ILLUSTRATIONS

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Editor: James Fleming. *Deputy Editor*: A.S.G. Edwards. *Editorial Advisor*: Toshiyuki Takamiya. *Design*: Prof. Phil Cleaver. *Marketing*: Silke Lohmann. *Website*: Sarah Bennett. *Subscriptions and Advertising*: Emma Brown, PO BOX 1163, ST ALBANS, AL1 9WS (07530 047470) emma@thebookcollector.co.uk • We welcome correspondence, bibliographical queries and suggestions for articles. Please contact Editor at THE BOOK COLLECTOR, 14 COXWELL ST, CIRENCESTER, GLOUCESTERSHIRE, GL7 2BH, editor@thebookcollector.co.uk • THE BOOK COLLECTOR is published by The Collector Ltd.

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A typical gathering of Murray authors in the Drawing Room c.1820
Courtesy of John Murray

Musings from 50 Albemarle Street

JOHN R. MURRAY

As a publisher I helped to nourish the variety of the Murray's list in the fields of history, travel, biography and art and archaeology but my position was always a mix of editor, salesman and administrator. One of my side interests was typography and design. When I was young my sister and I were given a small Adana hand printing press. Joe Tanner, director of the Frome printer Butler & Tanner that printed many Murray books, was a friend of my father and kindly supplied us with fonts of Bembo, Baskerville and Gill Sans. We used to print party invitations, Christmas cards, letter headings and suchlike for family and friends. This led to my fascination with printing and during later years I collected a wide range of printers' specimen type books, books on design as well as runs of *Alphabet & Images*, *Signature* and the *Newsletters of the Curwen Press*.

I pursued this particular interest and created a number of books, which I edited, designed and, on one occasion, typeset and bound myself. One of these was *A Gentleman Publisher's Commonplace Book*. After my father Jock Murray's death, I decided to make a selection from the enormous number of little blue notebooks in which he'd jot down any quotes, sayings or proverbs he came across whether wise, thoughtful, witty or sometimes simply dotty, and to assemble the best in a slim volume. I added illustrations from our archive by such as Osbert Lancaster, John Piper, John Betjeman, Kathleen Hale of Orlando fame and Johnnie Craxton as well as designs by Edward Bawden, Reynolds Stone and others. To my surprise we sold over 35,000 copies with four reprints. Another book I had fun producing was *Old Chestnuts Warmed Up*, a volume of narrative verse I learnt by heart at school. Antonia Fraser reviewed it in the Literary Review as 'an utterly delightful book. Inside you find a plethora of favourites'. Jeff Fisher, a friend and well known for the jacket of *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, kindly designed the eye-catching cover

and once again I had great fun illustrating it with all kinds of pictures from personal sources.

Early on I learnt that to the Murrays publishing was a way of life and that work and play merged into each other. While I was at boarding school my father used to write me letters with the latest news of what was going on at 50 Albemarle Street, the home and later the publishing offices of the Murrays since 1812. My father would describe how he went exploring parish churches with John Piper and John Betjeman in preparation for their county guides and how he would visit Dame Felicitas, Abbess of the enclosed order of Benedictine nuns at Stanbrook Abbey, to discuss with her through a grille her book *In a Great Tradition*. I also remember his description of the excitement when Paddy Leigh Fermor tracked down Byron's slippers in Missolonghi and sent back a tracing of them to my father to check them against Byron's boots in our collection. Then there was the evening spent in the drawing room at 50 Albemarle Street with Harold Nicolson and Peter Quennell reading through original Byron letters brought up from the archive, trying to discover what Byron was up to on a certain date in May 1815 that was a vital piece of information required by Harold Nicolson for a book he was writing. When my father read out a certain letter Harold Nicolson jumped to his feet exclaiming 'so that's where he was on that evening!' This gave me an idea of what the Murray style of publishing was like.

My parents were close friends with their authors and there was clearly an overlap with the family as can be seen by the choice of their children's godparents. Sir Francis Younghusband, who led Lord Curzon's notorious invasion of Tibet in 1904, was my elder sister's godfather, Freya Stark, the Arabian traveller, was my godmother, Osbert Lancaster, the cartoonist, writer and theatre designer, was my younger sister's godfather and John Piper was my brother's godfather.

I found early on that the Murrays were often much more than publishers in their duties to their authors. John Murray II collected from the London docks the body of Byron's illegitimate daughter Allegra, who had died in a convent in Italy, and arranged for her to be buried beside the porch of Harrow Church. John Murray III

organised for David Livingstone's daughter to receive music lessons in Paris and provided her with pocket money. Freya Stark asked my father to send her a hip bath to the Hadhramaut by diplomatic bag, and Noni Jabavu, the first Bantu author to be published in English, asked me to send her a pot of Plush Prune nail varnish urgently. I had no idea how to procure this so I had to ask the advice of a young secretary.

From 1812 the drawing room at 50 Albemarle Street became the great meeting place of authors, politicians, explorers, scientists and archaeologists. Walter Scott described these gatherings as 'Murray's Four o'clock Friends'. Its historic rooms are still lined with portraits of generations of authors including Byron, Walter Scott, Coleridge, Darwin, David Livingstone and those who came later. Up to 1928, when the publishing offices took over, No. 50 was the home of the Murrays and in many ways my father continued to treat it as home. Indeed, it still has the feeling of a family house. After the Second World War he re-established the tradition of commissioning portraits of his 20th-century authors and these now adorn the beautiful 18th-century staircase up to the first floor. When I'm in the main rooms alone in the evening as it gets dark, I can imagine the authors coming out of their frames like the scene in the haunted gallery in Gilbert & Sullivan's *Ruddigore* and picking up their conversations from where they'd left off.

In my father's time, Osbert Lancaster always popped in for a gossip after doing his pocket cartoon for the *Daily Express*. John Betjeman was another regular visitor and a great friend. They had met at Oxford, and my father had taken an interest in his early poetry. Betjeman's first collection, *Mount Zion*, was published privately in 1931 in a small hand-printed edition. My father took a copy to show his uncle old Sir John Murray, then head of the firm, saying 'You won't have heard of Betjeman, but I'm anxious to publish his verse.' Sir John replied, 'Poetry doesn't pay. Betjeman? Probably a German. No, no, no.' My father didn't give up and sold his few shares in Bovril to finance the publication of *Continual Dew* in 1937. It was Betjeman's second book of poetry and included one of his most famous lines, 'Come, friendly bombs, and fall on Slough!' My father would often take Betjeman to Murray's warehouse where

he enjoyed exploring the building and watching the staff at work packing books. At his request, the same wrapping paper was used for the dust jacket of the first edition of *Summoned by Bells*.

My father had great charisma and taught me how to get on with even the most difficult authors. An example of this is how he won over Kenneth Clark. Murray's had published a few of Clark's books before the enormous success of *Civilisation* in 1969. While the television series and book were being discussed with the BBC, Clark came to see my father and said, 'Jock, I've signed and sealed the contract with the B B C.' My father, in a way that only he could do, persuaded him that Murray's would serve him best and he amazingly agreed that he should renegotiate the book rights with the BBC. This was a demonstration of Clark's loyalty to my father, and it became the BBC's first book to be jointly published with a commercial publisher. That year my father arranged for K's royalty cheque to be put in the toe of his Christmas stocking. Who else could have got away with this?

When I became a publisher myself I learnt a similar lesson. A publisher's job was, it seemed to me, to give the best advice to an author for the success of his/her book. However, I quickly found that this was not always easy as authors rightly tend to be very possessive about their writing and are usually experts on their subject. This was certainly the case with Peter Hopkirk who came to me with the typescript of his first book *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road*. This taught me that any ideas an editor may have, if they were to be adopted, should appear to come from the author. Having read the first draft of Peter's book I realised it needed considerable attention and when I returned it to Peter, it was covered with my pencil suggestions. First, we immediately agreed on one point: that the end of one chapter should irresistibly lead the reader to the next one, an idea that Peter adopted as his own for this and all his later books. We had many tussles in the future but ours was a creative relationship. I had learnt always to see myself as a general reader and to persuade authors that a book was of little use if it was not intelligible to people like me.

It was, I think, always assumed that I would join the family firm and in hindsight I suppose I should have seen myself as an iron filing

attracted to a magnet. After my time at Eton I went up to Magdalen College Oxford and not being academic I graduated with an excellent third-class honours degree in Modern History (this only went up to the end of the 19th century beyond that was 'current affairs'!).

Speaking of Magdalen (and as a diversion), I was sitting there with a friend one evening reading an account by John Buchan of a walk he took from London to Oxford on a Sunday. In a fit of undergraduate enthusiasm we decided to follow his example and borrowing a friend's car, drove to London and set off on foot at 6 am from Hanger Lane. We followed the old A40 all the way to Oxford and walked exhausted twelve hours later into Hall at Magdalen for dinner. Just the kind of mad thing an undergraduate would do. On another occasion I swam the Bosphorus from Europe to Asia before wandering across Turkey to the Syrian border. I claimed to have followed in Byron's footsteps (breaststrokes!) until someone reminded me that Byron swam the Hellespont not the Bosphorus (needing much greater stamina). On the way back to England I climbed Mount Parnassus by moonlight up a stream bed and was nearly eaten alive by one of the fierce mountain hounds trained to defend sheep from the rustlers. I luckily survived and managed to watch from the summit the sunrise over the Peloponnese. Three months later a backpacker was found dead in the mountain as a result of an unfortunate meeting with one of these bloodthirsty hounds.

Before joining Murray's in 1964, I decided I should learn something about business and signed on to Ashridge Business School. There, far from learning how to cope with a small family publishing firm, I was trained to run businesses such as steel mills. I was almost the only person on the course coming from a company of under 500 employees. Murray's had thirty-seven and unlike the others was more like a large family. When, on joining Murray's I tried to implement critical path analysis to streamline the systems, I was firmly told by one of the packers in our warehouse, 'Young John, you can't possibly use that here'. There was an uproar and rightly so; the firm was too small for this to work and was also too steeped in tradition.

I then spent some time in Frome at the printers, Butler & Tanner, where I decided for my apprenticeship to produce a little book of my own to demonstrate the skills I was learning. It was made up of a

selection of quotes from letters sent to my ancestors describing their visits to 50 Albemarle Street. From such as Byron, Washington Irving, David Livingstone, Cavour and Herman Melville. It was entitled *Variations on Number Fifty. A Limited edition compiled and printed by John Murray VII for his friends and the friends of Fifty Albemarle Street*. It was illustrated by line drawings by Osbert Lancaster, of which I made steel repro plates, and I personally designed the cover showing the front door of No. 50. When I arrived at Butler & Tanner I was put under the supervision of a wonderful no-nonsense foreman. Reg had an incredible eye from years of experience – and complete contempt for 'new-fangled' designers who had just come out from art school. He sensibly designed by eye not by measurement. In those days the print unions were all-powerful: you only had to touch the machinery or the stone for them all to go out on strike. As a concession I was allowed to typeset *Variations on Number Fifty* on a monotype machine, but I could only use Centaur as the letter 't' was missing from the font and I had to insert each missing 't' by hand. Because of this they were happy for me to set the book as I wasn't depriving their members of any work.

Once I was installed at Murray's I was sent on an overseas marketing tour to meet our main overseas agents and booksellers. Wherever I went I received a warm welcome as everyone seemed to know of the famous house of John Murray. Oxford University Press had represented us for many years in Pakistan and India where I was to meet the Minister of Education. On arrival his secretary sat me down and asked me to wait. After I had waited a long time, I asked when my meeting would take place. He replied, 'As soon as Mr. Murray arrives'. When I explained that I *was* Mr. Murray, the secretary told me that they had been expecting an elderly man with a long white beard. Murray's and their books had been famous for so many years on the subcontinent that they clearly did not expect a youngster like me. We had a marvellous agent in Karachi who arranged for me to visit the Karachi Girls' High School, where I planned to talk about Murray's educational books with the headmistress. However on arrival and without warning I was told I was to give a talk to the sixth form and was led to the assembly hall and guided onto the rostrum in front of a room full of beautiful Pakistani

girls wearing their shalwar kameez. I was naturally terrified, having had no time to prepare for this. However I was saved as, after starting hesitantly, I discovered that I had to pause after each sentence so that it could be translated into Urdu thus giving me a moment to think what next to say. When at the end there was a Q & A session I must admit I made up most of my answers but nobody seemed to notice. This was a useful experience as it taught me that I should always be prepared to speak wherever I went.

The following years saw a great transition in the publishing world. The Standard Book Numbering system was being introduced and I was made responsible for responsible for implementing the system for Murray's. Much of my time was now spent away from editing books as I became involved in the business side of the firm. Clearly if Murray's was going to survive, it had to move with the times. So gradually we moved the entire business onto computers. Meanwhile we had a warehouse in Clerkenwell Road on five floors with a lift that moved at a snail's pace. We were often several weeks behind with orders, and unbelievably still had an employee who remembered as a boy making deliveries to bookshops with a horse and cart. We decided to sell the warehouse and put our distribution in the hands of Grantham Book Services part of the Random House group. This proved an excellent move as Murray's were publishers not distributors and had none of the essential skills needed for handling orders.

During this time our sales were increasing considerably. *Civilisation* was selling vast numbers both in hard cover and paperback and we were also selling millions of copies of D.G.Mackean's *Introduction to Biology*. On the general side, 1975 saw the publication of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's novel *Heat and Dust* that won the Booker Prize and was later made into a film by Merchant Ivory Productions. In 1978, Patrick Leigh Fermor received the W.H.Smith Literary Award for the first volume of his travel autobiography, *A Time of Gifts*. Without our new distribution arrangement we would have been in serious trouble.

Throughout my working life, and in the same way as my predecessors, I was totally immersed in the family publishing business not simply as a profession but as a way of life. To be working in