The Book in America

A History
of the Making and Selling
of Books
in the United States

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function: ". . . The editors I know shrink from tampering with a manuscript and do it only when it is required of them by the author, as it was by Tom [Thomas Wolfe]. When an editor gets to think differently from that, to think he knows more about a writer's book than the writer—and some do—he is dead, done for, and dangerous. When he thinks he is a discoverer because he doesn't fail to recognize talent—was a jeweler ever praised because he knew a diamond from a lump of glass?—he is a stuffed shirt, and through."

Book Distribution Methods

The main drawbacks in the American book business of the nineteenth century were the absence of an international copyright legislation and the vain struggle for a system of uniform prices. The first source of trouble, as we have seen, has been largely cured. The second one has not been solved, although some substantial progress can be reported. There is no lack of good will and some very serious efforts have been made to eliminate the evils of unfair competition, but it is difficult to say today how final the present solutions are.

The struggle for price maintenance is hard to understand without a knowledge of how books are distributed from publisher to reader. There are four general variations in the way books are sold in America to the public. They are (1) sold direct from publishers to customers; (2) sold from the publisher through the trade (wholesale and retail) to the customer; (3) sold as used books in the old and rare or second-hand market; (4) sold through the newstands, as more recently with the paper-covered editions.

The first group includes most textbooks marketed direct to schools, colleges, and institutions, also medical, law, scientific, and technical books sold by mail or by canvassers to the various professions; or the sets of reference works of great books, or the works of one writer, sold for the publishers by canvassers; or works of popular appeal or on special subjects sold by the publishers direct by mail, or by display advertising; or book club subscriptions sold direct or through bookstores. In the case of all such types of books sold direct to consumer, the publisher guides the sales effort, plans the advertising, controls the price which the customer pays. These books distributed directly by the publisher are roughly estimated to constitute
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in quantity about one-half of the cloth-bound new books sold in a year.

The other half of cloth-bound new books would be those sold through bookstores and book departments in department stores, which includes also some proportion of scientific, technical, and educational books.

The greater volume of antiquarian (old and rare and secondhand) books reach their purchasers through shops found in every city at prices governed by the facts of availability and market demands.

A vast quantity of books are now being sold in paper covers at twenty-five to thirty-five cents, marketed by the publisher through chain stores and newsstands as newspapers and periodicals are sold.

Each of these four groups has been roughly estimated to exceed the hundred million mark of volumes handled per year. No fully substantiated figures exist.

There are three reasons why so large a proportion of new books are distributed through channels controlled direct by the publishers. By direct control he can maintain a desirable uniformity of prices, he can be sure his sales plan is carried out as he would wish it, and he can press for a national coverage of distribution through his own agents to all schools, by canvassers to all homes, or on newsstands in every town and hamlet.

For the field of general literature, however, which is the chief subject of this history, the only possible way to make books available to the unidentified but waiting customer is through the bookstores, and of these there is not an adequate number, as general bookstores have not been successfully maintained except in cities of 25,000 or over, or suburbs of the more substantial type.

These are some outstanding characteristics which distinguish trade book distribution in the United States from the European system. One important difference can be seen in the extraordinarily uneven geographic distribution of book outlets, another one in the great variety of channels through which books flow on their way from the publisher's warehouse into the hands of the reader.

The geographic distribution of book readers throughout the country, and the sources of supply for reading matter available to them have been the subject of careful statistical studies. Vital information about these questions was supplied by O. H. Cheney in The Economic
Survey of the Book Industry, first published in 1931 and reprinted with additional data in 1949. In 1938 Louis R. Wilson published his Geography of Reading, a study of the distribution and status of libraries in the United States. It is a volume of carefully collected information on the distribution of books through the various channels, with statistics of library expenditures for books per capita of the population in the various regions, on the distribution of rental libraries, of juvenile book departments, and the sale of encyclopedias. One thing that the maps provided by Dr. Wilson show very clearly is that the states in which most books are sold are the same ones which enjoy good library circulation. The striking thing about the picture which emerges from these studies of the 1930's is that it still shows exactly the same relationship of "strong" and "weak" regions that we have described in our section on nineteenth century book trade conditions. The "strong region" extends along the Atlantic seaboard from Maine to New Jersey, and west through Pennsylvania, and Ohio, as far "out" as Wisconsin and Illinois, leaving Minnesota, Iowa and Missouri as border territories. The other parts of the country, with the striking exceptions of California and Texas, are "weak." Nor can it be said with any assurance that the last ten years have altered this picture in its essential features.

The amazing variety of distribution channels of American trade books is another distinct feature of major importance. If one were to ask a representative of the American News Company, that mammoth wholesaler of books, who, in his opinion, buys the books today, he could point to some very staggering figures for books sold through retail channels other than regular bookstores. The Baker & Taylor Company and A. C. McClurg & Co., on the other hand, take pride in being large firms of jobbers catering to the regular book trade. They do sell to drug stores and sometimes to single persons, but the bookstores, department stores and libraries are their biggest customers.

The difficulties resulting from both the geographic conditions and from a highly competitive situation which has placed the legitimate book trade in a defensive position have long been recognized. Many efforts have been made and are still being made to create a more secure and a broader place for the role of the book in American life and to strengthen the legitimate book trade, i.e. the general bookstore trade.

The raising of the professional standards of regular bookstore per-
sonnel was recognized long ago as an important step. To avoid misunderstanding, I should say again that "regular bookstore" in this connection refers to a shop which deals either exclusively or primarily in books, and where owners and employees see something more than just merchandise in the books which they sell. There has been a series of experiments to provide training schools for booksellers. B. W. Huebsch, of the Viking Press, was early associated with this movement for a dozen years. There was first, in 1911, a lecture course under the auspices of the Booksellers' League of New York. Then there were evening lectures at various bookshops and, 1915-17, Mr. Huebsch organized courses at the Y.M.C.A. Night School, and, later on, at the evening sessions of the College of the City of New York. These experiments came to a close in 1916, but they stimulated the trade while they lasted and caused the faithful to spread the gospel of education. A class in bookselling in Philadelphia evening high school was one of its several interesting offshoots. For five years from 1928 a three weeks' course in bookselling was conducted at the Summer School of Columbia University by Frederic G. Melcher, Marion Dodd and Sarah Ball. In recent years evening courses in bookselling and publishing have been and are being offered in the School of General Studies at Columbia University, New York University has developed publishing courses and the movement has been taken up elsewhere in the country. The National Association of College Stores has held several summer training courses.

The efforts thus to strengthen the book trade from within have their counterpart in what could be described rather loosely as a co-operative public relations program of the book industry at large.

The revival of the book fair in the twentieth century is part of this program. The new book fair movement can be said to have started in 1919 with the inception, that year, of the book week idea and, the same year, with the successful Marshall Field book fair. It has been a popular, almost a casual movement, which has had no permanent identical sponsor year in and year out, and no rigid schedule. The New York Times National Book Fair, held in November 1926 and 1927, was the most complete affair of this kind. Later fairs have been held in large city department stores, with publishers' displays and author appearances. For many years now, a very successful book fair for
Part III: From 1860 to the Present Day

children only has been held at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. It is hardly necessary to point out that these fairs are quite different from their nineteenth century forerunners, since they are not aimed by the publishers at the retailers, but by the book trade as a whole at the general public.

The basic objective of the various efforts to promote book reading and book buying is to strengthen the position of the book in relationship to other media of entertainment and information. These other media are of course often used in these efforts. In the 1940’s the book review pages in the daily papers were supplemented by an increasing number of Sunday sections, but by 1950 only the New York Times, the New York Herald Tribune, and the Chicago Tribune had separate weekly book supplements in their Sunday issues. Radio reviewing and radio dramatization of literature are well established. Television, too, is taking its share. It will surprise some readers to learn that The Literary Market Place for 1950 lists no less than twenty-five television programs featuring books.

Book and author luncheons, autographing parties, and many other methods for individual and collective book promotion could also be mentioned here. There seems to be growing recognition of the fact that a more highly organized, co-operative program on the part of the book industry as a whole would be vastly more effective in the long run than many individual, casual attempts here and there.

The Ohio Book Project should be mentioned in this connection as a recent example of a co-operative experiment conducted by the American Book Publishers Council in 1948 and 1949. The aim of this project, which was carried out by Joseph A. Duffy, was primarily to survey the available book outlets in the state of Ohio and to determine how these outlets could be strengthened and made more effective. Out of the experience gained through the Ohio Project, the American Book Publishers Council established, in 1950, a reading promotion program aimed at establishing close relations between the book industry and various government agencies and other organizations representing users of books on a large scale.

It is obviously impossible to attempt an enumeration of the worth-while bookstores operating throughout the country. Such an account could well be made into a book by itself. It
would have to trace the continuing today of venerable old stores of the nineteenth century (which to some extent has been done on pages 243-248); it should survey in detail the experience as retailers of the great New York publishers; it should take stock of the new foundation of good individual stores in the new century, the development of such big city chains as the Doubleday bookstore chain, Womrath’s in New York and Burrows in Cleveland, Brentano’s branches in the various cities and Fred Harvey’s chain in the West and the Southwest.

Department stores, steadily expanding their lines of merchandise, began to install books in the 1880’s, Wanamaker in Philadelphia and Macy’s in New York being first in the field. For many years a book department was used to attract trade to other lines by price cutting, as described elsewhere, but as time went on there came an increasing recognition of the public’s appreciation of good book service. Today in most cities there is adequate bookselling in the department stores, and they account for a large percentage of American book distribution.

One encouraging feature today is the fact that not a small number of bookshops have been started on a modest scale by well-educated people with a real love of books and good taste. These “personal bookshops” have grown in importance and usefulness. Women have played a conspicuous part in this development. The personal bookshop today is found in the heart of the great cities as well as in the suburbs and in the country. It has become particularly significant in the college town, because of the opportunity there to influence the taste and to spread the reading habit among educated young people. Marion Dodd’s Hampshire Book Shop in Northampton is an excellent example. Marion Bacon’s shop at Vassar and Hathaway House at Wellesley, founded by Geraldine Gordon, are among the other attractive college shops. College stores on many campuses give sometimes perfunctory but often effective support to the sale of trade books as well as the customary sale of textbooks.

A lively and interesting account of experience with a personal bookshop of thirty-five years ago is Madge Jenison’s Swansville Turn, a Human Comedy of Bookselling. It takes a good deal of courage and financial backing to carry such a venture beyond the critical first few years and to gain a secure foothold in the trade.

The traditional subscription method of selling books develops many
book markets more effectively than can bookstores. There are today a great many kinds of book purchases by mail order and on the installment plan that come under the name of subscription selling. Practically all encyclopedia purchasing is today on the subscription basis through canvassers; a large sale of dictionaries is through this channel, as is the case with many standard sets and children's classics.

There is the highly special art of selling by direct mail through display advertising or more often by prospectuses. The method is used both by booksellers who develop records of customers' interests, and by publishers who are selling books of very specific appeal.

Again, there is the tremendous outlet for books through rental libraries, which had a great increase in the twenties and early thirties. Rental or circulating libraries are an old institution. In 1900 Seymour Eaton gave this method of book service a great fillip by starting his chain of Booklovers Libraries, which evolved into the Tabard Inn Libraries and then failed. Arthur Womrath picked up the idea and built up a successful New York chain on the pattern so many emulated. In the 1920's a rash of rental libraries started, mostly in chains which were serviced from some central point. The rental library movement leveled off in the forties, and it has been decreased by the arrival of the paper-bound fiction.

Paper-covered books, on the other hand, have decidedly increased the volume of books sold through the newsstands, where books have always formed part of the stock-in-trade. One special form of the newsstand which does a particularly active book business today is the railroad bookshop, an outgrowth of modern transportation and a universal phenomenon throughout the world.

A unique American institution is the drug store. May we retell an old story? A flapper went into a bookstore and asked for lipstick, but quickly excused herself when she realized her mistake: "I'm sorry, I thought this was a drug store, I saw books in the window." The modern drug store sale of books developed originally in the 1920's as one of the ways to dispose of publishers' remainders. No publisher can accurately estimate just what printing to make of each book, and there is a constant overflow of remainders which after a period must be sold off at a price. These used to be sold wholly through catalog houses and department stores. The depression of the 1930's
increased the number of books to be dumped and an extra market grew up, which now follows its own rules, has its own distributing agents, and pretty much its own public. When the vogue of the twenty-five cent books in paper covers started in earnest, the drug store became at once an important, natural outlet for the new mass product.

Of great trade importance was the development of the low-priced reprint editions of titles previously published in a regular trade edition, a custom already started at the turn of the century. Soon after 1900 there began, along with the reprinting of already published titles, the production of new books particularly for this market. The firm of Grosset & Dunlap developed upon this basis into an enterprise of first magnitude. Just before 1900 there were still in vogue certain twenty-five cent series of new copyright books in paper covers. Grosset & Dunlap began by buying up large lots of such editions and binding them in cloth at thirty-nine cents and fifty cents. Soon the firm began making direct contacts with the original publishers and printing and binding their own editions. Upon this principle Grosset & Dunlap developed into one of the largest producers of books, not only to the general trade and department stores, but also to drug stores, newsstands, five and ten cent stores, etc. Grosset & Dunlap also have their own authors, especially in the juvenile field.

This plan of fiction reprints, or "popular copyrights," was also adopted by the old firm of A. L. Burt, publishers of long lines of popular series, later absorbed by Reynal & Hitchcock and then by Doubleday. Individual publishers made sporadic experiments in starting their own reprint line, but all soon fell back on selling such rights to either Grosset or Burt, who energetically developed the market.

In the 1910's the reprinting of nonfiction was successfully launched as a supplement to the long-established practice of fiction reprinting. Doubleday began this plan with their Star Dollar Books, and the increasing success of these led to the Blue Ribbon Books, which were cooperatively issued by four large publishers under the direction of Eugene Reynal. This series was later sold out to Doubleday, who had made themselves the chief operators in that field. Their main competitor was Max Salop, who established the Harlem Book Company. He first supplied remaindered to the department store and drug store market. Later on he successfully produced reprinted editions for these
outlets, whose customers were often getting their first introduction to book-buying habits in this manner. Selected titles of substantial subject value, which had been issued originally in editions of from two to five thousand copies at prices such as $4.00 to $6.00, could often be marketed in printings of from ten to fifty thousand copies with all the original illustrations, at odd-penny prices of $1.49 to $2.79, etc. The odd-penny price became the earmark of a bargain reprint.

This reprinting of nonfiction had the advantage of enabling many dealers inexperienced in handling books to provide for their public a fairly good representation of general literature and of useful information. Simultaneously, reprint series of standard classics not only held their own but had an expanding sale. Everyman’s Library from Dent of London, published in the United States by Dutton, Oxford’s World’s Classics and the Modern Library, launched with outstanding success by Random House, were the chief competitors in this field.

The steady broadening of the popular market led many to dream of producing books that would find their way to every newsstand and chain store. From Europe came the first clue to the answer for America, when the long-established paper-covered series of English novels, the Tauchnitz books, were given a new competitor in the smarter-looking Albatross Series, developed by J. Holroyd-Reece. This in turn was followed in England by Allen Lane’s Penguin Series, which, beginning with a series of sixpence books for newsstands and chain stores, has extended its operation to include new titles as well as reprints, also books on arts and crafts, new translations and books for children.

A program of books for the chain stores, especially for the ten-cent counters, had already been successfully ventured in the United States in the thirties by Whitman of Racine and others. Robert de Graff, however, who had devised the first nonfiction reprints for Doubleday, evolved his plan for a twenty-five cent series of popular titles, Pocket Books, a program which would use to the utmost all that had been learned about the economical production in large editions of paper binding with varnished covers (see page 302, 350). Large editions made possible the multiplication of outlets until 90,000 dealers were handling the books in 1950.

The series was just started when the war came and brought a paper
shortage, but others had visioned the marketing possibilities of the twenty-five cent popular reprint. Avon, Dell and others followed the lead of de Graff. Penguin established an American office which sold out to Kurt Enoch and Victor Weybright as the New American Library, while Penguin’s American manager, Ian Ballantine, organized Bantam Books for Grosset & Dunlap.

The development of these low-priced series has, with the book clubs, given a new turn to the American book trade, and their influence on general publishing and authorship cannot yet be determined. In both cases the authors have accepted low royalty percentages in view of large total printings, and this has started the road to lower prices on titles that can be thus marketed.

The issuance of a cheap reprint of a regularly published edition is not necessarily the cutthroat competition with the original edition that it may seem to be. By trade agreement fiction for a number of years did not go into reprint form until one year after publication, nonfiction after two years. This agreement has now broken down, but even when both editions are on sale simultaneously, they have not necessarily harmed each other. There seem to be circles here which do not touch, or which overlap only slightly.

One does not feel sure that this can be said of the book clubs, which represent yet another phase of bookselling through other than the traditional book trade channels. The book club idea was born in Germany and brought to America as an adaptation of magazine subscription and mail-order methods to the marketing of current books. After much debate, book clubs were closely defined in Germany and made to harmonize with other bookselling methods. It was specified that books sold by a club should be distinct in format and that the term “club” should be clearly defined in trade practice and to the public. In America the price comparison slant of the club advertising has kept the booksellers in varying states of critical opposition.

A book club was first projected in America in 1921, and in 1926 both the Book-of-the-Month Club and the Literary Guild got under way, followed by no less than about fifty others, some of which gained a foothold, while others failed or were absorbed very soon after their inception. Although there was from the start some misgiving among the bookstores as to the effects of the clubs, the size of the orders...
placed for each title selected diverted the attention of authors and publishers from the fundamental difficulties which might come up. Clubs organized for the sale of books in special fields, such as religion and history, or the Limited Editions Club, devoted to finely printed and illustrative works of world literature, have created no particular anxiety. The price competition of the Book-of-the-Month Club, with over half a million members and using printings of from 150,000 to 200,000 or more copies a month, is in the form not only of reduced prices but of premium books, one to each person who signs up for at least four books a year and a book dividend of one for each two books as purchased thereafter. The Literary Guild, now the largest club from point of view of membership, sells its books at $2.00 a volume with premiums of one book for each four purchased and two free books on joining. The Literary Guild uses department stores as well as mail order to reach subscribers, while the Book-of-the-Month Club subscriptions are taken by certain book stores as well as by book departments in department stores and, of course, by mail order. The large clubs do not buy books from the original publishers who submit titles to them, but purchase the right to print their own editions, often from the original publisher’s plates. On regular monthly selections the Book-of-the-Month Club pays a royalty of 10 per cent of the price the Club charges their members and the Literary Guild offers a royalty of twelve cents a copy. In this way they get their books at a lower price than that paid by booksellers and they can therefore offer books plus premiums and dividends at price levels the dealers cannot match.

The Book-of-the-Month Club has claimed that through their extensive use of the far-flung net of U. S. Post Offices, they have brought books into a large number of communities which have no other book outlets. The readers of this volume understand readily that the absence of an evenly distributed network of general bookshops is a traditional weakness which has its roots in the social history of this country. The Book-of-the-Month Club has indeed recognized and utilized the opportunities which such a weakness presented. On the other hand it should not be forgotten that a large number of book club subscribers are located in or near centers which have adequate bookselling facilities. For these and other reasons, apprehension has grown among booksellers in recent years. The situation is aptly described by John T.
Winterich in the 1950 Almanac of the American Booksellers Association, which has been the mouthpiece of growing book trade resistance, in the following terms: “During the twenty years that have intervened (since 1929) the ABA and the book clubs have maintained a mutual relationship comparable to that of a dog and a cat domiciled in the same household—a state of truce which is occasionally disrupted when the pair meet suddenly around a door-jamb.”

*The Struggle for Price Maintenance Goes On*

The reader of this volume already knows that the price-cutting evil is an old one, with roots that go back to the days when dry goods stores first discovered that books lent themselves particularly well to serve as loss leaders for their other merchandise. Even in the 1880’s this unwholesome practice had reached proportions big enough to worry the legitimate book trade, whose members cast about for the means to curb the evil, without finding an adequate control. In the depression that followed the panic of 1893 chaos reigned, with the average price for fiction as low as $1.50, but customers in the East expecting and getting a 25 per cent discount. The year 1900 saw renewed efforts at price control with the founding that year of the American Booksellers Association, followed the same year by a corresponding organization of the publishers in the American Publishers Association. The stated purpose of these two organizations was to establish and to maintain a uniform level of prices.

What was the situation in Europe at the turn of the century? Although such countries as England, Germany and France enjoy the advantages of settled traditions and well-worn trade customs, the nineteenth century also had brought some very serious difficulties. There, too, price cutting threatened to disrupt the trade, and in the seventies and eighties, when conditions were particularly discouraging in America, very similar trouble was encountered in the various European countries.

Because they had the most highly developed trade and ancient traditions and because of a congenital love of order and precision, the German booksellers and publishers were the first to bring into effect a lasting system of price control. After a hard struggle the Boersenverein der deutschen Buchhändler brought, in 1888, all members of