

A Boston Bookstore at the Turn of the Century

BY FREDERIC G. MELCHER

THE suggestion of this subject for a paper before the American Antiquarian Society was mine, and I appreciate the confidence of your Director that this subject might be made interesting and suitable. The history of the American book trade has interested me increasingly as years have gone by. Sixty-one of them have passed since I accepted a chance to start work in the Boston bookshop of Lauriat, then Estes and Lauriat.

I had prepared for Massachusetts Tech at Newton High School, but at the last moment had turned firmly against science and had decided to go to work, as college entrance then required more of Greek and Latin. Jobs were scarce in 1895 as the business cycle was at one of its low ebbs because of the "panic of '93" and the silver tide threatening from the West. That I turned, so fortunately for me, to retailing for a vocation, then considered without prestige or glamor, was due to the influence of my Grandfather Bartlett, who had inherited from Atkins uncles a part interest in a four-story French roof building at 301-305 Washington Street, directly opposite the Old South Church, whose chief ground floor and basement tenant was Estes and Lauriat. The publishing department under Dana Estes had just moved to its newly erected building at 212 Summer Street, while the bookselling was continued under Mr. Lauriat at the 301 frontage on Washington Street.

I have now been away from Boston forty years and more, but those first years are as clear and vivid as any of my sixty years with books. Today, an informal picture of a Boston bookstore which I knew from 1895 to 1913 might be worth recording. I would like to be able to give some outline of the Boston book trade at that time and something of what a bookstore was like.

In these present days of vocational preparation and careful career decisions, my entrance by pure chance into the book business seems haphazard. I had no inherited interest in, and no evident wisdom as to books, but was looking for a job and my grandfather's inquiry to Mr. Lauriat secured for me a beginner's place which gave me charge of handling the incoming and outgoing mail (letters copied with the aid of moist blotters and a screw press); the recording of staff arrival time, 8 to 6, six days a week; and answering the wall telephone, the first one that I had used regularly in all my sixteen years. The going pay for beginners was \$4.00 a week.

Bookselling had always been learned by apprenticeship as it is today, unless by hardy adventuring, and, perhaps, I was lucky to begin at an early age, as it gave me plenty of time to proceed gradually through the different activities of the business and to try a hand, in this fine old shop, at everything but store management, which I was to try later at Indianapolis.

Society, through its educational and business leaders, has decided in favor of special training for almost all socially important vocations, but the low respect in which retailing has been held kept this for long in an overlooked category. If the retailing of books was to be learned by working at it, then there were some advantages for me here at Lauriat's, as the owners and managers of this fine old store had known no other way to their competence.

Charles Emil Lauriat had joined with Dana Estes in the 70's after a brilliant record as a salesman in the big bookstore of William H. Piper and Company, now gone; Isaac R. Webber had joined the new enterprise from Campbell's Bookstore on Tremont Street; and Dennis F. Sheehan had come up in similar apprenticeship. These directed our shop.

Boston had many bookstores at that time, some of which were to go down in that day's price-cutting warfare, but earlier than this, the number had been reduced by the passing of the textbook selling from bookstore hands.

There was a variety of firms in book publishing in Boston then, more than today, and the largest had retail bookstores. Houghton Mifflin and Company, the house with a great inheritance and a great future, was a door or two above their present location on Park Street (what a perfect location for a publishing office). They had an attractive bookshop on their ground floor for H.M. books only. They were also publishers of *The Atlantic* at that time. Estes and Lauriat were publishers of first-rate importance with their outstanding lines of subscription sets of the great English authors, art books, and children's books in great variety, vigorously marketed. Little, Brown and Company on Washington Street in Newspaper Row was half publisher and half retailer with a very loyal "carriage trade." Parkman, Bartlett's Quotations, Dumas sets, a law department, Encyclopedia Britannica, and Farmer's Cook Book had long given their imprint national standing, but their buying up of the Roberts Brothers list brought about a move to the lovely building at Beacon and Joy Streets where the retail store was continued for a while. Thomas Niles had made the lists of Roberts Brothers great, with Alcott, Meredith, Morris, Stevenson, Balzac, and Dickinson. Lee and Shepard, with its vastly popular juvenile authors, Oliver Optic, Sophie May, etc., was located just back of the

Old South. Lothrop Publishing Company, of "*Wide Awake*," Pansy, and "Five Little Peppers" fame, was on Pearl Street. T. Y. Crowell's Boston plant at Purchase Street. L. C. Page and Company was getting started under the Estes wing. The great educational firms of Ginn, Heath, Allyn and Bacon and Silver Burdett were a natural result of the Boston atmosphere. Into these substantial pages of publishing was being written some new and brilliant, though short, records—those of Stone and Kimball, then starting up in a dormitory in Cambridge; Copeland and Day, on Cornhill, herald of a new taste and touch in publishing; Small, Maynard Company of the Mr. Dooley and "Self-Made Merchant" flashing successes; Lamson Wolfe (King Noanett); H. M. Turner and Company (Stevenson); John Luce and Company (Synge); Alfred Bartlett. All these houses were the source of much of the book stock which flowed through our bookshop and added to one's sense of belonging to an active, growing industry.

Retail bookselling had long before moved out of Cornhill and Washington Street, but had left behind as the century closed the admired bookshop of N. J. Bartlett and Company, antiquarian, imported stock and theological, new and old. On the same north side of the street was George Littlefield, a true bibliographer whose research and writings on early American books are irreplaceable. Colesworthy's and two or three other antiquarian shops kept the browsers coming to Cornhill. P. F. Madigan, first to gather the facts of 19th Century American publishing, was located in the Tremont Street area, while Charles Goodspeed was soon to start on his nationally famous bookstore in a Park Street basement and Andrew McCance was finding his way into the old book business via his Bloomfield Street magazine counters. And Richard Lichtenstein of the Burnham Antique Bookshop had jammed the basement of the Old South dangerously

full to the ceiling of collectors' material. The antiquarian side of Boston bookselling was supplemented by the famous book auction house of C. F. Libbie and Company on Washington Street.

The Lauriat bookstore was at the central point of five Washington Street bookstores, Little Brown was at the northern end of the row in a wide store which ran through to Devonshire Street. The publishing department was in the mezzanine, its immense success with "Quo Vadis" under James McIntyre's leadership had taken the firm's attention away from the retail business, but careful and competent service was given to a steady trade.

Across the street from Little Brown at School Street was the famous Old Corner Bookstore owned by Damrell and Upham but energized by George Moore with important assists from Joe Jennings. Mr. Upham directed the Episcopal Church section in the rear. It was a store of alert service and the sharpest new book competition for Lauriat's. There was a big magazine counter that brought a steady stream of customers. It has seemed too bad that that old building with its great Ticknor and Fields and E. P. Dutton traditions could not always have remained a bookstore. There is no such bookstore tradition anywhere in the country, and it is almost as well known as a landmark as the Old State House and the Old South Church and located halfway between these two shrines. The name has been kept, but two moves have served to dissolve the inherited atmosphere.

One hundred yards south of Lauriat's was DeWolfe Fiske and Company, both partners being active at that time. One half of the store was open to the street, which gave it the name of Archway Bookstore. How the dust did blow in on those bargain books, keeping Mr. Fiske busy with his big feather duster. The store moved first to Franklin Street and then to its present location on Park.

Opposite DeWolfe's was William B. Clarke and Company, which supplemented its income with a leadership in social stationery and a big rental library. This store moved to the basement of the Park Street Church and then to lower Tremont Street. Clarke was the doughtiest fighter in the country for "fair trade" pricing in the booksellings. A man with a cause, a valiant spirit who wore himself out and his business down, in that cause, he saw clearly that good book distribution, like good distribution for newspapers and magazines, depended on there being a stabilization of prices which prices could never be unnecessarily high against the public interest as long as readers could, if they chose, get the same titles free at any tax-supported library.

Still one other type of book outlet should not be forgotten, the fairly recently developing book departments of Jordan's and of White's, who, in the department store practice of that day, used cut-prices on popular current books to bring customers to the white goods or other profitable departments.

The Lauriat bookstore at which I arrived from Newton Center every morning at eight had an unimpressive front of fifteen feet, two show windows, one devoted to the old and rare stock and the other to current books. Under one side was a sidewalk-level window which swung open to let in the wooden cases and bundles of arriving books or to let shipments out. Coal for the one central hot-air furnace was poured down through a manhole.

The long, narrow store widened a bit farther in, and in the rear, under the skylight, doubled in size. Dark oak bookcases ran the full length of the store with secondary rows for books along the back of each shelf. Book-width ledges were three feet from the floor with bins below. The flat counters of heavy oak ran both sides of a main aisle and so near to the shelves that customers felt like intruders if

they went back to browse. The counters had broad drawers that might house picture books, prayerbooks and hymnals, or perhaps were used for the cloth sheets that were thrown over every counter at night to catch the dust from Jim Dooley's sweeping of the hardwood floor. Dust was pursued and flicked off with flat feather dusters from morning to night. Granite block street pavement ground by iron tires supplied plenty.

At the end of counters were small stand-up desks for the salesmen to keep safe memorandums and customer lists; larger space for the roll-tops of Mr. Webber and Mr. Sheehan, roll-tops with their rows of well-stuffed pigeon-holes. At the aisle's end was Mr. Lauriat's roll-top behind a swinging gate. Each roll-top was locked at night. In the flat upper drawer of Mr. Lauriat's desk was the daily sales record at which we took anxious looks, for a salesman's reputation, and, consequently, his future income, depended on those figures. The shipping counter of Allie Granger was here, and the cashier's cage manned by the even-tempered James Parsons and assistant. Then, against the back wall, the built-in desk where I began work.

I was shortly moved from the mail desk to a more bookish job in the basement as the receiver for all incoming stock, new books and old. The expressman dropped his big wooden cases or bundles on the sidewalk outside, pushed a bell, a swinging window opened, and up and down the wooden slide came case after case, eased by the rope which I threw up, or bundles under their own power. Daily shipments came from New York via Stonington Line, and on occasion, great shipments of fifty to a hundred cases from London. If one was to know books, this was the job. There were, in two years, tens of thousands of books into which I pencilled cost and selling marks (the word was "Cumberland" for the ten digits), checked the bills and saw the books to stock. In the base-

ment, too, were long aisles with crowded shelving and bins. Here in "Cat Alley" was a full set of the old Bohn Library from Aristotle to Xenophon and Addison to Young. Here, too, were the novels of Mary J. Holmes, Augusta Evans Wilson, and Marion Harland, which libraries still bought. Stored, here, too, were great stocks of remainders, Ridpath's "History of the World," Payne's translation of "Decameron," a rack full of the big reprints of Audubon Birds and a far cellar full of English remainders, good material for the highly successful mail-order catalogs which Mr. Sheehan was always getting out to a 17,000 mailing list of customers from Boston to San Francisco. The theory that city booksellers never thought of using the mails to reach potential book buyers over the country came later in the book club's advertising.

I so liked the daily handling of the infinitely varied content of incoming cases and bundles that I almost regretted to be taken upstairs to handle, first, mail orders, then library shipments. Two great bookmen and expert salesmen had died, Seneca Sanford and Charles Lord, and we younger men all moved up. Estes & Lauriat was then coming to the end of a busy period of fine subscription set publishing in which these salesmen had played a fine part for the company and for themselves. Fortunately, that incomparable salesman and rich personality, James Piper, remained to challenge and delight us for two or three decades more.

Lauriat's did not have departments for stationery, magazines, or cards, but did have books of wide variety, the so-called standard sets in greater coverage than is common in bookstores today. The demand for standard books in uniform sets has fallen off steadily, but at that time it was expected to find them in a good bookstore, the Gadshill Dickens, Smith Elder Thackeray, Harper's Hardy, Scribner

Stevenson, all the New England authors in the Riverside Editions, the Cambridge Poets, etc., etc. All these editions we knew, and the stock was kept complete for the buyers of separate volumes. In the great run on Temple Shakespeare in the '90's, the titles, arranged in the order of the First Folio, were renewed almost daily. The whole span of great authors was somewhere on the shelves, and we salesmen came to know all the comparative merits of different editions. When the craze for bible-paper, flexible leather editions came along, hundreds of people were filling up sets volume by volume, and friend told friend what volumes of Stevenson, Kipling, Austen, they wanted for birthday or Christmas.

Perhaps because of the old Boston clientele we were serving we could sell by the hundreds the Life and Letters of Holmes or of Lowell, Morley's Life of Gladstone or Allen's Life of Phillips Brooks, etc. Each new work from John Fiske was a welcome event and new volumes of Rhodes or MacMaster were welcomed. The era of recorded best-sellers was just beginning, and our contribution to the totals was to sell in hundred lots "When Knighthood Was in Flower," "David Harum," "Soldiers of Fortune," Richard Carvel, Eben Holden, and the others. It was exciting to see the piles melt away, but the facts of the new book business were such that, because of meeting the price competition, we probably lost money on every current book we sold and we had to make it up on old English stock and remainders. Even back in the Nineteenth Century the practice of seeking business by giving some, and finally everyone, a discount had been ingrained in the book business. The \$1.50 book was sold at \$1.12 or \$1.10 in Boston, and the store had paid 90 cents for single copies, 85 cents for 25 or over, 81 cents for 100's. Every once in a while, a department store would take a leader and sell it to anyone

for 85 cents. At whatever the level to the customer you lost money and stores all over the country were giving up, or switching to stationery.

The sales value of the jacket had not been discovered at that time but the cloth covers were often in gold stamping design. Novels were usually illustrated, perhaps by Gibson or Christy. Our new fiction counter, the busiest spot in the store, had neat piles in parallel rows. A big seller might be stacked up from a box on the floor. I liked the excitement of selling. Here books were being mated to actual readers, author reputations were being built, personal tastes developed, book audiences being created. If every publisher of books was to have bookstore experience, he would have invaluable knowledge of the ways of the public in its acceptance and resistance of books. To know the book-buying public at its best and worst, one should have gone through a Christmas season at Lauriat's. Two, three, even four customers at a time, quick interpretations of needs and tastes, complete knowledge of the whereabouts of every book in a large stock, 35 cents for supper money, then long evenings for clearing up. I wouldn't have wished to miss the experience, but it was hard.

The books in stock would have been easier to locate, both for salesmen and for customers, I always thought, if they were arranged by subject. But tradition had decided that all the books of each publisher be together. This made it easier to check the catalogs of a publisher on the traveler's semi-annual visit to see Mr. Webber for the big orders. So if an author had four publishers, you brought them to your customer from four directions. I considered it quite a triumph when I had persuaded Mr. Webber to let me put the editions of poetry old and new in one section. Poetry then seemed to be considered a completed aspect of literature to be gathered up in stout, double-column volumes.

A few new voices were just beginning to get a hearing, such as Richard Hovey and Stephen Phillips, but were not an impressive sector in bookselling. My other effort toward departmentalizing was to bring together the books for children. This department had had once-a-year attention only, and the other salesmen cheerfully gave me special rights in seeking to develop year-round service to those parents who gave thought to their children's reading.

All our new book business was directed by Mr. Webber, an iron man who boasted of never taking vacations. A careful buyer for me to get experience under, so careful of the independence of his decisions that he would never lunch with a publisher's traveler. Years later, on his final retirement, he traveled all the way from Winchester on the next Monday morning, marched in to his desk, and rolled back the top before he remembered that these days were over and, without speaking, he walked out.

Our business with old and rare books and purchased libraries was directed by Mr. Lauriat, the chief purchasing being done in England. Mr. Lauriat was a fine-looking man with a full, white beard. When Estes and Lauriat failed in 1898 as the result of bad collections in the over-expanded subscription set department, he took on the full financial responsibility for the retail store, and all his vigor and drive went into its successful rebuilding. His son, Charles E., Jr., had just come into the business, later to take over successfully the management. Carl Litzelmann, Stanley Bezanson, and myself formed the new selling front for business building along with the old expert, Mr. Piper. We moved up from selling about \$20,000 a year apiece to \$40,000 a year, and those totals meant unremitting attention to the finding of steady book buyers and their book interests.

What we displayed, advertised and sold beside the current books was chiefly the type of books which were coming out

of the substantial English libraries of the earlier part of the century. These Mr. Lauriat collected on his month-of-May trips to England when he went from store to store and city to city, hoping to pick his choices before the New York buyers and summer travelers got there. The books he most loved and bought were the staples of English literature and history, usually in old leather bindings, having been published before cased-in bindings began. First editions interested him less, unless the first was also the best edition. He was a well-known figure to British dealers, and the regularity of his visits permitted them to save up stock for him of the kind he most loved.

The business in antiquarian books, to use the useful British term for the whole area of second-hand and rare book dealing, has always had many aspects. The specialties in historical material have a firm position requiring research and scholarship as with George Littlefield; the dealers in first editions have exacting literary problems requiring knowledge of writing and of collecting sentiments as with P. K. Foley; in no one of these fields is the feeling for books as books as strong as in the business of fine library editions as they appealed to Mr. Lauriat and as he picked them up in England in those years when so many private libraries were being gradually dispersed. These were usually from libraries that had been put together in the first half of the Nineteenth Century, staple works of literature, well printed and substantially bound in leather, binding which had acquired the patina of use and time.

I asked D. B. Updike at one time, when he was looking over a big English shipment, how I would learn to know good printing. "Buy Pickerings," he said. And so I bought Pickerings and could pass on to the customer my delight in the "feel" of a good book, one that appealed to the touch as well as the mind and the eye. How many sets of Gibbon

I sold in fine, old brown calf, and editions printed by Baskerville and Bulmer and Whittingham. How many sets of the Croker Boswell and the Murray Byron, Hogarth and Gillray in folio and quarto, the poems of Samuel Rogers because of their Turner plates, the long series of British Poets and British Dramatists and the exquisite A & C Black "Waverley." Probably it is well that the desire for sets has passed, but the fine old editions of the early Nineteenth Century will always claim a book lover's affection.

There was one other neighbor near our bookstore whose activities were important to our business, the *Boston Transcript* just across the street at the corner of Milk. Its literary pages under Edwin F. Edgett were important to books and especially respected by our customers. Edgett's editorial sanctum was tucked away on the fourth floor rear. Even with its small circulation, the *Transcript* reviews had a direct influence on book sales in our area and were quoted across the country.

The Lauriat clientele were the people of established book-buying habits. Men who were the heaviest buyers would be likely to come up from State and Devonshire Streets, lawyers, financial and insurance men, perhaps dropping in after lunch at Thompson's Spa, Parker House, or Young's. Women customers came in from the Back Bay, Brookline, the Newtons, Cambridge, and Milton. Harvard provided good buyers, not as many as I would have expected; however, many of these stayed with us as customers as they went back to distant homes. It sometimes troubled me that we seemed to be developing so few really new book buyers. Our visitors were those with already established reading habits. The parents who were buying children's books were the children of parents who had bought them children's books, Alcott, Hawthorne, Howard Pyle.

The high tide of great New England authors had passed. Thomas Bailey Aldrich, as a last leaf on the tree, lived on Mt. Vernon Street, and one of his pastimes was to drop in to Lauriat's of a morning to swap stories with our Mr. Piper, who could give as good as he got. Sarah Orne Jewett was a distinguished visitor, a quiet dignified figure, an author marked for permanent esteem. Laura E. Richards, one of Estes' most important authors ("Captain January," "Three Margarets," etc.), was another frequent visitor from Maine. Her mother, Julia Ward Howe, was still living. George Herbert Palmer liked to look over the English shipments. Amy Lowell would telephone her needs, perhaps for out-of-the-way French books, and in the summer, the calls came from Dublin, New Hampshire. I have met people in different parts of the country who began their book buying in the Boston bookstores of these years as well as from their successors of today.

Boston bookstores have had over the years a real part in making Boston mean books and libraries to tens of thousands of people. My eighteen years in one of Boston's famous bookstores fell at the turn of the century and at a turning point for the book business of the country as well as for other affairs of the growing nation. There are no useful statistics by which to make comparisons of book sales per capita, a half century apart, of private libraries, of reading time and habits, but there is some evidence that there is an increase of recognition of society's stake in books and book distribution and the growth and enrichment of home libraries. If there is to be increased interest in the story of bookselling, and an active desire to pass on the experience of each generation to the next, informal records like this may have their place. Such are the evidences, once wrote Professor Palmer, of a business evolving into a profession.

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