

The Pearl in the Oyster: How Poetry Is Published

WILLIAM M. SLOANE

The SRL has asked Mr. William M. Sloane, an old contributor to these pages, and editor for Henry Holt & Co., publishers, to discuss some of the economics of the publishing of poetry.

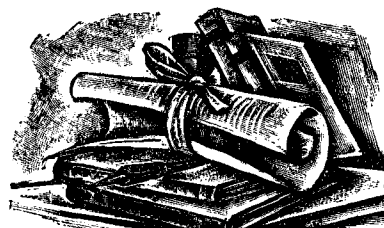
THE *Saturday Review* has recently been exploring what is generally supposed to be a publishing wasteland: the slopes of Mt. Helicon, where Euterpe has gone into a pauper's decline. The combined effect of Elizabeth Jackson's piece, "Poetry and Poppycock," and George R. Stewart's "The Novelists Take Over Poetry" suggests that the muse has been first abused, then neglected, and finally robbed of everything she owned. Anyhow, they are still talking about the lady, and perhaps a page or so of testimony from one of her business managers ought to be read into her obituary, which they are so busily writing against her imminent demise.

Now poetry publishing is regarded by some of my shrewdest and most sensible contemporaries as a form of amiable eccentricity. There seems to be a general agreement among them that the muse does not pay off, and that it is slightly silly to go on wasting a couple of hundred dollars at a time on "slender volumes of verse." It is *unbusinesslike*, and of all human illusions, the last which is likely to be abandoned is the publisher's belief that he is a businessman. . . .

A number of prominent American publishers have a house rule against contracting for books of poetry, and supposedly they will make no exceptions. But such houses are actually themselves the exceptions. Most of the leading publishers have brought out verse almost from their beginnings, and the newest large-scale publishing enterprise, Duell, Sloane and Pearce, actually inaugurated its career with a poem by Archibald MacLeish. Harper, Scribner's, Norton, Oxford, Harcourt, Brace, Holt, Knopf, Dutton, Putnam, Macmillan, Doubleday, Doran, and Farrar and Rinehart—to name the first dozen that happen into my

mind—have all published book after book of verse, and they are still doing so. Most poets who have not yet found a publisher believe that only a few houses will bring out a book of verse. My own impression is that substantially more than half of the forty largest American houses issue one or more books of poetry per year.

To suggest how much money there still is in the publication of certain kinds of poetry, I may as well cite an incident in our own experience at Holt. A year or so ago we paid an advance of \$2,500 on a single book of poetry, and on publication day we had sold enough copies of the book to cover this entire sum. The book was the "Collected Poems of A. E. Housman," and such a publishing prize does not come the way of any house very often. Nevertheless, the year before that we had owed Robert Frost a very comparable sum on the royalties earned in advance by the new edition of his collected poems, even though a lower-priced edition was being published only two weeks later. Ask any bookseller about what an Edna St. Vincent Millay publication date means in terms of sales. When Stephen Vincent Benét completes his new narrative poem, I do not think John Farrar will let the ensuing publication date pass unnoticed. Already we ourselves are planning an impressive sales effort and campaign for a poem which we are to publish later this year, a book-length narrative by Mark Van Doren. There seems to me no question that, viewed coldly and without special pleading, poetry is still an important item on the sales quota of American publishing.



All these cases which I have just cited will seem like exceptions to some readers, simply because they are obvious. Any book which sells at all well is *ipso facto* a publishing exception, but poetry publishing has its share of these pleasant surprises, some of them far less foreseeable. Alice Duer Miller's "The White Cliffs" is a recent case in point. The Pulitzer Prize award in poetry almost always means a substantial and very profitable plus sale to the house which has brought out that particular book. I can still remember the bemused look on the face of our sales manager as he scanned the transcripts just after Mark Van Doren's "Collected Poems" won that prize last year. Fifty- and hundred-copy lots look good on anybody's daily sales record. And a surprising number of books of verse have hit that most longed-for of literary jackpots, a book club adoption.

There are two other respects in which poetry publishing is good business. Successful poetry is one of the most solid of backlog items. It keeps selling even when that *terrific* new novel on which you were counting so heavily has just laid a *terrific* new egg in your lap. There are any number of well-known publishing houses whose entire backlist business must be smaller than the backlist business of Macmillan's in poetry alone. This kind of stabilizing sale is coming to be more and more esteemed by editors who are looking far ahead. My own feeling is that just because it is so difficult to exploit immediate sales possibilities in poetry publishing, we publishers are often prevented from the promotional excesses which cause us, often enough, to lose money on the publication of books which have sold a most creditable number of copies. Readers of poetry have a habit of refusing to be stampeded into reading any particular piece of verse. They buy a poet's book when they get round to "discovering" his particular excellences.

The second important asset of a poetry list is the fact that poetry can prove extremely profitable through what are called "permissions"—fees charged for the inclusion of a given poem in somebody else's anthology. These fees, which are divided between publisher and poet, have in many cases accounted for more sales dollars than the actual books in which the poems first appeared. Carl Sandburg's "Chicago Poems," which includes a number of poems which anthologists have included in hundreds of subsequent collections, is a case of this sort. The book has sold well in its own right, but "Fog" has sold better.

EVERYBODY knows that poetry is a dying art. Everybody in the book and literary business, that is. The news has not yet spread to the masses, and radio, for instance, continues to make quite extensive use of poetry. In their various ways Ted Malone and Norman Corwin and half a dozen others have made great successes of poetry programs over the air. Corwin's own highly successful radio plays have more than once been written in verse. Permission fees accrue to publishers from radio releases of poetry almost every day. There is a growing number of victrola records of spoken poetry. Magazines and newspapers continue to publish poems, and it is a fair presumption that the listeners and readers must want poetry if so much of it is being used.

From the publisher's approach, there is one final thing to be said for the publication of poetry and poets as a sound business practice, but I had best defer that until after a brief examination of the red ink entries on the opposite page of the ledger. These entries, here at Holt's as well as in every other publishing house of which I have any accurate knowledge, suggest that most books of poetry lose money for the firms putting them into print. Now losing money is a painful, unwelcome process to anyone, and this numerical preponderance of losing books is what has given poetry a bad name among publishers. They have a habit of watching current sales more closely than backlist sales anyway—or at least I have—and the sale of many a poetry volume is like the movement of a glacier—you have to come back the following year to notice any change at all.

A good many of the people who come into my office with manuscripts of poetry want to know "how much it costs to print a book of poems." This is a question which it would perhaps be wiser not to answer, but since it bears directly on the problem of profitable poetry publishing, it needs to be faced. Single volumes of poetry

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are of varying lengths, but the two commonest sizes, probably, are those which run to 64 pages and those as large as 138 pages. The shorter length costs us at Holt about \$530 for an edition of 1,000 copies, including the cost of plates. Our costs are higher than in some other houses of which I know because we believe that the people who *do*—occasionally—buy books of poems want them as permanent and worthy parts of their library. The longer books run to \$720 for an edition of the same size.

Two dollars is the customary list price for single volumes of poetry—and of this amount the publisher receives about \$1.20 gross. Furthermore, publishers are driven to distraction by people, including poets, who assume that what a book costs from the printer is *all* it costs. The departmental and other overhead costs on each book generally at least equal the outlay to the printer and plate-maker. So it is fair to assume that a single small book of poetry costs at least \$1,250 to add to the list, and it costs something each year to keep it in stock and in the catalogue. Assuming a sale of 500 copies of such a book of verse, there is a substantial cash deficit apparent at once, amounting to around \$650. This deficit has to be made up out of the profits on some other book.

These are the figures which make poetry publishing so much a matter of patience, of being willing to wait until a poet has achieved his full stature and popular acceptance. They also drive home the fact that it does not pay to be wrong about a poet, to take someone second rate and miss the supplementary sources of income, the anthology rights and the other kinds of permission fee. The cost sheets of poetry have to be figured in decades, not seasons, as is the case with novels. So far as I have been able to ascertain, practically every fine and profitable poet was once a red-ink figure in his publisher's ledger.

As for the poet, if he is fortunate he has a contract with his publisher at the standard book rate, which is 10% of the list price. Nominally he receives twenty cents, therefore, on each copy of the book sold, or a gross of \$200 if his book sells a thousand copies, which it most generally will not. Against this royalty the publisher charges the cost of such alterations as he makes in galleys over and above an allowance of perhaps 10% of the cost of typesetting. It is quite possible for a poet, therefore, to clear less than \$100 on his book when the dust has all settled. (However, he has frequently put his book together out of poems previously sold to magazines, sometimes, I suspect, interlarded with

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The Saturday Review

The Soul of A People

KABLOONA. By *Gontran de Poncins*.
New York: *Reynal & Hitchcock*.
1941. 339 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by ELLSWORTH HUNTINGTON

A long last one of my most cherished aspirations has come true. For many years I have wanted to visit the Far North with its flesh-eating Eskimos, the South Seas with their round atoll islands and graceful people, and the windy tip of South America where children four or five years of age gather shellfish, roast them in the fire, and actually get their own living. These are the three chief types of environment that I have never seen. The inhabitants of two of them, that is, the unspoiled Eskimos and the primitive tribes of far southern Chile, are outstanding examples of the world's most primitive people, representing fossil cultures in which our world of radios, bombers, politics, and war simply does not exist.

And now I have visited these people. Not in the flesh, to be sure, but in the spirit. I have seen their soul. In many books I have read of the outward life of the Eskimos, but never before have I felt that I had really been carried beneath the surface so that I not merely lived with these children of the North, but realized how their minds work and why they act so differently from us. In most books you see mainly the "queerness" of Eskimo habits together with privations, squalor, and seeming indifference to suffering. In the best books you also see that Eskimo habits are well adapted to an environment of intense cold, seals, fish, ice, caribou, and vast darkness or endless light. All the time, however, you are an outsider, looking on at something which is enacted before you as a play on a stage.

In Count de Poncins's book, "Kabloona" (The White Man), the Eskimos appear in a new and most fascinating way. When Count Keyserling attempted to see the soul of a people, he went among them as an Olympian observer. He did not talk to many people; he did not live their life; he did not stay long enough to permit his early impressions to be revised. Hence what he called their soul was more largely his own soul with a few temporary dents in it. De Poncins employs a different method—a method like that of Stefansson, except that it is less "scientific," if scientific means objective. This artistic, literary, modern Frenchman, with all the culture and sensitivity which these adjectives imply, went to the Far North of Canada and spent a year among the Eskimos. Part

of the time he lived in the most remote of Hudson Bay posts with an Irish post trader. Part of the time he lived with Eskimos who had become hangers-on of a post where they sell skins of the white fox in exchange for tea, clocks, telescopes, knives, flour, and knickknacks. And part of the time he went off for a glorious visit among Eskimos who still live almost completely untouched by the white man's civilization.

At first he found the Eskimo mode of life appallingly disgusting.

There were three men (for example) and fifty pounds of meat. The three men attacked that meat with the rumblings and growlings of animals warning their kind away from their private prey. They ground their teeth, and their jaws cracked as they ate, and they belched with long cavernous fatty belchings as of brutes drowned in contentment. The walls of the igloo were horrid with the ruddy drippings of bloody spittle. . . . And still like beasts they picked up chunks and almost instantly flung them down in order to put their teeth into other and perhaps more succulent bits . . .

At a later time, when he knew better how to make himself at one with the Eskimos, and fell among finer people, the story was wholly different. "That day was perhaps the warmest in human companionship that I have ever met." When his Eskimo hosts came home in the evening, they surrounded him with "a degree of solicitude rare among men."

"Are you not hungry?" one would ask when I stopped eating to draw breath. And another: "Give him more tea."

One reads this book with interest like that aroused by an absorbing novel. The style of the author is graceful

and vivid. The book arouses and sustains one's interest in even the smallest event, such as fastening the load onto a sledge, or trying to keep warm at forty below zero when riding on a sled no more than two feet long. The feature which does most, however, to lend an enthralling interest to the book is its swift and effective contrasts. Some of the most vivid contrasts portray the author's inner feelings as a white man over against his feelings when he throws away his childhood and youth, and merges completely, even if only temporarily, into the life of the Eskimos. One moment the Eskimos seem to him utterly childish; the next moment some courtesy or neglect on their part, or some unintended ineptitude on his part makes him realize that it is he and his European kind who are childlike.

The scenery, too, although monotonously flat, changes most wonderfully. "For Utak snow was the long-awaited gift of the gods, the magical element that made travelling possible, that furnished him a rampart against the wind when he spent hours on the frozen sea, waiting for the seal to rise." For the half frozen white man the snowy scene was

grey, undefined, a world without proportion, without dimension, above all without color. Never did the horizon draw its comforting line to divide the earth from the sky; the two were of the same substance. There was no middle distance, no perspective, no outline, nothing the eye could cling to except the thousands of smoky plumes of snow running along the ground before the wind.

But take another look at this same land on a day when the sun has come back and the Eskimos are hunting the great wandering herds of caribou—

That night we left the monotonous mediocrity of the low-lying land by the sea and came out into a vast plain. . . .

Imagine a world covered by the waters of an endlessly wide lake, and the waters receding until only peaks emerge like islands over the lake-bottom. There were hundreds of these peaks as far as the eye could see, with here and there a ridge that ran like a prehistoric river bank, its smoothly worn slope covered with pebbles that appeared from far away as fine as sand.

A book studded with passages like this, a book that discloses the inner workings of the Eskimo mind, a book that makes you feel that you have visited the people and been initiated into their lives—such a book is a scientific as well as literary masterpiece.



Drawing from "Kabloona."