

JACOB NATHANIEL BLANCK

From 1936 until his death on December 23, 1974, Jacob Blanck, book hunter and bibliographer, was the principal authority on American first editions. Born in Boston, Massachusetts, on November 10, 1906, he was one of the eight children of immigrant parents, Selig Blank, a tailor from London, England, and his wife, Mildred R. (Friedman) Blank. Even as a lad he could grasp the importance of old books when he found 'in an unlighted corner' of the old Warren Street branch of the Boston Public Library a file of *St. Nicholas*, the herald of his lifelong interest in American children's literature. After high school and a stint of clerking in a clothing store, he opened early in 1929 The Galleon Book Shop at 3 Irvington Street in the Back Bay. There I. R. Brussel, LOGS,* made the best discovery of his career. It was not a book but a bookman that he brought back to New York after the shop failed in December. He ordered Merle Johnson to hire young Blank for twenty-five dollars a week, and Blank proved himself on the spot by identifying the handwriting (Mark Twain's) and text (the suppressed chapter of *Following the Equator*) of the manuscript Johnson thrust at him. The rest is bibliographical history.

Johnson, an illustrator and cartoonist, was an amateur bibliographer who liked to make author collections which he would sell. He had compiled bibliographies of Mark Twain (1910) and James Branch Cabell (1921), and in 1929 he brought out *American First Editions*, checklists of 105 American authors which he had compiled or solicited, edited for *Publishers' Weekly*, and revised. 'American Firsts' was to replace Foley's *American Authors* (1897) with dealers and collectors as the arbiter of who were the collectible authors and which were the correct 'points.' Blank was man of all work about Johnson's 'studio,' compiling a catalogue of books for

*Last of the Great Scouts.

sale, scouting, and running errands, but he was hired specifically to work on the second edition of 'American Firsts' (1932). His first published bibliographical work was a checklist of Louis Bromfield in the February 21, 1931, issue of *Publishers' Weekly*. Edited by Johnson, it was headed 'Compiled by Jacob Blanck.' That spelling of his name, irreplaceable bibliographical experience, and fond memories of a kindly mentor were all that Johnson could leave his young apprentice when his death in 1935 cast Jacob Blanck adrift in the depths of the Depression.

During those hard times the learned but irascible Max Harzof harbored in his shop, G. A. Baker & Co., such brilliant young bookmen as Edward Lazare and David A. Randall. Without rent or salary Blanck took a desk there among his peers until the strength of his talents prompted Frederic G. Melcher to hire him to work for the R. R. Bowker Co. and *Publishers' Weekly*. For Bowker he revised and edited the third and fourth editions of 'American Firsts' (1936 and 1942), and he realized Melcher's brainchildren by writing, compiling, or editing a stream of magazines, auction records, and price guides. To *Publishers' Weekly* he contributed a regular column of antiquarian booktrade news that ran from October 17, 1936, through 1947 and continued in *Antiquarian Bookman* for another five years. His crucial experience with Bowker was the preparation of *Peter Parley to Penrod* (1938), a selective bibliography of American children's books which rendered instantly collectible that previously neglected field. Research led him to the Library of Congress where he found that the renowned collector Josiah K. Lilly, Jr., of Indianapolis had funded anonymously a bibliographical project, led by the rare books librarian V. Valta Parma, to segregate and describe copyright deposit copies of nineteenth-century American juvenile series. On April 1, 1940, he was appointed bibliographer there, a post he held through 1942, which resulted in his bibliography of Harry Castlemon, the favorite

childhood author of both his former patron who published it and his new sponsor to whom it was dedicated.

Lilly, well aware that he had secured the most promising American bibliographer at the turning point of his career, called Blanck to Indianapolis just before he reported to LC. Blanck found himself signing on for several years at LC followed by a stint at Indiana Historical Society where Lilly would establish other bibliographical projects. Then, asked 'J.K.,' what would he like to do? There in the game room at Eagle Crest he revealed the dream that would engage each of them until his death: an extended 'American Firsts' to be based on booktrade records, copyrights, and the inspection of all items. Most alert American bookmen were aware of the need for a comprehensive bibliography of the national literature, but only Blanck and Lilly could have conceived, undertaken, and realized the *Bibliography of American Literature*. Always influential in support of Blanck and the plan was the bookman on whom Lilly depended for counsel, David A. Randall, then manager of Scribner's rare book department and later librarian of the Lilly Library.

Blanck spent 1943 in Indianapolis establishing editorial principles for a James Whitcomb Riley bibliography begun by Anthony J. Russo who had died before completing it. At the same time he and Lilly began to plan 'the big book.' They won the immediate support of such illustrious bookmen as Carroll A. Wilson, William A. Jackson, and their friend David A. Randall who were soon joined by James T. Babb and Clarence S. Brigham to form a supervisory committee for the Bibliographical Society of America. Administered by the society for the Lilly Endowment which funded it, the bibliography was begun officially on January 1, 1944, when the committee published its prospectus and author list, naming Blanck as editor with an office in the reference library of the R. R. Bowker Co. While the editor prepared collations and drafted sample entries for committee deliberation, his assis-

tants Geoffrey Gomme and Louis Barron combed British and American trade records. In 1948 the Houghton Mifflin Co. made it possible for Blanck to realize one of his old ambitions by publishing a children's book of his own composition. How gratifying to see *Jonathan and the Rainbow* and its successor *The King and the Noble Blacksmith* (1950) both reprinted for school libraries. In 1950 the BAL office moved permanently to Houghton Library, and in 1955 Volume I, *Henry Adams to Don Byrne*, was published.

Before his death Blanck saw through the press six of what will be the eight volumes of BAL: 15,684 numbered and numerous unnumbered entries on 3222 pages. Those entries, most of them providing the first comprehensive statistics of the books they describe, result from the genius of one man supported by an enlightened bibliophile and encouraged by a sympathetic supervisory committee. Only Blanck could have brought to BAL the bookseller's wide experience with nineteenth-century books and the bibliographer's familiarity with their booktrade and copyright records; the unprejudiced critical faculty which unravels complexities in order to present facts clearly and succinctly; and the journalist's sense of urgency in producing and proofing copy tempered by the editor's determination to get it right. He handled books with respect, he distrusted secondhand knowledge, and he loved to see accurate reports correctly published. The thirty-one-page preface to Volume I abounds in his bibliographical caveats; it is the best introduction for work with nineteenth-century books. Just as predicted in a poem by John T. Winterich, BAL has joined Sabin and Evans as a recognized authority and a standard reference. No bibliography of any other national literature is as thorough or detailed.

Like his membership in this society, his affiliations were honorary or elective: Antiquarian Booksellers' Association of America, Massachusetts Historical Society, Harvard chapter of Phi Beta Kappa, and Club of Odd Volumes; and he held the

L.H.D. from Brown University. He is survived by his wife, the former Stella Balicer, and their daughter Rosamunde.

Roger E. Stoddard

RUSSELL MURDOCK STOBBS

Russell Murdock Stobbs, lawyer and insurance executive, was born in Thompson, Connecticut, August 7, 1907. His parents were George Russell and Mabel F. (Murdock) Stobbs. He was raised in Worcester, but spent time in Washington, where his father, a Republican, was United States Representative in Congress from the Fourth Massachusetts District from 1925 to 1931. He was sent to Phillips Exeter Academy, graduating in 1925. From there he went on to Williams College (A.B., 1929) and Boston University Law School (LL.B., 1933). He was in the private practice of law in Worcester for a few years after graduation; then in 1938 he joined the Massachusetts Protective Association, Inc., as assistant counsel. He later moved up to associate counsel (1950) and counsel and assistant secretary (1960) of the company now known as the Paul Revere Life Insurance Co. He retired in 1967.

Stobbs served as a communications officer in the Navy during the Second World War. His ships saw action in the Pacific, Atlantic, and Mediterranean theatres of operations, for which service Stobbs received several battle ribbons.

Active in political party affairs like his father, Stobbs was a member of the Republican City Committee from 1936 to 1956 and a city councilman from 1948 to 1950. He also served in numerous charitable and civic organizations.

Historical matters were of great interest to him, especially political history. In Worcester he was long active in the councils of the Worcester Historical Society. Later he became an overseer of Old Sturbridge Village. He was elected to membership in the American Antiquarian Society in April

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