

# The Penguin Logo: Brand Mascots and the Image of Mass Democracy in Interwar Britain

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The launch of Penguin Books in 1935 has an assured place within twentieth-century British history. The firm's mission to issue cheap paperback reprints of great works of literature is viewed as a formative moment within the wider drive to democratise culture that finally reached fruition with the Welfare State. The company's paternalistic project has always been favourably contrasted to the more aggressive tactics of American commercial culture. Penguin, so the story goes, never allowed the pursuit of profit to take precedence over its customers' citizenship needs. More importantly for us, commentators have persistently located these values within the books' visual design. Works such as Phil Baines's *Penguin by Design: a Cover Story* (2005) celebrate the austere format of the blocky early covers as a truthful communication of the merits of the texts inside. The Penguins of the 1930s are seen to have been their own best advertisement, a sober expression of their social and intellectual value that could dispense with the gaudy solicitations of the conventional mass-marketplace.

This paper will complicate this narrative by probing deeper into the communicative strategies embedded within Penguin's early design and marketing. In particular, it will examine the one element within the firm's publicity that has so far evaded all critical discussion: the Penguin logo (or colophon, as official histories prefer to call it). Like many aspects of the company's early history, the logo has gained its own origin myth. The company's founder, Allen Lane, was discussing with colleagues the need to choose an appropriate creature to become the firm's mascot, when Joan Coles, an eavesdropping secretary, piped up: "What about Penguins?" Edward Young, then responsible for all Penguins' design and marketing, declared her a genius and immediately ran off to London Zoo with his pencils and sketchbook (Young in Hare, 1995, pp. 4-5).

This paper will argue that the Penguin logo, far from being inconsequential, was the crucial visual element within the firm's commercial project, for it provided a cultural mechanism by which potential consumers might imagine their place within the firm's progressive vision. In part, this had to do with the inherited dynamics of the brand mascot, which, by 1935, had become a productively complex semiotic form. Developed during the nineteenth century to differentiate products and encourage brand recognition, mascots began to be theorised in the early 1920s in trade journals such as *Advertiser's Weekly* and professional manuals like Constance Miller's *How to Write Advertisements* (1924). These texts reveal brand characters to have become slippery devices within interwar Britain. At different times, or even at the same time, a particular mascot might personify the qualities of either the product or the manufacturer, might play the part of either an absent salesman or a personal confidante, or might offer the consumer a fantasy image of personal transformation. Entering everyday culture alongside the cinema, the brand character copied many of the film star's traits. Both derived their appeal from a predictable attachment to a standardised product, whilst trying to maintain interest by deploying a succession of contextual scenarios.

Some of the mascot's productive ambiguity was captured within an Underground poster by H. C. Herrick for the 1920 International Advertising Exhibition in London, in which a crowd of well-known brand characters was shown waiting on the platform for an incoming train.<sup>1</sup> Cleverly reworking the genre of nineteenth-century railway panoramas, this strangely utopian vision projected the vibrant, expressive and diverse society that mass consumption now appeared to promise. Viewers on the platform were slyly invited to imagine their own place within this colourful, democratic community - to let their relationships to mass-produced commodities transform them into characters as exciting as those on the wall. This latent performativity might also explain brand mascots' popularity as fancy-

dress personas during the costume-ball craze of the 1920s and 1930s, photographs of which record crowds very similar to the one on Herrick's platform.

By 1935, I suggest, the brand mascot had developed a semiotic complexity that often involved a suggestion of personal transformation. The particular efficacy of the Penguin logo lay in how it attached this underlying potential to another, highly-specific vision of social utopia: that on display within Tecton's Penguin Pool at London Zoo. Newly unveiled the previous year, this daring geometric white-concrete structure was an immediate popular sensation. One of the few modernist buildings in England, the pool was a careful set-design that showed off the penguins at their theatrical best. Their comedic waddle up its cantilevered walkways was a huge hit with visitors and effortlessly translated into newsreel footage. Yet this entertaining spectacle concealed an important didactic message. Julian Huxley, soon to be the Secretary of the Zoological Society, intended the pool to provide a valuable lesson in biotechnic engineering – that is, of how a living organism's everyday environment could be scientifically redesigned to meet its biological needs. As visitors gazed appreciatively at this visibly-healthy penguin colony, they were meant to perceive how such modern architecture might elevate London's slum-dwellers to a similar level of sociable health. There was, then, a basic accordance between the pedagogic project of Huxley and Tecton and that of Lane and his Penguin colleagues. Both sought to make paternalistic interventions into the lives of ordinary people and progressively fashion them into social-democratic citizens.

The Penguin logo borrowed the covert social meanings of the interwar penguin to further expand the agency of the brand mascot form. Material from the Penguin Archive reveals how, during the company's first operative years, the central motif within its press and point-of-sale advertising was that of a posse of cartoon birds. Each penguin was drawn to be slightly different from its brethren, whilst many were given open paperbacks to hold between flippers. In so multiplying its anonymous mascots, the conventional invitation to identify with a named brand character was reworked into a novel form of collective address. In effect, customers were being asked to imagine themselves within a community of purchasers – each one essentially similar, but never simply uniform. The message was explicit: to read a Penguin was also to become one - the consumer invited not just to purchase a particular book, but to buy their entry into an enlightened social colony.

Significantly, bookshops usually displayed Penguin books *en masse* in a dedicated section, rather than integrate them with other firms' titles upon the ordinary shelves. When so collated, the small penguin logos at the base of each spine formed an orderly civic line - a linear image, perhaps, of the egalitarian democracy that the books were promising to fashion. To be clear, the deeper effect of these mass-display aesthetics was never a conscious marketing strategy. I make no claim about intentionality, for the effects described here were not articulated or even noticed. But when, in 1947, the social investigators Mass-Observation inquired into ordinary people's book-buying habits, many respondents confessed a peculiar pleasure at seeing groups of Penguins books together (Mass-Observation, 1947, pp. 9-10). Neither they nor the investigators could explain this strange effect, but it is tempting to connect it to those lines of logos created by default on the Penguin shelf. By successfully fusing the anthropomorphic meanings of the interwar penguin, the expansive possibilities of the mascot device, and the basic display effect of mass-produced goods, Penguin books as collected objects offered not only a potent subconscious image of what a social democracy might look like, but also a mechanism by which individual customers might buy their own place within it.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This poster is currently available to view here:

[http://www.ltmcollection.org/posters/poster/poster.html?\\_IXSR\\_=QizfmPfKvtJ&\\_IXMAXHITS\\_=1&\\_IXinv=1983/4/1240&\\_IXsummary=artist/artist&\\_IXartist=Frederick%20Charles%20Herrick&\\_IXFIRST\\_=1](http://www.ltmcollection.org/posters/poster/poster.html?_IXSR_=QizfmPfKvtJ&_IXMAXHITS_=1&_IXinv=1983/4/1240&_IXsummary=artist/artist&_IXartist=Frederick%20Charles%20Herrick&_IXFIRST_=1)

## REFERENCES

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- Miller, C. (1924), *How to Write Advertisements*, Hutchinson & Co., London.