

THE ROLE OF THE BOOKSELLER*

By JEREMY NORTH†

It is my understanding that a hundred years ago almost the only type of bookseller here in the South was the travelling bag-man or colporteur, who carried samples of his stock about with him from place to place. This proves beyond any doubt whatsoever that the original carpet-bagger was a bookseller. And since I am a bookseller who comes to the South from England but via the Yankee state of Rhode Island, I sincerely trust that I shall not prove to be the unpleasant type of carpet-bagger known to your history.

It is presumptuous of me to stand here and talk to you about "The Role of the Bookseller in Relation to the Librarian, the Researcher and the Collector." It is presumptuous of *any* bookseller to talk on this subject in purely philosophical terms, because—after all—a bookseller sells books for a *living*, and not as a species of contribution to the public good. It is not much of a living, true. The old-fashioned sort of antiquarian and second-hand bookseller, to which tribe I count myself happy to belong, does not make much money; but he has a good deal of quiet enjoyment. I became a bookseller because—of all the many ways in which it is possible to struggle for a living—I think that bookselling is the most pleasant way of going bankrupt known to civilized man.

The bookseller is a queer sort of fish in modern waters. He labors under the handicap of exercising a profession which is not a profession, he works at a trade which is not a trade, and he conducts a business which it is impossible to make businesslike.

Bookselling is, as you know, a very ancient calling, trade or profession, and the history of bookselling is a fascinating and little-known subject. Indeed, the number of useful books on the subject can be counted on the fingers of an accident-prone circular saw operator.

The most amusing and illuminating memoirs of an old-time bookseller known to me are those of James Lackington, a battered copy of which has been with me some twenty years. Lackington opened his bookshop in a very mean street of London on Midsummer Day, 1774. You may be interested in learning what his stock on that opening day consisted of.

Fletcher's *Checks to Antinomianism* in five volumes, Watt's *Improvement of the Mind*, Young's *Night Thoughts*, Wake's *Translation of the Apostolical Epistles*, Fleetwood's *Life of Christ*, the first twenty members of Hinton's *Dictionary of Arts and Sciences*, some of Wesley's *Journals* and some of the pious *Lives* published by him. In addition a bagful of old books, chiefly divinity, purchased for a guinea from the friends of an holy brother lately gone to heaven.

The bias was certainly on the side of serious thinking, but fortunately for Lackington men *were* serious thinkers in his day. He put the value of his stock on opening day at five pounds—or about twenty dollars at the time. In the course of ten hardworking years this happy bookseller built up his business so assiduously and fortunately that by 1784 he was selling over one hundred thousand volumes a year. Even in an age when books were almost the only entertainment available, that is a vast turnover, and I doubt whether any second-hand bookseller today, anywhere, can boast of so large a yearly sale.

*Address before the College and University Libraries Section, North Carolina Library Association, High Point, N. C., October 21, 1955.

†Mr. North owns the Friendship Bookshop, 1931 Chapel Hill Road, Durham, N. C.

Lackington owed his success as a bookseller to two simple things: He paid better prices than anyone else when he bought, and he sold more cheaply than anyone else when he sold. You may be interested in learning his method of buying.

When I am called upon to purchase any library or parcel of books, either myself or my assistants carefully examine them, and if desired to fix a price, I mention at a word the utmost that I will give for them, which I always take care shall be as much as any bookseller can afford to give. If the seller entertains any doubt respecting the price offered, and chooses to try other booksellers, he pays me five per cent for valuing the books; and as he knows what I have valued them at he tries among the trade, and when he finds that he cannot get any greater sum offered, on returning to me, he not only receives the price I at first offered, but also a return of the five per cent which was paid me for the valuation. But to such as fix a price on their own books I make no charge, either taking them at the price at which they are offered me, or if that appears too much, immediately declining the purchase.

This equitable mode I have the pleasure to find has given the public the utmost satisfaction.

I think you will agree with me that Lackington's method is about the fairest that could be devised in transactions of this sort. It could be practiced today with advantage whenever private persons dispose of their collections of books to a bookseller.

The bookseller and antiquarian was a power in the world of letters during the 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries. He was not only a seller of books, he was usually also a publisher and, above all, a patron of writers. You will remember that the great bookseller Cave got Samuel Johnson his start as a hack-writer in London's Grub Street, and stood behind most of the great works which flowed from Johnson's somewhat indolent pen. And Dr. Johnson never forgot his debt to the booksellers.

You will also remember that the bookseller Constable spurred on Walter Scott in his fabulous career of writing for more money than anyone since has been able to make by his pen. What Scott as author, and Constable as publisher and bookseller, made out of that seemingly endless series, the *Waverley Novels*, would make small beer indeed of the combined earnings of *Gone With the Wind*, *From Here to Eternity* and *The Caine Munity*, including film and television play rights.

When Constable over-reached himself in 1825 and went bankrupt, he brought Scott down with him in the crash. Between them they owed an amount worth in today's money some three million dollars. You will recall that Scott spent the rest of his life writing hard to pay off his debts. And Constable, the bookseller, started again from scratch and founded the firm which is still one of the foremost in British publishing.

I have dwelt a little while on the past of bookselling, and bookseller because, of all callings, that of the antiquarian bookseller is *most deeply rooted in the past*. The antiquarian bookseller of our time daily handles (or, I hope, fondles) books which his colleagues of a hundred, two hundred or three hundred years ago, bought and sold, and which ordinary people or celebrities of those days used and cherished. No bookseller who has a modicum of imagination can fail to win pleasure and zest from the close ties with men long dead which his calling gives him.

To get back to our own times. An antiquarian, or second-hand bookseller, *may be defined as one who keeps a transient hotel*, as it were, for books passing from one owner to another. However, he does not give house-room to all books. In that respect he is

a good high step above the junk shop proprietor. The junk man takes in *all* books. The antiquarian bookseller is more selective.

Of the thousands of books which are published every year about 80% are unwanted, unhonoured and unsung as soon as the publisher's publicity drum ceases to reverberate. A good many of these books, perhaps, should never have been published at all. The remaining 20%—and that is a high and optimistic percentage—are more or less useful books, with a life span running to five, ten, twenty or even fifty years. And of these useful 20% there is a small select percentage of books—a very, very small percentage—which remain useful for a much longer period, some of them indeed, being immortal.

It is these useful books of all ages which form the mainstay of an antiquarian bookseller's stock, and he serves a useful purpose for the librarian, the researcher and the collector, in seeking them out and making them available.

I do not wish to minimize the possibilities of the junk shop. Many a man has found a treasure there, though the search is dusty, long and usually disappointing. But many more men have found treasures in antiquarian and second-hand bookshops, because no bookseller can be a specialist in all fields or subjects, and extreme bargains may be found in any bookshop by the person who has his wits about him.

The antiquarian bookseller, then, serves a useful purpose for the librarian, researcher and collector by finding, buying and stocking useful books, which cannot readily be found anywhere else. He also serves a useful purpose to those who own useful books by acting fairly and properly to those who wish to sell their books.

Of course the economics of bookselling are such that the private person wishing to sell, is almost always disappointed at the price offered by a bookseller. Everyone has a higher regard for his own property, his own collection of books, than anyone else could have.

Supposing that you spent twenty years, twenty intelligent years, in getting together a collection of books on the War Between the States, published in the South during the war. And supposing that at the end of twenty years your collection of such books numbers 500.

And now you want to break your heart by selling this prized collection. *What is it worth?* You remember that some of the items cost you a good deal of money. Others you were lucky enough to pick up for a song. But think of the man-hours you spent during those twenty years, burrowing in junk shops, browsing in bookshops, travelling hundreds of miles to track down a rumour that someone had an interesting item in your field. When you consider all these things you may justifiably feel that your collection of Southern books about the War between the States is worth quite a bit of cold, hard, cash.

So you ask a second-hand bookseller to look at your collection and make you an offer. He comes along and inspects the collection and then makes his offer. Ten to one that offer will seem too small to you. Very possibly that bookseller is the wrong one for your collection, but if he is a good bookseller he can be helpful to you even if he is not interested in the subject of your collection, and has no customers sharing your interest.

When a specialized collection of this sort is to be sold it is best for the owner to bear in mind a number of points:

- 1). Most important: Remember that, in the case I have cited, you have had twenty years of pleasure out of your collection. Any doctor will say that an interesting hobby adds immeasurably to a man's well-being. So a collection of books cannot entirely be valued in money, even though many shrewd

collectors get back much more than they laid out for their books.

- 2). Get a reputable bookseller to come and see the collection and make an offer. If he cannot see his way to make his offer high enough to agree with your own ideas, then discuss with your bookseller friend the possibilities of disposing of the collection at auction or by specialized catalogue, directed at libraries and private collectors interested in your field.
- 3). Thirdly: In case you are snatched away from this earth before you have sold your collection — leave your wife the names of librarians, booksellers and collectors who are most likely to take it off her hands at a fair price. Otherwise the poor woman, left alone with her memories and the collection, may dispose of the latter all too unwisely.

There have been, and for all I know, still are, too many unscrupulous persons on the fringes of bookselling, as there are in most fields. There are not many unscrupulous booksellers — proper booksellers — for they have bookshops and reputations to keep up. But there are and have always been, men on the fringes of bookselling who have made it their business to pay as little as possible for valuable books. In particular, New England, has been scoured thoroughly during the past fifty years, by men with a sharp nose for literary property of value, and a determination to get it for next to nothing.

Now I know at least three very pleasant and absolutely fair so-called book scouts, but some others working under that general title are a curse. Any of them have little or no knowledge or respect for books except for the "highlights" of Americana. They may come to a house and find, in a collection of a thousand books, perhaps ten or twelve interesting items of Americana. So they set a price on the whole lot based on what they know they can get from a bookseller or library for those ten or twelve items. In selling to such a person the seller cannot possibly get the best price, for the books are carted away, the ten or twelve "highlights" are sold to a bookseller or put up for auction, and the remaining nine hundred odd are sold cheaply to another bookseller. And because there may be among these books, several or many of far greater value than the ten or twelve of Americana, the former owner has had the worst end of the bargain.

Anyone who has a collection of books to sell, should call in a reputable bookseller. Using Lackington's eminently fair method, the bookseller will not object to the owner trying other booksellers for a better offer. The moral is, when selling books be sure of your man before you let them go to the first comer.

There are, of course, trade associations which safeguard the interest of both the public and the bookseller. I myself belong to the Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America, belatedly founded only a few years ago, and to the much older Antiquarian Bookseller's Association (International) of London. Membership in such associations guarantees that a bookseller is competent and just. It is common sense to turn to a bookseller whose reputation is vouched for by his membership in such an association, when a collection is to be sold.

Now, one of the most fascinating things about bookselling is the *Catalogue*. It is a great pleasure to compile a good Catalogue and to send it out over the country and abroad, hoping that it will do well. The days immediately following upon the launching of a catalogue are always filled with excitement. One hopes for a barrage of long-distance telephone orders, for swarms of Western Union telegraph boys, and for bags of mail.

But it is not only a pleasure to compile and issue a Catalogue. I, for one, think that

a second-hand bookseller's catalogue is the most interesting of all reading matter. And many share my feeling. It is certain that the ranks of bookseller's Catalogues, many hundreds every year from England and America alone, are the most important ephemerae in the world of books. *For they are the stuff of living Bibliography.* Were you to arrange in some order every catalogue issued by every English and American bookseller over the past fifty years, you would probably come very close to having a *complete* Bibliography of every subject and author since books were printed in English.

The English bookseller favours the mixed catalogue, the miscellany, and some of them — bless their hearts — favour a little humour. I don't think that a little quiet humour is out of place in a book catalogue, and personally permit myself little asides in compiling the descriptions. I shall not forget the many appreciative remarks written to me after I described the condition of a copy of *Letters on Early Rising* as "weak at the joints."

I can quite understand that you librarians dislike the mixed catalogue or miscellany, since the haphazard arrangement makes your task of searching for wanted titles so much the harder than in a catalogue which is methodically arranged or is devoted to one subject. However the English booksellers are set in their old-fashioned ways and most of them persist in issuing miscellanea. Mind you I think that miscellany is the most enjoyable type of catalogue to browse through. One never knows what one will find next.

There it is, in a slightly tattered envelope. You take it out, and immediately you are seduced by a verbose and mellifluous title page. Something like this:

Catalogue Number 1367

Being a Gallimaufrey of choice and valuable books lately purchased from the Executors of the late Lord Featherstonehaugh of Barstow Castle . . . And including among upwards of fifteen hundred noteworthy items:

A SUPERB COPY OF THE GUTENBERG BIBLE in a state of freshness almost impossible to overpraise . . .

The excessively rare first edition of THE TRAGEDY OF HAMLET, PRINCE OF DENMARK, with copious annotations and corrections in Shakespeare's own hand . . .

The only known copy of A DISCOURSE OF PRINTING, from Caxton's press* in 1477, and believed to be the first book to be printed in the English language . . .

A rich and varied collection of items of American interest, including Sir Walter Raleigh's *Manuscript* JOURNAL OF A VOYAGE INTO VIRGINIA . . . and a copy in almost pristine state of the celebrated BAY PSALM BOOK . . . together with a great many other items of the utmost choiceness . . . now offered for sale at moderate prices . . .

What book lover can resist a catalogue of that sort? Every day of every year some English or American bookseller issues a catalogue. Perhaps they do not all contain treasures such as I have just announced, but it is certain that in *every* bookseller's catalogue there are wonderful books at bargain prices. Anyone who is seriously concerned with books, be he librarian, bookseller or collector, *must* take notice of antiquarian bookseller's catalogues, and constantly keep his eye in by reading them in search for wanted titles.

When I started issuing catalogues seven years ago I sent them to 600 university librarians. After about three years something like half these libraries had found some-

thing to buy — sometimes a nice fat order, sometimes a single useful book for a small sum. But there were still 300 libraries from whom I had heard nothing after I had sent them twelve to fifteen catalogues. So I wrote to these 300 librarians, asking if they wished to continue to receive my catalogues, and asking for some guidance as to their fields of interests, so that I could avoid sending them catalogues on subjects outside of their interests. I had many pleasant letters in return, but one particular answer caused me the utmost surprise and consternation. This librarian wrote, "We do not purchase from second-hand bookseller's catalogues, but rely entirely on bequests and gifts as regards out of print books."

Well, we all know that most university and public libraries are short of funds, like booksellers, but imagine running a library on the remote chance that gifts of books will fill out gaps in the collections and supply badly needed titles!

Finally, a few words about the value of books.

Booksellers — and librarians for that matter — are frequently approached by persons wishing to find out the value of a particular book in their possession. The commonest enquiry of this sort which comes to a bookseller is the dear old lady, or dear old gentleman, who comes in or writes in asking: "I have a Bible which has been in our family since 1840. My friends tell me that it may be very valuable. What is it worth?"

And dear old ladies or dear old gentlemen are always bitterly disappointed when you tell them that in 99 cases out of 100 a family Bible is only of value for sentimental and family reasons, and worth little or nothing to an outsider.

Another common enquiry runs along these lines: "I have a book published *over 200 years ago*. It seems to be a volume of sermons, and is in rather shabby condition, but so old a book must be worth quite a lot. What will you offer for it?"

As *we* know, age is not criterion of value in a book, excepting that *anything* from the very Dawn of Printing has a substantial intrinsic value. But the general public, even intelligent people, constantly confuse age with value, and are always disappointed when told that the treasure which they hold is not worth its weight in gold.

In making a valuation the Bookseller, like the librarian, has these things to go on:

- 1). Auction Records. What sort of prices has the book obtained during the last ten to fifteen years at Book Auctions in England and America.
- 2). His experience. A constant reading of a great many bookseller's catalogues gives one a pretty good idea of values.

In the case of a book important enough to have stood by itself at auction — but which has not actually appeared at auction — and which does not appear to have been listed in any Catalogue within memory — the Bookseller must base his valuation on the *probable importance* of the book to the right library or libraries, and the best thing he can do is to consult with the librarians most likely to be interested, to explore the extent of that interest. Between them, the librarian and the bookseller, will be able to arrive at a pretty fair sort of price for the owner.

But values and money are not, fortunately, everything in the business of bookselling. If that were the case I am sure that booksellers would be far more unpleasant, sharp and businesslike fellows than they really are.

A great deal of money has been made out of important books and literary properties, but only when extremely wealthy patrons — a J. P. Morgan for instance — backs the bookseller of his choice with unlimited capital.

NORTH CAROLINA LIBRARIES

If I had a quarter of a million dollars right now I am sure that I could double it in five or six years. I would search out and buy manuscript books of the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries. They are beautiful things, there are not so very many of them left outside of libraries, they cannot be forged, and they can be bought now for not too excessive prices. If I were to scour the English and Continental dealers, laying out my quarter of a million dollars shrewdly during the next year or two, my stock of manuscript books of the Middle Ages would be unique in the world, and could not fail to appreciate very considerably in a few years.

But I am afraid that anyone able to back me with a quarter of a million dollars is more likely to play the stock market instead, so that I — like my bookseller colleagues — must forget the jam and concentrate on the bread and butter of bookselling — finding, buying and selling useful books at moderate prices.

I hope that you will drop in and see my bookshop whenever you are in Durham. In Rhode Island I could truthfully bill myself as "the most remotely situated Bookseller in America." I sold books from an island, with a \$2.50 ferry at one side and a \$1.50 toll bridge at the other. There are no such difficulties for anyone to look me up in Durham.
