

Publishing at the Huntington Library

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FOR NINE YEARS, from 1928 to 1937, the Huntington Library issued its books through a cooperative arrangement with the Harvard University Press. Eight works, all reproductions of the Library's treasures, were printed. Three other books were issued in cooperation with other publishers—the Medici Society of London, the University of North Carolina, and Houghton Mifflin Co. Books published during this first phase included such rare items as *Laws and Liberties of Massachusetts* and the "bad" *Hamlet* of 1603.

Although these publications undoubtedly enhanced the prestige of the Library, one feels certain that neither the Harvard University Press nor the Huntington Library benefited financially from their joint endeavors. Since the Library early adopted the policy, following the precedent set by the Clarendon Press, of never remaindering, it had made a modest start toward amassing the stock of unsold books that now graces its basement shelves. In retrospect, however, the situation was not hopeless, for as of today four of the eleven titles are out of print, three others are represented by fewer than fifty copies each, and the residue amounts to less than six hundred books. All the others have been sold—or given away.

In 1937 this infant institution, succumbing to the magic of print, engaged upon the experiment of publishing under its own imprint. Keeping one foot on dry ground, however, it announced that it would con-

tinue to have books published in cooperation with the university presses of the United States and England. Since that time, only seven joint publications have been undertaken—two each with California and Oxford, and one each with Cambridge, Johns Hopkins, and Oklahoma. In 1937, too, occasional scholarly bulletins were allowed to burgeon into a full-fledged quarterly, with a full-fledged annual deficit.

By the close of 1953, a total of fifty books had been published bearing the Huntington Library imprint. The largest number of titles issued in any one year—seven—was published during the fiscal year 1948-49. The average number of titles per year for the whole period 1937-1953 has been four. During the decade 1941-1950 the Library had spent, according to the accountants, \$190,119 and had grossed \$179,147, a "net loss" of \$10,972 on thirty-one titles. The average loss per scholarly volume over the decade, then, was \$353. As an offset, the Committee could point to the considerable stocks of unsold mint copies.

During the year 1951, the Board of Trustees, alarmed because the "revolving fund" had been overdrawn by \$20,000, decided to re-examine the program and called in Joseph A. Brandt, publisher, to conduct the investigation. This revolving fund of \$2,500 had been created in 1941 in the expectation of undergirding a book-publishing program and perhaps, in the fullness of time, of increasing the initial capital! The trend was the other way; in fact, the revolving fund was in the red from the start. Some, of ungracious disposition, believed it

to be an ingenious device intended to put the brakes on a carefree Publications Committee. But Mr. Brandt was far from alarmed. "The showing is amazing, all things considered," he wrote. To abandon the publishing venture "made possible by Trustee encouragement, staff vision and self-sacrifice, would be a distinct loss to learning." Thus the venture was permitted to continue upon the same footing. Meanwhile, the activity had survived the depression and the war, neither of which, of course, had any influence upon scholarly sales. The gross annual receipts mounted slowly, if erratically, touching a high of \$23,900 for the fiscal year 1948-1949. The *Annual Report* of that year observed, too, that "the value of the inventory was much increased."

Through twenty-five years of such adventuring, the Huntington has learned a few lessons, a few truths—and a few tricks. Armed with the experience thus garnered, the Publications Committee even looks forward to erasing the revolving fund overdraft.

The Huntington finally accepted the axiom that book-dealers have to live. Here was a problem indeed. To ensure the maximum distribution of its small editions of 2,000 copies or less, the retail price had invariably been set at a few cents above manufacturing costs. Dealers, upon ascertaining that they might obtain a modest return of from 5% to 15%, condescended to order—as a favor to a customer! As much as they respected the Publication Committee's dedication to pure scholarship, they politely refused to share in this noble experiment. In 1952, therefore, the Huntington Library adopted the standard discounts of 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ % and 40%. To its surprise, it has acquired a host of cooperative friends, and some of its frozen wares had begun to find their way to the marts of trade.

The Huntington, too, has learned to measure the potential market for each book. The ordinary commercial rules do not apply; first, because Huntington editions are small; and second, because manuscripts are chosen for publication upon the basis of whether they contribute to the knowledge and understanding of some phase of English or American civilization. However, works of exacting scholarship do move slowly and, unless subsidized, it would be difficult to keep the program going. But should such books be readable, they can be sold instead of stored and capital remains relatively fluid. Additional manuscripts can be printed, thus fulfilling the purposes of scholarly publishing.

As a rule of thumb, the Library expects to sell an edition of a professional book of limited appeal in five years, and one of some interest to lay readers in three years. With this rotation of capital, as slow as the tempo might seem to a commercial publisher, the demands of scholarly writers can be met. There is no greater discouragement to scholarship in the humanities than for an author to be told that for financial reasons alone, his manuscript—the product of years of toil—cannot be published.

When a manuscript is adopted for publication, the usual efforts are made to bring it to the attention of potential readers. Three to five thousand circulars are sent out to possible purchasers and fifty copies of the book are sent to selected journals for review. Fortunately, the Western newspapers are giving increasing attention to books, especially to those published in the West and to those dealing with Western subjects. This is most encouraging in a region exhibiting both a rapid increase of population and a rising index of educated lay readers.

Publishing stunts to the contrary, the most praiseworthy duty of the publisher is to inform those likely to be interested in a

title of its availability and then let nature take her course. Once this has been done, he can depend on satisfied readers to tell others about it and hopefully await a chain reaction. Moreover, such readers, once familiar with a small imprint, are apt to become regular customers. The elements of good taste and discriminating scholarship are the most reliable hallmarks for the small publisher. Our admittedly meager advertising and promotion budget of \$1,000 per annum cannot go a long way.

A scholarly press can more easily compete with the commercial publisher in the field of format, i.e., typography, design, and binding. This has been noted several times in *Publishers' Weekly*. The reasons are obvious. A scholarly press can, if it chooses, work at a leisurely pace. Publication dates are flexible. Thus Huntington books, like those of other university presses, have received their share of mention in the lists of the Western Books Exhibition and the American Institute of Graphic Arts. Incidentally, certain collectors specialize in finely printed books, so that the effort to manufacture books of excellent format is not wasted.

In 1940, the Library published Dr. Robert G. Cleland's *The Cattle on a Thousand Hills*, a California book with a great appeal to the general reader. The local book stores immediately stocked it. "The publication of this book," states the *Annual Report* of that year, "will doubtless make more dealers and individuals acquainted with the Library's publication activities." Less fastidious was the observation that sales for the year had advanced by \$1,700 over those of the previous year. The following year *The Cattle on a Thousand Hills* "easily headed the sales from the stock in hand." But it took some time to realize that here was a market for the asking. In 1950, the *Annual Report* sol-

emnly commented that "since five of eight items on the subject were out of print, there was a continuing demand for Californiana." With the successful launching of five California books during 1952 and 1953, the lesson had finally been learned. More than 50% of each issue was sold in a year—a pace somewhat disconcerting to the Publications Committee. Californians are vitally interested in their history. The reason is simple: their fathers and grandfathers built the country, and the third and fourth generations are completely absorbed in the same exciting business. This spirit of tradition is no longer manifest in many of the older parts of the country.

Because there are at the Huntington Library men of many talents in the world of books, the Publications Committee is able to avail itself of their skills without adding to overhead. For example, the Research Department appraises manuscripts, the Rare Books and Manuscripts Departments advise upon typography, design, and illustrations, and in pinch the Catalog Department assists with the compiling of library lists and with the distribution of prospectuses. Rent, utilities, and storage are also free items. Since the Publications Department is charged only with one full-time employee and for a few miscellaneous services and supplies, the expense for overhead is hardly more than \$5,000 per annum. Royalties are not required unless there is a second edition—a rare event.

Visitors to the Library, almost from the beginning, have purchased souvenirs such as colored postcards and reproductions of paintings. Catering to this taste, the Publications Department in 1941 began to issue softbound guides and catalogues such as the *Art Gallery Handbook*, *Desert Plant Collections*, and *Great Books in Great Editions*. This venture into the "softbound field" has yielded a small but steady profit.

Through the years the Huntington has built up an exceptionally large and interested friends' organization, with a current membership of well over a thousand. Since this organization is not a fund-raising device, but rather a vehicle for bringing together men and women who share an appreciation of manuscripts, rare books, prints, paintings, and horticulture, the dues are a nominal ten dollars. The Friends permit each member to select gratis, annually, a book, or a colotype reproduction of a painting to the value of five dollars, or a free subscription to the *Quarterly*. With the growth of this organization and the interest in publications, each new title is certain to be selected by several hundred members. The Publications Department is reimbursed by the directors of the Friends for these selections, less a small discount. Thus each book, as it goes to press, is now assured a potential group of customers: sales at the Pavilion (retail store), sales to dealers, standing orders with college libraries, and adoptions by the Friends of the Library.

As has been indicated, the latest chapter in the Huntington's publishing adventure has been encouraging. Keep in mind, however, that this recital is not a success story. Financially, the crux of the matter is, how little do you lose? In 1952-1953, however, the gross from sales, \$22,500, almost matched that of the banner year, 1948-1949, and that of the current year is running at the rate of \$32,000. In the past two years, one book, *The History of the Irvine Ranch*, ran through an edition of 1,500 copies in eight months and is now in a second edition. All the other books published during this period have also sold well. *The Indians of Southern California*, manufactured by the Plantin Press, has won international recognition for typographical excellence; *Music in the Southwest*, designated as a "sleeper" by a Utah reviewer,

sold 1,000 copies within a year; *California's Utopian Colonies*, the recipient of a scholarly award, sold 1,000 copies within six months; *The Life and Adventures of Don Agustin Janssens*, a Christmas offering, sold 596 copies in two weeks; *The Place Called Sespe*, distributed for the California Institute of Technology by the Huntington, sold 40% of the small issue in a month; and two Renaissance studies, *Shakespeare's Use of Learning and Science and Religion in Elizabethan England* are moving at a two-year instead of a five-year schedule. *Fields of the Atlantic Monthly* received the "lead review" in the New York *Herald Tribune* book section on January 31 and has been adopted as the April alternate selection of the Atlantic Monthly Book Club.

Also in the past two years, the character of the inventory has changed appreciably. In January, 1951, the active stock was 3,000 volumes; the inactive was 15,000. In January, 1954, with a revival of the program, the active stock (salable within two years) has grown to 12,000 volumes; the less active (salable within three years) is 8,000 volumes; and the inactive stock has declined to 5,000 volumes. The momentum regained by regularly publishing a half-dozen books a year has had a salutary effect upon the "dead" stock. The bitter lesson of sporadic publishing has been learned the hard way.

For the satisfying results of recent years the Huntington can thank the bookdealers, the Friends of the Library, book reviewers, and those at the Library who believe that no research institution can flourish without the means of exhibiting the results of research. Lastly, the Trustees deserve credit for putting up with the vagaries of the Publications Committee and for advancing credit over a period of nearly twenty years.

In conclusion, let us glance at the *cons* and *pros* of this publishing activity.

Book publishing, *per se*, is a tough business. The per unit cost steadily mounts. No single element in the cost of manufacture reveals any other tendency. The cost of composition, paper, binding, jackets and even prospectuses, follow the trend. In a small business, also, higher costs cannot be passed along to the consumer. "Publishing and certain specialized textile operations," states an economist, "cannot cope with inflation." They are examples of "the sort of business which finds itself caught between an inelastic selling price and costs it cannot control." The "break-even point" is too high. The Library has learned that no one will pay \$7.00 for a trade book, no matter how authoritative and scholarly. Small businesses, too, find it impossible to cut overhead. In our case one person, certainly, is needed to take orders over the phone, to mail out books, to call on dealers, to maintain the records, and to correspond occasionally with anxious authors! Moreover, books cannot be distributed without paying the postage fee, and certainly enough advertising must be done to notify potential customers that a book has been published.

The outlet for hardbound books is diminishing. In 1951 there were 3,500 bookstores of some reputation. Today there are fewer than 3,000. The "soft-bounds," marketed in drugstores, grocery stores, stations, etc. have taken a hard toll of the retail bookman.

At best, then, our enterprise is one jump ahead of the sheriff.

On the other hand, the Huntington Library is a research library with rare book and manuscript resources that grow continually, and with a large following of scholars in the humanities. It is inconceivable that the Library should not make an effort to publish the results of the best work done here. To be sure, a few men are prominent enough to receive the backing of commercial publishers and a few others can count on their university presses, but the large majority (among them many promising young men) have only the discouraging prospect of publication by using their savings.

The heart of the matter rests in the fact that the Huntington Library has managed to publish the best of the work of its readers regardless of cost. To paraphrase Norman Cousins, book publishing is essential to the national culture, and book publishers, large and small, are custodians, in a sense, of infinitely valuable literary properties, the future protectors of talent yet to be developed. This period of adventuring, therefore, will continue so long as talented scholars are willing, at such personal sacrifices to them, to ponder and appraise the cultural heritage of the English-speaking people. Publishing by the Huntington Library fosters this talent.

Why We Need to be Investigated

(Continued from page 387)

the investigation that will start soon afterwards. I shall be surprised if the problems are not plentiful.

I shall be surprised also if it does not do us good to be investigated. I think the investigators will benefit too. We do not want to supply more books or more services than are needed. If there are non-essentials

that can be eliminated, we shall be glad to know of them. We shall welcome help in solving our problems, and we can feel sure that professors and presidents who understand these problems will not advocate solutions—or budgets—that will ruin our libraries, which after all are theirs as much as ours.