

THE SUBTERRANEAN CENSORSHIP

By Morris L. Ernst and William Seagle

IN THE middle of the nineteenth century in England there arose an institution which as an instrument for literary censorship has never been surpassed, not even by the Watch and Ward Society of Boston, which is its nearest and most successful rival, nor by the American Postal Laws. That institution was the English Circulating Library.

In 1842, when Mudie's Select Circulating Library was founded, there had newly arisen in Great Britain a prosperous, educated and leisured upper-middle class. It was also the day of the three-volume novel—"the old three-decker", as the Victorians affectionately called it. The earliest English novels, the novels of Richardson, Fielding, Fanny Burney, Smollett and Sterne, had appeared in from five to ten volumes; but with the appearance and popularity of the Waverley Novels three volumes became the customary size. Three volumes, at an almost standardized price of thirty-one shillings and sixpence! Even sturdy middle-class prosperity could hardly hope to stock a library of three-deckers at that price.

The answer, it was obvious, was the circulating library; and a number of them—Mudie's and Day's and Moses's and Smith's—sprang up to meet the need. From the first the most popular was Mudie's.

It seems hard to believe that the circulating library, that almost terrifying force for righteousness throughout the better part of a century, could ever have been regarded with suspicion. But there were respectable folk in those early years who looked upon reading as a secret and shameful vice. "Madam," said Sir Anthony Absolute, in "The Rivals", "a circulating library in a town is an evergreen tree of diabolical knowledge. It blossoms every year." But very soon the circulating libraries were fighting "diabolical knowledge" root and branch. For decades they exercised their subterranean censorship in an almost uncontested tyranny,

and even today their disapproval is a force with which English novelists must reckon.

All the circumstances of literary production and distribution among the Victorians conspired to give great power into their hands. Public libraries, the modern Open Sesame to books, were unknown. But since education for the first time was general, and leisure was no longer the prerogative only of the upper classes, the success of the new venture was immediate. "Going to Mudie's" was an event in the Victorian household; it actually came soon to confer social prestige. The fashionable congregated there. The wife of the prosperous merchant saw the great lord and lady within its portals. Of an afternoon the carriages of the gentry would draw up before the shop in Oxford Street, and anon the powdered footman would follow his master or mistress bearing the precious burden of books. Packages of books went to every corner of the Empire, and even beyond the Dominions. "I remember," we are told in one of the Memoirs of the times, "when staying abroad at His Excellency's, the Ambassador, the Government dispatch boxes were awaited with eager interest because the Queen's Messenger was the bearer of important novels from Mudie's!"

The greatest novelists of the day, Thackeray, Dickens, George Eliot, wrote to the traditional three-volume size and had their work passed beneath the watchful eye of the circulating libraries' censor. That they actually managed to produce literature in those trying times is proof that genius can overcome any handicap. A horde of minor novelists arose, padding out their thin gifts to the required length by the insertion of moral tales, sermonizings, homilies and reflections; they descended to the absurdest inanities. The tales of the lady-novelists of that day—Ouida, Edna Lyall, Miss Braddon and the rest—although invariably provided with repentance and a proper moral, did sometimes glow with

sulphurous passion, but this was exceptional. The literary prudery of the age was unbelievable. It is hard for us to realize that "Jane Eyre" very narrowly escaped being banned; that George Eliot's "Adam Bede" was characterized as "the vile outpourings of a lewd woman's mind"; and that Mrs. Browning's "Aurora Leigh" was described as "the hysterical indecencies of an erotic mind". Kingsley's "Hypatia" caused such a tempest that he was actually forbidden to preach in London until after an investigation had been made of the charges against him, and Harriet Martineau, although she was a free-thinker, declared herself "unable to read 'Vanity Fair' from the moral disgust it occasions".

The remarkable uniformity of the moral judgments of the period was one reason for the success of the circulating libraries as censors. Before any hint of sexual irregularity the Mid-Victorian face was set; the code had been transgressed, the offender must be punished; no law of the Medes and Persians was more rigid. The libraries were representative middle-class institutions which accurately reflected the attitude of their times. The proprietors of the libraries were earnest Victorian Christians, as ready to be shocked by the very least hint of impropriety as any of their readers. It took only a very faint protest from a guinea subscriber to alarm them. As tradesmen their whole prosperity was bound up with keeping the novel pure for their customers, and their relation to the author, publisher and reading public made it easy for them to dictate terms. They did not need to be bold or to venture into perilous experiments; their income was assured under the existing arrangement.

The publisher was, by the nature of his agreement with the proprietors of the circulating libraries, entirely at their mercy; Mudie's, Smith's, and the others, had become not only middlemen but virtually monopolists. By the existing terms they took a minimum number of copies of every book published, good, bad, or indifferent, just as jobbers agree to take specified lots of goods from factories. When a book offended it was entirely unnecessary to invoke the law. The Anglo-Saxon hates to go to law when it can possibly be avoided. It is such a nuisance.

He will not budge from his stand, but he hates to be disagreeable. And although the success of even such a semi-private censorship as that of the circulating libraries rests implicitly upon the threat of an appeal to law, the legal standards of obscenity did not coincide with Victorian literary prudery until 1868, which is a comparatively late date. No; going to law was not necessary. If the libraries agreed among themselves not to stock a book the publisher might just as well decide to sell it for so much waste paper; it had been relegated to limbo.

As the end of the century drew near British novelists began to grow restive under the interacting tyranny of the three-volume book and the circulating library censorship. Thackeray had already satirized both institutions. "Anybody," said Oscar Wilde, that hopelessly lost soul among the Victorians, "can write a three-volume novel. It merely requires a complete ignorance of both life and literature." George Gissing drew a vivid portrait of honest writers of the period struggling with the incubus in "New Grub Street". Meredith and Hardy had complained, though ineffectually. The cause of literary freedom needed a champion who was both artist and fighter, and it found him in George Moore.

Mr. Moore is to the history of Anglo-Saxon book censorship what Bernard Shaw is to the history of Anglo-Saxon dramatic censorship. Shaw had his Lord Chamberlain; George Moore found his Mr. Mudie. In 1883 Moore had published "A Mummer's Wife". One day he was informed that Mudie's Library had refused to stock it because of the protests of two ladies in the country, who had written in to say that they disapproved of it. He was infuriated, and no wonder. He determined to go at once to see Mr. Mudie personally. Moore waited below in the library, and soon the guardian of the public morals descended the stairs from his sanctum, "an almost lifeless, thick-set, middle-aged man", to use Moore's own words. Moore demanded, as a man of letters, to know the reason for the indignity that had been visited upon him. Mr. Mudie refused to explain or to change his stand. Mr. Moore lost patience. "I will wreck this big house of yours, Mr. Mudie!" he cried. "My next novel will be issued at

a popular price. I will appeal to the public." The defiance delivered, he departed to compose "A Modern Lover", which duly appeared under the imprint of Vizetelly and Company in a one-volume format, at the popular price of six shillings.

"A Modern Lover" was suppressed, and Moore joined the ranks of the great English pamphleteers with "Literature at Nurse, or Circulating Morality". There are no reminiscences of George Moore more amusing than those in which he tells of his encounters with Anglo-Saxon prudery. It remains to this day his favorite subject. Towards Mudie his personal vanity made him merciless; he dubbed his victim "the British Matron, and President and Founder of the English Academy". But his animus did not undermine his judgment; he perceived very clearly that the English censorship of his time was a censorship by virtue of thirty-one shillings and sixpence, and that it would not be over until the three-volume novel was vanquished.

The victory was not won in a day. The three-decker died hard. But the Nineties looked more favorably on the six-shilling book than the readers of the decades who preceded them. The turn of the tide came when Heinemann's brought out "The Manxman", by Hall Caine, that Prince of Best Sellers, in a six-shilling edition. Within a fortnight the book had sold one hundred thousand copies, and the three-volume tradition went down in the flood. Figures in Shaylor's "The Fascination of Books" tell the story: in 1890 there were one hundred and sixty three-volume novels published; by 1897 there were only four. Rudyard Kipling celebrated its death agony in "The Three Decker":

Full thirty foot she towered from water-line to rail.

It cost a watch to steer her, and a week to shorten sail;

But, spite all modern notions, I've found her first and best,

The only certain packet for the Islands of the Blest.

Fair held the breeze behind us—'twas warm with lovers' prayers.

We'd stolen wills for ballast and a crew of missing heirs.

They shipped as Able Bastards till the wicked nurse confessed,
And they worked the old three decker to the Islands of the Blest.

By ways no gaze could follow, a course unspoiled of cook,

Per Fancy, fleetest in man, our titled berths we took

With maids of matchless beauty and parentage unguessed,

And a Church of England parson for the Islands of the Blest.

We asked no social questions—we pumped no hidden shame—

We never talked obstetrics when the Little Stranger came:

We left the Lord in heaven, we left the fiends in hell,

We weren't exactly Yussufs, but—Zuleika didn't tell.

No moral doubt assailed us, so when the port we neared,

The villain had his flogging at the gangway and we cheered.

'Twas fiddle in the foc's'le—'twas garlands on the mast,

For everyone got married and we went ashore at last.

I left 'em all in couples akissing on the decks,

I left the lovers loving and the parents signing checks.

In endless English comfort by county-folk caressed,

I left the old three decker at the Islands of the Blest.

But those who celebrated the end of circulating library censorship when the three-volume novel passed celebrated it prematurely. "One day," wrote Carlyle, "the Mudie mountain, which seemed to stand strong like other rock mountains, gave suddenly, as the icebergs do, a loud sounding crack; suddenly, with huge clangour, shivered itself into ice dust; and sank, carrying much along with it." Too optimistic by far. Indeed, a decade after the three deckers had finally disappeared, the circulating libraries, still conscious of their high mission, attempted to revive their censorial powers. They refused to circulate Sudermann's "Song of Songs", Neil Lyon's "Cottage Pie", and even, to cap

the climax, Tyler's book on Shakespeare's sonnets! The Times Book Club declined to send out Henry James's "Italian Hours", explaining that "it was not likely to promote the library's reputation as a circulator of wholesome literature", which raised the speculation that the title had perhaps been misread as the more voluptuous one, "Italian Houris".

But, apparently still unsatisfied and still crusading, in December of 1909 the circulating libraries—Mudie's, Smith's, Boots's, The Booklovers' Library, The Times Book Club, Day's and Cawthorn and Hutt's, Ltd.—organized the Circulating Libraries Association. "We have determined," they announced, "that in the future we will not place in circulation any book which by reason of the personally scandalous, libelous, immoral or otherwise disagreeable nature of its contents is in our opinion likely to prove offensive to any considerable section of our subscribers." Not content with this, they required publishers to submit all books one week before publication, to be divided into the categories of "satisfactory", "doubtful", or "objectionable". The members of the association then agreed that they would not circulate any book to which three members of the Association took exception.

The impudence of this proposal was manifest. The battle for "pure literature" reached such an intensity that to many of the good late Victorians it appeared to be dictated by the sternest necessity. They had been shocked almost into insensibility by George Moore's "Esther Waters" (which the circulating libraries promptly banned upon its appearance in 1894); Hardy's "Jude, the Obscure", banned in 1895, almost floored them. But it was the publication of H. G. Wells's "Ann Veronica" in 1909 which made them feel that the world was coming to an end. It was denounced by publishers and editors, headed by J. St. Loe Strachey, famous editor of *The Spectator*, who made a personal appeal to the Home Secretary for the application of a rigid literary censorship. Hardly was this excitement over when Frank Harris wrote an article in the *English Review* in which he compared the Japanese code of morals with the Ten Commandments to the disadvantage of the latter,

and Mr. Strachey announced that thereafter no advertisements of the *English Review* would appear in the chaste columns of *The Spectator*. But Frank Harris was a fighter; he began a campaign against English hypocrisy, and discovered and pointed out that Mr. Strachey himself was the publisher of the passionate Byron, and of unexpurgated editions of the plays of Beaumont and Fletcher.

By this time the proprietors of the circulating libraries could contend blandly that novels were now within the reach of the purse of the general public, and that the outcry of the authors against this "suppression and censorship" was quite irrelevant. Certainly, as private tradesmen, they were privileged to regulate their own business, and that was nobody's business but their own. The speciousness of this argument deceived nobody. The united libraries were still too important as book distributors for their action to carry no weight. The authors revolted and the publishers refused to submit their manuscripts to this private Inquisition. To Moore and Frank Harris there now rallied Sir Edmund Gosse, John Balderston, Austin Harrison, Charles Tennyson, Sir Oliver Lodge, Hardy, Wells, Bennett and Shaw. The days of the worst abuse of this private censorship are over, but even now Mudie's, Smith's and Boots's have an informal agreement that when one of them comes across a book which it considers immoral it will inform the others, and they will all refuse to place it on their shelves.

When one muses on the circulating libraries' censorship, one is naturally led to think of Boston. There is little, indeed, that is new in the show it is making of itself. When the little slips of paper are handed out which spell the blacklisting of a book by the Boston Booksellers' Committee, it is the subterranean censorship in action again. The agreement of the Boston booksellers among themselves that they would not circulate or stock any book to which the Secretary of the Watch and Ward Society took exception is so reminiscent in all essential aspects of the English Libraries' Association that it is only another instance of the repetition of history.

The American public library system has

always been far better than the English. However, in recent years the public libraries, with their budgets remaining almost stationary while the price of books has risen, have fallen behind the demands for the latest fiction. In consequence commercial circulating libraries have sprung up everywhere. Last year alone sixty-seven new ones appeared, outnumbering new bookstores by three to five, and new free libraries by seven to one. So far no one has concentrated on them as agents of literary "decency", and it is to be doubted that they will ever be in a position to dictate to their readers. Yet no one can really predict what might happen if a Smith or Mudie appeared upon the scene. But rumor has it that when a few years ago a protest was made to Womrath's, the largest chain of circulating libraries in New York, to the effect that it ought to be ashamed not to take steps to check the spread of indecent literature, Womrath's replied that if their customers wanted to read "bad" books they would be supplied with them as long as the books were not outside the law.

The subterranean censorship, however, may appear in the public library. Do public libraries attempt to supervise the tastes of their readers by making it a policy not to buy "objectionable" books? The public librarian often has the plausible excuse that since the funds of a library are limited he must pick and choose, and naturally the more wholesome books are given preference. This works out to the end that however great the demand

for books of the unapproved type may be, the public library readers may not have them. The Kansas City Library has explicitly banned "Elmer Gantry"; other libraries have at times excluded not only Robert W. Chambers and Elinor Glyn but also "Huckleberry Finn" and *Les Misérables*, exactly as English provincial libraries not many years ago outlawed Kingsley and Scott. Often "sex" books are not listed in the general catalogues. The catalogue of the great British Museum Library showed neither Ellis's "Psychology of Sex" nor Carpenter's "The Intermediate Sex", although the library had both. Many public libraries in both England and America have "private cases" of books in which such old classics as "The Arabian Nights", "The Decameron" and Rabelais are kept.

The subterranean censorship exists, and is exercised in innumerable ways. The history of the circulating library censorship suggests the only principle for determining those forms of censorship which are benign from those which are malignant. It is the principle of public use, which says that there shall be no combinations, restraints or monopolies—no concerted action, no collusion, no agreements. A literary trust is no less inconceivable than a beef trust. The degree in which an agency of a public or quasi-public nature is in a position of monopoly should be of decisive consideration. Otherwise the subterranean censorship may reach intolerable limits.

AN AUTHOR

By Patrick Kearney

EVERY evening the author dined at the same place. It was a little restaurant just off Broadway at the top of Morning-side-hill, and meals were only forty cents. The table-cloths were as dirty as daily usage could make them, and the dishes were thick and ugly, with cracks and rough edges that, in the cups, grittled harshly against the lips. The author always tried to dash down his coffee without touching his lower lip to the cup in order to avoid the unpleasant contact. He did this unconsciously, for his mind was never on his dinner. Then too, the coffee always spilled into the saucer, so that he had to pour it back. Every time the cup was lifted coffee dripped on the cloth and the clothing, making little disagreeable stains.

The author's light summer suit was very badly stained, for he wore it the year round. He had an overcoat which was thin and worn, and he had had it for ten years. He wore low tan shoes with buttons. His hat flopped weakly over his forehead and ears.

Every evening for ten years the author had eaten the same meal in this place and then every evening he had returned to his room, which was four blocks away, down the hill. When he got home he would write until ten o'clock, and then he would go to bed.

He had to get up very early in the morning in order to get a good start at the drudgery which supported him. He supported himself by selling books. By starting his rounds at eight and continuing until twelve he could make from two to three dollars, enough for his needs. He had been selling books for twenty years, ever since he came to New York to be an author. After he had finished his morning's work he returned to his room and wrote all afternoon.

His name was Remington Bishop. He was born in a small town in Ohio, and he was led to literary pursuits by seeing a picture of Mark Twain in a magazine and later reading his writings and his life. He immediately

adopted Mark Twain as his ideal and guide, and his determination to follow in his steps led him to a little western college, where he worked his way to a bachelor's degree, and finally to New York. His aspirations were received with no sympathy by his family, who were ignorant and poor.

He was thirty when he left home, but he was consoled by reading that very few authors had done anything really good until they were past thirty, and he felt that by working hard and studying his chances were as good as anyone's else.

In New York he made no acquaintances. He was by nature and habit retiring and shy. He had lived so long in isolation that he knew nothing about making friends. One or two persons had spoken to him in the lunch-room, which was the only place he frequented, but he had answered their approaches in such a shy way that no further advances were offered. Only indiscriminate mixers ever thought of approaching him at all. He did not promise much in appearance. He was tall and stooped and slightly bald, and his face carried perpetually an expression of mingled fear and shyness and humility which established him in the minds of the judicious as one born to live alone and within himself.

His shyness was an almost insuperable barrier to his even making a living. Were it not for his unfortunate weakness he could have made four times as many sales in his working periods. But the slightest frown, the least show of impatience on the part of his prospective customer, always drove him to confused apologies and an ignominious departure. His work was torture to him. But any other kind of work would require all his time, and as his writing was his prime interest his lesser comforts were of necessity sacrificed.

His routine had continued for twenty years without any variance. Promptly at noon every day he set off for his room and deposited