

Much Art in Buying Books at Auction

FROM very early times, since books have been printed from movable type, there have been sales at auction of collections made by lovers of such property, all then gathered in Europe, especially in France and Germany.

The first sale in England appears to have taken place in 1676, and the list or catalogue had the title *Books by Way of the Auction or Who Will Give the Most for Them*.

For some three hundred years then these sales have continued, and in the earlier day were described as the "morning lounge for gentlemen," and as being princely sport.

First Book Sales.

It is not a little remarkable that there are many persons who are more or less constant buyers in the auctions here and abroad who have never been within the doors of the rooms where the sales take place and whose knowledge of what goes on there is entirely superficial.

Early sales in America, of which there are a few records, present some curious phases, not the least of which is the high prices which then prevailed for books that would now be considered of comparatively little value; for our progenitors were given to gathering up a considerable number of volumes of rather dry reading, as we look upon it now. Nevertheless, many of the books printed at that time, such as the writings of the Mathers, bring astonishing prices to-day.

Book auctions by catalogue have existed here in New York for a very long time, more than 125 years, with perhaps as many collectors to keep them going as were to be found on the other side of the ocean, and one of these catalogues is still extant in the shape of an enormous broadside giving simply the titles of the books, with no descriptions of size, binding or condition.

Clever Auctioneers.

It happened that the personality of the auctioneer very often had much to do with the success of the sales, for he was usually a man of high intellectual quality, possessed of a pretty wit and much book lore, from both of which he freely drew during a sale, to the delectation of the crowded room of buyers; and it is perhaps within the memory of some persons yet living when John Keese and others that followed him were surrounded by a coterie of buyers that would delight the hearts of auctioneers of the present, and when prices were considered to be about as high as they ever would be.

There was one of these gentlemen of whom special mention must be made because he was easily chief—the late Andrew Murwin. It was his wont when on the block to so change his voice as to make it appear much like that of a ventriloquist, pitched high or low as occasion demanded. His humor was catching, and his calling down of some unlucky wight of a dealer who was trying to capture a plum for a ridiculous sum was worth going far to hear. Peace be upon him. We may never look at his like again.

Brilliant Buyers.

And where could be found such an assemblage of men of culture!—Menzies, whose hobby was Americana; S. P. Avery, collector of art and costume books; C. W. Frederickson, who confined himself to Byron, Keats and Shelley;

Two Books on China.

THAT the missionary's duties sound all the depths and shallows of the immense sea of Chinese humanity is plain from Charles Ernest Scott's volume, *China From Within*. While Mr. Scott testifies generally to the thrift and industry and the qualities fitting them for survival of the typical Chinese, he also describes depths of superstition, brutality and animal-like existence which tax credulity.

The 80 per cent. of infant mortality in many provinces includes not a small proportion of infanticides, principally of female children.

The position of women as observed by the author in his travels among the peasants is so pitiful as to offset to the Western mind almost all the claims for potential civilization of the 400,000,000 people who have held their national identity for so many centuries.

Marshal C. Lefferts, Americana; Richard Grant White, Shakespeariana; E. B. Holden, lover of Americana; De Vinne, looks on printing; Andrews, fine bindings; the Salmis, father and son, famed for their knowledge of Americana and rare prints; Chew, first editions and Elizabethan poetry, and a host of others who never missed being present at an important sale, their wit and humor vying with that of the "auctioneer," as he was designated in the early days in England. And it was from this galaxy that the world famous Grolier Club was formed.

That all may have a knowledge of the various steps taken with a consignment of books it is proposed to follow one on its way from date of its receipt by the consignee until settlement is made with the owner at Anderson's, which is now the oldest of rooms selling books, prints and autographs—what is known as literary property generally; or at the American Art Association, which began selling books a few years ago; or at Scott & O'Shaughnessy's; or at the Walpole Galleries, the youngest of the places so engaged.

When books are received, unpacked and arranged they are catalogued by people who are supposed to be especially fitted for work of that character, possessing expert knowledge gleaned from the innumerable bibliographical works with which every complete auction house is equipped. Each item is written up separately on slips of paper until all in the consignment have been so treated.

Unless there are enough to make a full catalogue or sale books belonging to other owners are added, the usual catalogue covering about 600 lots, which is sufficient to make a two session sale.

The written slips are now sent to the printer—and the trouble begins. That is, the trouble for the auction house. Brickbats are more plentiful than bouquets. Having passed safely through the perils of proof reading the finished catalogue is sent to the auction rooms and is there folded, jacketed and mailed, and the books await the day when they shall be sold.

Luxurious Salesrooms.

The salesrooms of the present bear so little similarity to those of former times, that were one of the old time habitués to visit them he would be lost. Then the bare floors, stained and dirty walls, hardwood chairs, horseshoe tables, very high auctioneer's stand and generally disordered appearance of everything gave no hint that here was a place in which many thousands of dollars were exchanged for books.

Now it is very different. Artistry is evident on every hand. The mellow but rich tones of the walls, the deep piled carpets and rugs on the floors, the opera chairs cushioned to the height of luxury and the indirect lighting lending its soft radiance blend into a composite and luxurious whole.

With the coming of the day and date announced on the catalogue as that of sale the books are taken from the room in which they have been on exhibition for some three or more days and placed on shelves back of the stage, which has been set for the occasion with wine colored hangings and a table draped to match. At the appointed hour the auctioneer takes his place on the dais, the clerk goes to a platform just below and the sale begins with the offering of "No. 1 on your catalogue. How much am I offered?"

At an earlier day it was the custom for

the auctioneer to wait until some one had made an offer in response, but at present the chief cataloguer has marked a copy with approximate prices for the guidance of the salesman, who begins at once to cry the item.

A stranger within the gates is much astonished by hearing the next number called, as he did not know the first had been sold. Not a voice has been heard except that of the salesman, all the bidding having been done by motions of some sort and at no time has the only voice in the room, the salesman's been raised above an ordinary conversational tone. The entire lot assigned for the session is sold in about an hour and a half or two hours.

On the completion of the sale the account of sales is made up, the auction house taking thirty days to settle with the consignor because disputes may arise which would affect the sum total involved. These are likely to come over trivial matters and it takes time to straighten them out.

Terms of a Sale.

Terms of sale vary, being governed pretty much by the sum total involved; the usual ones are a commission of 15 per cent., to which are added the cost of preparing and printing the catalogue at \$2.50 a page, postage and advertising. In days long past these charges were much less, 10 per cent. being the maximum commission with a catalogue assessment at 75 cents a page, and no charges for postage or advertising; but if such rates were made at present, with the excessive cost of paper and printing, with increased postage and with the heavy overhead expense, there would be no more book auctions in New York or any other American city.

Many other differences between the old time auctions and those of the present exist, such as the frequency of the sales at that time. It was the custom at Leavitt's, and later at Bangs's, to have sales every day of the week throughout the season, which began about September 15 and continued until June following. At the present there are comparatively few weeks in which there are more than two sales, and in some of the rooms as few monthly. At Bangs's rooms there were but six people employed to turn off this prodigious amount of work, while in the houses of the

present there are as many employed in writing catalogues alone.

Quite a large percentage of the bids executed in the auction room are for non-resident buyers or for those in town who for one reason or other do not care to attend the sales in person; for the accommodation of these there are commissioners who execute bids for 10 per cent. on the price bid. These representatives are usually men of more than average intelligence, well posted on values, with information obtained by contact with books and in auctions, who can be relied upon faithfully to perform the functions required of them by their principals.

Dealers from other cities employ the services of these representatives very largely, but with little profit to the man who executes the bids because of the strange vagaries usually held by their principals, such as bidding ridiculous prices on books that they well know will sell for many times the price they offer.

More labor is expended by the commissioner than at first seems apparent. He must enter the bids in his sale catalogue, inspect the books he has to bid on to see that they are up to description, execute the bids at the time of sale, and whether he buys anything or not he is expected to report to his principal the result on each of the items he was instructed to bid for.

Ridiculous Offers.

In a sale not long ago a list of more than 100 items was sent to the local representative of a large library and only four items were secured out of the entire lot, the sum total of these being less than \$50. A few samples of the bids may be illuminating: \$16 on a book that sells for \$100 and is considered by competent judges as cheap at that price; a bid of \$37.50 on a book that sold for \$360; one of \$52.50 for a book that sold for \$600, and so on.

It is hardly probable that any well posted bookman would make bids of this sort unless with a desire to overreach and, in case of success, to show how smart he was.

Those who engage the services of a commissioner should have sufficient confidence in him to entrust him with some latitude and discretion in bidding and buying.

Captain James Norman Hall

author of "Kitchener's Mob," and one of America's greatest aviators, was brought down wounded, and captured by the Germans on May 7, after exploits and adventures that had made him famous throughout the country.

HIGH ADVENTURE

Captain Hall's new book, completed just before his last fight, is now on sale at a price of one dollar and fifty cents (profusely illustrated). Critics who have read advance copies say it is not only the greatest aviation book of the war, but also one of the few enduring volumes that the conflict has called forth.

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
Boston and New York



THE OLD HUNTSMAN

By SIEGFRIED SASSOON Highly commended by John Masefield

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