

Points of View

From a Bookseller

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review*:
SIR:

There are quite a number of angles to be considered in the business of printing and distributing books. That there has not been an adequate return to the bookseller for the money invested, his time and his trouble, is generally acknowledged; at least, among the booksellers, themselves.

A number of years ago, when I needed more money in my business, I went to the bank I had been dealing with for some years, and asked for a larger loan than they had been accustomed to give me. The vice-president of the bank, whom I had known for some time, called me by my first name and said: "They tell me that the bookselling business is not a very profitable one. How about it?" I acknowledged that the profits were small, but felt that with more capital I could make a larger turnover and show a considerable profit. He asked for my statement, showing our discounts from the publishers, turnover, gross and net margins of profit. He simply took a glance at this statement and handed it back to me and said: "That is a business on which this bank would not feel authorized in making loans; all we can loan you is what your personal endorsement, or some other person's endorsement, is worth!" Like the young man in the Bible, I went away "exceedingly sorrowful," as I was in somewhat of a tight place. A man who was interested in the business had concluded that there was not enough profit in it for him, and wanted to get his money out of it. I borrowed every cent I possibly could on my life insurance, managed to get a few thousand dollars through another bank, and wiggled out of my difficulties; made two or three lucky buys, and continued in the business.

One of the principal troubles with the book business is that there is not sufficient margin of profit to cover overhead expense, damaged and poor stock, etc. The average small bookseller's discount, or the largest bookseller's discount on small orders, is from 33 1/3 per cent to 33 1/3 and 5 per cent. On quantity orders the discount is somewhat more. The cost of doing retail business at the present time is 33 1/3 per cent. These figures, alone, are sufficient to condemn the business in the eyes of bank and financial people. The matter of discounts should be revised, so that there is a reasonable net margin of profit above the overhead costs. I am inclined to think that the quantity discount should be modified or abolished, as there is a temptation to over-buy in order to obtain this discount. In any case, where the bookseller has bought the quantity, and continued to order in smaller quantities of from ten to twenty-five copies, he should have the benefit of the original discount. It seems like paying a penalty on the part of the bookseller for selling more of the particular title after he has once risked considerable and worked hard to sell the first quantity. Many booksellers buy the quantity in order to get the quantity price; then, when they feel safe on a particular title stop trying to sell it and buy a quantity of another title. If the bookseller enjoyed the same discount on re-orders he would keep on pushing the older titles.

Then, too, there is the question that has been so much discussed, concerning the quality and over-production of books. There are, surely, too many books of no particular literary or instructive value published. This is especially true of fiction. We read through a great number of books and select a few titles. Even these titles have a life of but about six months, or a year at the most. And there are many books of this class that have a life of only from one to three months.

The great number of magazines probably has something to do with the failure to sell more books. I am librarian of our club, and find that there are very few of the members who read books. They all read the magazines and daily papers.

There is another reason that un-

doubtedly curtails somewhat the selling of books, and that is the housing of books. People live in smaller apartments and it is not the fashion to accumulate libraries as it was thirty-five or forty years ago. I used to have customers who thought they should buy nearly every book of value that came out, such as biography, history, essays, etc., and add to their collections. Their sons now ride in expensive cars and they have not, probably, invested \$500 in books.

Another factor which I believe mitigates against the collection and owning of books is the books, themselves. The average modern book is not as well printed, well bound, or as pleasing to handle as the same class of books were a number of years ago. If you will refer to recent biographies and histories, most of them are printed with wide margins on thick bulky paper and the price is high. I have just examined a biography of two volumes containing about 365 pages, each, which is more than half paper, the cost of which is \$10. Several biographies and histories of about 350 pages cost from \$3.50 to \$5. These books are surely not well printed or pleasing to handle. The covers are no longer stamped in gold; they take up a great deal of room on the shelves and are heavy and bulky. If we are to foster a love for books, a desire for collecting and possessing books, they should be made beautiful and attractive.

So much for the business and the merchandise, of books! A word about the bookseller, himself! Some time ago, in conversing with one of the larger publishers, he made the statement that "Booksellers were rather a slow, unprogressive lot." I replied that it might be true, but where there was a general, universal "effect" there must be a "cause," and I thought it would pay the publisher to find out just where the trouble lay.

With plenty of keen men in other business, and making money, why should there not be enterprising, intelligent booksellers? As a matter of fact, there are a great many people who have considered the book business as a life work. Quite a number of college graduates and trained librarians have asked me what the prospects were in the book business, and I have been obliged to answer that if they had some capital and were content to work for small returns, with the right location they probably could get a living; but that I did not see, under present conditions, that there could be much money in the retailing business.

If there were more profit; if some arrangement could be made for the return of unsalable stock, or a part of it, whereby the bookseller would not be responsible for the book he bought of the publishers' representative, with only very slight personal knowledge of what he was buying, there would be more profit in the business and, with more profit, more people would engage in selling books. There should be a bookstore in every town and city of the United States of five thousand inhabitants, or over. That is, a store that carried a fair stock of books with perhaps stationery, office supplies, and the other items that usually go to make up a book store.

The bookseller should know more about the merchandise which he sells, instead of offering the "most popular book" or the book for which the publisher, by his advertising, has created a demand. He should have more first hand knowledge of the books he buys and sells. He should know something more about his own immediate public. There are always, in every community, people who buy books. Many of them are buying them away from their own home town. I know of men and women in my own city who are buying the greater part of their books from New York or Boston because they claim that they can more easily find what they want there than in their own town. On the other hand, I have customers from New York and Boston, and many of the larger cities. Service and catering to the wants of book buyers and everlastingly keeping on the job will secure the business.

H. R. HUNTING.

Reviewing Reviewed

BY a regrettable accident the concluding paragraphs of a letter by Mr. Seymour Van Santvoord, printed in the *Saturday Review of Literature* of February 28, under the caption, "Reviewing Reviewed," were omitted. Mr. Van Santvoord had begun his letter by calling attention to "the careless and superficial exercise of censorial authority which reviewers are so prone to display," and had followed that statement with an illustration drawn from an article, entitled "American Sagas," recently published in this *Review*. He next proceeded to group book reviews into three categories, the first containing those reviews "which embody conclusions that the subject under review is absolutely wanting in merits of any sort"; the second, "made up of those occasional instances . . . when the fortunate writer has fully measured up to the understanding and lofty ideals of the reviewer, . . ." and the third, comprising "those literary ventures in which the lack of style, the false ideals, the ignorance of human nature, the general aimlessness, and myriad other faults of the author are pointed out with the assurance and certainty of a master—finally qualified by an admission, or at least implication—that to certain ones not so gifted as the reviewer the book may have a passing interest if not actually appreciable value."

The paragraphs which developed from this and which were omitted follow:

In the vocabulary of every competent review of literary productions under present-day standards, there are three essential words: "But," "However" and "Notwithstanding." Thus day in and day out we read:

"But in spite of these glaring faults and the author's ignorance of the barest rudiments in the art of story-telling, it is conceivable that a certain class of readers will take very kindly to Mr. Smith's first attempt, which indeed might have disclosed much less actual merit without absolutely discouraging him from further effort."

"However the story has some good points, and at least we must accredit the author with the courage of his innocence."

"Notwithstanding all this—which ought to make the author much more cautious in his next attempt, it must be admitted that there are many things in this book which are bound to commend it to the thoughtful consideration of the general reading public. The author is at his best in describing the flimsy costumes of the Kaffir women, their manner of cooking food, meal hours and general domestic affairs."

In the use of such a saving clause the review under especial consideration—which falls within the third class noted, although at times dangerously approaching class one—does not disappoint our final expectations. After filling four solid columns of the *Saturday Review* in demonstrating Zane Grey's "stiffness in style," "imperfect mastery of English," "lack of appeal to those whose taste has been formed on those of Howells and Bennett," "crude and rough-hewn portrayal," "lack of psychological analysis," "curious ignorance of human nature and sex views," "amazing and incredible simplicity and unsophistication of mind" *et id omne genus*—in the fifty-ninth minute of the eleventh hour, our reviewer observes in the good old fashion:

"But whether we happen to care for his work or not, I think we must grant him a certain merit in his own way." (Of course, not in the line of what is generally conceded to be literary merit in the abstract).

I wonder whether this conclusion was from deliberate conviction or was subconsciously formed because, as the writer concedes, albeit doubtfully and grudgingly, Grey enjoys "an astounding popularity." But however this may be, our author must find great comfort in this final admission that he has a bit of merit "in his own way"—not, of course, in the line of what is generally conceded to be merit.

Side by side with the critique of Zane Grey's novels in the *Review* appears a discriminating article entitled "Education for Authors." To borrow one of its forcible phrases, "In these days of cock-sureness of opinions . . . when many well-known writers do not know their own trade," one cannot escape conviction that the recognized need of education (using the term in its broadest sense) for authors, is scarcely less manifest than in the case of the reviewers, who so airily crown with immortality, consign to oblivion—or damn with faint praise, those who have made it possible for the writers to display their learning and scholarship and their superior knowledge of the

hidden springs of high-grade literature.

"But" I am not writing from an unfriendly standpoint. It is true that the average person presumably will be impressed by the reviewer's apparent purpose to demonstrate that Grey is not entitled to that astounding popularity: "however," I can understand how many readers will find interest in it. And "notwithstanding" the reviewer's argument and conclusion seem not to be in accord with his nomination of Mr. Grey as American *tusitala* (I wonder how many readers of the review know what that word means!), "I think we must grant him a certain merit in his own way."

SEYMOUR VAN SANTVOORD.

Troy, N. Y.

The New Books Poetry

(Continued from page 604)

Who has ever described Strawinsky's music so well as that?

Mr. Ewing is no more obscure than Browning, and he has this virtue: whereas Browning couldn't help it, Max consciously achieves obscurity, with his tongue in his cheek the while. But with all his artful obscurity, he is often remarkably close to the unparalleled music of Swinburne.

On his title page, Mr. Ewing quotes Francis Picabia:

Je voudrais avoir un nouvel ami
pour dire des choses incompréhensibles.

The author of these sonnets "too mad to read" should make not a few new friends.

SONGS AND SONNETS OF PIERRE DE RONSARD. Translated into English Verse by CURTIS HIDDEN PAGE. Houghton Mifflin. 1924. \$2.

Professor Page's translation of a selection from Ronsard's minor poems has for long been a pleasant memory to English enthusiasts for the great French lyricist, but a desideratum unfortunately difficult to acquire. The book was originally issued in a limited edition, designed by Mr. Bruce Rogers, at least twenty years ago; and the only considerable translation of Ronsard's poems in English has thus remained in the obscurity of private and public collections. It is now reissued in a popular edition, in commemoration of the presumable fourth centenary of Ronsard's birth.

Professor Page's selections from Ronsard's voluminous poetical remains are neither extensive nor representative; but they have the advantage of being excellently translated. None of the longer poems are attempted, the present anthology being devoted wholly to the best-known of the love sonnets, short odes, and madrigals which, pedantry aside, are the most pleasing part of our inheritance from the chief French poet of the Renaissance. The selections number seventy-four, and the book is prefaced with a long and sympathetic essay on Ronsard by the translator, who has further exercised noteworthy intelligence in his choice among the large number of varying texts which exist for every poem.

War

THE EMPIRE AT WAR. Edited by SIR CHARLES LUCAS. Vol. III. Oxford University Press. 1924. \$7.

In an attempt to perpetuate the story of imperial coöperation toward the winning of the World War, the editor of this and the preceding and succeeding volumes of this work allocated his writing geographically. He told in the first volume the narratives of colonial participation in previous wars, in the second the tales of the aid rendered by the American possessions and Dominions. In this volume we have the vivid and unforgettable record of the work of the Anzac fighters. Africa caves in the next, and so on. Of course, it might be possible to impeach this method of writing history, or at least this method of arranging history. But the fact of the matter is that the volume now in hand gives brief, striking, and well-considered accounts of the operations of the Australians and the New Zealanders on Gallipoli, in Palestine, and in France: heroic to be sure. Also finely told; and in addition told fully and accurately, more fully than most accounts, more accurately because more studied, and more readably than the official records and reports would seem to the average person who cracks the pages of a book. The only difficulty is a difficulty in classification: geographical rather than chronological. For the rest the book is a fine and worthy tribute to imperial participation in the common cause of the empire.

The World of Rare Books

By **FREDERICK M. HOPKINS**

SALE OF BARCLAY LIBRARY

THE library of the late Robert S. Barclay, of Rowayton, Conn., including library sets of American and English authors, extra-illustrated works, illuminated manuscripts, early printed books, and autograph letters and manuscripts, with additions, was sold at the American Art Galleries, February 24 and 25, 677 lots bringing the handsome total of \$62,673. All three sessions were well attended, bidding was lively, and good prices were realized. The highest price, \$2,000, was paid for Orme's "British Field Sports," illustrated with twenty magnificent colored engravings by Howitt, oblong folio, morocco, published in London in 1807. Gabriel Wells paid \$1,000 for the original manuscript of Bret Harte's "Crusade of the Excelsior," 174 pp, 40, bound in French levant morocco.

Other important lots and the prices which they brought were the following:

Ainsworth (W. H.). "Historical Romances," 20 vols., 8vo, three-quarters levant, Philadelphia, n.d. Japan paper edition. \$200.

Beaumont and Fletcher. "Comedies and Tragedies," folio, morocco, London, 1647. First collected edition. \$250.

Blake (William). Original pencil drawing, signed, about 13 by 3 inches, framed. Fine study in composition. \$310.

British Poets. Extra-illustrated set of the Aldine edition, 78 vols., 12mo, morocco, New York, 1892. \$635.

Author's autograph edition. \$340.

Conrad (Joseph). "Collected Works,"

19 vols., 8vo, morocco, Garden City, 1920-23. Sun-Dial edition. \$310.

Cooper (James Fenimore). "Complete Works," 33 vols., 8vo, morocco, New York, 1900. Author's autograph edition. \$425.

Racinet (A.). "Le Costume Historique," 500 full-page plates, 6 vols., folio, half morocco, Paris, 1888. Large paper copy. \$200.

Dickens (Charles). "A Tale of Cities," 8 parts in 7, 8vo, in case, London, 1859. First issue of first edition. \$395.

Dickens. "Works," 30 vols., extended to 60, royal 8vo, inlaid levant morocco, London, 1881-82. Extra-illustrated copy of Chapman & Hall's large paper edition. \$700.

Autograph Letters. A unique collection of surpassing interest by Dickens, Thackeray, Charlotte Brontë, and others, 21 pieces in all, bound in a folio volume by Reviere. \$1,025.

Dumas (Alexander). "Romances," 43 vols., 8vo, three-quarters morocco, Boston, 1893-95. Edition de luxe. \$225.

Autographs. Fine collection of autograph letters and documents signed by the Emperors of Germany from Frederick IV, 1490, to Wilhelm II, 1894. \$375.

Field (Eugene). "Writings in Prose and Verse," 12 vols., boards, parchment, New York, 1896-1901. Japan paper edition. \$490.

France (Anatole). "Works," 30 vols., 8vo, three-quarters levant, New York, 1904.

Hardy (Thomas). Collected set of first editions, 36 vols., half levant, London, 1872-90. \$400.

Harte (Bret). Original manuscript signed by "Cressy," 149 pp., 4to, bound in levant morocco. \$910.

Harte. "Writings," 19 vols., 8vo, half morocco, Boston, 1896-1903. Author's autograph edition. \$390.

Ingersoll (R. G.). "Complete Works," 13 vols., 8vo, levant, New York, 1900-11. Dresden edition. \$410.

Tolstoy (Count Leo). "Complete Works," 28 vols., 8vo, calf, Boston, 1904-12. Grand de Luxe edition. \$330.

Irving (Washington). "Life of Washington," 5 vols., extended to 10, imperial 8vo, levant, New York, 1889. Limited Centennial edition extra-illustrated. \$625.

SALE OF VIRGINIA LIBRARY

A VIRGINIA historical library formed by an old Virginia collector, comprising rare Revolutionary War broadsides, Lincolnia, Washingtoniana, historical autographs, and general American historical works, was sold February 23 and 24 at the Anderson Galleries. The collection comprised 554 lots and brought \$6,818.35.

A few of the rarer lots and the prices realized were the following:

Adair (James). "History of the American Indians," map, 4to, calf by Adams, London, 1775. Uncut copy of original edition. \$37.50.

Broadside. Proclamation of Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer prompted by Burgoyne's threatened invasion, folio, Boston, 1777. \$45.

Broadside. Proclamation for suppressing Rebellion and Sedition, folio, Boston, 1775. Original Boston issue of the first royal proclamation printed in America after the opening of hostilities. \$50.

Broadside. Proclamation for a day of

Thanksgiving and Prayer for Burgoyne's surrender, Boston, 1777. \$35.

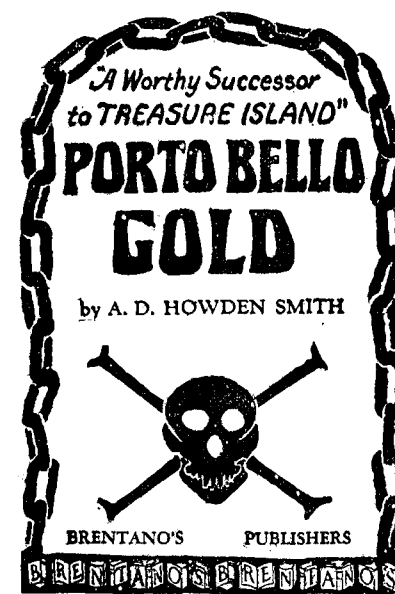
Beverley (Robert). "History of Virginia," small 8vo, half morocco, London, 1705. First edition. \$57.50.

Burk (John). "History of Virginia," 4 vols., 8vo, morocco, Petersburg, 1816. Complete set of first edition. \$70.

Davies (Samuel). "Virginia's Danger and Remedy," small 8vo, morocco, by Stikeman, Williamsburg, 1756. Sermon printed on the defeat of Braddock. \$65.

De Bry (Theodore). "Grand Voyages," 9 parts in 2 vols., folio, vellum, Francofurt ad Moenum, 1590-1602. With Edward N. Crane's bookplate. \$230.

Jones (Hugh). "The Present State of Virginia," 8vo, calf, London, 1724. Choice copy of this rare work. \$250.



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EDITORIAL PROOFREADER for Dictionary. State experience in detail and pay expected. The John C. Winston Co., 1919 Arch Street, Philadelphia.

HUDSON'S Green Mansions; Purple Land; Crystal Age; each \$1.60. Gotham Book Mart, 51 West 47th Street. (Bryant 5812.)

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