

THE PUBLISHING EXPERIENCE

CASO CENFIELDO

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by
CASS
CANFIELD

*A. S. W. Rosenbach Fellow
in Bibliography, 1968*



PHILADELPHIA
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA PRESS

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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**THE
REAL
AND THE
IDEAL
EDITOR**

It is standard practice for a speaker to announce formally that he feels honored to have been invited to make an address. This produces a problem for me for I'm really at a loss to convey to you the extent of my appreciation for the invitation from President Harnwell to be the Rosenbach Fellow in Bibliography and, as such, to deliver two lectures.

I am fortunate in having met Dr. Rosenbach on several occasions. He was a great friend of E. V. Lucas, the English author and man of letters, whom I knew quite intimately. To be in Dr. Rosenbach's company was a delight; he combined scholarship with charm, and communicated to his friends his wonderful zest for life.

Just the other day I learned from my son-in-law, Joseph Fox, that his grandfather of the same name had encountered young Rosenbach at a small book auction in Philadelphia in 1895. Mr. Fox wanted to acquire a sixteenth-century manuscript-missal which he expected to buy for the proverbial song, but he had not counted on the presence of a young stranger, Rosenbach, then a college student. The bidding was brisk and Fox acquired the item, bidding higher than his competitor could afford. He noticed Rosenbach's crestfallen look and gave him a ride home in his victoria. As they conversed, Fox became more and more impressed with his companion; from this encounter developed a lifelong friendship. Joseph Fox provided the funds for setting up the Rosenbach business and so a great career as a book collector and dealer was launched. Those of

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you who have read the interesting biography of A. S. Rosenbach by Edwin Wolf and John F. Fleming may recall a brief reference to this incident.

I intend to discuss the publishing experience, which is nearly as old as the hills. Publishing far antedated the invention of printing. Under the Ptolemies, staffs of scribes prepared editions of the classics. In the Rome of the Caesars, slaves toiled to produce editions of books, and in the Dark Ages monkish copyists succeeded them. As Allan Nevins has described, a cloudy line of publishers stretches back from Mainz on the Rhine and Subiaco on the fork of the Tiber, the little towns whence printing first spread slowly over Europe. Some of the great publishing houses of today, like Longmans Green in London, date back to the eighteenth century.

If the value of my own publishing experience were measured in terms of time it could be called vast, comprising as it does 44 years with Harper, which was established in 1817, two years after the Battle of Waterloo. However, the value of experience should be related to the intelligence of the experiencer rather than to the mere passage of time. In fact the time element should be heavily discounted, for a perceptive person of thirty will have profited more from his mistakes than a plodder of twice his age.

In any case the value of experience is finite. While it's probably too extreme to observe, as did Earl Wilson, that experience is what makes you recognize a mistake when you make it again, the fresh, imaginative outlook is what means most in

publishing. Taking the risk of making a mistake is essential to creative publishing.

Now I am primarily a trade publisher and editor; I shall use these terms interchangeably. My observations are mainly within that framework, although for quite a number of years I was chief executive of a publishing business—The House of Harper—comprising books in every field, including medicine, excepting only law books and reference volumes produced in sets. A trade publisher can be defined as one who caters to the general public which buys books in bookstores, as distinct from the buyers of books in special fields, like medicine, or textbooks.

In a piece I wrote for *Harper's Magazine* last year, I reviewed the history of the Harper firm over a century and a half in an attempt to discover what could be learned from it. I found, to my discouragement, that the publishing mistakes of the nineteenth century of overproduction and competitive price cutting were repeated in the twentieth, and that the editorial techniques of another age offered only limited guidance.

Furthermore, I must admit that after a great many years in the publishing business I still have little more idea of what kinds of books sell than I did when I started. I've pored over the sales records of titles we have published over the past twenty-five years and am still unable to produce meaningful generalizations about the necessary ingredients of a best seller.

What I have been saying is negative. Let me be

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positive, and state that what counts is that the editor be one who can find the individual book of quality and appeal, not one who seeks guidance from the past and from the sales records of previously published books.

Enough of generalities. I think I can best illustrate my points and the complexities of editing general or trade books by reviewing my own experience over the years.

I have found a sense of timing essential to good publishing. To be behind the times leads to disaster, and no one regrets the passing of publishers who failed to keep in tune with their contemporaries. On the other hand, to be too far ahead of the times can also be disastrous, since publishing is necessarily a commercial enterprise, as is selling works of art. In the art field it was not the dealers of the 1890's who made fortunes from the paintings of the Post-Impressionists; it was, rather, those who promoted them some twenty-five years later.

I will give you examples of bad and good timing in publishing. In 1939 we published a book called *In Stalin's Secret Service* by Walter Krivitsky, head of the Soviet Intelligence organization in Western Europe, who chose to find sanctuary in this country. It was an extraordinary book, revealing Soviet operations involving any number of cold-blooded murders. I remember a confrontation between Krivitsky and our lawyer when the two seemed unable to communicate. The lawyer kept pointing to passages that, in his opinion, would lead to heavy

libel damages; Krivitsky, however, kept insisting that unless he told the truth about what his accomplices had done under his direction to exterminate enemies of Stalin's regime, these men would be liquidated by the Kremlin. Krivitsky was entirely right but could not make himself understood. Nor could the public understand or believe that the events described by Krivitsky in his book could have really happened. The book, a fascinating document, was a flop because the public was not ready to accept such disclosures. The timing was wrong.

Incidentally, Krivitsky was a charming, civilized person in conversation, as far removed as one could imagine from the stereotype of a master spy and terrorist. I grew to like him, and was distressed when a few months after the publication of his book a short item appeared in the *New York Times* stating that Krivitsky had killed himself in a Washington hotel. I doubt this story and believe that he was either murdered or forced to commit suicide.

Inside Europe by John Gunther, published in 1936, is an example of good timing. For two or three years previously I had been pressing Gunther to give up his career as foreign correspondent of the *Chicago Daily News* so that he could write a revealing book on the personalities and political trends in Europe. I felt that such a book, different and broader in concept from any that had been written up to that time, would be useful and would enjoy a large sale. Gunther had resisted my importunities — which were carried to the point of my nearly causing him to miss a sailing to Europe because of

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my insistence that he sign a contract before doing so—until a little alarm clock which he carries inside of him announced that the time had come to take the plunge and work on *Inside Europe*. The book appeared at just the right moment of crisis when Hitler and Mussolini were riding high and were laying their plans to conquer the Western world. The little alarm clock has served Gunther well over the years; in book after book he has covered areas of the world that were, at the time of his writing about them, at the explosive and critical stage.

The capacity for getting on with authors is, of course, essential to successful editing. They are a special breed; I was made to realize this at a dinner given for me in London by E. V. Lucas many years ago. He had invited about thirty men involved in the various arts and I found myself sitting next to Max Beerbohm. Since I knew only five or six of the guests I asked my neighbor to tell me something about the others and what they did. Beerbohm offered me a challenge; he said, "Look around the table and you can identify the writers. You'll find that they are the worried-looking ones; the painters, architects and sculptors appear, and are, relatively cheerful." I did as I was told, and, sure enough, correctly spotted the writers by observing their harassed expressions.

The business of the writer is, indeed, demanding and wearing—to a greater degree than the more instinctive occupations of painters or sculptors. The writer needs special attention and an editor who

understands him. This assignment for the editor is difficult, but has its own rewards because sometimes the editor is in touch with genius.

Among the most gifted writers I have known was J. B. S. Haldane, the English geneticist. He took no advanced degree at Cambridge but was blessed with an original mind. I remember his saying to me once, "I get one or two ideas a year. If you can achieve that, you're pretty well ahead of the game and of most people in science." His interest was research; he cared little for making his ideas known to the general public. But going into London on the train from the country he would become bored and start to scribble. These scribbles were published, several volumes of them. They have not been surpassed in grace of style and in scientific interest for the layman.

Such a man needs a sympathetic editor, as do most talented writers. Each one requires personal attention, a sensitive understanding of his or her particular problems. Awareness of this is essential for anyone working with authors.

Stories of other authors come to mind—Aldous Huxley and Edna St. Vincent Millay. Huxley was a strange and wonderful person. Perhaps the quality of his endlessly searching mind is best suggested by a story about him told to me by his older brother, Julian, the scientist. Julian related to me that Aldous, as a small child, was often lost in thought. One time, at the age of five, he was sitting by his mother, apparently oblivious of his surroundings. His mother asked him what he was thinking about,

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whereupon the child looked up, paused a moment, and said, "Skin." A most surprising line of inquiry for a five-year-old!

Edna St. Vincent Millay was one of the most extraordinary people I have ever known, combining a beautiful lyrical gift with the mind of a mathematician. She was professional to her finger tips, and took justified pride in the technical perfection of manuscripts she sent to us, her publishers. Although I should have known better, I once questioned her use of a classical phrase. Then all hell broke loose; after an avalanche of magnificently outraged letters from her, I caved in, properly chastised.

After her charming husband, Eugen Boissevain, died, she fell ill and was confined in the Doctors Hospital in New York in a very depressed state of mind. The question then arose as to whether or not she should be allowed to return to her home in Austerlitz, New York, as she wished to do. Her doctor sidestepped making a decision since there was a danger that in her melancholy condition she might commit suicide. So the decision was left to a few intimate friends, who were divided in their opinions, with the result that it was finally put up to her editor. I decided that she should be allowed to do what she wished and took her back to Austerlitz. On this rather long motor ride we confined our conversation to what we saw and observed on the way; when I left her in her lonely house I remember that she thanked me for my detachment and said, "I'm not going to kill myself. Don't worry." She didn't,

and lived for several years to write some very fine poetry.

To try to understand and help people of talent is difficult and rather wearing; needless to say, one often fails to satisfy them. Still, there are times when authors express to their editors extravagant and unwarranted appreciation. Dr. Alexis Carrel was a case in point. His book, *Man, the Unknown*, achieved outstanding success, not because of any brilliant promotion effort on our part but because we had reluctantly permitted a condensation of the work in *The Reader's Digest* which aroused wide attention. As a result the book took off and we could not keep it in print. Actually, we deserved a reprimand from the author. Instead, Carrel told me at the time, in his office at the Rockefeller Institute, that if scientists could plan and develop their programs with the foresight and accuracy we had shown they would achieve results beyond their wildest dreams. I listened to this dissertation, was grateful for the undeserved tribute and kept my own counsel.

The question is often asked whether the book publisher should seek to influence public opinion. Some publishers have done so, and succeeded, like Victor Gollancz in England, who represented the responsible Left. My own view, however, is that the publisher's primary role is rather that of the catalyst, to provide the means for the expression of any responsible opinion. His basic function, I think, should be to draw out his authors, to stimulate them so far as he can.

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Occasionally one succeeds. I remember sitting next to Margaret Leech at a dinner party. We were strangers to one another but I knew of her as the author of some good novels. I found her extraordinarily intelligent. In the course of our conversation I developed a theory about historical writing, that the shorter the period covered, the more interesting would be the resulting book. I maintained that it was almost impossible to write a readable volume dealing with the whole development of Western civilization because in such a book events and personalities could not be described vividly and at sufficient length to hold the reader's interest. The conversation ended with my suggesting to her that she write a book covering only a fortnight in the life of Abraham Lincoln, which would give her the opportunity of reporting what was appearing in the press at the time, what Lincoln said to various important contemporaries, what people were thinking at a crucial period. The idea intrigued Miss Leech so that she prepared an outline. Actually it failed to satisfy her and she turned to another subject. But she kept to the concept of limiting the size of her historical canvas so that she could write about events in detail and describe what happened from day to day. She decided to write about the Civil War as it affected civilians in one locality—Washington, D.C. The book, *Reveille in Washington*, won the Pulitzer Prize and is still widely read today.

To what extent this work started a new trend in historical writing it is hard to say. The fact is that

in succeeding years many arresting books of what I call concentrated history have appeared, like Jim Bishop's *The Day Lincoln Was Shot*, Walter Lord's *Day of Infamy* and his *Incredible Victory*.

So I emphasize that the role of the editor should be to try and stimulate his authors, to draw them out, rather than to attempt to impose his own ideas. Of course some degree of knowledge is useful to the editor and this helped me in working with Sumner Welles when he was writing *The Time for Decision* in the early months of 1944. My associate, Marguerite Hoyle, and I spent many days with Welles, asking him questions based on what we knew of recent international events. When Welles had reached the point in his book where he was to deal with the future of Germany, we asked him, "What are you going to propose? One Germany, two Germanys, or several Germanys?" To our amazement, since Welles as Under Secretary of State was primarily responsible for developing our postwar policy and had been working on this for many months previously, the reply was that he had not yet decided how to answer these questions. Two weeks later, when we saw him again, he had reached his conclusions and wrote the chapters on Germany. The pattern he proposed was substantially the one that was adopted in the postwar settlements. It can be maintained that in that fortnight the fate of Germany was determined.

I have spoken of the usefulness of *some* knowledge but would observe that too much may handicap the editor. Some years ago I visited Oxford, in-