INTRODUCTION

THE early years of the nineteenth century witnessed a significant change in the function and spirit of publishing. Before that time it was, more often than not, incidentally and intermittently connected with the selling of books and stationery; now the issuing of books became a vocation in its own right. This turn towards specialization may be detected in the modulation of the word *bookseller*. A good enough word in the eighteenth century, it now frequently carried an overtone of disparagement. Thus when the usually generous John Murray II suggested that Southey should within three weeks vamp up a *Life of Wellington* by slightly expanding a *Quarterly* article and annexing an account of Waterloo, Southey was vexed by the Bibliopole's offer of fifty guineas for the work; he described Murray as a 'bookseller' and declared that his letters were 'booksellerish' and 'Scotchy'.[1]

To be sure, there were booksellers in the preceding century who were influential in the lives of authors and who enjoyed the respect of some of the most eminent figures in London. Jacob Tonson entertained men of birth and learning in his celebrated villa, and Robert Dodsley's shop in Pall Mall was a favourite haunt of men of wit and fashion. Bernard Lintot's prosperous career was crowned by nomination to the post of High Sheriff of Sussex, and William Strahan was elected to Parliament. Lintot's respect for literature was expressed in his payment of £200 for each of the six volumes of Pope's *Iliad*, and Dodsley's literary sensibility may be seen in his immediate and enthusiastic response to the manuscript of *London* by the young Samuel Johnson. Nevertheless these men were not publishers in the modern sense of the word. At various times Tonson held the exclusive right to certain government printing jobs. Several of the notable editions issued by Lintot and Dodsley were supported by subscriptions,

[1] Letter to Grosvenor C. Bedford, 28 June 1815.

and many of the publications undertaken by Andrew Millar, William Strahan, and others were on a co-operative basis—that is, the financial risk was reduced through the division of the responsibility into shares taken by other booksellers. As for the actual influence of the eighteenth-century booksellers upon literature, it should be remembered that the works which they directly touched were for the most part encyclopaedias, dictionaries, and other kinds of compilations.[1] And finally, along with their activity as publishers, Dodsley, Millar, and their colleagues continued to carry on the ordinary business of bookselling.

The shift from bookselling to publishing is clearly illustrated in the careers of two of the earliest and most influential men in the trade at the turn of the century, John Murray II and Archibald Constable. When Murray's father left the Marines in 1768 and bought a bookshop in Fleet Street, he described his business on his card, which bore the legend, 'Sells all new Books and Publications. Fits up Public or Private Libraries in the neatest manner with Books of the choicest Editions, the best Print, and the Richest Bindings. Also, Executes East India or foreign Commissions by an assortment of Books and Stationery suited to the Market or Purpose for which it is destined: all at the most reasonable rates.' Murray entered publishing cautiously by issuing new editions of older works, among them *The Castle of Otranto*. He did not live up to his publisher's mark, a ship under crowded sail, but he published a few meritorious books, the most notable of which was Mitford's *History of Greece*.

When John Murray died in 1793, his son was only fifteen, so the business was carried on by the 'faithful shopman' Samuel Highley. The youth fretted under the caution of Highley, who was afraid to issue any books whatever. Shortly after coming of age John Murray II bluntly asked that the partnership be dissolved, and by way of demonstrating his emancipation he offered George Colman, the playwright, the handsome sum of £300 for the copyright of *John Bull*. In making the proposal he explained, 'The truth is that during my minority

[1] Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (London, 1957), p. 55.

I have been shackled to a drone of a partner.'[1] Colman replied that he was even more pleased by the 'manner' of the offer than by its 'solidity'. It was in this spirit, then, that John Murray II embarked on his career as publisher, the spirit which won him such epithets as 'The Emperor of the West' and the 'Anak of publishing'. His manner and enterprise made the drawing-room in 50 Albemarle Street the centre of literary London.

The career of Archibald Constable, the other pioneer spirit in early nineteenth-century publishing, ran parallel to that of the second John Murray. After serving an apprenticeship to an Edinburgh bookseller, he set up an antiquarian bookshop in 1795. His energy soon found an outlet in the publishing of pamphlets, and in 1802 he found his stride when he established the 'able, intrepid, and independent' *Edinburgh Review*. In the crowded years that followed he published such works as *Marmion*, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and *Waverley*. Like John Murray he conducted his affairs with both spirit and 'solidity': he gave Scott 1000 guineas in advance for *Marmion*, and he paid Dugald Stewart and John Playfair £1000 each for two dissertations prefixed to a supplement to the *Britannica*. It was for this kind of decisiveness that he came to be called the Czar of the North. When Constable met financial disaster in 1826, the very size of the default—something beyond £250,000—was evidence of the scope of his projects and a measure of the distance which now separated publishing from bookselling.

The audacity of Constable's speculations was partly due to his reckless optimism and to his flair for the dramatic, but it was something else as well. Money, to Constable, was a source of energy in publishing, a means for making life more pleasurable and meaningful for his fellow-men and for discovering and developing literary talent. It was Constable, said Lockhart, who made 'the first application of this wonderful engine'—that is, 'a bunch of banknotes'. The effect was a radical

[1] Samuel Smiles, *A Publisher and His Friends* (London, 1891), vol. I, pp. 82–3. As it happened the proprietor of Covent Garden Theatre refused to part with the play.

change in the thinking of publishers and 'almost as great a revolution in minds not so immediately connected' with the book trade. Constable's use of money, Lockhart continued, generated a 'prodigious impetus' which was 'continually carried into every region of the literary world'.[1]

The force of that impulse may be seen in the following payments to authors: John Murray II paid £600 for the first two cantos of *Childe Harold* and £2000 for the third canto. He gave Thomas Moore approximately £5000 for preparing a life of Byron. Blackwood paid Miss Ferrier £1000 for *Inheritance*, and, thanks to the competition among publishers, she received £1700 for her next novel, *Destiny*. Admittedly the highest prices were commanded by Scott's stirring novels and Byron's feverish poems, but good prices were paid to writers of lesser talent and popularity. Thus Southey received £750 from Longmans for a naval history in one volume, and Colburn and Bentley paid G. R. Gleig the same amount for a novel.

The openhandedness of Constable and Murray was not of course a matter of pure magnanimity. Even if they had been niggardly, they would have been obliged to make generous offers to Byron and Scott. That is to say, at the very time when these two publishers were disposed to handle money with warm-hearted readiness, there appeared on the literary scene a pair of authors who exerted an extraordinary fascination upon the public. The first edition of *Childe Harold* was exhausted within three days, and every copy of the first printing of *The Corsair*—variously stated as 10,000 and 13,000 copies—was sold on the day of publication. The appeal of Scott's novels was vividly described in Constable's letter to the Wizard of the North on the day after the publication of *The Fortunes of Nigel*, certainly one of the minor romances. Writing from London Constable declared, 'so keenly were the people devouring my friend *Jingling Geordie*, that I actually saw them reading it in the streets as they passed along. I assure you there is no exaggeration in all this. . . . The smack *Ocean*, by which the work was shipped, arrived at the wharf on Sunday; the bales were got out by one on Monday morning,

[1] *Peter's Letters to His Kinsfolk* (Edinburgh, 1819), Letter XLII.

and before half-past ten o'clock 7000 copies had been dispersed.'[1] Obviously writers who could cast such a spell over the public had to be treated in princely fashion by their publishers.

The influence of Byron and Scott was felt in the trade generally. The impact of Scott's poems is strikingly clear in this sentence from a letter of Longman to Thomas Moore, 'Upon your giving into our hands a poem of yours of the length of *Rokeby* you shall receive from us the sum of £3000.'[2] Interestingly enough the anonymity of the Waverley novels and the romances conspired to whet the interest of readers and to intensify speculation on the part of publishers—so that it seemed that 'every unknown was a possible Scott'.[3]

Paradoxically both Byron and Scott, despite the high financial rewards they received for their writings, had their doubts about authorship as a profession. The former frequently depreciated men of letters with such comments as, 'Mr Rogers . . . is a poet, nor is he the less so because he is something more' and 'No one should be a writer who could be anything better.' Much the same attitude was expressed by Scott in a letter to Crabbe. Writing as a fellow-poet in 1812 he declared, 'I have often thought it the most fortunate thing for bards like you and me, to have an established profession and professional character, to render us independent of those worthy gentlemen, the retailers, or, as some have called them, the midwives of literature. . . . It is curious that you should have republished *The Village* for the purpose of sending your young men to college, and I should have written *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* for the purpose of buying a new horse for the Volunteer Cavalry.'[4] And even as late as 1830 Scott wrote, 'I determined that literature should be my staff but not my crutch, and that the profits of my literary labour, however convenient otherwise, should not, if I could help it, become necessary to my ordinary expenses.'[5]

[1] Lockhart, *Life of Scott* (Everyman Edition), p. 418.
[2] Harold Cox and John E. Chandler, *The House of Longman* (London, 1924), p. 22.
[3] Mrs Oliphant, *Annals of a Publishing House: William Blackwood and His Sons* (Edinburgh, 1897), vol. I, p. 12.
[4] *The Life of George Crabbe, by His Son* (London, 1947), p. 175.
[5] Lockhart, *Life of Scott*, p. 136.

Now this doubt of authorship as a profession may have made Scott feel like a sheriff and a country gentleman, but it was somewhat disingenuous of him to express it. If he did not need the financial yield of his writing for food, lodging, and the necessities of life, he nevertheless placed himself in the position of needing money for such things as pine plantations and 'a higher tower, with a more spacious platform' for Abbotsford. Though he swore that no son of his should be a writer, his own career was an obvious fact: it was bound to be imitated by other men. It was Sir Walter Scott, said William Godwin, who discovered that a reputable author might produce not three novels but twenty or thirty.

Although Scott, in 1812, applied the derisive term *retailers* to publishers, the use made by Constable, Murray, and others of their money should not be interpreted as a sign that they felt that their connection with authors was simply a cash one. On the contrary, their unprecedented payments to writers may be more fairly construed as evidence of their desire to dignify the profession of letters. On this point Lockhart was explicit and level-headed. Discussing the generous payments to the contributors to the *Edinburgh Review* he declared, 'The projectors of this Journal—both writers and publishers I should imagine—were quite satisfied that nothing could be done without abundance of money. Whoever wrote for their book must be paid for doing so, because they would have no distinction of persons.'[1] In short, when Constable insisted that every contributor to the *Edinburgh* was obliged to accept a worthy wage, he made the first effective move to dignify professional authorship by erasing the distinction between the gentleman amateur and the workaday writer and by cancelling the line between the Grub Street hack and the genius. Constable's rule about payment was the answer to the contemptuous attitude toward remunerative writing expressed by Lord Camden in 1774. During the debate over copyright in the House of Lords he declared, 'I speak not of the scribblers for bread, who tease the press with their perishable trash. It was not for gain that Bacon, Newton, Milton, and Locke

[1] *Peter's Letters to His Kinsfolk*, Letter XLII.

instructed and delighted the world; it would be unworthy such men to traffic with a dirty bookseller. When the bookseller offered Milton five pounds for his *Paradise Lost*, he did not reject it and commit it to the flames, nor did he accept the miserable pittance as the reward of his labour; he knew that the real price of his work was immortality, and that posterity would pay it.'[1] Lord Camden's scornful epithet, 'scribblers for bread', was literally true of Oliver Goldsmith when he was the drudge of a bookseller in Paternoster Row. During that time his payment for contributions to the *Monthly Review*, one of the chief periodicals of the day, consisted of board and lodging in a room over his employer's shop. If, fifty years later, Goldsmith had been writing for the *Edinburgh Review*, he would have received at least sixteen guineas a sheet or more likely the average payment of twenty-five.

The result was that authorship became a recognized profession, and a man might unashamedly call himself a writer or a journalist. Among the professionals who, in Scott's phrase, depended upon no other staff, were Southey, Hazlitt, Hunt, Lockhart, Galt, Gleig, and many lesser men. Some of these were to learn that there was a risk involved in leaving the counting-house or the Church or the Navy for what Scott described as 'the most ticklish and unsafe and hazardous of all professions, scarcely with the exception of horse-jockeyship'. Most of them would not in any case have received a tithe of the prices that Byron and Scott commanded. And the competition, especially in prose fiction, became so keen that it is doubtful whether Sir Walter himself could have continued to command his prices. For example, James Fenimore Cooper, no mean competitor, saw the value of his British copyrights shrink from £1300 to £500 within a period of eight years, and at the close of his career he had difficulty in getting £100.

About 1825 the glamour of publishing was distinctly dimmed: the death of Byron itself cast a gloom over the scene. Other lights of poetry had also been extinguished, and new talents were not visible. The demand for verse waned, and it was a dark, unpromising period in English writing. So at least it

[1] Frank Mumby, *Publishing and Bookselling*, 2nd ed. (London, 1949), p. 191.

seemed to John Murray II, who had responded, and added, to the lustre of the earlier years. Depressed in spirits, he now refused almost all manuscripts of an imaginative kind, and he even went so far as to transfer many of his copyrights, including those of the novels of Jane Austen, to other publishers. He retired to the safety of biographies and books of travel. In his financial arrangements he retreated to the profit-sharing arrangement with his authors—a sad declension from the day when he gave thousands of pounds outright for a book of poems.

The profession of publishing had also been tarnished by some of the men who had been drawn into it by the dazzling activity of John Murray II and Archibald Constable. Among them was Henry Colburn, who had entered the trade by way of the proprietorship of a circulating library. He soon became an assiduous promoter of periodicals and an energetic manufacturer of novels. At first glance the canny bustling of Colburn may have seemed to resemble the energy of the two pioneers, but actually they were poles apart. What was largesse in Murray was a cynical assumption in Colburn that an author could be bought. Murray saw literary talent in writers as different as Byron and Jane Austen and Milman; and he then rewarded it. Colburn crassly assumed that he could contrive it or purchase it. His mercantile attitude toward the world of letters may be illustrated by a story which went the rounds of literary London. When Colburn heard that Sydney Smith had suffered a financial loss in some American investments, he calculated that this was the moment to lure the Canon into writing a novel. Smith, who had a boundless sense of fun, pretended to favour the proposal and outlined an absurd plot. The hero was to be an archdeacon; he would be involved in a love-intrigue with a pew-opener; and their letters would be discovered under the hassock. Completely taken in, Colburn fawned over the Canon and approved of the plot with fulsome praise.[1]

It may be that Colburn was quite without literary taste or that he brazenly assumed that the reading public had none

[1] Mrs Oliphant, *op. cit.* vol. II, pp. 356–7.

either. In any case, whether it was a matter of taste or scruple, his strategy was to operate in terms of 'sheer topical ingenuity'.[1] Indifferent to questions of permanent value he gambled, moving from a sensational best-seller one year to another similar novel the following year. Colburn's policy of brightness at any price was ridiculed in an anecdote told by Thomas Campbell, who for a time served under Colburn as editor of the *New Monthly Magazine*. In Campbell's burlesque story God came to London to sell the copyright of the Bible. 'Longman observed to his "Lordship" that the copyright was of late years deteriorated in value, hazardous to publish, but might still do for a school book; he would be very happy to print it at his Lordship's expense on commission. Then the Bon Dieu goes to Colburn. Colburn does not dispute the general merit of the work but doubts whether it will take with the fashionable world. He suggests a few alterations of high life—the manger and the fisherman are decidedly low—and a few piquant anecdotes about the court of King Herod.'[2] It is not enough to say that the publishers of London laughed at Colburn and made him the butt of the trade: many of them regarded him as something of a disgrace to their profession.

There was of course a further and more substantial reason why John Murray II should have been depressed in the late 1820's—it was a financial one. During November and December of 1825 six London banks ceased payments, and even the Bank of England was on the verge of stoppage. On the morning of 6 December Lombard Street was blocked by anxious depositors, and when on 14 January 1826 a bill drawn by Constable on Robinson of the large London firm of Hurst-Robinson was dishonoured, the whole structure of Constable and Ballantyne fell. Other publishing houses crashed, and many more were driven to the desperate measure of unloading their stocks at remainder prices. And because of the prevailing mode of transacting business—by bills and counter-bills—credit was rendered uncertain, so that even those publishers and booksellers who were sound could not carry on until the credit

[1] Michael Sadleir, *XIX Century Fiction* (London, 1951), vol. II, p. 113.
[2] Michael Sadleir, *Bulwer: A Panorama* (London, 1931), pp. 204–5.

of everyone had been determined. Although Constable started afresh the following year, he was broken in health and spirit and died within a few months. John Murray II had not been seriously disturbed by the panic, but he suffered a heavy blow the same year—a loss of £26,000 on his unhappy attempt to establish a newspaper. This, together with the unfavourable balance of £2,000 on the edition of Crabbe, had a restraining effect on Murray's subsequent ventures in publishing.

A few years later the book trade fell into such a depressed period of inactivity and uncertainty that some publishers declared that the doldrums of 1831 were even more trying than the tempest of 1826. William Blackwood wrote, 'There never has been so slack a year in our trade ever since I have been in business.'[1] And a writer in the *Athenaeum* of 26 November 1831 reported that 'all literature continues dull as a great thaw' and that six hundred London printers were jobless because publishers were holding back long-promised books. On an inspection tour of the trade in both the provinces and London Thomas Frognall Dibdin heard everywhere that books 'were tied down by the stiffest birdlime that ever was manufactured'.[2]

Among the reasons for the drop in the sale of books were the death of George IV, the fall of the Wellington government, and the tightness of money. The chief cause, however, was the political turbulence in the larger cities and the pressing question of the Reform Bill. On the title page of his *Bibliophobia* the eccentric Dibdin placed this sentence: 'In short, Fear is the order of the day. To those very natural and long-established fears of bailiffs and tax-gatherers must now be added the fear of *Reform*, of *Cholera*, and of *Books*.' He concluded that 'the wished for *Reform in Parliament*, like Aaron's serpent, had swallowed up every other interest and pursuit: and books were now only the shadow of what they were'.[3] Wordsworth, now an apprehensive Conservative, reported that in Scotland 'the bookselling trade was in a deplorable state, and that nothing was saleable but newspapers on the Revolutionary side'.[4]

[1] Mrs Oliphant, *op. cit.* vol. II, p. 104.
[2] *Bibliophobia* (London, 1832), p. 25.
[3] *Bibliophobia*, p. 15.
[4] A. S. Collins, *The Profession of Letters* (London, 1928), p. 260.