

Old Books, New Faces

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Reprints of old and not-so-old books seem to be rolling off the presses as fast as new titles, adding to the selection problems of librarians already overburdened by the so-called information explosion. Moreover, there is very little done in the way of bibliographic control either by reprint publishers or for that matter by librarians. Titles are reissued, occasionally two by different publishers, when the originals are still available in quantity from out-of-print dealers at more reasonable prices than the facsimile editions. The bulk of reprint titles are not reviewed and a good number are not even entered in trade lists. Unfortunately this brief survey of the reprint trade and the librarian can do little more than point out these problems.

There have been various definitions given of reprints, but they always incorporate the basic idea of a reproduced copy of a previously printed work. New technology in publishing has placed emphasis on facsimile editions through the use of photography, photo offset processing for book work and microphotography for microform editions and collections. Although the reprint publishers vary considerably in size and output, they essentially fall into three categories: (1) the reprinter issuing 10 or less imprints a year; (2) the

publisher issuing between 10 and 49 imprints usually averaging about 20 titles; and (3) the major houses releasing more than 50 imprints and usually over a 100 titles. During the 1960's there was a trend for the book and educational divisions of such giant corporations as Xerox, Britannica, and the New York Times to enter the ranks of the trade, but a number of small group and single man operations are still entering the field. And the granddaddy of the modern industry, Peter Smith, is still alive and selling. Most of the smaller reprinters engage in specialty publishing usually binding their production to a subject or geographical area, which is quite often delineated by the press' name. The major houses have impressive lists and a number of them have entered microtext publication with a vengeance and often release sets with thousands of titles which cost an equivalent number of dollars. A few publishers will even reproduce a single copy of a book on demand, but generally that sort of thing is considered reprography and not publishing, even though one of the major houses, Xerox University Microfilms, pioneered the service.

Reprints are usually acceptable to librarians, though they vary in quality from publisher to publisher and sometimes from

title to title. When Carol Nemeyer surveyed the trade in her dissertation, a set of editorial standards for facsimile publications acceptable to librarians was the subject at special conferences of the Rare Book Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries that released a nine-point report in 1972, "Recommendations for Control of Editorial Quality."¹ While most publishers have readily acceded to those standards, even upgrading their productions, they have not radically changed their modes of publication. Some houses go well beyond meeting the minimal standards of the "Recommendations," and a few publishers continue to ignore them.

Reprinted titles for the most part are books produced better than their originals. Almost all of them are printed on high quality, durable paper making them much more compact volumes than their originals, and they are well cased. Photo offset technology produces impressions certainly no worse than the originals, and in league with the improved paper used by reprinters usually it makes clearer impressions. Illustrations are often superior, though not to the point that reprinters can be depended upon to always improve them. Reproduced illustrations are occasionally marred and quite often are altogether omitted without comment from the publisher. Tipped-in maps and plates are particularly susceptible to omission. Microphotography produces even more compact packages than letterpress, but it is less likely to improve impressions, and it introduces a host of new problems for the librarian. Microtext publishers offer the librarian fewer options in selection; usually the librarian must purchase a complete set or a substantial portion of one from a publisher with no opportunity to choose and pick according to the needs of his library. While microtext publications offer new libraries an opportunity to substantially increase their holdings especially of rare and difficult to obtain items, these publications often exceed the purchasing power of either a single library or a library system.

Reprints are easily located in finding

lists and trade registers, but as with original book publishing, the outputs of some either less-established or local houses and the occasional publisher are difficult to locate. Of course, the annual *Guide to Reprints* provides a listing of those reprinted titles that are available for purchase from most of the publishing houses. And a careful analysis of the *National Union Catalog* and its predecessor will usually indicate facsimiles and their originals. But these are merely registers of imprints and offer little in the way of clues to the value of a book's text.

John A. Wiseman correctly observed that the subject expertise of the library, its staff, faculty in institutions of higher education, and other interested book buffs, is the only sure way to collection building.² Reviews are but one of the tools of the informed bibliographer, and the uses of reviews depends to a large extent on the organization of a particular library system. Of course, there are publishers' notices and blurbs, but these must always be treated with caution and their use requires some skill on the part of the book selector.

But it might well be asked, what of reviews?; and for facsimile publications, there is indeed a skimpy selection. The major source of reviews for librarians, *LIBRARY JOURNAL*, does not review reprints, though it does contain an occasional feature announcing forthcoming reprints. It sets the pattern for those trade and scholarly journals that highlight reviews. Even special series of reprints are slighted. For instance, the North Carolina Library Association's sponsored facsimile series of North Carolina imprints has received no mention in this journal except for the announcements and advertisements of the series, even though *NORTH CAROLINA LIBRARIES* features that peerless review section of new North Carolina books by Bill Powell. *CHOICE* is the only major, mass circulation review journal that includes reviews of facsimile publications. Since 1955 *THE REPRINT BULLETIN* has reviewed reprinted publications.³ Turned into a quarterly with volume 19, the *BULLETIN*

reviews over 250 books an issue, but its circulation is well under a thousand, so it reaches only a small portion of those library systems that order books. The *MICROFORM REVIEW* includes authoritative reviews of microtext publications which stress the quality of the texts and compilations as well as the production of the sets under review.

While the reprint situation is improving for librarians and publishers, it still remains a terribly disorganized mess for the librarian attempting to select and acquire reprints for his institution. In view of the growing interest in the history of science and technology and the coming Bicentennial of the American Revolution, the boom in reprint publishing gives no appearance of abatement. So librarians may expect another headache engendered by the so-called information explosion and the very real problem of inflation.

Notes

¹Nemeyer's masterly study was a major stepping-stone in bringing together librarians and reprint publishers, but much more remains to be done in generating cooperation between the two groups. The most comprehensive survey of the reprint trade to be made, her study was published as *Scholarly Reprint Publishing in the United States* (New York: R. R. Bowker Company, 1972). The "Recommendations" endorsed by representatives of the leading rare book libraries in the United States first appeared in *COLLEGE AND RESEARCH LIBRARIES NEWS*, no. 7, July/August 1972, 197-198.

²John A. Wiseman, "THE REPRINT BULLETIN — BOOK REVIEWS Another Librarian's View," *THE REPRINT BULLETIN*, XVIII (Fall 1973), 2-3 was a rejoinder to my own simplistic demand for librarians to make greater use of the *BULLETIN*. Mr. Wiseman's comments on collection building are well worth reading. He also brings to the forefront the very difficult problem of terminology involved when the reprint goes beyond being a mere facsimile. It is an issue that I have been guilty of ignoring by using facsimile and reprint as synonymous terms.

³Issued in offset by Oceana Publications and edited by Sam P. Williams, the *BULLETIN* was originally a project of the Reprint Expediting Service sponsored by the American Library Association. In addition to keeping an editorial ear attuned to the corporate world of reprint publishing, it features editorials and essays about reprinting. And as Mr. Wiseman indicated the *BULLETIN* applies the broadest possible definition to reprints even taking notice of an occasional first edition.



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