

Why Books Don't Sell, in England Anyway

A London Letter From Hugh Walpole

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I HOPE that I shall not be boring the readers of THE SUN if my letter this week is concerned with the question of book distribution here in England and especially in London. I write about it because it is just now a subject of discussion in London and also because I have never seen any article in any American paper that touched on the question. I on my side know nothing about your American methods of distribution, although I hope to discover something for myself in the autumn of this year, but I do know from personal experience that there is an "aliveness" about American book-selling methods that does not seem to exist over here at all.

Many English writers when they complain with bitterness of the methods of British book distribution blame the publishers for most of their sorrows. Let me say, with my hand on my heart, that my personal experience has been, with one single exception, that English publishers do their very best and that it is not their fault that present conditions are so false and unsatisfactory. I blame, without hesitation, our bookshops and our circulating libraries. I am told that in America your bookshops are very often your publishers, and that you have no circulating libraries.

Well, what happens with us when a book is published? In the first place the publisher, as I believe, does his best—not all publishers, perhaps, but most. He sends out copies of his book to all the most important papers in the country for review, he lures as many booksellers as he can into ordering as many copies as possible and he does the same with the circulating libraries. After that he has to rely upon advertisement and can hope for two things—one, the good review, and the other the chatter of the dinner table. It can be seen at once, then, how seriously the publisher and the author behind him is dependent upon the bookshops and the circulating libraries.

The personal recommendation from reader to reader is the most valuable of all assets, but that can happen, decisively, to only a very few books in the season. In the last six months in London, for instance, I should say that the books that have been talked about have been *The Hell Call*, *Christopher and Columbus*, E. T. Raymond's *Uncensored Celebrities*, Lord Jellicoe's *Naval History*, Barbellion's *Journal of a Disappointed Man* and Hergesheimer's *Three Black Pennys*. Of these only the Raymond, Barbellion and Hergesheimer books were by men hitherto unknown. It is, in fact, only a rare and lucky chance that singles a book out for discussion, and very often some question of personalities is partly responsible for this, as with Mr. McKenna's *Son-in-Law* last year.

Behind this chatter the real work is done, I repeat, by the bookshops and the libraries. Now what about the bookshops of Great Britain? Are they the strongholds of erudition, wisdom, discrimination, judgment that they ought to be? Alas, I fear no. I do not altogether blame the booksellers. When I discuss this question with them they tell me that they simply cannot get the assistants that they require, that they have not the time to keep up with

what they invariably call "the flood of modern literature," and that, even if they had, it is the stock Classics of the past that form their real trade rather than the "ephemeral productions" (booksellers love long words) of the present day.

I am sure that there is a great deal of truth in what they say. The fact remains that I know only two bookshops in the whole of London where modern work is properly valued and adequately sold. In every other bookshop with which I have had any experience you will find assistants of such gross ignorance and incompetence that it is amazing that they should be allowed to hold their jobs for a week. It is not only that these assistants know very little about the names and works of modern writers "and that little wrong," it is also that they seem to have no sense at all of the kind of work to offer to their buyers.

When, for instance, a young man with inky nails, long hair and a haggard cheek comes in and looks timidly about him it is probable that the *Lustra* of R. Ezra Pound or the last novel by Gilbert Cannan will have some interest for him. You may be certain that his eyes will be blinded and his dignity be affronted by the determination of the bookseller to press upon him the new work of Mrs. Elinor Glyn or Gilbert Frankau's poem about London society.

These things may be excused. All inky nailed young men do not care for culture, and the bookseller may be right after all. But, to take a horrid example, in a shop not five minutes from Piccadilly Circus there was, during the war, an assistant who persistently refused to allow any of his regular customers to have what they wanted. "Oh, but you won't like that," he would say when they pleaded to be allowed to take away Conrad. "I assure you that Miss Dove sells in thousands and I sat up myself reading her last book until the early morning hours. You'll like her novel much better. I found Conrad heavy myself."

To all new work these men remain not only deaf and blind but obstinately hostile. It is much better for them to get rid of a tall pile of some popular novel than to sell the stray one or two copies of a poem or an essay or a new novelist. "You must get this. It's a good book. It's had some excellent reviews"—you say.

"Yes!" the bookseller will inquire with an air of languid indifference. "There are too many new books these days. Don't you think so, sir?"

The result of all this is that many excellent writers do not find their public. There are novelists like Ethel Colburn Mayne, Charles Marriott, Brett Young, Bohun Lynch, and poets like Sturge Moore, John Freeman and Richard Aldington, to name only a few, whose publics are simply waiting for them, and the connecting link has never been formed. When it is formed, as recently in the cases of John Drink-

water and Frank Swinerton, it has been very often because of some quite accidental reason. It is nonsense at present to say that in England good work is always recognized. It may be recognized by a few critics, but it does not begin to find its way to the readers who would value it.

Against the circulating libraries one must level the same accusations. They are staffed for the most part by incompetent assistants, who do not know their job and do not care to know it. They deal by preference with trashy work because that is the laziest and easiest thing to do. With the single exception of the *Times* Book Club, that has now an admirable system by which subscribers are entitled to receive any new work they require on publication, all libraries in Great Britain seem to deliver up books to their clients with a reluctance that is harrowing. In one library that advertises itself as "supplying all the latest books with the greatest possible

speed" I discovered no single work published within the last six months, and when I asked for a book that had been published in February of this year I was told that "They had not got it yet."

Now all this is a serious matter—serious for American writers as well as for English. What remedies are there? In the first place it is surely not too much to ask for shopmen of a better education. Men who sell boots and stockings are expected to know about boots and stockings. Why not booksellers? Then it would be pleasant to see a bookshop or two that specialized a little more in some single direction. Why should there not be Smith in London from whom one would be certain to get the very best advice and information about fiction; Jones, who has men trained in the knowledge of Poetry and Belles-Lettres; Robinson, who has a particular interest in the literature of the Nineteenth Century?

One is seeking here, perhaps, for the Millennium. I do not myself believe that anything will be done until the public shows its discontent, and how can the public show its discontent until it is aware of what is happening in modern literature? So the vicious circle runs. It is a depressing state of things. HUGH WALPOLE.

Unprepared for Peace

THE inevitable result of reading James B. Morman's *The Place of Agriculture in Reconstruction* is the conviction that the United States is quite as unprepared for the problems of peace, as they affect the returning soldier, as it was for the problems of war when it called these same men into its army and navy. It might seem that this reflection was not particularly germane to the subject of Mr. Morman's book; but as the problem of the discharged soldier and sailor in relation to agriculture is the *point d'appui* of the work its aptness cannot be denied.

In presenting this study of national programmes of land settlement "with the idea of formulating a practical programme of land settlements in the United States for our discharged soldiers and sailors" the writer gives a sketch of the labor problems bound to confront us on the return of peace and then, in turn, describes the proposed systems of land settlement in Great Britain, France, Canada and the United States, all of which are in operation except our own. Following this he devotes five chapters to showing what a progressive policy of land settlement should be for us; discusses the future supply of farm laborers and tenant farmers; analyzes the sources of credit for successful agriculture and the problem of rural credits in the United States. In his final chapter he gives an exposition of the relation of agriculture to our national welfare.

So far as the United States is concerned we have a programme presented by Secretary Lane, and there for the present it seems to have stopped. We have not even progressed to the first step in the programme of the Secretary of the Interior, which was to find out just how much land there was in the United States that could be utilized in the project of employing discharged soldiers and sailors. In France the American Red Cross has tried some experiments with gardening from the viewpoint of occupational therapy with considerable success. But we are at a standstill in the whole problem otherwise, a temporary impasse that is not cleared away by the lack of enthusiasm of discharged service men for farming. For as a matter of fact the numbers of such men who will take jobs on farms is practically nil.

Canada's treatment of this whole question has been so much more advanced and practical than ours as to make one feel ashamed. Mr. Morman's sketch of what our northern neighbor has done is most complete and illuminating; and as we have borrowed liberally of Canada's ideas of the practical application of occupational therapy in our military hospitals we may, in time, adopt her method of handling the returned soldier in relation to agriculture. What the Dominion Government has done is of most interest to us,

since her situation, in the matter of available land, is more closely akin to that of the United States than is either the situation of Great Britain or France, where agricultural territory is necessarily limited.

If every American who keeps a thought for this special problem of the employment of the discharged soldier and sailor, or the more general one of our agricultural progress, in the back of his mind would read this work of Mr. Morman we might get some action on those two essential needs. For with the many weighty reconstruction problems before Congress at the present time it is only natural our representatives should consider first those which they are made to feel are most pressing.

If our discharged soldiers and sailors are not inclined to go "back to the farm" and our people don't take any interest in making agriculture more attractive as a business proposition it will necessarily follow that our tentative programme will get nowhere. The problems of farm labor and of helping feed the needy peoples of Europe will, by the same token, fail of solution also.

This is a most valuable and suggestive volume that covers its subject completely and thoroughly.

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