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EDUCATION OF A PUBLISHER

BY JOHN HOOPER

DOCTORS and publishers have at least one thing in common: they do not choose to discuss their business with laymen. Such discussions usually lead to questions which cannot be answered, short of a course of instruction which would lift the layman to a professional status. But I have just completed six years as a small-time publisher, and it is possible that an exposure of my experiences in building a miniature publishing house may help to reduce the larger structures of publishing to an understandable size — and that some of the common questions may be answered by implication.

In the dismal fall of 1932, I was selling schoolbooks. This was as near as I had been able to come to the dream which so many college seniors have of editorial chairs. I had been selling schoolbooks for four years, but I still coveted the editorial chair. The depression had set in far enough to make any change seem to have its possibilities; and when the opportunity came to try to salvage a year-old publishing business in Vermont I rushed hopefully in. I knew nothing more about publishing than what I had learned from the sales letters of the district manager of a textbook house. But this did not dampen my enthusiasm to see how it felt to swivel among manuscripts.

We moved to Vermont, my wife and I. We occupied the editorial chairs; there were two of them, one on each side of a big desk. There was nobody else occupy-

ing any kind of chair. We were the staff, and we divided the highly dubious titles of publisher, editor, publicity director, sales manager, manager of the manufacturing department, salesman, stenographer, and office boy. The matters of bookkeeping and shipping were handled by the printing company which we had persuaded to continue its venture. As I look back on it now, the decision must have called for a tremendous amount of faith.

We were given a free hand to build a publishing business along such lines as we saw fit; that is, if we could do so on a basis of self-sufficiency. Since we were without capital of our own, we must not abuse the long-term credit and small cash advances which our co-partner, the printing company, provided for the bare necessities of our existence. The expansion or growth, if any, must come through an accumulative process of making dimes and nickels grow into dollars. It was necessary in the beginning to accept the fact that we were starting in the pushcart stage of publishing.

With this in mind, we looked around the office and found that we had inherited two small books of poetry, a small ski book which had been reprinted from a college magazine, one limited edition of Christopher Morley, a book of essays, and a series of books about Vermont whose first edition had done a beautiful mail-order business, but whose second edition reposed dismally on several shelves in our stockroom.

It was necessary to publish something quickly that would help pay the bills. I had written a manuscript on teaching poetry which I had been unable to sell to any publisher. But here was something to peddle; so, against my better judgment, I published it myself. I then acquired two school readers, and set out on the road to try my luck while I dreamed of bigger things.

It was soon obvious that we could not depend on manuscripts to come in unsolicited. The smaller the publisher, the poorer the manuscripts which are unloaded on him. We got a cold shoulder from literary agents who neither knew us nor wanted to take the time to look us up. The few big names which we were able to approach were willing, out of the kindness of their hearts, to let us have a thing or two which had been collecting dust for some time. But this would help us less than it would their regular publishers, who could, and occasionally did, slip such stuff through.

While the school readers were serving as temporary providers, a definite publishing policy was in the making. I built a fence around our publishing programme that has kept us in bounds ever since. I felt that I knew a good deal about New England, both its places and its people; I certainly had driven over enough of it selling schoolbooks. So why not publish books about New England? If the subject was interesting, it might not matter how little was known about the author. I could choose the subjects, and then look for the right person to do the book while I was out selling school readers. It might work.

The formula, fruit of necessity, was simple. My wife and I jotted down all of the New England subjects in which people were most likely to be interested — the obvious ones, such as covered bridges, old houses, antiques, outdoor sports, scenic places, and country homes. Then we started inquiring among our friends and acquaintances for names of people who were even in the

slightest way fanatics or authorities on these subjects. With the first likely name in my pocket, I was off in hot pursuit.

This first chase took me ultimately to the top of Mount Washington, for I was after the story of the first year-round occupation of that mountain by any group since the middle of the nineteenth century. My reasons for thinking that this might be a profitable book were these: the newspapers had given the scientific expedition considerable space; my own perusal of the reports from the mountain showed that one of the members of the expedition could write clearly and objectively; and I knew that Mount Washington itself held a good deal of interest for many people within and outside of New England.

This was to be our first trade book, the first book which I should try to sell through the regular channels of the wholesale and retail stores. One of the rules of publishing is that the cost of the book shall not exceed 25 per cent of the expected retail price, if the publisher is to get out of it with a whole skin after deducting bookstore discounts, royalty, selling commissions, advertising, and office overhead. I had read somewhere that the average sale of a book of non-fiction is about fifteen hundred copies. I decided that we would plunge to the extent of two thousand copies, and that the market could probably stand a \$2.50 book in that edition. This meant that I could spend about sixty cents a copy for the manufacturing of the book. So, even before the author started to write the book, I had carried the statistics down to the number of words and the number of pictures he could have for his story.

After about half the manuscript was in, a publication date was set, and announcements were sent to the bookstores. Time slipped by and the book was still far from finished. Mail moved slowly from Mount Washington, and our author seemed to count his time by

geological ages. Finally, in desperation, I begged him to come down off the mountain and finish the book in our office. Quite as eager as we were to see the book done, he came. For all of one day the two editors literally stood over him, trying to help him find an end somewhere. At five o'clock the ending had been tied on, and we went down to the street. 'My God!' he cried. 'My wife! I had forgotten all about her.' She had been left sitting in the car early in the morning, and our author had completely let her pass out of his existence.

With our first trade book finally published, I went to Boston and New York. I don't blame the bookstores at all for being leery of a small-town publisher with one book in his bag. But when the New York booksellers started asking about shipping costs and how much the postage was from Vermont, and when one of them even asked if we had to slip through Canada, I began to wonder if we should ever make it. Fortunately, the book had been brought out just before Christmas, and we sold 1682 of the 2000 copies during that holiday season.

II

The next book was a juvenile on the subject of maple sugar, written for us by a Vermont schoolmaster. I don't know why a book on maple sugar had n't been published before, but I am certainly glad that we were the first to think of it. This informational book gave me courage to go on later into other juveniles on New England subjects, books where the subject was of sufficient interest to make up for lack of funds to buy the customary beautiful four- and five-color illustrations which on dear children's books to parents.

Still in the depression, I took advantage of the depression state of mind among book buyers and published a book by a young man who had come to Vermont with his wife and young son, to work out an existence on a farm. I knew

he could write, since I had read a previous book of his, which had had the misfortune to be launched during the Bank Holiday. I drove to his farm and asked him to write the story of the two years which he had spent trying to make the soil produce what printer's ink could not. This small book, while not much more than a group of essays loosely strung together, had something both in the quality of its writing and in the attitude of its writer to tempt two thousand people to purchase it.

Times appeared to be getting better. People no longer sat at home and read *Anthony Adverse*. They wanted to be up and doing, themselves. This opened up possibilities of books about places, and guidebooks for travelers. I had seen in a Portland, Maine, newspaper several articles by a lighthouse keeper on the subject which, of course, he knew best. I drove to Portland Head Light and went over with him the outline for a book which I hoped he would do for me. We agreed that he should send in all the material he could write on the subject, and that I should boil it down later.

When several armfuls of manuscript had come in, it seemed best that I should go to Portland for a visit at the lighthouse — to obtain the atmosphere which might help me arrange his material. He had invited me to come and 'sit watch' with him some night. When I arrived, I had visions of sitting up in the tower, guarding the light with the old keeper, and helping to protect the lives of sailors at sea. We talked about the book, had supper, and when the latter was cleared away we continued to sit in the dining room, talking. At about eleven o'clock I asked if it was n't about time we went on watch. 'Well, son,' said the keeper, 'we've been on watch for the past four hours.' Such are the ways of modern lighthouse keeping. Electricity does it all.

As publishers we continued to climb out of the depression, by way of lighthouses, covered bridges, flower books, ski books, biographies, and juveniles. I

chose our advertising media as carefully as I knew how, believing that because our books were selected within a definite field the advertising must be also. While by nature and circumstance I published conservatively, I was persuaded by an overenthusiastic salesman to extend our New England material to the field of fiction. And there is a warning for all embryo publishers.

As it exists to-day, at least, fiction is a greater gamble than nonfiction. It is a distinct kind of publishing which calls for an astute editor (good fiction editors are born, not made) and a selling organization efficiently geared to all the wheels of high-speed promotion and distribution. Moreover, styles change faster in fiction, and last year's best seller is likely to bob up in this year's bargain basement. Most novels to-day which have failed to 'catch on' in the first few months after publication will probably be financial failures. Some of them may turn up one day as classics, but that does n't make them any less of a gamble. . . . We don't publish fiction any more.

In our own field we continued to stay within the bounds which I had set up in 1932. Some of these ideas panned out and some did n't. But the dreary days of the Bank Holiday were followed by brighter ones which saw several books catch on and swing by the ten-thousand mark — books which at first had been merely ideas discussed while swimming in the West River, or while climbing Haystack Mountain, or while riding home from the Rutland Fair. 'I've got a hunch,' became a byword with us. If the hunch weathered the first barrage of arguments which we would hurl at each other, we then subjected it to the advice of friends, or sent a hasty call for counsel to a few of the bookstores, or thoroughly thumbed through the catalogues of other publishers to see if the subject had been done before. To me there are still few things sweeter than a good hunch, bound in cloth, and marked 'third edition.'

III

In the publishing world there are several 'general' publishers, and they are the superstructures. But even these are divided into departments, each of which specializes in one kind of publishing. Most of the smaller houses tend to specialize in a particular kind of book. Personal interest, experience, and ability set the course upon which any publisher's imprint is pointed.

Publishing is primarily a business — a way of making a living; but no matter how large or how small the organization, any publishing house is the expression of a personality, either of a long-dead founder or of a person actively in control to-day. This personality is reflected in the house's 'policy.' Even my small house could not help expressing the interests and ideas which had led me to choose this way of earning my bread and butter. I published books which I thought would please a small part of the reading public. But as a publisher of New England books I was as much interested in interpreting, as in reporting, New England.

I waited a long time, for example, before I found the right author to undertake a book on the plus and minus qualities of farming and general country living. I refused two unsolicited manuscripts on the subject before tackling it with an author whose background of experience in this special field gave me the necessary courage to invest the time and money which this one book would demand. (With a list of only ten books a year, it was absolutely essential that each book should pay its way.)

I knew the region which we were going to cover. The author did n't. But he knew the general field of agriculture, which I did n't. It was important that my prejudices be balanced by his perspective. We decided to travel the region together, reporting, discussing, and arguing on the scene of action.

This was a new experience for me. It

was new because I was working with a writer who had learned his trade, so that I could put all my energies into helping develop the subject, instead of working far into the night completely rewriting a manuscript by one, say, who had lived a most interesting life at sea but who could n't write a book about it to save his life. So many interesting people, with great stories to tell, left school at the eighth grade; while so many college graduates, who want to write, have nothing interesting to tell.

When the book was completed, its physical appearance was like any other book. But what a strenuous, exciting lot of time had gone into its making! There were memories of many faces, of men in the fields, in hotel lobbies, and in crowded hotel rooms, of days and nights of friendly conversations with men who know their job of farming and were proud to talk about it. There was mile on mile of dirt road with an equal number of miles of talk about the book by its author and publisher. There was the author's two-month retreat to his hill farm, and his long hours at the typewriter. There was the secretary (who had come to us from a small bookshop of her own) busy writing publicity that would pave the way for the book. There was the publisher fussing with figures and working on the jacket with his layout man (a blessed combination of artist, traveling salesman, and promotion manager). There were hours of feverish discussion of the manuscript at its various stages, either at the author's farm near by or in the small office where the whole staff could add its voice. There was the designing of the book to meet the budget and to fit the subject, the sending of the final manuscript to the printer, then proof-reading, more discussion, and a few changes; and at last the word to 'let 'er go' on to the presses, into the bindery, and, God willing, into the homes and hearts of our countrymen.

On the whole, publishing is a com-

paratively safe kind of business. It is like a meandering stream, winding in and out through that small part of society which is accustomed to read and to buy books. Once in a while it spills over and extends beyond its natural banks. Seldom does it roar speculatively into the dark chasms of mass production. It has established a few tributaries in that direction, but the main stream clings to its time-worn channel. And along its banks bloom each season's crop of blurbs and advertisements, the perennial adjectives which have seeded themselves since time immemorial.

Yet, for all its quiet meandering, it moves. Publishing has never become stagnant, it has never dried up, and it has demonstrated its tremendous force to anyone who has tried to dam it by censorship.

IV

There was not much of a splash when I entered the stream six years ago. Having gone along with it since then, I have learned something about its pattern, and a little about its high and low points. Adding up these experiences, I find that the high points outnumber the low ones, that there is a lot to be learned from adding up either column.

On the low side, there is, first, the difficulty of accepting the fact that the book-reading public is a mere drop in the bucket compared with the movie public. Second, it is impossible even within the book market to prophesy the popularity of a book. Third, the wrong season, the wrong title, or an ineffectual jacket can check the progress of many a good book. And, fourth, the already overloaded shelves of the routine outlets for books make it hard to find display room for all the good books which pour from the presses.

I remember only too well the hollow feeling when I first realized that out of the thousands who had cheered a famous athlete only a few were willing to buy his story of his athletic experiences—in

spite of the fact that he was practically a New England institution. (I should have known that few books by track, football, or baseball stars have ever sold well.) I never felt more sorry for myself than when I first tried to explain to an author why his book was not in every bookstore in which he chose to browse. (I have learned that there is no satisfactory explanation to appease this kind of author.) I nearly had heart failure myself when an author's daughter telephoned that the changes I had made in the lady's manuscript had necessitated calling a physician. (I know now that an oral agreement to changes should be bound by a written one, as an aid to human memory.) I had many dark days when an excellent book about the sea, which had been written for me only after much persuasion, failed to find its public. (I will never again make the mistake of trying to get a title for a book which will allure readers from beyond its natural market.)

I have not yet learned how to answer those who believe that a publisher selects only those books which interest him, which are the kind of books he would take home to his own library. Nor have I an answer for the book lover who exclaims over the ecstasies which I must surely enjoy, 'being so close to the fountains of lit'rature.' A publisher selects books for other reasons than his own personal taste, or else he is sunk. And mighty few books which come any publisher's way can be called literature.

The plus column contains the pleasanter prospect. There is, first, the knowledge of a fairly dependable reading public, with fairly well-defined interests. Second, the outlets for books are at the disposal of any publisher who does not abuse the privilege. Third, there is a constant variety in the days of a publisher, a continual excitement. And, fourth, the disparity between the profits of publishing and those of many other businesses and professions is compen-

sated by the stimulation and satisfaction found within the business itself.

No breeder of blooded horses ever followed the circuit of shows with more excitement than that with which I follow the circuit of critics, once a new book is sent into the ring. I know that the critics alone cannot make, or break, a book. They may not be able to pick all the winners, but they have been around the stable long enough to know good, or bad, horsellesh when they see it.

In fact, while much of the reviewing of books is a perfunctory sort of thing, the lowest order being a mere quotation from the publisher's own blurbs, the first flight of book judges remains extremely important to any publisher. On them depends much of his state of mind. If a publisher depended on his friends for criticism he would be living in a world of self-delusion. It is the literary critic who takes away his rose-colored glasses.

Now that six years have passed, I am a little surer about some points of my trade, less sure about others. I find it increasingly exciting and more challenging. I often wonder what it is like in the big houses, in the superstructures at the other end of the estate. Most likely the difference is merely in size and splendor, and in the view. For here the Connecticut instead of Broadway sets the tempo below my office window; here my home is in the country, summer and winter; and around me spreads the New England scene, much of it still to be cut to the trim-size of a book.

There are now four typewriters instead of two, harnessed to this small unit of publishing; and through them courses some of the vitality, some of the fun and frenzy, some of the tragedies, and some of the tricks which make up the trade known as publishing. The sixty books on my desk, which mark the past six years like the rings of a tree, have much more to tell than appears between their covers. For me, they are the past six years.