

THE NEW ORTHODOXY



*And the
Decline
of the
Book Business*

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IN THE PAST two decades there has been a disturbing break in the continuity of American culture, and the nature of the upheaval is only now becoming clear.

Some of the relevant symptoms are the disappearance of the old publishing houses, the steady transformation of those still in existence, the retirement of the older editors, the introduction of advertising office methods and personnel into editorial offices, and the lessened influence (when they are not closed down altogether) of the literary publications and sections.

Then, as additional signs, consider the respectful critical attention given to ghost-written books, the

injection of press-agentry into scholarship (the Boswell journal, for example), the crude exploitation of themes like psychoanalysis which, in the present treatment, serve to distract from rather than to contribute to understanding of contemporary questions. Also disconcerting are the sudden literary booms and revivals (Kafka, Conrad, James, Ford Madox Ford, etc.) turned on and off like water taps, the elevation by ballyhoo of sophomore first novels to august critical eminence, followed immediately by an equally awesome critical condemnation. We see the market flooded with political books, the contenders killing each other off, the dubious qualities of the incompetent

and dishonest productions lessening the authority and interest of those books that merit attention.

Still another sign of the cultural break is the confusion in standards. "In my youth," John Dos Passos said recently, discussing current criticism, "we had the old stuffies. Today we have the new stuffies. When I look back I prefer the old stuffies who at least had a taste for style. The new stuffies have only their prejudices." In terms of the "machinery" of American trade book publishing, the triumph of the new stuffies is almost complete.

The American experience, moreover, with a few exceptions, seems to have been duplicated in French and British publishing. In France, according to a publisher's service, "the discerning, cultured reading public of before the war seems to have disappeared. It has been replaced by people who rarely buy a book and whose tastes are unknown. Bookstores do not know what to stock; publishers bring out books which nobody reads." In England, according to Alan Ross in *The Forties*, "the age" has turned "short story writers into novelists, poets into prose writers, novelists into script writers, critics into journalists. . . . Books were written by the less talented."

Further detail this general picture and the cultural contribution of the new stuffies becomes somewhat clearer.

First, there is the concerted attack on works which lie outside their "scheme of things" — the sort of assault which Ralph de Toledano described in relation to books on China in the July issue of *THE MERCURY*. These attacks are the work of Communists and fellow-travelers rather than of the new stuffies themselves — who, ordinarily, do not commit themselves so definitely. But they are made possible only by the creation of the new atmosphere of orthodoxy.

The second element is more difficult to get at. It consists in part of the mock profundity, the admiration for the stupefying platitude, for the odd, for the off-balance, for the out-of-focus, for the semi-irrational. This tendency, or preference, can be seen most clearly in their fiction, in which anachronistic or incongruous elements are grafted on to a solid foundation, or realistic details filtered into an unreal plot. It is especially evident in their "highbrow" criticism of hack writers.

Unrestrained, the tendency may reach out even for the consciously freakish, the frozen-faced assertion of the known falsehood, or the nutty irrelevancy, of which the now-classic example is Alger Hiss' request to examine Whittaker Chambers' teeth in order to identify him.

The third element is perhaps the way of life — the house in Connecticut or New Hampshire, the annual trip abroad, the constant elections to

academies, councils and societies, the periodic presentation of awards, degrees, fellowships and grants, the lecture circuit in creative literature each winter, the courses and conferences on novel and short-story writing each summer. Above all, the orientation of publishing, books and literature, as the creative life, the work of people of integrity who care about these things, who are compelled to struggle constantly against the indifference and philistinism of the masses and the commercialism of society — in short, the old 1912 Greenwich Village stance combined now with the briefcase, the lunch club and the sales conference.

IF THESE EFFORTS were commercially successful the victory of the new stuffies over the old might be interpreted as the working of inexorable economic law. But by some unexplained process each “upward step” seems to be accompanied by another decline in sales, followed by rumors of the collapse of the industry.

At the American Booksellers convention in Cleveland last May, the author of a book called *How I Raised Myself from Failure to Success in Selling* addressed the assembled booksellers on the subject of Sales Techniques. Calling for two volunteers, from the audience, he persuaded them to stand on opposite sides of the stage, and shout, “Force yourself to *act* enthusiastic and you will be-

come enthusiastic!” The entire roomful of booksellers rose, pounded their fists, and shouted the slogan in unison.

Laudable as these efforts in behalf of literature doubtless are, they do not seem to be quite what is needed. The mood of depression that extends throughout the publishing industry is deep and genuine. It is present under the surface of the facile enthusiasm of the new stuffies; it affects the subordinate employees of the publishing firms. It is basically an expression of a concern for literary values and leads to the conviction that the entire business has become, or is in serious danger of becoming, anachronistic. And the mood is probably strongest among the booksellers.

Though it seems to have advanced beyond what sales figures warrant, the feeling plainly has a real basis in business conditions. Consider these signs. In the past six months Macmillan, the second largest American firm, has been sold by its British owners. The stock of the Book of the Month Club, formerly closely held, has been listed on the stock exchange, and has forlornly traded at the rate of 200-300 shares a day at about ten dollars. Four firms have combined or gone out of business.

In view of these, and other, dismal developments much attention is currently being paid to book reviewing, and such scrutiny and pondering is proper. There is, plainly,

no point in publishing books if no substantial means exists to convey information about their contents to the book-buying public. There is no way, in addition, to sustain a literature or a cultural tradition without a critical means by which our creative, informational and reflective products may be assessed and discussed. But book reviews are not at all as influential as many assume them to be. Nor is the book business itself, in spite of the self-portrait it sometimes like to draw, exactly what it would like to be.

So far as most books are concerned, the sort of reviews they receive — important as they are in many ways — does not seem to make much difference regarding sales. Sometimes when all the major reviews — the *New York Times*, the *Herald Tribune*, the *Saturday Review* and most of the nation's papers — unite in overwhelming praise for some worthy work, it does not sell more than 2,500 copies. And it would probably sell that many, or few, anyway. This is one of the mysteries of the business that remains unexplained.

THE TRUTH IS that the entire field of American book reviewing has almost disappeared. When the old stuffies, with their essays on Matthew Arnold and their recollections of Richard Watson Gilder disappeared, something went with them, a kind of steadiness of approach which invested the making of books (like the

keeping of records) with an innate significance and integrity. Something of unquestioned importance was thrown out along with the portraits of the founder of the firm, the letter of commendation from Theodore Roosevelt, and the framed autographed photo of Mark Twain.

There are now supposedly — according to *Editor and Publisher Yearbook* figures — 304 American dailies with book review departments, out of 1,780 dailies. But these are answers-to-questionnaire statistics. Actually, there are only nine dailies on publishers' lists of "A" papers, these being the publications that receive copies of all published books. They are: the *New York Times* and *Herald Tribune*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Boston Herald*, *Dallas News*, *Los Angeles News*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and the *Washington Post*.

There are only a handful of magazines: the *Times Book Review*, *Herald Tribune Books*, the *Saturday Review*, the *New Yorker*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, the *Atlantic*, *Harpers*, the *Nation* and *New Republic*. Beyond these are twenty-odd "B" papers, of the rank of the *Christian Science Monitor* and the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, and forty-odd "C" papers, such as the *Louisville Courier-Journal* and the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. There are only a handful of syndicates — about a hundred book departments in all, to review the 11,000-odd books published each year.

Most of them operate with no budget whatsoever. The Publishers Adclub in New York, in connection with a contest for book review sections held last March, received answers like this one from Houston: "There isn't any budget for reviews. Reviewers get no pay." Or from Dayton: "We have no budget for reviews. All are done locally, without remuneration." Some of the largest and wealthiest papers in the country run their book pages with unpaid contributions.

In this context, it seems remarkable not that there are shortcomings in book coverage, but that there are any reviews at all. And it must be said that, in many cases, the reviews in the smaller papers are equal to, or better than, those in the metropolitan dailies. It is difficult to compare the two kinds of book reviewing — and the situation is changing now, as more and more of the metropolitan publishing dignitaries are making excursions into the provinces — but, in general, the reviews in the smaller papers are simpler, less clique-ridden, less pretentious, not so arch or pontifical, with few intra-fraternity jokes and allusions; in short, with less of the dead hand of the new stuffiness upon them.

FOR THE USUAL inaccurate picture of current American publishing which the public has, the publishers themselves are largely responsible. The industry's view of itself is one

of considerable power and influence, fairly prosperous, shrewd and successful behind a facade of benevolent inefficiency. Simultaneously, the industry feels that it is a poor relation, a weakling, a scholar and gentleman, seedy and honest, genteel, one who maintains appearances and performs public services for a pitifully small reward.

At the moment, there is a tendency in publishing circles to emphasize the cultural importance of the business and its economic weaknesses. In the press, however, there appears to be a tendency to stress its economic importance. Statistics on the industry are notoriously hard to come by and are subject to question when they are obtained. But it appears that the products of all book publishers — of all kinds of books: novels, directories, high school annuals, almanacs — amount to about half a billion dollars a year. Economically, book publishing is therefore much less important than horse racing, and more important than heavyweight prize fighting or college basketball. Any moderately successful bestseller grosses more than all but the biggest Madison Square Garden fights, and a single real success earns more than all Citation's races. The industry employs 37,000 people, embraces some six hundred firms, and its total sales increased from \$154 million in 1939 to \$463 million in 1949. The number of books published in the first six

months of 1951 is about ten percent over last year — 5,691 as compared with 5,121 — and business is reportedly about the same.

And yet there is a solid reason for the sense of depression in the industry. The larger firms must now sell 8,000 to 10,000 copies of a novel to break even on it, and in houses with less overhead the figure is still around 5,000. The publishers are not equal to the task. In some cases sales of 10,000 put a book on the bestseller lists. Consequently, 75 percent of the books published by these houses lose money. Also, there is a reason for the sense of weakness in the trade book branch of the industry even in comparatively prosperous seasons. The half-billion dollar total for the industry is misleading. The biggest branch — textbooks — accounts for \$150 million. The twenty-five cent reprints account for about \$50 million. The 40-odd university presses do about \$4-5 million business annually, with the two largest, Columbia and Chicago, accounting for nearly a million dollars each.

Deducting the reference books and religious books and miscellaneous categories, the sales of novels, biographies, travel books, poetry and trade books generally account for about \$90 million. Of the 600 publishing firms, only a hundred do business of more than \$100,000 annually.

Thus, though the industry is large and flourishing, most publishing

houses are small — smaller than the average New York law firm — most books lose money, and the total that is spent each year on all the products of most of the firms is less than the total, say, for comic books (\$70 million).

Sales-wise, even if the conditions which Toledano described were reversed, and the anti-Communist books on China reviewed without partisan bias, or praised, it might not matter much, so long as the present set-up in publishing and reviewing remains. The books would still reach the same small audience, be discussed in the same small group of papers, and sell in about the same numbers.

The essential need is to reach with important and meaningful books the audience — by far the largest audience of all — which does not read new books of any kind, or reviews of any political description. In publishing and reviewing alike it means something like the settlement of the intellectual prairies rather than continued fine-spun answers to the theories of Calhoun, the establishment of free states rather than merely continuing attacks, by groups of expert dialecticians, on the Dred Scott Decision.

ONE OF THE paradoxes of American publishing is that the small firms scattered about the country are potentially more important than is the entire trade-book branch of the industry at present, just as the more

than one thousand daily papers which do not review books are potentially more important in this field than are the hundred or so which do. The 500 small and medium-sized publishing houses (and the 300 which publish fewer than five books a year) are too miscellaneous to be exactly defined, but they have a common characteristic in that their limited means pretty well spares them the high-brow nonsense of the new stuffies.

The Abelard Press, for example, occupies a small, one room office on the fourteenth floor of a Fourth Avenue building in New York, with the bustle of four trade papers surging around it. It is the subsidiary of a firm publishing liquor and jewelry trade magazines. Simmons-Boardman in New York is the book publishing branch of *Railway Age Magazine*. It entered the book business in the 1870's, in order to make material derived from or related to its magazine articles permanently available, branched into reference with a standard work, *The Carbuilders Encyclopedia*, and got into popular books in a mild way a generation ago when a Columbia professor wrote a history of American railroads for his son. Now there are so many railroad fans in the country — about half a million — that the firm is beginning to publish books on model railroading, the first time that a firm with direct access to railroad information has brought out such a work.

The Bookman Associates in the financial district of Manhattan is on the fourteenth floor of a building whose ground floor houses the Isbrandtsen Shipping Company; it is the scholarly half of the Twayne Publishing Company, and tries to concentrate on a field between university press books and trade books — a biography of Henry James, senior, a volume of *The Prayers of John Donne*, a forthcoming reissue of Thomas Benton's *The Artist in America*, in cooperation with the University of Kansas City Press. Floyd Clymer in Los Angeles began publishing books about antique automobiles seven years ago, and has since brought out ninety titles, branching out to automobile racing, motorcycles, early steam traction engines, horse drawn vehicles and Americana, selling by direct mail to about a hundred thousand customers.

Alan Swallow in Denver (The Sage Press), who doubles as director of the University of Denver Press, began by publishing his own books by hand. He now brings out new editions of such works as Janet Lewis' *The Invasion*, and Frank Waters' *The Man Who Shot the Deer*. "We live in a region where there are no book manufacturing plants," he says. "Therefore we are faced, in production, with coordinating the work of several plants, each of which is itself limited in what it can do. Often we produce a book which has been divided into five different processes,

with a different firm contracting for each. We are also in the smallest region for book buying, since about three percent of all the books sold in the country are sold in the Rocky Mountain area." Nevertheless, the University of Denver Press has remained in the black in all but a few months of its four years.

These are representative samples, and much the same sort of report comes from the Dietz Press in Richmond, the Naylor Company in San Antonio, or, the most famous of all the regional firms, the Caxton Printers of Idaho. There are occasional books which make a local stir. But, for the most part, the regional publishers have great difficulty in getting adequate publicity for their books. The Caxton Printers keeps a detailed record of what happens to all review copies it sends out. Noting that 229 review copies brought only 66 reviews the firm reached "the inescapable conclusion that three out of four reviewers must be engaged in affairs of extreme magnitude."

THE FIRM WHICH best exemplifies the difference between the new

order and the old, however, is probably Binford and Mort in Portland, Oregon. Its origins go back to 1891, when Peter and Maurice Binford, orphaned in Indiana, moved to Klickitat County, Washington, to live with their sister and brother-in-law, and subsequently set up their own printing business in Portland with an Excelsior hand press. They published *The Young American*, which, in time, was sufficiently successful to become a weekly. In 1899 they bought a printing company at a sheriff's sale, and in the Thirties began publishing books. Peter Binford set the first one, *Cathlamet on the Columbia*, by hand. They have since published about 250. None of their books make a big profit, for, since they have no national distribution, they never reach the national best-seller lists. But they bring out about 20 volumes a year, in editions of from 4,000 to 5,000, and 95 percent of all their books pay off, as compared to the inexorable fate that dogs the larger publishers, 75 percent of whose books are now doomed to lose money, a situation which might well inspire soul-searching.

**LETTER
FROM
OKLAHOMA**

*the return of
Prince Rupert*

Otis Durant Duncan

WHEN PRINCE RUPERT, Oklahoma's \$25,000 sterile bull, came home in disgrace from Iowa, he was the maddest bull ever seen in this country. He pawed the ground, bellowed, and roared for weeks. It wasn't his fault that he couldn't induce Iowa heifers to calve. They were frigid from those terrible winters up in that tundra. Nothing can breed in Iowa but Swedes.

Prince Rupert went to Iowa determined to inject some real live Oklahoma bovinity into that fetid atmosphere. He had been promised an air-conditioned, disinfected barn,

with a harem of exciting females. Instead, denied air-conditioning, he was almost overcome by the stench from the hogpens which chiefly characterize Iowa; and the cows furnished him by money-hungry owners were flabby-teated, overbred, old canners and cutters. For a sensitive bull with esthetic tastes, all this was enough to shatter his nervous system.

Oklahoma's Governor Roy Turner, who had sold Prince Rupert into Iowa, is a man of honor, with sympathy for both men and bulls. When he heard that the Prince was accused of being sterile, he telephoned