This time a return to the past with the reproduction of a truly great work of art. The fresco overlaps onto the spine and is placed within a background which has appropriate majestic coloured tonings. Unfortunately the Black Death, an epidemic of the bubonic plague that swept Europe in 1348, killed from half to two thirds of the population of Florence and Siena, including Ambruogio and his brother Pietra, and called a halt to any further progress in the effects of good government for some time.

The essentials of good cover design as stated by Helen Semmler would appear to have been satisfied. The dominant styles and formats chosen by each publisher are markedly different, as are their reasons for policy change, although there are instances where both the former and latter coincide. Cover changes are evident so far only in the paper covered texts. The hard covered issues remain in the traditional garb. One could surmise from this that both Law Book Company and Butterworths are aiming at the student market as the cost of the paper back is normally around one third less than the price of a hard copy. The cover changes not only attract attention, but have breathed fresh air onto the shelves of law libraries which previously displayed a stale and monotonous uniformity in style. The growing awareness of the need to modernise and reform the legal system has met with a similar awareness within the editorial departments of major law publishers. The winds of change have begun to filter through the houses of the legal publishing world and blow the dust of centuries off the covers and jackets.

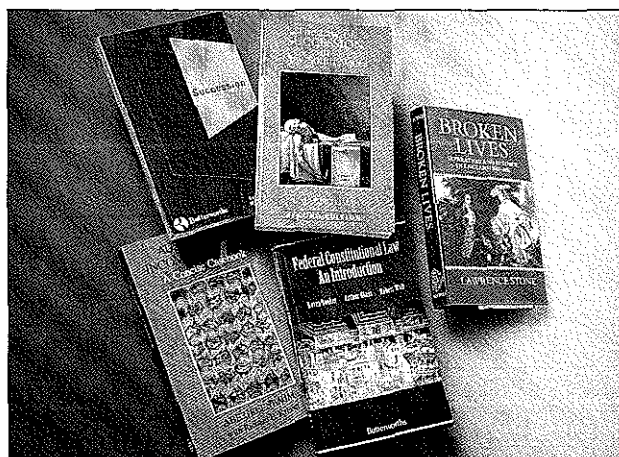


Figure 3