

THE FORTUNES OF MITCHELL KENNERLEY

B O O K M A N



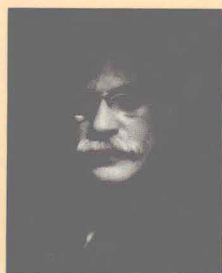
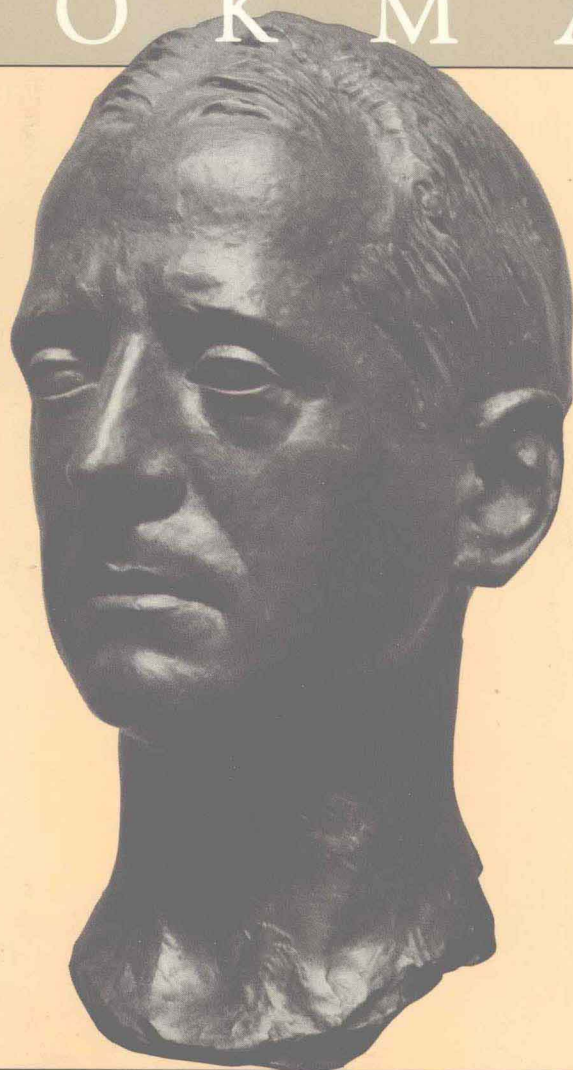
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THE FORTUNES OF
MITCHELL KENNERLEY,
BOOKMAN



by
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HBJ

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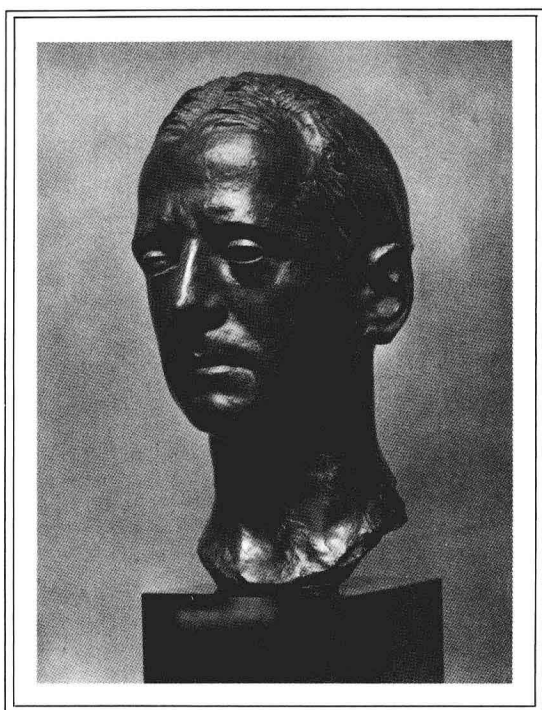
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A B C D E

THE FORTUNES OF
MITCHELL KENNERLEY,
BOOKMAN

Also by Matthew J. Bruccoli

The Composition of *Tender Is the Night*
As Ever, Scott Fitz—(editor, with Jennifer Atkinson)
F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Descriptive Bibliography
Supplement to F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Descriptive Bibliography
Apparatus for a Definitive Edition of *The Great Gatsby*
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Some Sort of Epic Grandeur: The Life of F. Scott Fitzgerald
Scott and Ernest: The Authority of Failure and the Authority of Success
Ross Macdonald/Kenneth Millar: A Descriptive Bibliography
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James Gould Cozzens, A Time of War (editor)
James Gould Cozzens: A Descriptive Bibliography
James Gould Cozzens: A Life Apart
Nelson Algren: A Descriptive Bibliography



Mitchell Kennerley by Jo Davidson

For Jean and Morley Kennerley

This relation will not be wholly without its use . . . if those, who, in confidence of superior capabilities or attainments, disregard the common maxims of life, shall be reminded, that nothing will supply the want of prudence; and that negligence and irregularity, long continued, will make knowledge useless, wit ridiculous, and genius contemptible.

—SAMUEL JOHNSON

The dead keep their secrets, and in a little while we shall be as wise as they—and as taciturn.

—ALEXANDER SMITH

When this world makes having money so important, so essential to well-being, it is hardly reasonable to blame a man for anything he may have done to try to get himself a supply.

—JAMES GOULD COZZENS

Frederic Goudy, distinguished printer and type designer, created an original type face for his friend Mitchell Kennerley. Goudy named the face Kennerley Old Style, and the handsome, practical design has continued in use for more than a half-century. This book is set in contemporary variants called Kennerley Roman, Kennerley Open Face, and Kennerley Italic.

INTRODUCTION

MITCHELL KENNERLEY pursued money, women, and books.

This biography might have been titled “The Quest for Kennerley.” My quest appropriately commenced in a bookshop. Twenty-five years ago I found stacks of old book-auction catalogues in the basement of Peter Keisogloff’s Cleveland store, and he gave me all of them that I wanted. The best of these catalogues had been issued by the Anderson Galleries in New York and bore the imprimatur MITCHELL KENNERLEY, PRESIDENT on their covers. I was impressed by the circumstance that the same name also appeared as the publisher of important books; but I was occupied with other projects and failed to follow up on Kennerley—thereby diminishing the present work because many key sources were then alive. For the next twenty years Kennerley kept reappearing in my reading: rarely more than a paragraph, but always in connection with books and often implying something improper. Many of these comments have proved untrue or inaccurate. In 1972 I interviewed Jean and Morley Kennerley for my biography of John O’Hara—ignorant of their connection with Mitchell Kennerley. When I admired a bust in their London flat, Morley identified it as his father and seemed

rather surprised that I knew who Mitchell Kennerley was. That was another signal I ignored. Other books intervened, but in 1982 I obtained the Kennerleys' permission to attempt this work. They were patiently encouraging. Shortly before his death in 1985 Morley approved my working draft, and Jean has maintained her generous aid.

It is often asserted that notable figures would have succeeded in any time or place, but such tributes are unverifiable. Timing is always crucial to extraordinary careers. This book examines Mitchell Kennerley in the context of the world of books in the early decades of this century. Kennerley operated in two overlapping fields: as a publisher from 1902 until about 1924 and as head of the Anderson Galleries during 1915–1929. The latter activity coincided with the golden era of American book collecting. Golden eras require golden men; Kennerley's world was populated with legendary bookmen. Literary treasures fell like rain upon the auction rooms, and Kennerley was the rainmaker.

Fitzgerald wrote of Gatsby: "If personality is an unbroken string of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him. . . ." Until Kennerley's string broke, he promoted a series of coups through the force of his personality, which combined cool egotism, arrogance, audacity, ruthlessness, recklessness, and charm. Yet personality is destructive when it becomes a substitute for character. It was said that Kennerley knew everybody, but he was an enigma to those who knew him. Jo Davidson commented that he "was a hundred men to a hundred men"¹: generous friend, implacable enemy, con man, rake, bon vivant, patron of literature. Christopher Morley described him as "incalculably and mercilessly himself."² There was a self-destructive component in Kennerley: a compulsion to place himself at risk. Like many men who rise through daring, he needed to test fortune.

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| Introduction | xv |
| PART I | |
| England and America, 1878–1901 | 1 |
| PART II | |
| Publisher, 1902–1914. | 21 |
| PART III | |
| The Anderson Galleries, 1915–1929. | 87 |
| PART IV | |
| Exile—Restoration—Deposal, 1930–1938 | 215 |
| PART V | |
| Fallen Enterprises, 1939–1950. | 243 |
| Appendix 1: <i>The Kern Sale</i> | 263 |
| Appendix 2: <i>The Bishop Sale</i> | 269 |
| Appendix 3: <i>Checklist of Mitchell Kennerley Publications, 1906–1938.</i> | 271 |
| Sources and Acknowledgments | 287 |
| Notes | 291 |
| Selected Bibliography | 317 |
| Index | 325 |

PART I

ENGLAND AND AMERICA,
1878-1901

CHAPTER ONE

*The Five Towns—London and John Lane—
New York—Bliss Carman, Thomas Bird
Mosher, and William Marion Reedy—
Money—The Smart Set—Helen Morley*

A SEVENTY-ONE-YEAR-OLD MAN hanged himself in room 1828 of the Shelton Hotel in Manhattan on 22 February 1950. Mitchell Kennerley, “former publisher and president of the Anderson Galleries,” rated thirteen column inches in *The New York Times*.¹ The obituary noted that under his direction the Anderson Galleries auctioned a Gutenberg Bible for \$106,000 in 1926 and that Lord Leverhulme’s art collection brought \$1,248,493 in 1927. The summary of Kennerley’s publishing activities mentioned his proprietorship of *The Reader* and *The Forum* magazines and his 1913 trial on the charge of sending an objectionable book, *Hagar Revelly*, through the mails. *The Times* did not indicate that the Mitchell Kennerley imprint had appeared on more than 400 books, including works by Van Wyck Brooks, Edward Carpenter, Frank Harris, Joseph Hergesheimer, D. H. Lawrence, Vachel Lindsay, Walter Lippmann, John Masfield, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Edgar Saltus, Upton Sinclair, H. G. Wells, and Oscar Wilde.

The life of Mitchell Kennerley is a success story, and it is a failure story. Magazine publisher at twenty-three and head of his own publishing house at twenty-eight, in his forties he was among the most

prominent figures in the book world. No one else was as actively engaged in so many aspects of literature and antiquarian books. In his sixties he was an obscure has-been living on loans.

Mitchell Kennerley's triumphs were fostered by the ebullience of the American Twenties, but his history began in Victoria's England. He was born in Burslem, Staffordshire, 14 August 1878. Disraeli was the Prime Minister. Tennyson, Browning, Meredith, Carlyle, Morris, Swinburne, Arnold, and Ruskin were alive. In that year Hardy published *The Return of the Native*; Gilbert & Sullivan produced *H. M. S. Pinafore*; and Oscar Wilde came to London. In New York vice-suppressor Anthony Comstock—who would subsequently act against Kennerley—was prosecuting an abortionist.

Burslem was one of Arnold Bennett's "Five Towns," now consolidated into Stoke-on-Trent. There were actually six towns, with a population of 130,000, in an area of roughly seven miles by five miles: Burslem (Bennett's Bursley), Tunstall, Hanley, Stoke, Longton, and Fenton. The business of the Five Towns was pottery, and Burslem ("The Mother of the Potteries") was the home of Wedgwood. It was a grim setting of smoking chimneys, slag heaps, and clay pits. Bennett wrote, "The towns are mean and ugly in appearance—sombre, shapeless, hard-featured, uncouth; and the vaporous poison of their ovens and chimneys has soiled and shrivelled the surrounding greenness of Nature till there is no country lane within miles but what presents a gaunt travesty of rural charms."² The dominant virtues of the citizens were hard work, thrift, honesty, and self-denial—which, except for work, would not be blatant in Mitchell Kennerley.

Mitchell's mother was Anne Hawley Wood Kennerley (1843–1935), a former milliner and the daughter of a potter's turner. His father, William Snelson Kennerley (1847–1890), a tailor's son, was a solicitor's clerk. Mitchell was the fourth of five children: William Wood (1870), Gertrude Annie (1873), Helen Maude (1877), and Leonard (1885). The Kennerleys were comfortably middle class, residing at 11 Rushton Road in the Cobridge section of Burslem, where the Bennetts also lived on Waterloo Road. The two families were on close terms despite the social distance resulting from the circumstance that Enoch Bennett was a solicitor. The gap was narrowed by the senior Kennerley's po-

litical activities; he was Secretary of the Conservative Association of Burslem, Conservative Registration Agent, and elected Borough Auditor, as well as treasurer of the Burslem Cricket Club.

Mitchell was not one of Bennett's jumped-up Bursley poor boys, like Denry of *The Card*. Nonetheless, he was the product of a rigorously class-structured society in which it was obligatory to know your place. He attended the Middle School in Newcastle-under-Lyme until he was twelve, walking three miles each way. After his father died of heart disease in 1890, the family moved to London where the eldest son, William, was in the Science & Art Department of the Board of Education. Mrs. Kennerley lived with the younger children on Mimosa Street in Fulham, and Mitchell entered Chelsea Polytechnic. The earliest London photo of him shows the wide-eyed stare that he retained. Mitchell's schooling terminated before he was fifteen, when he became a messenger at the Civil Service Commission in Cannon Row near Whitehall. By this time he had been encouraged in book-collecting by Bennett, who was eleven years older than Mitchell and had commenced his London journalistic career. While Mitchell was still in Burslem he received a copy of Andrew Lang's *Books and Bookmen*, inscribed "To Mitchell Kennerley on hearing that he was becoming a booklover, from Arnold Bennett."³ William Kennerley married Bennett's sister Tertia and acted as his informal editor; *The Old Wives Tale* (1908) is dedicated to him. A group of men who met weekly for literary talk in London included Bennett, William Kennerley, Frederic Chapman of the Bodley Head publishing house, bookseller Charles Young, and George Sturt (who became a respected writer as George Bourne). Young Mitchell was allowed to sit in on some of their gatherings.

His messenger rounds afforded Mitchell opportunities to browse in bookshops. He regularly visited Robert A. Cross's antiquarian shop at 5 Agar Street, off the Strand, and soon accepted a job there. The best training for a bookman is the opportunity to handle books; at Cross's Mitchell developed his retentive book memory, for which he became celebrated. One of the Cross customers was publisher John Lane, for whom Chapman worked as office manager and reader. This connection led to Mitchell's employment as Lane's junior clerk or office boy in 1894 at age sixteen: "There were only four members of the staff when