

The Four Lives of Alan Bott

by John Handford

The name Alan Bott is forever associated with Pan Books, of which he was the founding father, but it may be news to some that, before launching the imprint for which he is best known, he had pursued three other successful careers.



Alan Bott in uniform as a Captain in the Royal Flying Corps

Born in Stoke-on-Trent in 1893, he joined in 1909 the 9th (Queen Victoria's Rifles) Battalion, London Regiment, a newly formed Territorial unit, giving his age as 17 and his occupation as warehouseman at Debenham & Co, 97 Wimpole Street. After the outbreak of war he enlisted in the Royal Garrison Artillery, a branch of the Royal Artillery tasked with improving the accuracy and efficiency of gunnery. He soon transferred to the Royal Flying Corps, and by April 1916 he was serving with the newly formed 70 Squadron, known as 'Umpty' Squadron, in France. Flying as the observer in a two-seater Sopwith 1½ Strutter biplane, he achieved three kills of enemy aircraft. On one occasion, his plane was hit by enemy fire and forced to land.

Having trained as a pilot, he transferred, with the rank of Captain, to 111 Squadron in Sinai, flying French-built Nieuport biplanes in support of Allenby's Expeditionary Force. He made two further kills over Palestine and was awarded the Military Cross. His five kills qualified him to be called an 'air ace'. However, on 22 April 1918 he was shot down in flames in the desert and taken prisoner by the Turks. His escape four months later after several failed attempts earned him a bar to his MC, and sowed the seed for his second career as an author and journalist.



While on the run in Turkey in 1918, Bott used this photo, taken while a prisoner in Constantinople and signed with a false name and rank, to convince a gendarme that he was a German officer in mufti.

Bott made his début as a writer in 1917 with *An Airman's Outings with the RFC*, (or in the US edition *Cavalry of the Clouds*), published under the pseudonym 'Contact', the word a pilot shouted as his mechanic swung the propeller to start his engine. One of the earliest first-hand accounts of air warfare, it is still available both in print and online. Writing in France before he left for the Middle East, he predicted: 'I am convinced that war flying will be organised as a means to victory', a forecast that has since been amply fulfilled, though many would have doubted it at the time.

As the war was still raging at the time of publication, any information that might help the enemy, such as types of Allied planes, was censored. A sequel recounting more exploits of aerial combat was clearly the intention, but fate intervened, so the flights in the title of his next book, *Eastern Nights – and Flights* (1920) were on the ground and from his captors.

His repeated attempts to escape led to his removal further from the front line, first to Damascus, then to Aleppo, and finally to Constantinople. He eluded his captors only a few weeks before the Turkish surrender in October 1918.

The return of peace saw Bott working as a journalist, contributing to weeklies and writing theatre reviews. In 1926, he was appointed editor of *The Graphic*, an illustrated weekly magazine, where he remained for six years and where his byline appeared frequently. It was through journalistic contacts that he met Josephine Blumenfeld whom he married in 1930. They had three children, Simon, Annabel and Susannah (see Nicholas Byam Shaw's article in this issue).

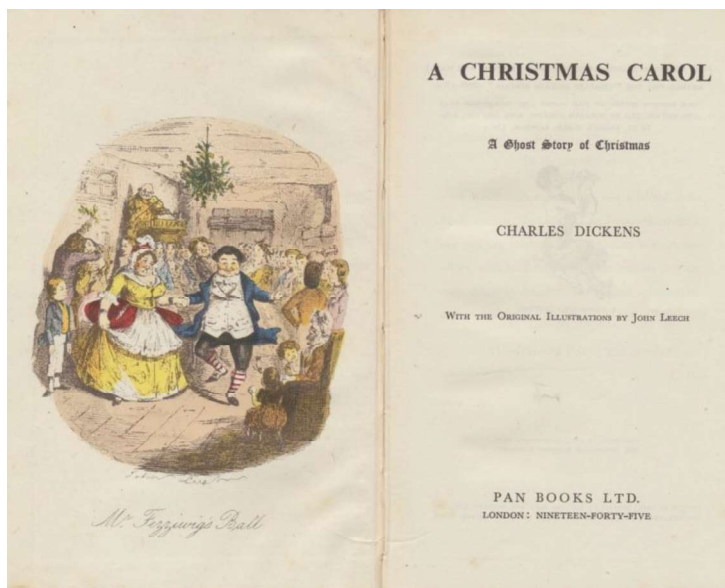
He wrote one further published book, *Our Fathers* (1931), an illustrated survey of the manners and customs of his father's generation and was an editor or contributor on three others.

Bott's first venture into book publishing was the Book Society which he founded in 1929 and which ran for forty years. A panel of eminent judges from the world of letters selected a 'Book Society Choice' each month, usually a novel, from proofs supplied by hopeful publishers. Members, of whom there were as many as ten thousand at its height, received a copy of the publisher's first edition at the full published price – a huge boost for authors and publishers. Further, selection for the Society often led to sustained sales and bestsellerdom, while the Society benefited from generous discounts from publishers. Among Macmillan authors chosen were Charles Morgan and Mazo de la Roche; Hugh Walpole chaired the panel of judges.

His next initiative was to seek a much bigger market for cheaper, but still recently published, books through the Reprint Society (also known as World Books), of which Harold Macmillan was one of the founding directors. It was launched in 1939 with T E Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* in two volumes at 3/6 (17½p) each. The monthly books that followed were hardback, economically produced but with good design and typography, and uniform. Hopes that sales would be sufficient to justify the low price were fulfilled, with, at its peak, 200,000 members paying 2/6 (12½p) a book, making it the nation's biggest book club. It was especially popular during the war, and survived long after its founder's death.

Bott was also associated with The Folio Society from its foundation by Charles Ede in 1947, though he took no active part in its management.

And then there was Pan. The company was registered in 1944 but it took a long time to overcome wartime red tape and print the first paperbacks. Meanwhile, the imprint was launched with six hardbacks, now much sought after by collectors.



The earliest Pan books sported a full-length piper. It was soon replaced by the familiar half-length silhouette which lasted until the Macmillan group logo took over.

The frontispiece and title page for one of the six hardbacks which launched the Pan imprint.

By 1947, restrictions on paper supply were overcome by using continental printers, mainly in the Paris area. The colourful covers, in contrast to the sober typographic designs of the principal competitor Penguin, combined with smart marketing and low cover prices, quickly secured Pan's position in the marketplace.



Sadly, Alan Bott did not live to see the first million seller, *The Dam Busters* by Paul Brickhill. Published in 1954, its sales passed the million mark in 1956. But by the time he died, aged 59 after a short illness, in 1952, over two hundred paperbacks had been published. His Times obituary called him 'a shrewd and capable man of affairs'.

I am indebted for some of the facts about Alan Bott's life and work to Tikit.net, the website for Pan collectors which includes a chronology of his life and the full Times obituary. Thanks also to its creator Tim Kitchen for the copies of the wartime pictures which appeared as the frontispieces of the US editions of the two books mentioned.

An Airman's Outings with the RFC can be found online [here](#) and Eastern Nights – and Flights [here](#). The latter was later reissued in paperback by Penguin in 1940 as just Eastern Nights.

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