

BANNED BOOKS

Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties.

John Milton (*Areopagitica*, 1644)

Since 1525, when William Tyndale's translation of the New Testament was condemned and burned in front of Old St. Paul's, governments, monarchs, judges, juries, bishops and assorted bigots have been denying others the freedom to express themselves without restriction.

Writers, publishers, printers and booksellers have been prosecuted and convicted by recourse to an astonishing array of laws, the most pernicious of which have been the archaic obscene, blasphemous and seditious libel laws.

Following the *Lady Chatterley's Lover* trial in 1960, the courts were hard pressed to define just what is liable to 'deprave and corrupt' according to the Obscene Publications Act (1959 amended 1964). But this made little difference to Customs and Excise officers, who regularly used the outdated Customs Consolidation Act (1876) to decide what we were allowed to read.

These books and other works by authors like Samuel Beckett, George Bernard Shaw, Thomas Hardy, George Eliot, Daniel Defoe and John Milton have all been censored or banned, at great cost to society, and often to the writers themselves.

1633	BURNED	<i>Histrion-Mastix, the Players Scourge, or, Actors Tragedy</i> by William Prynne (1633) For this Puritan work, Prynne suffered cruel punishments. He was fined £5000 by the Star Chamber, imprisoned for life, and had both ears cut off on the pillories at Westminster and Cheapside. Accused of publishing seditious libels again in 1637, he was sentenced to pay a further £5000, lose the remainder of his ears, and be branded on both cheeks with the letters 'S.L.' for 'Seditious Libeller'.
1683	BURNED	<i>Leviathan</i> by Thomas Hobbes (1651) Written during the turmoil of the Civil War, this influential work of political science was the main object of attack when the House of Commons debated a bill against 'Atheism and Prophaneness' in 1666. Fortunately for Hobbes, the Lords allowed the Bill to fall during the next session. In 1683, the Oxford Convocation declared his doctrines worthy of 'detestation and abhorrence' and condemned it.
1684	BANNED	<i>A Dialogue between a Married Lady and a Maid</i> by Nicolas Chorier (1676) This was almost certainly the first example of truly pornographic literature in English. Translated and adapted from <i>L'Academie des Dames</i> , it landed a succession of publishers in trouble. William Cademan was prosecuted in 1684 for 'exposing, selling, uttering and publishing the pernicious, wicked, scandalous, vicious and illicit book', followed soon after by Joseph Streater in 1688.
1708	PROSECUTED	<i>The Fifteen Plagues of a Maiden-Head</i> by Madam B.....le (1707) James Read and Angell Carter were prosecuted in 1708 for publishing these bawdy verses. They were freed on the grounds that obscenity was considered a matter to be dealt with by the ecclesiastical rather than civil courts. This opinion was reversed in 1728 when Edmund Curll was found guilty of obscenity for publishing <i>Venus in the Cloyster</i> .
1763	BANNED	<i>An Essay on Woman</i> by John Wilkes (1763) This clever but indecent poetic parody of Pope's <i>Essay on Man</i> , was read out in the House of Lords, which then resolved that it was 'a most scandalous, obscene and impious libel'. John Wilkes MP, already reviled by the Establishment for his radicalism, was expelled from the Commons and ordered to be arrested. Having already left the country, he was outlawed by the Court of King's Bench in 1764.
1817	PROSECUTED	<i>The Late John Wilkes's Catechism</i> by William Hone (1817) This was one of three political parodies of Anglican prayers and services for which Hone was imprisoned for two months prior to the Government proceeding against him by <i>ex-officio</i> 'informations' instead of indictments. Almost without precedent, Hone was tried three times for the same offence, over three successive days, and was acquitted by the jury on each occasion.
1819	BANNED	<i>The Age of Reason</i> by Thomas Paine (1795–6) Richard Carlile was prosecuted for blasphemy when he reprinted <i>The Age of Reason</i> in 1819. He was sentenced to 3 years in prison, and fines and sureties totalling £2700. He served an additional six years, inspiring a succession of brave shopmen and women to continue his fight for freedom of expression. Paine had earlier been condemned for sedition in 1792 for <i>Rights of Man</i> , his famous appeal for republicanism. He died in America in 1809, lonely and forgotten.
1822	BANNED	<i>Queen Mab</i> by Percy Bysshe Shelley (1813) In 1821, William Clarke published a pirate edition of <i>Queen Mab</i> while Shelley was living in Italy. The following year, the Society for the Suppression of Vice prosecuted Clarke for publishing a blasphemous libel. He was found guilty and imprisoned for four months. In 1840, the publishers of Shelley's <i>Poetical Works</i> were privately prosecuted to publicise the absurdity of the law of blasphemy. They were also convicted, but no sentence was passed.
1888	BANNED	<i>The Earth</i> by Émile Zola (1888) Victorian animosity towards foreign literature resulted in Henry Vizetelly, the publisher, being prosecuted by the National Vigilance Association – an anti-vice society – for publishing a bowdlerised translation of Zola's <i>La Terre</i> . He was fined, but the following year repeated the offence. Although an old man of seventy, he was forced to serve three months in prison. He died a ruined man in 1894.

1909	BANNED	<p><i>Indian Sociologist</i> (Guy Aldred) (1909)</p> <p>The <i>Indian Sociologist</i> advocated Indian independence from the British Empire. Guy Aldred was charged with writing, printing and publishing 'a certain scandalous and seditious libel' in 1909. He was found guilty and sentenced to 12 months in Brixton Prison. His second prosecution, in 1921, was the last seditious libel trial to be held in this country.</p>
1915	BANNED	<p><i>The Rainbow</i> by D. H. Lawrence (1915)</p> <p>Following much clamour in the Press, copies of the book were seized shortly after publication. At Bow Street, the publishers offered no defence and the books were destroyed. Lawrence and his friends believed the real reason for the prosecution was his denunciation of the 1914–18 Great War. Expurgated editions were published after 1926. The complete text was finally reissued in 1949.</p>
1923	SEIZED	<p><i>Ulysses</i> by James Joyce (Dijon, 1922)</p> <p>Because of Britain's obscenity laws, <i>Ulysses</i> could only be published abroad and copies shipped to individuals and bookshops. In 1923, 500 copies were reprinted, of which one arrived in London. The remaining 499 copies were seized by Customs and Excise at Folkestone and burned in 'the King's Chimney'. The book was relentlessly pursued until the American courts cleared it of obscenity in 1933, after which it quietly appeared in England.</p>
1928	BANNED	<p><i>The Well of Loneliness</i> by Radclyffe Hall (1928)</p> <p>After an edition printed in France was seized by Customs and Excise, the publishers were required under the Obscene Publications Act (1857), to show cause why Radclyffe Hall's lesbian novel should not be destroyed as obscene. Expert witnesses for the defence were rejected by the Bow Street magistrates and it was condemned. An appeal was unsuccessful. It was only republished in 1949.</p>
1934	BANNED	<p><i>The Perfumed Garden</i> by Sheikh Nefzawi (1886)</p> <p>This famous Arabic love manual was translated by Sir Richard Burton for the Kama Shashtra Society in London but, tragically, over a thousand pages of a manuscript translation of the missing sections were destroyed by his wife after his death. A bowdlerised version was condemned in 1934 when the Police raided the Fortune Press in London and seized a number of translations and novels.</p>
1934	BANNED	<p><i>The Songs of Bilitis</i> by Pierre Louÿs (1894)</p> <p>Following a 1934 raid on the Fortune Press in London, a wide range of novels and translations were seized, including three by Louÿs and <i>Satyricon</i> by Petronius. All were condemned by the magistrate, Mr A. Ronald Powell, who will only be remembered for his ignorant remark, 'a classical author might lapse into obscenity'.</p>
1934	BANNED	<p><i>Boy</i> by James Hanley (1931)</p> <p>A bowdlerised reprint of Hanley's novel was seized by the Police from a lending library in Manchester in 1934. The librarian and publishers were prosecuted for obscene publication and pleaded 'guilty'. The book was subsequently republished in Paris, but the author resisted all attempts to have it published again in Britain during his lifetime.</p>
1934	SEIZED	<p><i>The Tropic of Cancer</i> by Henry Miller (Paris, 1934)</p> <p>Hailed by Samuel Beckett as 'a momentous event in the history of modern writing' and by Ezra Pound as 'an unprintable book that is fit to be read' it was, together with <i>The Tropic of Capricorn</i> (1939), eagerly pounced on by Customs and Excise for almost thirty years. It was first published in England in 1963, followed by <i>The Tropic of Capricorn</i> a year later.</p>
1946	SEIZED	<p><i>Forever Amber</i> by Kathleen Winsor (USA, 1946)</p> <p>While this book was being attacked in the American courts, Customs and Excise were seizing copies. Some public libraries in England were also removing copies and burning them. The novel was not found to be obscene on appeal in America but, as the judge remarked, 'a soporific rather than an aphrodisiac'.</p>
1953	PROSECUTED	<p><i>The Decameron</i> by Giovanni Boccaccio (1353)</p> <p>A classic of European narrative, <i>The Decameron</i> has been read and enjoyed for centuries. Until 1953, that is, when the Director of Public Prosecutions supported the destruction order of an unexpurgated translation at Swindon during an 'anti-vice drive'. The order was reversed on appeal.</p>

1955	SEIZED	<i>Lolita</i> by Vladimir Nabokov (Paris, 1955) Regarded as obscene by Customs and Excise, copies were immediately seized under Section 42 of the Customs Consolidation Act (1876) – an act used by the government to ban the import of ‘indecent or obscene prints, paintings, photographs, books, cards, lithographic or other engravings, or any other indecent or obscene articles’. <i>Lolita</i> was openly published in 1959.
1960	PROSECUTED	<i>Lady Chatterley’s Lover</i> by D. H. Lawrence (Florence, 1928) Banned in England until Penguin Books published an unexpurgated edition in 1960. Prosecuted under the Obscene Publications Act (1959), the defendants elected to be tried by jury at the Old Bailey. The prosecution asserted that the book would tend to deprave the minds of many who were likely to buy it at the low price of 3s 6d. After five days the jury returned a verdict of ‘not guilty’.
1964	BANNED	<i>Fanny Hill, or Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure</i> by John Cleland (1748–9) Many versions and pirate editions have been printed and banned since this classic of English erotica first appeared. Yet, as late as 1964, London’s Chief Metropolitan Magistrate ruled that it was obscene and ordered the forfeiture of 171 copies seized from the publishers in London.
1967	BANNED	<i>Last Exit to Brooklyn</i> by Hubert Selby Jr. (1966) When prosecuted for obscenity in 1967 the publishers, Calder and Boyars, opted for trial by jury, but lost the case. In 1968, the Court of Appeal quashed their conviction on the grounds that the judge had not given sufficient direction, especially on the question that even if obscene, publication can still be for the public good.
1971	BANNED	<i>the little red schoolbook</i> by Søren Hansen and Jesper Jensen (1971) Copies of the first edition were seized and the publisher prosecuted for obscenity when a London magistrate decided that the section on sex was ‘likely to deprave and corrupt’ young people. Only after changes were made was a new edition published, in which amended passages were highlighted.
1976	BANNED	<i>The Love that Dares to Speak its Name</i> by James Kirkup (1976) Mary Whitehouse brought a private prosecution for blasphemous libel against Denis Lemon, Editor of <i>Gay News</i> , after no action had been taken to prosecute for obscenity. The prosecution was successful, and in 1977 Lemon was sentenced to nine months in prison (suspended for eighteen months) and a fine of £500. On appeal the conviction was upheld, but the prison sentence was quashed.
1986	INJUNCTION	<i>One Girl’s War</i> by Joan Miller (1986) Following the Thatcher Government’s efforts in Australia to suppress <i>Spycatcher</i> by Peter Wright, the Attorney General secured temporary injunctions in the Dublin and London High Courts against Joan Miller’s Second World War MI5 memoirs. The courts decided that the book would not do ‘unreparable damage to the security services’, and lifted the injunctions. Joan Miller had died two years earlier.
1986	PRESS CAMPAIGN	<i>Jenny lives with Eric and Martin</i> by Susanne Bösche (1983) After a virulent campaign by the <i>Sun</i> newspaper, with headlines like ‘Vile Book in School’, several libraries were forced to withdraw copies in 1986. The Thatcher Government subsequently used the book as an excuse to pass its anti-gay legislation enshrined in Section 28 of the Local Government Act (1988).
1998	CHARGED	<i>Mapplethorpe</i> by Robert Mapplethorpe (1992) The publisher and the University of Central England in Birmingham were charged under the Obscene Publications Act in 1998 after a student sent photographs of pages from the university library’s copy to a chemist for processing. An employee reported them to the Police as suspicious. The publisher and university committed themselves to fighting a prosecution, but the charges were dropped.

‘Banned Books’ was exhibited by **Frontline States** at the 38th Annual Conference on Book Trade History in November 2016 at Stationers’ Hall, London, and at a Banned Books Week conference held on 24 September 2017 at Pembroke College, Cambridge. www.frontlinestates.ltd.uk