

PUBLISHER OF THE MIND

Seventy-Five Years of
Karnac Books

Brett Kahr



Books by Professor Brett Kahr

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To Kate Pearce

One of the very best people on the planet!

“I am full of enthusiasm for our future plans.”

*Dr Ernest Jones, Letter to Professor Sigmund Freud, 25th March, 1919,
on the prospect of publishing psychoanalytical books
and journals in the English language.*

Jones (1919a, p. 338).

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Preface

Throughout my professional lifetime, I have maintained a long-standing love affair with the esteemed psychoanalytical publishing house Karnac Books.

As a young psychology student, I deeply enhanced my education by having visited the London-based shop, H. Karnac (Books), on Gloucester Road, on many occasions. Subsequently, I became one of the many grateful authors whose books would be published by this firm. And as the decades unfolded, I developed warm friendships with many members of the various publishing teams at Karnac Books.

Little did I suspect that, in 2021, I would eventually become the Advisory Editor-in-Chief of this esteemed publishing company—a post that I maintained with honour and with pleasure for several years.

In view of my lengthy and life-enhancing relationship with Karnac Books, and as a result of my training as an academic medical historian, I would often recall that Mr Harry Karnac had first established this company back in 1950. Thus, when, in September 2023, Mrs Kate Pearce became one of Harry's successors as the new Publisher of Karnac Books, I reminded her that, in 2025, this important firm would certainly need to celebrate its *seventy-fifth birthday* and should thus derive tremendous

delight from being the oldest surviving, fully psychological publishing house on the planet.

Kate expressed great interest in my passion for the history of Karnac Books and, with much kindness, she encouraged me to write a small volume about the creation and the development of this institution over the last three quarters of a century. Happily, I have agreed to do so.

Alas, neither Harry Karnac nor any of his early successors actually maintained accessible files of their original paperwork from the 1950s and 1960s; hence, Karnac Books does not possess a traditional archive of its early documentation. However, I did enjoy the privilege of having collaborated with, and having interviewed or having conversed with every single one of the publishers of Karnac Books from its inception to the present day, namely, Mr Harry Karnac, Mr Cesare Sacerdoti, Dr Judith Feher-Gurewich, Dr Michael Moskowitz, Mr Oliver Rathbone, Dr Stephen Setterberg, and Mrs Kate Pearce. Consequently, over the years, I have acquired an immense amount of data about the creation and the maintenance of this vitally important industry.

In the chapters which ensue, I shall offer a concise and, often, personalised encapsulation of this groundbreaking psychoanalytical publishing firm which, over time, has contributed immensely to the promotion of mental health across many continents.

I remain honoured that I have long suffered from a truly incurable, but nonetheless delectable, disease which I have entitled “Karnacitis”. And I hope that this short history of Karnac Books will encourage many others to contract a lifelong case of Karnacitis as well! I can happily confirm that, having fully immersed myself in the world of psychoanalytical publishing as a customer, as an author, as an adviser, as a historian, and as a beneficiary, I have certainly obtained the honour and the privilege of leading a much, much richer professional life indeed.

Although no one wishes to contract infectious illnesses such as Covid in years to come, I do hope that every single mental health worker might well become truly afflicted with all of the huge benefits of catching Karnacitis!

INTRODUCTION

I Suffer from Karnacitis

Many long decades ago, as a baby undergraduate, I embarked upon my university studies in psychology. Back in the good old days, the internet simply did not exist; consequently, one could not Google the contents of one's college curriculum. If one wished to learn, we simply had to read books in great detail.

Quite naively, I had presumed that, as a budding psychologist, I would spend much of my days and nights reading the works of Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung. But, to my deep shock, I soon discovered that the academic experimental psychologists under whom I studied did not venerate these gods of mental health in quite the same way that we, as psychotherapists and psychoanalysts, have always done. Indeed, most of my esteemed academic teachers at the ancient university which I had attended absolutely loathed Freud and his followers and many even argued that those pioneering individuals had actually “set back” psychology by at least fifty years!

Shockingly, not one of my psychology professors had ever assigned a single paper or book by Freud as part of our course requirements. Nevertheless, in spite of the widespread hostility towards psychoanalysis and psychotherapy among research psychologists at that point in time, I yearned to absorb the work of that amazing Viennese genius,

and so, although I devoted a great deal of my time to the reading of such non-psychoanalytically orientated periodicals as the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Animal Learning and Cognition*, and the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, I did, also, immerse myself in the works of Freud and his followers, even though my teachers did not approve, and many, if not all, regarded the study of psychoanalytical literature as a complete waste of time!

Thankfully, I did learn a very great deal about such topics as conscious cognitive processes, statistical research, and neuroanatomy, and I continue to have benefited from those experimental psychological studies to this very day. But I simply never heard the names of Freud or Jung spoken out loud by any of my teachers during our daily lectures.

Nevertheless, keen to learn more about such shocking subjects as “infancy”, “childhood”, “sexuality”, and the “unconscious”, I continued to pursue my Freudian investigations, albeit quite privately.

Although I yearned to read more depth-psychological, psychoanalytical writings, whenever I visited the nearby university bookshop—the noted Blackwell’s—I actually struggled to encounter any overtly Freudian titles, none of which appeared on our dry and dusty anti-Freudian syllabi. Thus, although I had no difficulty purchasing textbooks on statistical psychology, I could not easily locate a straightforward introductory volume about psychoanalysis. And with no computers available back then—and certainly no access to Amazon Books—I spent an immense amount of time scouring the shelves of my own college library, desperate to obtain some texts which examined such traditional Freudian matters as human sexuality, early childhood traumata, and other related topics.

Happily, years later, while training as a postgraduate student and pursuing my very first honorary research post in a local psychiatric hospital, I happened to stumble upon a copy of *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*—a periodical which one of the senior members of staff seems to have left lying abandoned on a nearby table. With great curiosity, I began to browse through this precious and hitherto unknown publication with much excitement, and I then began to read all of the articles contained therein with tremendous gusto.

Not only did I learn a great deal about modern psychoanalytical theory from having immersed myself in this esteemed Freudian journal, but, to my surprise and delight, I happened to spy an advertisement printed in the back pages of this journal, promoting a certain London bookshop of which I knew absolutely nothing at that point in time, namely, H. Karnac (Books), located in the heart of South Kensington, in South-West London. The advertisement listed some of the newly published Freudian titles, and, although I must confess that I cannot recall precisely which titles had appeared on that page in the journal, I do remember that I became quite intrigued by such volumes and I decided that, at my first available opportunity, I would hop on a train from Oxford, journey into our nation's capital, and then become a customer at this little-known but quite intriguing shop.

I shall never forget my very first visit to Gloucester Road, more than forty years ago. With much anticipation, I disembarked from the train at Paddington Station in West London, and then I boarded the London Underground and travelled to South Kensington on the Circle Line. After exiting the tube station, I then walked briskly to this special bookshop, located on Gloucester Road.

Upon my arrival at H. Karnac (Books)—the nation's only psychoanalytical bookshop—I took a deep breath, stroked my wallet, knowing that I would certainly spend a bit of my small sum of cash on at least one or two special Freudian texts, and then I opened the glass door of the building and leapt inside this shop in a very youthful and highly gingerly manner.

To my great surprise, however, I found the shop to be *completely* deserted, with not even a salesperson visible behind the cash register. Naively, I had presumed that I would meet zillions of Freudian psychoanalysts thumbing through books in such a venue, but, as I happen to have arrived round about 3.00 p.m.—a time of day when most qualified London-based clinicians would be treating patients in private consulting rooms—I failed to encounter a single mental health specialist on that occasion.

But, even though I seemed to be the only potential paying customer in the bookshop at that particular moment, it staggered me much more that I could not even spy a member of staff. Nevertheless, I scoured the many bays of shelves at H. Karnac (Books) and, within seconds,

I quickly clocked many beautifully produced volumes on such traditional subjects as cookery, gardening, sports, and literature, including many recently released novels. But, tragically, I could not detect any books at all about psychoanalysis. I quickly became very worried that I had stupidly entered the wrong building. Consequently, I dashed back out onto the street in order to double-check that I had, indeed, popped into H. Karnac (Books) correctly!

I then opened the glass door once again and re-entered the building, and, fortunately, within seconds, my eyes suddenly glanced towards the very back of the shop, and there, perched on a high shelf, occluded in darkness, I spied a bust of none other than Sigmund Freud, whose bearded and balding face I recognised with little difficulty. Intrigued, I walked swiftly towards this plaster cast reproduction sculpture—undoubtedly a copy of the famous work by the distinguished Hungarian-born artist Oscar Nemon—and there, hanging from a railing beneath Freud's head, I saw an old, dusty, dark velvet curtain. With some timidity, I walked through the curtain, padded down a dimly lit, narrow, creaking staircase, and then, to my amazement, I entered a brightly lit basement room, full of nothing but books on psychoanalysis! Like a little child in a sweet shop, I immediately felt as though I had stumbled upon Ali Baba's hidden cave, crammed with secret treasures.

Funnily enough, although the basement contained what seemed to be literally trillions of psychoanalytical books, I could not spot other customers and, still, failed to detect any staff members at all. This struck me as extremely shocking. I had never, ever before entered a shop in Central London without any fellow human beings in sight. Perhaps I had become the only person who maintained an interest in this seemingly odd subject known as psychoanalysis.

Nonetheless, with literally no other customers in the shop, I began to soak up the quiet atmosphere of this windowless, noiseless, downstairs room with much reverence, and I quickly began to scan all the multi-coloured spines of the many book titles—one by one—which lined every bit of the wall space.

Eventually, after approximately fifteen minutes of glancing at each of the psychoanalytical titles in full isolation, with no other human being in the room, an elderly, bespectacled man with white hair and a salt-and-pepper beard and moustache suddenly appeared, as if from

nowhere, and introduced himself to me as the proprietor of the shop. Sensing that I seemed to be a rather unexpectedly young customer, this man asked me why I had walked down the staircase! When I told him that I had recently embarked upon my university postgraduate studies in psychology, the owner then introduced himself to me as “Mr Karnac”, the founder of H. Karnac (Books), and he immediately took a benevolent interest in my potential purchases.

At that point in time, I had not realised that the shop might actually be owned by a man called Mr Karnac, whose forename I had not yet discovered!

Moments after having met Mr Karnac for the very first time, I then selected quite a few titles which I planned to buy—by no means an easy choice, as I could readily have selected every single book in the basement—and then I carried those three or four books over to the downstairs counter, intending to hand over my limited amount cash. (Back then, most people of my age purchased items with actual money, rather than with credit cards). However, to my utter surprise, Mr Karnac immediately objected to each of my proposed choices. I remember that I had selected a particular book about schizophrenia, as I had only just begun to work with psychotic patients at that time, but Mr Karnac—i.e., Harry Karnac—ridiculed that chosen volume, albeit written by a prominent American psychoanalyst, and he then told me that I should not waste my money on a schizophrenia title but, rather, that I should, instead, spend my money on Dr David Malan’s (1979) recently published, best-selling book on *Individual Psychotherapy and the Science of Psychodynamics*.

Whether Harry Karnac adopted such an interventionist approach with all of his customers, I certainly cannot say. But never before, and never since, have I ever encountered such a vocally bold bookseller. Certainly, Mr Karnac stood out immediately as a most unique person indeed.

At that point in time, I had never previously stumbled upon the work of David Malan—one of the inventors of short-term psychoanalytically orientated psychotherapy. And, although I have always preferred long-term, intensive work, I certainly appreciated that as a young trainee, I would unquestionably have to absorb Dr Malan’s contributions as well; and so, following Mr Karnac’s unusually explicit, indeed

controlling, instructions, I returned the book on schizophrenia to the shelf, and, instead, I paid for Malan's title, along with one or two others about the life and work of Freud himself.

After having spent at least an hour—possibly even two or thereabouts—scouring the shelves of Harry Karnac's unique basement library, I then conveyed my thanks to this elderly gentleman, placed my new purchases in my rucksack, and ultimately exited this already very memorable shop.

Upon my eventual return to my student dormitory room in Oxford, I boasted to all of my fellow psychology students that I had just treated myself to such a lovely afternoon at H. Karnac (Books). To my horror, not a single one of my university comrades had ever heard of this shop in London, and not a single trainee expressed any interest at all in visiting an *overtly* Freudian bookseller. Clearly, most of the people in Oxford continued to hate Sigmund Freud and his followers, and, in view of the fact that in my one-hour or two-hour visit to the shop, not a single fellow customer entered the building at all, I found myself surprised that Karnac Books continued to persevere financially. Perhaps Mr Karnac earned his salary predominantly from selling cookery books and gardening books, which occupied most of the space on the ground floor. I seemed to be one of the only people who had actually spent money in the basement!

As the months and years unfolded, I persevered with my studies at university, and although my teachers remained grotesquely anti-Freudian, I continued, nevertheless, to develop a huge, private love affair with *Herr Professor* Sigmund Freud in my spare time. And, consequently, I would often travel back to London and would readily revisit this iconic bookshop on Gloucester Road on many more occasions.

Whenever I returned to the shop, Harry Karnac—a man whom I inevitably addressed as “Mr Karnac”—greeted me most cordially, ever happy to recommend his favourite new titles. In spite of his lack of clinical training, Karnac had come to meet virtually all of the world's most famous psychoanalysts; hence, he would often base his recommendations for books upon his private relationships with some of the authors. Out of respect for Mr Karnac, I certainly endeavoured to follow his purchasing suggestions whenever possible.

Over time, Harry Karnac and I developed a warm relationship, and, some years later, he encouraged me to call him “Harry” as opposed to “Mr Karnac”. At one point, he very kindly permitted me to conduct a lengthy, formal interview with him in which he shared many reminiscences about his early life and, moreover, about his close association with numerous leaders of British psychoanalysis during the post-World War II era, not least the iconic Dr Donald Winnicott, whom he had encountered on innumerable occasions. Indeed, Harry eventually gifted me with a pre-publication copy of his indispensable Winnicott bibliography (Karnac, 1993), which proved invaluable to my budding work as Winnicott’s very first biographer (Kahr, 1996a).

As our warmly pleasant encounters progressed, Harry certainly came to appreciate my burgeoning research in the field of psychoanalytical historiography, and, on many occasions, he would telephone me on my landline, keen to share further memories about the early days of British psychoanalysis. A truly impressive raconteur, Harry spoke with such fluidity, such generosity, and such engagement, and, moreover, with such great delight, that I found every single one of his anecdotes to be utterly thrilling.

Needless to say, as the years unfolded, I became increasingly obsessed with Harry Karnac and with H. Karnac (Books).

In fact, it pleases me to reveal that, in due course, I began to develop a new, untreatable psychological condition, which I have come to refer to as “Karnacitis”, namely, a huge addiction to psychoanalytical books and to the psychoanalytical bookshop then located on London’s Gloucester Road (cf. Kahr, 2005b, 2005c, 2006).

If I should ever succumb to a serious psychopathological disease such as schizophrenia, depressive psychosis, or borderline personality disorder, I would hope to receive much life-transformative psychoanalytical treatment on a five-times weekly basis over many years and thus be cured in due course. But, in view of my self-diagnosis of suffering from “Karnacitis”, I deeply trust that I will *never*, ever receive treatment for this condition, because I have remained a huge fan of Karnac Books over nearly half a century, and, I can report with deep pleasure that Karnac Books has enhanced my world quite immensely.

Thus, “Karnacitis” remains, in my estimation, the most helpful psychological illness imaginable!

Not only has the bookshop provided me with access to huge numbers of texts over the years, but, once I moved to London permanently, I would often pop into the shop several times per week, and, during my visits, I would meet innumerable colleagues with whom I would develop warm relationships and professional associations. I also became increasingly friendly with the shop's staff members, and, to my huge surprise, one of the core members of the team actually facilitated the publication of my very first book, back in 1996, namely, a biography of the great British psychoanalyst, Dr Donald Woods Winnicott (Kahr, 1996a). And, moreover, it never occurred to me back in those olden days that, years later, I would actually receive an appointment as the "Advisory Editor-in-Chief" to Karnac Books and that, in such a role, I would myself facilitate the publication of literally hundreds of new psychoanalytically orientated books.

Thus, I have, indeed, suffered from "Karnacitis" for virtually the whole of my professional life, and I remain delighted and honoured to have developed and to have sustained such a long-standing relationship with this vital organisation.

Back in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s, Karnac Books devoted itself entirely to the sale of books, but, in the 1980s, the company also became one of the leading publishers of new psychoanalytical book titles and remains so to this very day.

As I have indicated in the "Introduction", back in 2023, I happened to chat on the telephone to Mrs Kate Pearce, the current Publisher of Karnac Books, and I reminded her that Harry Karnac had first founded his shop back in 1950, and that, in due course, in the impending year 2025, the firm would actually reach its seventy-fifth birthday. Having enjoyed a long and creative collaboration with Mrs Pearce, who has published many of my titles over the years (e.g., Kahr, 2019a, 2024), we discussed whether I might endeavour to write a brief, encapsulated history of the first seventy-five years of Karnac Books. As a trained medical historian, and as someone who happened to have interacted with all of the publishers and staff members of Karnac Books since the early 1980s, I accepted this invitation with great pleasure.

In the pages that follow, I will share some of my knowledge and archival research about the history of psychoanalytical publishing and, particularly, about the work of the pioneers of Karnac Books, as a means

of paying tribute to this extremely important organisation and its loyal creators.

I feel very honoured to have stumbled upon H. Karnac (Books), and I remain deeply grateful to have enjoyed so many years of pleasure and collaboration with this institution and with its team members, all of whom have contributed hugely to the growth of the fields of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis.