

Jottings of a Learned Profession

By WILSON FOLLETT

I. The Profession

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THIS is a day of suddenly and vastly increased interest in books. Not that the interest is wholly a civilized one, or that it necessarily has much to do, at first, with the improvement, or even the production, of literature. But the increase is an unquestionable fact, of importance to everyone who is engaged at any point of the long and involved process which includes the creation, the production, the distribution, and the consumption of books. It is a fact which has also its eventual importance to literature. However materialistic the tone of most present discussion of the problems connected with book-production, the fact that such discussion is now both possible and common denotes a real increase of opportunity along the whole chain. The author, the decent publisher, and the ambitious book-seller can, if they do their work well and coöperatively, make capital out of this renewal of interest and turn it to the uses of better reading matter—not merely of more pieces of reading matter per capita. And if they do this, the art of criticism and, more important, the judicious reader himself are going to be the ultimate beneficiaries. Briefly, more of the public will be more civilized than it now is.

At the moment, the increase of interest is revealed by a set of wholly non-literary symptoms. The following are some of them: (1) The recent considerable increase in the number of American publishing houses, which shows a tendency the opposite of that responsible for the amalgamation and centralization of nearly every other kind of commerce—the recent absorption of one great house by another being vastly important, but not typical. (2) The increase in the amount of business done, and in the number of titles handled, by houses which specialize in cheap reprints, and the consequently greater number of books which stay in print beyond their first two or three seasons. (3) The greatly accelerated tendency of all successful publishing houses to outgrow their own sales organizations—to issue more books than the number for which they can secure adequate distribution. (This is the real sense of the frequently heard complaint about our overproduction of books. The actual fact is that, by comparison with Germany, Russia, or Scandinavia, we as a nation, are conspicuous for a rather disgraceful underproduction. We have simply allowed production to forge ahead without adequate care for the channels of distribution; the reservoir is over its banks only because there is no adequate system of irrigation ditches.) (4) The number of persons who have lately inaugurated small book-shops or book departments, or thought seriously of doing so—a number so considerable as to have called into existence a special advisory organization, the Book Sales Promotion Bureau. (5) The rapid republication of partly forgotten classics (whether by special organizations or by the regular general publishers) in uniform editions and series, usually at modest prices. (6) The application on a large scale, as through The Book-of-the-Month Club and The Literary Guild, of the idea that large economies and large profits can be effected by applying the magazine-subscription idea to the circulation of books.

It is to be noticed that all of these symptoms have to do with books as merchandise, as the subject-matter of a business. If anything is characteristic of the kind of attention which the public now has to spare for the processes by which its reading matter is purveyed, it is the preoccupation with purely, or at least primarily, commercial considerations. There is nothing more certain to fire the national blood, or to make better news, than the rumor of any sort of price-cutting venture. When, for example, The Literary Guild inaugurated with an enormous advertising campaign its project of distributing books of regular publishers at lower prices than non-members would have to pay, the resulting quarrel between The Guild and the publishers became a front-page issue for day after day in metropolitan newspapers. The Guild's printed matter put all its emphasis on the propagation of literature, but that was not the point that attracted the attention. The public, via its daily journals, went straight, as usual, to what interested it; and what interested it was, as usual, fundamentally a matter of dollars and cents. Could anything better illustrate the anomalous situation in which

"the book business" today finds itself, or the deviousness of the labyrinth in which certain basic meanings become lost to sight?

A book is originally written, let us say, by an individual who has had what he believes to be a new vision of something, and who has worked in the conviction that his vision will have significant validity to a great number of his fellow men if he can succeed in getting it communicated. It is accepted, for communication to all and sundry, by a publisher who, if he cannot see his way to a financial profit on the transaction, can at least figure out a fair chance of avoiding an unbearable loss—and who, if he undergoes a loss, will have to pay the author something for the privilege of incurring it. It is put into type by a printer at so much per thousand ems, and into covers by a binder to whom it is an article $5\frac{1}{8}$ inches wide, $7\frac{1}{2}$ high, and $1\frac{3}{8}$ thick. It is described and sold to book-stores, or in larger quantities at a larger discount to wholesalers, by travelling salesmen who travel on expense accounts and sell on salaries plus commissions, and who in all likelihood will never read the book which it is their job to extol. In the book-shop it suddenly becomes an article of retail barter, salable for the first time to all comers at the price originally marked on it by the publisher. Only then has it a chance to resume, if it find a lucky reader here and there, some fraction of the quality of vision which was its original cause for being. And what a trivial fraction at the best! for we must remember the truism (pointed out, I think, by Mr. Cabell) that, had a blind poet not expended certain years of his blindness in the production of an epic called "Paradise Lost," the utmost consequence would have been that a few persons would now put in an occasional spare evening rather differently.

A book may be the precious life-blood of a master spirit, but it spends the most crucial transition period of its existence as a unit consisting of so much paper, cloth, and printer's ink, weighing about sixteen ounces in the aggregate, and significant in pretty much the same way that a theatre-ticket is significant.

Manifestly, about everything that happens to a book, from the time its author writes "The End" to the time it falls into the hands of a more or less like-minded reader, happens on a basis of the lowest commercial expediency. At one end of the chain is an artist creating, at the other an audience appreciating; but everything in between seems to be a crass materialism, expressive of neither the artist's purpose nor the audience's delight—in fine, the complex process constituting "the book business." How, in the face of such a condition, is it possible to advance the claim that book-production is the subject-matter of a learned profession? Is not the public, are not the newspapers, correct in putting the emphasis on the money which is to be made out of books, and are they not justified in imputing a basic cynicism to the considerable number of persons who attempt to make their living out of what are grandly called the fruits of authorship?

It is the contention of these paragraphs that they are quite wrong, and that the business of publishing differs from practically every other money-making enterprise in ways, and to a degree, which classify it among the learned professions, and emphatically not with ordinary commerce. It is, to be sure, an affair of buying and selling; if successful, of buying at a lower price to sell at a higher. But then, so is every other recognized way of supporting life. The author sells his output, the lawyer his advice, the teacher his learning, the surgeon his skill, the laborer his time; the clergyman receives money for the very prayers that he offers; even the man of inherited wealth takes income for the use of his resources. The difference which we all feel between the learned professions and the commercial ones is that the latter exist by driving the shrewdest bargains they know how, whereas practitioners of the former are well content to take part of their pay in the satisfaction of doing exactly the work which they were born to do.

The typical manufacturer may be honestly sentimental about the merits of his product, he may gratify himself with the idea that his function is "service," he may work himself up to the evangelical fervor of actually believing the assertions in his own advertising; but the final test of his

motive is whether he ever lets one dollar get away from him without a definite expectation of getting two dollars back for it—the answer to which question is, *tout court*. He does not. He admits, even proclaims, this himself.

With the professions it is otherwise. A doctor is not worth his salt who does not often find occasion to say: "Any fee that you could afford would mean little to me. You had to have the help—and I can easily take it out of the next patient who has more than he knows what to do with." And what should we think of a clergyman not disposed to preside with equal willingness over the weddings and burials of rich and poor, or of a teacher of young men not regularly addicted to the habit of handing out at every demand a thousand dollars' worth of free advice? And as for literary critics, have we not seen them postpone their own immortal works from year to year, and sometimes until after the funeral, while privately spending hundreds of hours gratis over the manuscripts of friends and complete strangers, giving the guidance and encouragement which build reputations? Authors affect great contentment with the apothegm, "Those who can, do; those who can't, criticize;" nevertheless, the good critic is a creator who is the victim of his own awareness of other persons, and also of the inherent claim of any literary problem, be it his own or another's, to the most searching analysis he can devote to it. Any critic who has done his work vigorously and honestly has but to glance through a handful of the publishers' lists for any current season to trace the record of his own unsigned collaborations.

In short, the activities properly describable as learned professions contain their large element of disinterestedness—of the spirit which, granted the ordinary minima of subsistence, takes its reward in terms of the chance to do its proper work. The business mind is preoccupied with what it can make; the professional mind, as soon as the elementary necessities are provided, is concerned primarily with what it can give, first for mere self-respect, secondly for the advancement and the dignity of the profession.

Now, it is the present point that the complicated job of publishing books contains this same large element of disinterestedness, and that for this reason it is to be grouped with medicine, the law, the church, teaching, architecture, criticism, and authorship itself, when these are practiced according to their best canons, and by no means with the vending of real estate, chewing-gum, brass tacks, steel rails, advertising space, inventions, petroleum, bonds, and political influence.

The publisher must, to be sure, make money if he is to continue to publish—and, be it added, if he is to be at all serviceable to any of the most idealistic purposes of authorship. But the decent publisher is not much concerned with *how much* money he can make. He is always paying for things that he can't afford with the proceeds of things which he can a little more than afford. He is always putting his profits back into his business by issuing books that gratify his personal taste or feed his pride without filling his pocket, or by effecting improvements in the physical properties of his books—improvements for which no one has asked and which few will even notice. He is always standing by authors whose books do badly season after season, in the conviction (too often blind) that he will be eventually paid by the cumulative results of his work for them, or out of a simple feeling that *noblesse oblige*. And he is always paying too heavily for imperceptible values, such as the prestige of having on his list a particular author to whom he has to concede such terms that he could far better afford to let some other house publish him.

The test of this difference between the spirit of publishing and that of the purely commercial proficiency for which America is notable among the nations is in the attitude toward the publisher of the simon-pure business man himself. A hard-boiled real-estate man, at his luncheon club or in a foursome at the country club, hears a group of his publishing acquaintances talk about the characteristic problems and worries of their calling. He listens, with bewilderment which changes to amazed incredulity and presently to something suspiciously like scorn. And at last he bursts out: "You mean to tell me that you spend even a minute of your time thinking about transactions which aren't practically sure to return you a profit? Why, I never heard of such a thing. My business would go to

wrack and ruin in three months if I conducted it in any such fashion."

There you have it. The publisher does, in sober fact, expend nine-tenths of his ingenuity and his time (and all of his lying awake nights) over affairs which, after he has put in the hardest work of which he is capable, may or may not escape a deficit. The few affairs which are certain to yield him a profit call for relatively little work on his part, and in the main they are relatively uninteresting to him.

And, by the way, there is no one who does quite so much lying awake nights. The publisher is working at a twenty-four-hour job; all his conversation is shop-talk; and, because he feels that his shop is the most interesting in the world, he is pretty well content with the fact that, when he locks his office door at night, he is far from having locked his troubles in and left them behind—whereas even a gambler in stocks sees few occasions in a calendar year that require him to be agitated about his affairs outside bankers' hours.

A New York publishing friend, reputed brilliant and uncommonly successful, was talking to me about himself and his business. "It is high time," he said, "that—[his wife] and I were thinking about building ourselves a decent house and moving out of this jam, which is certainly no place to bring up children in. The business has got going unexpectedly well; yet in all these years we haven't made it do anything appreciable for ourselves personally." He grinned, and the grin was a little rueful. "Somehow the profits are all reabsorbed into improving the game. The business is all we have to live on, and yet we persistently treat it as a plaything, a luxury. Can't seem to help ourselves."

This is so typical that different readers will supply at least eight or ten different identifications out of their own acquaintance, and without going off Manhattan Island.

HE history of printing is not, taken by itself, of very great consequence, but there is no other single historical aspect which supplies so complete a microcosm of the life of a community. Anyone who feels inclined to challenge this claim may profitably spend an hour or two with "Salem Imprints, 1768-1825," issued by the Essex Institute, of that city. Whether one wishes to get a comprehensive outline of what was going on in the United States during the most important half-century of its existence, from a fresh point of view, or desires to know intimately the life of a small New England community which has left a sharp impression upon state and nation, these pages will supply about all that is necessary.

An appendix of fifteen pages records the evidence of the ownership of books, from the Salem probate records, prior to 1830. The titles we would like to know about are rarely mentioned, but Purchas's "Pilgrimage" is listed in 1647; and "English Physician," "Discourse of Comers," and the "Battledore Book" in 1689. There were several sizable libraries, and in 1743 an inventory mentions books in the hall, the lower room, and the chamber entry. The Hon. William Browne, who died in 1764, was a real collector, leaving pictures, tapestry, a library, and medals. The earliest detailed list is that of a Cabot who died in 1786. He had the *Spectator* and *Guardian*, with other magazines, "Hudibras" and Lady Montague, "Pomphreets Poems," Congreve and "Paradise Regained." William Pynchon, three years later, had an impressive legal library, besides Milton and Montaigne, "Tristram Shandy," and the "Sentimental Journey," and Prior.

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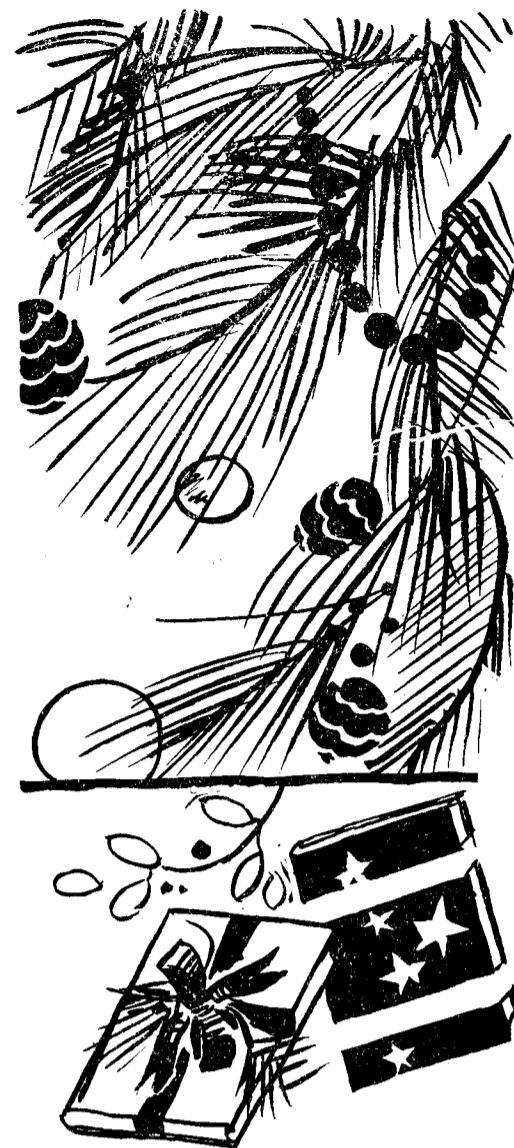
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The Wits' Weekly

Conducted by EDWARD DAVISON

Competition No. 8. A prize of fifteen dollars is offered for the best continuation in not more than 400 words of Sterne's "Sentimental Journey," the narrative to be taken up at the precise point where it breaks off in the original. (Entries should reach the *Saturday Review* office not later than the morning of December 5.)

Competition No. 10. A prize of fifteen dollars is offered for the most original short Nursery Rhyme for a Twentieth Century Child. (Entries should reach the *Saturday Review* office not later than the morning of December 12.)

Competition No. 9. A prize of fifteen dollars is offered for the best Christmas Carol in the American vernacular. (Entries should reach the *Saturday Review* office not later than the morning of December 19.)

Competitors are advised to read very carefully the rules printed below.

THE FIFTH COMPETITION

WON BY CLARIBEL WEEKS AVERY,
OF TILTON, N. H.

A prize of fifteen dollars was offered for the best unrhymed poem in which every second line was borrowed without alteration from the work of some "standard" poet.

THERE were more than a hundred entries. Unfortunately the majority of competitors, apparently thinking they had to deal with an easy problem, strung their lines together haphazardly. Their poems smelled not of the lamp, but of Bartlett and the index to the "Oxford Book of English Verse." Eleanor Hoffman, in spite of the fact that all her quotations were taken direct from the Index of First Lines, contrived to manufacture an amusing poem. But, to borrow her own and Milton's words—

*Yet once more, O ye laurels, and
once more
The wasted stamp, the Editor's regret . . .*

P. S. wrote an amusing fragment in which he admitted abandoning Bartlett in favor of Ward's "English Poets." Loretta Roche offered two poems of which "Anniversary" was the better. It was a little surprising to encounter among her "standard" authors a number of living, youthful poets—Joseph Auslander, Virginia Moore, Countee Cullen. A line had to be drawn somewhere and I regretfully drew it here. "Standard" is a misty word, but not so misty as all that. Another competitor very tastefully used a line of my own, but I ungratefully disqualified him. Tom Nob plucked most of his quotations from the humorous poets, while Edith Hull ingeniously separated her "standard" poets with a parenthetical chorus in the manner of "Two red roses across the moon." Both these entries needed rhyme to make them convincing. The many competitors who wrote regretting that rhyme had been forbidden will be given an opportunity to show what they can do in a few weeks' time.

In "Silver Threads Among the Gold," Margaret Ladd Franklin faced the problem courageously. For I will give you if you will not stir
Before my pen hath gleaned my
teeming brain,
The strangest interweaving—now a
line

Pure as the naked heavens, majestic,
free,
And, close beside, one dark and lustreless . . .

If any sparkles than the rest more
bright,
'Tis Shakespeare's, Milton's, Dryden's
—mine 'tis not.

A number of rival "interweavings" were indeed strange; for instance

My feet unloosened from their bond,
Pregnant with celestial juice,
And gathering roses all the way
The richer cowslips home.

When I consider how my life is spent
I pray the gods to let me once be
glimpsed

By woman wailing for her demon
lover,
That with her I might taste of life
again.

*See! the white moon shines on high;
Take me safely home at last!
So long as men can breathe and eyes
can see,
My heart, my life, my soul I'll
give—
A horse, a horse, my kingdom for
a horse.*

It was difficult to make a final choice. H. E. Rich, B. D. Brown, L. H. Phinney, H. H. Hall, J. M. Dobbs, M. F. Hastings, and especially Josephine Whittier, R. E. Wade, Garland Smith, and *Slightly* deserve honorable mention. I salute future prize winners in Herbert McAneny, Lenore Glen, and Tu Quoque though this time their poems had to be set aside in favor of Claribel Weeks Avery's "Song of the Sword." Miss Avery was wise enough to choose her quotations from the obscurer corners of poetry and thus the seams of her fragment are less obvious than most. It reads like an original poem.

THE WINNING POEM

SONG OF THE SWORD

By Claribel Weeks Avery

*I am Siegfried, son of the Volsungs.
Upon my red robe, strange in the
twilight,
Flickers the ruddier light of the
flame.
The gray magician, with eyes of
wonder,
Stands to watch while I forge me a
sword.*

*Dawn is dim on the dark, soft water.
All night long has been labor and
prayer.
What now, O Watcher?*

*Red as slaughter
Morning comes on, and thy sword is
alive.
Giants and sorcerers cannot withstand
it;
Iron and silk are as one to its edge.*

*Was I born under the sun or the
thunder,
Saved for what purpose, bred to
what master,
Or what was the service for which
I was sold?*

*He who has weaponed thee orders
thy goings.
With His hands full of flowers—red
burning flowers,
He is marking the way for thee,
Swordman of God.*

Line 2 is borrowed from Morris's "Arthur's Tomb," line 4 from Tennyson's "Merlin and the Gleam," line 6 from Swinburne's "Swimmer's Dream," lines 8 and 9 from Cawein's "Watcher on the Tower," line 11 from Longfellow's "Saga of King Olaf," line 13 from Gilbert Parker's "Right of Way," line 15 from Emerson's "Ode to Beauty," and line 17 from May Probyn's "Beloved."

THE SIXTH COMPETITION

A prize of fifteen dollars was offered for the most convincing extracts from a diary supposed to have been kept by Edgar Allan Poe during his schooldays at Stoke Newington.

WON BY F. H. G. OF PASADENA, CAL.

THIS competition was less popular than most. Perhaps lay-people are less interested in morbid psychology than they were a few years ago. I hope so. Not many competitors allowed their imaginations to play freely with the probable fears

and superstitions of the boy Poe. Recent biographies, notably those by Mr. Hervey Allen and Mr. Joseph Wood Krutch, pointed several easy ways, while it would have been easy to take a few hints from M. Maurios and Mrs. Barrington. Most entries, however, stuck too closely to the few known facts concerning the poet's English schooldays.

Slightly makes him encounter Charles Lamb in the street—an ingenious conception, but it was done too abruptly. Lois K. Pelton made some juvenile verses in her extracts *Olympia* and *W. A. S.* deserve honorable mention for two careful atmospheric fragments. The prize goes to F. H. G. for some extracts that do not maintain the standard of his second paragraph with its magnificently sinister "O, if I had been that boy!"

THE PRIZEWINNING EXTRACTS

Stoke Newington, June 17, 1819. Saturday. This afternoon the great gate with iron spikes was opened again to let us out for our weekly walk. How thick and heavy is that gate! Has any boy ever dared try to climb its dreadful heights and run away? The older boys say that one did, but will never tell us how fearful was his punishment.

I also heard them talking of a man named Eugene Aram, who was once an usher in our school and was a murderer! I have shuddered since, each time I have passed the dark old house in the town, where he did his awful deed. Yet I long to go in and see the very room, and hear how it was done. They say he hid his deed so cleverly that no one could discover the murderer; yet remorse so filled his mind that he told the whole story of his crime to one of the boys—pretending it was a dream! O, if I had been that boy! It is a fearful tale, and stays in my mind at night.

June 25, Sunday. To church with all the school this morning, and how strange it seemed again, as always on Sunday, to see the Master of our school ascend into the pulpit of the church and preach to the people! It seems impossible that he is our severe master, for he is disguised in a white wig, high and vast, long silken robes, and such a gentle face. Why must he lay them all aside, even the kindly smile, when he turns schoolmaster?

June 28. Today our Midsummer holidays begin, and Mrs. Allan has consented that I spend them with Tom Harwood. Huzzah! His father will come in the coach to fetch us. Then we shall shake hands solemnly with the masters, and go out through the front door, by which we never enter or leave save on some great day. And how joyfully we will wave farewell to the old schoolhouse and the boys, as we drive off in the coach through the great gate.

RULES

(Competitors failing to comply with rules will be disqualified.)

1. Envelopes should be addressed to "The Competitions Editor, *The Saturday Review of Literature*, 25 West 45th Street, New York City." The number of the competition (e.g., "Competition 1") must be written on the top left-hand corner.
2. All MSS. must be legible—typewritten if possible—and should bear the name or pseudonym of the author. Only one side of the paper should be used. Prose entries must be clearly marked off at the end of each fifty words. Competitors may offer more than one entry. MSS. cannot be returned.
3. *The Saturday Review* reserves the right to print the whole or part of any entry. The decision of the Competitions Editor is final and he can in no circumstances enter into correspondence.